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Thinking-Feeling the Margins An Intersectional Ethnography of the Conflict within the Colombian Pacific Rainforest

Bernasconi Attilio Oscar

Bernasconi Attilio Oscar, 2022, Thinking-Feeling the Margins An Intersectional Ethnography of the Conflict within the Colombian Pacific Rainforest

Originally published at : Thesis, University of Lausanne

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FACULTÉ DE SCIENCES SOCIALES ET POLITIQUES
INSTITUT DE SCIENCES SOCIALES, LABORATOIRE D'ANTHROPOLOGIE
SOCIALE ET CULTURELLE

Thinking-Feeling the Margins
An Intersectional Ethnography of the Conflict within the
Colombian Pacific Rainforest

THÈSE DE DOCTORAT

présentée à la

Faculté des sciences sociales et politiques
de l'Université de Lausanne

pour l'obtention du grade de

Docteur ès sciences sociales

par

Attilio Oscar Bernasconi

Directeur de thèse

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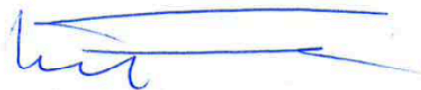
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autorise, sans se prononcer sur les opinions du candidat, l'impression de la thèse de Monsieur Attilio BERNASCONI, intitulée :

« **Thinking-Feeling the Margins: An intersectional Ethnography of the Conflict Within the Colombian Pacific Rainforest** »



Nicky LE FEUVRE
Doyenne

Lausanne, le 9 mai 2022

Abstract

The National Liberation Army (ELN) is the most prominent Marxist-Leninist guerrilla movement in Colombia. One of the regions where this movement has the most significant influence is the Pacific basin, a region rich in natural resources and inhabited predominantly by Black and indigenous ethnic groups. In this space, the guerrillas of the Western War Front move, for the most, young people originally from local communities.

Based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork, this research explains the functioning of this war front, the supporting ideologies and practices behind it, and the reasons why young Afro-descendent and indigenous people become a part of it. Above all, this research explores the complex relationships that bind the guerrilla movement and local inhabitants.

Intersectionality is the analytical framework of this work since, in the Colombian Pacific, considering race, class, gender, and relationships with the environment allows for an in-depth analysis of this reality on the margins of the state.

This research shows how a clear line of demarcation cannot draw the boundaries between ELN and ethnic communities and how economic relationships, kinship, or affection, prevail over ideological commitments or adherence to armed struggle.

Finally, should a peace process with the ELN be reopened, this study indicates how lasting peace in Colombia can only be achieved through the active and leading participation of the groups that inhabit the territories affected by the internal armed conflict – the only ones who have a deep knowledge of these spaces.

Résumé

L'Armée de Libération Nationale (ELN) est le mouvement de guérilla marxiste-léniniste le plus important de Colombie. L'une des régions où ce mouvement a la plus grande influence est le bassin du Pacifique, une région riche en ressources naturelles et habitée majoritairement par des groupes ethniques noirs et indigènes. Dans cet espace, les guérilleros du Front de Guerre Occidental déplacent, pour la plupart, des jeunes originaires des communautés locales.

Basée sur un travail de terrain ethnographique approfondi, cette recherche explique le fonctionnement de ce front de guerre, les idéologies et les pratiques qui le soutiennent, et les raisons pour lesquelles les jeunes Afro-descendants et indigènes en font partie. Par-dessus tout, cette recherche explore les relations complexes qui lient le mouvement de guérilla et les habitants locaux.

L'intersectionnalité est le cadre analytique de ce travail car, dans le Pacifique colombien, la prise en compte de la race, de la classe, du genre et des relations avec l'environnement permet une analyse approfondie de cette réalité en marge de l'État.

Cette recherche montre comment une ligne de démarcation claire ne peut pas tracer les frontières entre l'ELN et les communautés ethniques et comment les relations économiques, affectives et de parenté, prévalent sur les engagements idéologiques ou l'adhésion à la lutte armée.

Enfin, dans l'éventualité de la réouverture d'un processus de paix avec l'ELN, cette étude indique comment une paix durable en Colombie ne peut être obtenue que par la participation active et prépondérante des groupes qui habitent les territoires affectés par le conflit armé interne – les seuls à avoir une connaissance approfondie de ces espaces.

*I dedicate this thesis to the countless waterways
that run through the Colombian Pacific basin.*



*My wish is that they would stop having to carry the mutilated bodies of racialized youth,
mercury used in industrial gold mines, or glyphosphate used in aerial fumigation.*

*For those who know that peace requires the preservation of the pluriverse, may these
waterways become the paths for your dreams and laughter to flow.*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Walking throughout the Colombian Pacific, I heard that before entering the sea, the river trembles with fear. Apparently, the river turns back to observe the path it has traveled and becomes frightened as it approaches such a large expanse of water, entering which can mean being lost forever. They say the river at that moment accepts its nature, the fact that there is no going back in life, and with this, it understands that flowing into the ocean is not about getting lost but about becoming the ocean.

Looking back on all these years, made of light and darkness, summers and winters, joys and tears, I can only turn back and offer a smile of heartfelt gratitude to all the people who have been close to me and have made this thesis possible.

To all those in the Pacific rainforest whose names I cannot mention:

Thank you for welcoming me and for your trust and patience. With you, I understood the brutality of war, the suffering in losing loved ones, and yet the value of life in each of its briefest and most profound moments.

To all my friends and extended family in Colombia:

I am heartbroken that I cannot write your names, but given our country's repressive policies and practices, I prefer not to risk it. Thank you for all your life lessons, unconditional friendship and hospitality, and for letting me discover my country through the eyes of those who live on its margins. ¡Soy porque somos!

To my close family: Mamma, Papà, Paia, Filippo, Virginia, Andrea, Mattia, Paola, Solana, Taqwa, Tauheeda, Sadaqa.

I may never be able to thank you enough for all the love you have given me and continue to give me on a daily basis. In moments of fear or loneliness in the rainforest, it was your thoughts that gave me courage and warmed my heart.

To the members of my committee: Ieva, Mark, Alessandro, Aurora, Éléonore, Julie.

Thank you for your support, for all the time you have dedicated to me, and for your constructive criticism that has hopefully enabled me to become a better anthropologist and a deeper thinker.

To other scholars who, in one way or another, have supported me in this research process: Arturo and Magda Escobar, Ellen Hertz, Olivier Edjeryan, Anthony Dest, Isabel Käser, Sarah Ihmoud, Aline Helg, Julia Eckert, Gaële Goastellec, Angèle Mendy, Marie-Christine Doran, Anne Levanchy, Christine Verschuur, Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi, Jérémy Voirol, Romina Seminario, Cristian Terry, Anne Kristol.

Thank you for being on my side, especially in the most challenging moments, where your words restored my hope and strength to continue. In academia, one is often bound to hierarchical structures. Yet I find great beauty in being able to call you friends.

Finally, to all I love: Franziska, Thomas, Poornima, Giullione, Gustavo, Piotr, Beppe, Mike, Noëmi, Julie, Oliviero, Dilan, Angelica, Atak, Urpi, Luca, Astrid, Nick, Sapo and Nora, Duende, Antonio, Gustavo and Patricia, Jairo, Elo, Fuchs, Loris, Cyrillo, Fäbu, Ben, Maria, Blablo, Brati, Ghedda, Cél, Jul, Renate, Dorian, Vladimir, Danielle, Jessica, Olivia, Patrizia,

Nina, Christina, Angela, Nicole, Caro, Carolina, Jérémy, Marina, Alice, Mirj, Efraín, Bladimir, Brenno, Laure, Cristian, Greg, Joana, Marty, Verena, Dominique, Sergej, Mélanie, Tej, Manu and Bob, all the students I had the honor to teaching in Lausanne, my “Shining Tribe” in Bern, and the birds singing outside my window.

Perhaps what matters most in life is to be surrounded by valued friends. You are, for me, the most precious treasure. Thank you for your mutual-aid and for making me a better person every day. The ocean appears less scary, knowing that I have you in my heart.

PART I

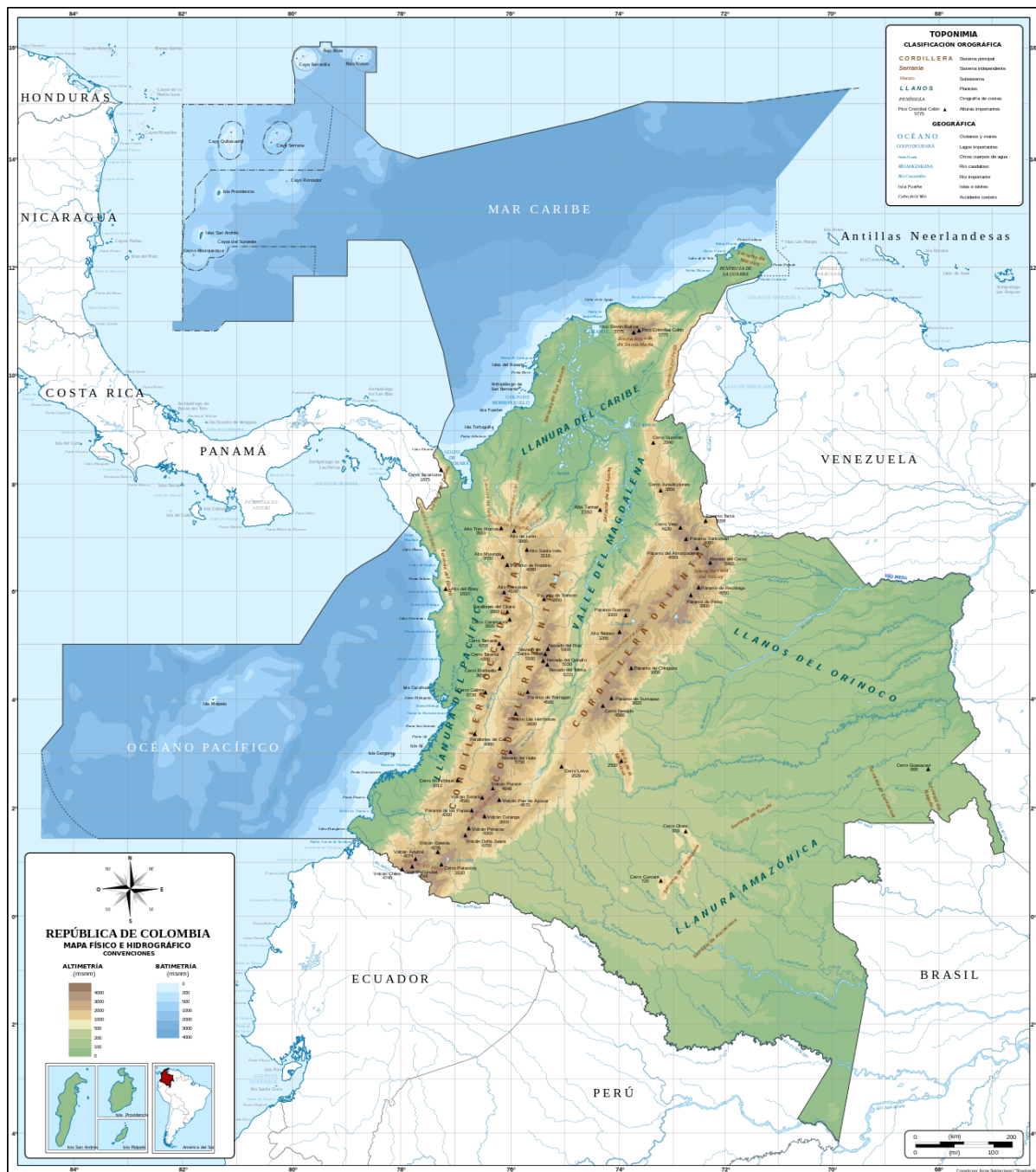
**“WE ARE NOT A
VACATION RESORT!”**

OPENING – THE FIRST ENCOUNTER

It was September 11, 2017, the day I received the message that opened the doors of the most prominent guerrilla movement in Latin America to me. I remember the date because I was a little puzzled by the fact that it was the same day as the commemoration of the fall of Salvador Allende and his government, one of the greatest icons of the Latin American Left. "There is no need to be superstitious," I said to myself while preparing my backpack, nervous about the fact that I had not yet bought either the bread or the *Semana* magazine – two things I was asked to buy which, along with the password, "I am Manuel's brother," would allow me access inside the famous "*zona roja*" ("red zone"), one of those areas marked in the national territory as a war zone. First, from Cali, I had to cross the Andean Western *cordillera* and descend to Buenaventura, a city once known as the Pearl of the Pacific and which today showcases the social and racial inequalities that characterize contemporary Colombia. The road to Buenaventura is extremely hazardous because the drivers of the minibuses seem to enjoy going at full speed, rallying between the cumbersome trucks that daily transport the containers for sorting inland from the port, and because of the constant weather changes, which as one descends toward the coast, surprise with sudden storms. During the three hours of travel, we were stopped at one of the various military police checkpoints, and I found myself arguing with a policeman who told me that he could not find my *cedula* (identity card) in the system. With the most innocent air possible, I said to him that it was probably because it was issued by the Colombian embassy in Switzerland, where I live. Perhaps under the pressure of the exasperated looks of all the passengers, eager to continue the journey, he decided to let me go. As I got back on the bus, I still remember that feeling of unease occasioned by the dozen inquisitive looks directed at me. I went back to sit next to the driver who, after starting his mad race against time, asked me, "What happened?" "I didn't realize my ID had expired," I replied, trying to avoid a conversation.

Although I am Colombian by origin and manage to pass more or less unnoticed in big cities, as soon as I open my mouth, my accent is immediately identified as "strange" and therefore foreign. As the years went by, I began to get used to this type of situation. But that day, in a bus speeding along in the rain, darkness, and fog, I was seized by panic. I was going to do an interview for my thesis work. Still, for the Colombian government, I was about to make contact with the ELN, a terrorist group that, after the demobilization of the FARC-EP, officially represents the last major threat to peace in the country.

RELIEF MAP OF COLOMBIA¹



My interest in the ELN, *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Army) had begun years ago when for my Master's thesis, I became interested in the Afro-descendant communities that mainly inhabit the coastal regions – Pacific and Caribbean – of Colombia. Moving around villages that seemed to belong to another era, I had often heard about the

¹ Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geography_of_Colombia#/media/File:Mapa_de_Colombia_\(relieve\).svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geography_of_Colombia#/media/File:Mapa_de_Colombia_(relieve).svg)

presence of the guerrillas, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse, but always indirectly, as if the mere mention of them could be a source of problems.

When the beginning of my doctorate research coincided with the beginning of the peace process of the FARC-EP followed by that of the ELN, I decided it was the perfect opportunity to take a deeper look at this actor who has been disputing power with the state for more than half a century. For years I had sought direct contact with the guerrillas, but as time went by, I began to believe that I was following the ghosts that everyone talks about but whom no one is ready to give precise information about. Now, however, in that minibus launched at breakneck speed, I knew the meeting was near. I didn't know with whom, nor how, but I knew when – the next day – and more or less where – in a tiny village I had never heard of before and whose name I had written down on a piece of paper hidden in my shirt pocket.

My main concern was that, unlike all my travels in remote Colombia, this time, I hadn't been able to tell anyone where I was going or for how long. I had warned two trusted friends in Switzerland to start making calls if they didn't hear from me in three weeks. In Colombia, however, to this day no one knows about my meetings with the guerrillas. Above all, I have never been able to tell my Afro-Colombian activist friends anything. This is for their safety, since in the case of a police investigation if something happened to me, not knowing anything would have allowed them to tell the truth, while having sensitive information would have forced them to lie in order to protect me and themselves. Besides, I know that none of my friends would have ever let me go on such a risky research project. In fact, when a couple of years later I made a presentation at the university and a friend of mine with whom I normally stayed in Cali found out that I had come into contact with guerrillas because of my work, she told me, "I didn't know you talked to guerrillas. I'm sorry, but that makes you a danger to me and my family, so from now on you can't stay in my house anymore!" I remember being heartbroken, and to this day I wonder if my research was worth the loss of such a precious friendship.

Once I arrived in Buenaventura, I slept at Johana's house,² a girl from Arupí and a friend of friends, who gave me her room in a stilt house made of wood. When I arrived, the ocean tide was rising under the house floor, and with it, the smell of the garbage that ordinary people throw every day into the water for lack of adequate infrastructure. In the last decades, Buenaventura has become one of Latin America's major ports and millions of dollars of goods pass through it

² I'll come back to this point in the section "Ethics and Methods in Fieldwork" (Ch.2), but it's important to mention here that all the names of people and places – of villages as well as rivers – used in this thesis have been changed to protect the identity of research participants. The only exceptions are the names of large cities like Cali, Buenaventura, Medellín, and Bogotá.

every day. For years the national government has wanted to make Buenaventura a tourist destination, but the economic efforts to improve the city are all concentrated on the waterfront, while most of the population, predominantly Afro-descendants, continue to live below or just above the poverty line in neighborhoods lacking any kind of infrastructure and where violence between armed gangs never ceases to claim victims. For dinner, Johana's mother prepared me a delicious fish that I enjoyed while observing two little girls running with agility between the wooden planks, the iron bars, and the various holes in the floor. They were happy because an uncle had just given them 1000 pesos (about 30 USD cents) each, not much, but enough for some candies in the shop down the street. Once I finished eating, I went to lay down under the incessant noise of the rain tapping on the metallic roof, and the rats, that once it was dark, began to run under my bed. It took me a while to fall asleep. On the one hand, I was nervous and worried because I had not been able to buy the *Semana* magazine. On the other hand, I was plagued by guilt for having occupied what was undoubtedly the best bed in the house. Yet, this is the hospitality of the Colombian Pacific's people, which seemed to demonstrate a universal truth: people who have the least are the most willing to give. As far as I knew, the ELN struggle for justice was a struggle for them too.

The next day, I took a boat at seven in the morning, which would take me to my meeting point in about four hours. Once I arrived at the village, I sat there waiting. After a couple of hours, two armed young men passed by. Guerrillas? Paramilitaries? They had no uniforms. Out of fear, I dared not ask anything. I only tried to leave in plain sight the loaf I had managed to buy shortly before embarking. The two men ignored me and went away, leaving me full of doubts about what to do. What if, for some reason, whoever was supposed to come get me was unable? What if the information had filtered down to military intelligence or, even worse, to the paramilitaries? The more these questions occupied my mind, the more the seconds became minutes and the minutes hours. When I was starting to seriously worry about how to find a solution for the night, a young Black man came in cheerfully, shouting, "Who has a *Semana* magazine here?" Suddenly I realized that the magazine, the password, and the bread over which I had been worrying so much, were not really needed. Probably they were nothing more than a ritual, a first act to be interpreted to enter the mystical territory controlled by the ELN, an area where no tourist or "good citizen" risked entering. I felt relieved, but I also felt completely stupid realizing that even after years spent travelling in complicated and dangerous environments, in Colombia as in other countries, I was still very naïve about the world outside my comfort zone.

The young man, who introduced himself as Ricardo, invited me to board a small boat accompanied by a young indigenous woman, who will later introduce herself as Ramona. We quickly slipped into a tributary of the main river, and on both banks, I began to admire the rising and overlapping of hundreds of trees of all sizes. The boat was moving fast, and the water, at times almost transparent, reflected the vegetation's thousands of greens. While Ricardo sang happily, sometimes giving me an inquisitorial glance, Ramona continued to scold him for maneuvering in a wicked way. A few days later, Ramona will tell me that Ricardo had taken advantage of the village trip to buy rum and get drunk far from the control of his superiors. The noise of the engine however did not allow any conversation, so I remained contemplating the play of lights around the boat, and the blue and red dragonflies that appeared from time to time as if to welcome us.

After about an hour or so, we finally reached a village where I was accommodated in one of the last three houses, a hundred meters detached from the nucleus. I remember my surprise at not being in the middle of the rainforest, in one of those machete-wielding military camps made of cut branches and leaves. In the collective imagination of urban Colombia, the "*zona roja*" is a territory where the guerrillas move in the shadows, far from the people, who are most afraid and feel threatened by the presence of this armed force. Daily, the national media report the ELN as a terrorist group that threatens local communities forcing young people to enroll. So how was it possible that we stayed on the edge of a village without our presence posing risks for either the guerrillas or the villagers? Who were the members and what were the ideologies of the last major guerrilla movement in Latin America?

The person who helped me answer these questions was Commander Marcos. I was introduced to him the next morning and our long discussions filled the following days. The Commander wanted to know everything about me, how I had become interested in the ELN, why I wanted to write a thesis on this armed movement, what was being said about the ELN in Europe, and what people thought of the peace process. Then he began to ask me about my political stance and my thoughts about Maoism. When I replied that the only current of political thought in which I saw my ideals reflected was anarchy, or the anarcho-communism of thinkers like Kropotkin, Rocker, Emma Goldman, Bakunin, and others, he looked at me with a worried smile and exclaimed, "Oh Jesús! They sent me an anarchist!" He then went on to tease me about my accent, saying that I spoke like an Arab. We laughed a lot in those days. I soon realized that Commander Marcos was not only respected for his position, but he was also loved for his ability to put people at ease, and for his attentive care toward each of his militiamen. I didn't know that the Commander thought I would only be there for a couple of days, until he announced to

me after breakfast on the third day after my arrival, "Normally, when someone comes to visit me, for security reasons they cannot stay for more than two or three days. Are you sure you want to stay?" "Yes, Commander!" I answered him, so he said to me, "Well then. I hope I will not regret this decision. Welcome into the National Liberation Army!"

This was the beginning of about ten months of fieldwork, distributed across four years, embedded in a revolutionary armed group that has been challenging the Colombian state's hegemony for half a century.³ The ELN is nowadays the main actor in the Colombian internal conflict, the oldest ongoing conflict on the American continent. This conflict started in the 1950s after the assassination of the socialist presidential candidate Jorge Gaitán in 1948, an episode that triggered a decade known as *La Violencia*, a period that left approximately 200,000 people dead, and which remains indelibly engraved in Colombian history. Towards the end of *La Violencia*, at the dawn of the 1960s, two primary leftist guerrilla movements arose under the influence of the Soviet Union and the Cuban Revolution. The first of these, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo*, FARC-EP (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army), has finally demobilized after signing a historic, yet highly controversial peace agreement with the Colombian government in 2016. What is left today is a political party, the *Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común*, FARC (Common Alternative Revolutionary Force), and a dissident faction that took up arms again in 2019 after the government failed to fulfill its promises.

The second major guerrilla movement born in the '60s is the National Liberation Army, ELN, which still maintains military activity and has become the last and most significant guerrilla movement, not only in Colombia but in Latin America as a whole. In 2016, peace talks between the ELN and the Colombian government began, but in 2019, President Duque's administration aborted them without any agreement being reached.

Throughout its 60 years of existence, the ELN has undergone profound transformations, in part due to internal changes, and in part in response to the evolution of an ever more uneven war against the state, whose military and media apparatuses are increasingly difficult to counter. If, with the end of the Cold War and the more recent decline of leftist governments in Latin America, armed revolutions seem to be merely utopian projects of the past, my study will show the continued relevance of such movements by explaining reasons for the preservation of such

³ The entire fieldwork, involving months of research outside the ranks of the ELN, lasted seven years, from 2015 to 2021.

political-military force in the Colombian landscape. My research reveals that the ELN is no longer a ‘classical’ Marxist-Leninist guerrilla movement as it was in the 1960s, but rather is now an armed group capable of adapting strategies and goals in relation to a new global economy characterized by trade liberalization and innovations in technology and communication. Moreover, as a leftist guerrilla movement, the ELN has been able to adapt to different political and historical conditions, but has not abandoned its revolutionary objectives. The latter have been modified – from the seizure of power to that of a mere armed resistance – but they have not changed in substance, for the struggle remains directed against the ruling classes that personify the state and capitalism. My contention is that understanding why and how the ELN has endured across time will offer insight into the broader underlying struggles that are symptomatic of the absence of a new social model and possibilities on which people can rely – whether in Colombia or elsewhere.

As we will see in the methodological section (Chapter 2), my four years of research with the ELN is part of a much larger project including both the seven-year PhD and earlier work on ethnic communities in the Colombian Pacific that began ten years ago during my two Master's degrees in social anthropology and human geography. The objective of my initial doctoral project, which began in 2015, was to study the peace process between the ELN and the government with a focus on the participation of the ethnic communities. Gaining access to the Western War Front (FGOc) of this guerrilla movement changed my thinking and my project along with it. I have transitioned from focusing on the peace process which has basically remained at a standstill and redirected my attention to the daily life of the ELN. As I am probably the first anthropologist who has been able to share firsthand the life of the guerrillas in the rainforest, I have decided to prioritize this unique access and place this experience at the center of my thesis.

As referenced in the title, the aim of this dissertation is to provide an ethnography of ELN guerrillas in the Pacific basin and their multiple struggles for justice. Most of the guerrillas in the FGOc are Afro and indigenous youth. In the months I spent amongst them, I was impressed by the high number of women and the important roles they play in the movement. I was fortunate to witness and understand the interactions between ELN and local inhabitants, which in the Pacific basin are principally Black and indigenous communities, officially recognized as *ethnic groups* by the 1991 Constitution. Also, I observed the particular connection between

ELN and the communities⁴ with the surrounding environment. These factors led me to the analytical-methodological framework of this thesis, namely, intersectionality, and to my main argument that an intersectional analysis is imperative to understand the complex political and social landscape in which Pacific youth grow up, and the motivations for them to move from their home communities to the ELN and vice versa. This thesis moves toward an understanding of the reasons why these youth join the ranks of the ELN, remain there over time, and in many cases, regrettably die there.

This research has historical, theoretical, and practical implications. After almost 60 years of existence, the ELN has accumulated experiences that reflect social changes over time, while also highlighting the stagnation of patterns that lead to the crystallization of social inequalities in particular sites, such as at the state's margins. The theoretical approach of this study offers a platform to reflect on the meaning of revolution within a global neoliberal order while shedding light on post-conflict possibilities and their articulation with different ontologies. On a practical level, my extensive fieldwork illustrates everyday praxes of resistance against multiple layers of structural violence that exceed the insurgent space and may be relevant for society at large.

I argue that a complete portrayal of the ELN necessitates three levels of analysis, the local, national, and global. The first level of analysis is determining the role of the ELN at the local level and its interactions with the ethnic communities: the latter fear they will end up in the middle of an armed confrontation, but at the same time depend on the ELN to carry forward their everyday – often illicit – economic activities at the margins of the state. Also, for many young inhabitants of the Pacific region, enrolling in the ELN is the only way to support their families, provide food, get a basic education and, especially for young women, strive for independence and emancipation.

At the second level of analysis, the national, is the parsing of the ELN's paradoxical armed struggle against and simultaneous negotiation with the state. As mentioned above, I began my research in the midst of an ongoing peace process with the state. The latter was conducted independently from the armed conflict that continued throughout the peace talks other than during a three-month bilateral ceasefire in 2017. This situation reveals the multiple perceptions of guerrillas towards the government's intentions, but also the different opinions within the warfront and the ELN more broadly.

⁴ In this dissertation, I use the categories of ethnic communities, rural communities, and ethnic groups interchangeably. Although rural communities in Colombia can also be peasant communities – thus not necessarily belonging to ethnic groups – in the Pacific basin the majority of the rural population is Black or indigenous. In Chapter 8 we will address the debates around the terms of race and ethnicity.

The third level of analysis focuses on the ELN's relations and influences on the global scale, including the significance this armed actor has for other political and/or armed movements internationally, as well as the effects these movements may have on the global neoliberal order. The years of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted prior to my doctoral research allowed me to start in the field with previous knowledge of the three levels listed here, and to obtain exclusive access to the ELN's Western Front. This experience has allowed me to carry out interviews and collect ethnographic data that are unique within the anthropology of Colombia's long-term conflict and more recent peace processes.

The major contribution of this thesis is twofold. The first, inherently academic, is to enrich debates and address gaps in the literature of the anthropology of the state that is concerned with the interactions binding the state to its marginalized populations, and that often separately analyzes the categories of class, race, and gender. Making use of intersectionality as an analytical framework, my study places at the center of the relations between the state and the communities that seek to resist it, the unequivocal interaction between the aforementioned categories. In other words, this research makes it absolutely clear that in the study of the state and its margins – particularly in postcolonial settings – it is not possible to focus separately on the discriminatory dynamics related to class, gender, or race without highlighting the constant interaction between these three categories. Moreover, this study contributes to debates on intersectionality in that it shows how in postcolonial contexts, the territory – and the processes of territorialization and deterritorialization that come with it – is not a neutral space, but the place (*le lieu*) that directly affects the way class, race, and gender articulate in their resistance to state systems of oppression. Ultimately, intersectionality allows me to show how race, class, gender, and an inherent relationship to the environment are categories that unveil root reasons for armed conflict, and enable an understanding of what drives Pacific youth to adhere to the ELN.

This dissertation's second contribution is more political and engaged in nature. By narrating little-explored aspects of Colombia's internal conflict, I hope that this work can highlight the urgency of a dialogue with ethnic communities should a new peace process open up with the government that will be elected in 2022. Ethnic communities – both Afro-descendants and indigenous – are the populations most affected by the Colombian internal conflict since they inhabit the territories where it takes place. As this research shows, a peace process whose only objective is to put an end to the confrontations through the demobilization of an armed group – as in the case of the FARC-EP in 2016 – does not resolve the social

conflict present in the country. If the populations afflicted by the conflict are not placed at the center of a peace process, young people from these marginalized communities will continue to flock to those groups at the edge of the law that offer both concrete and ephemeral alternatives to extreme poverty and systematic discrimination.

This research revolves around the following questions:

The first, which expands beyond Colombia's borders, is *how can the action, longevity, and in many cases, the popularity of revolutionary groups be analyzed as revealing conditions of social inequalities worldwide?* From Colombia, to India, to Kurdistan, to Palestine, and in dozens of other countries around the world, armed revolutionary groups have emerged with the goal of seizing power. However, changes in the modality of warfare such as the rise of aviation and the technologization of state control and surveillance apparatuses during the 21st century have forced these groups to redirect their revolutionary efforts and ideologies. No longer able to aspire to the participation of a radical change, it is worth asking what are the factors that allow armed resistance to last, i.e. what social conditions continually drive youth – often, as in the Colombian Pacific, racialized ones – to join these groups. My research question thus extends to an epistemological query, since it is about moving beyond the preconstructed categories of armed/terrorist groups and showing how prior to an ideological and armed struggle against the state, these groups showcase social malaise. The latter, being the consequence of the uneven development of the capitalist model, is traceable all around the world.

To help answer this first query, I propose two sub-questions that are more directly relevant to the Colombian case. *How do the guerrillas conceive of and legitimize their struggle? And what are the strategies the ELN adopts to endure in a context of global capitalism and national “neoliberal peace”?* To address these questions, in-depth ethnographic research is needed to illustrate an overall picture of the internal and external functioning of the guerrilla movement and to offer an analysis of the ways the ELN legitimates both its fight against the state and its presence within neglected communities. More specifically, since the support of the civilian population is of the utmost tactical importance in guerrilla warfare (Guevara 2014 [1960]; Marighella 2008 [1969]), I ask through which strategies and discourses the ELN seeks to gain the support of the rural/ethnic communities. Also, I explore the apparent paradox of the guerrilla movement being open to engage in peace negotiations with the state, while at the same time fighting against it.

The second research question this thesis aims to answer is *what are the meanings and implications of the often-obscured interactions between the ELN and the ethnic (Afro-*

descendant and indigenous) communities in the Colombian Pacific basin? While the ELN's economy of war is mostly based on income generated through kidnapping and drug trafficking, the inhabitants may also benefit from the cultivation of illegal crops and more generally from economic exchanges and bargains of all kinds made possible by this guerrilla movement. My aim is thus to understand whether these economic relationships entail only pecuniary interests or if they also involve the sharing of a revolutionary ideal on behalf of the communities. Consequently, I'm also attentive to why and how these interactions are concealed from the state.

WHAT IS KNOWN AND WHAT I ADD

Intersectionality lies at the center of this thesis. For Kimberlé Crashaw et al. (2013), intersectionality as a field of study can apply to three sets of engagements consisting of the “applications of an intersectional framework or investigations of intersectional dynamics; [...] of discursive debates about the scope and content of intersectionality as a theoretical and methodological paradigm; [and] of political interventions employing an intersectional lens” (785). But as the authors point out, intersectionality should be interpreted as a nodal point that opens up avenues for interdisciplinary reflection on inequalities and not as a self-referential closed system (ibid. 788). It is a matter of reading a problem through multiple lenses at once and thus, inevitably, analyzing, deconstructing, and above all, demonstrating the interconnectedness of multiple power structures.

In my research, I am not attempting to describe the various levels of discrimination, but to take them as key aspects of understanding the functioning of the entity called the state. As Catherine MacKinnon writes, "Method concerns the way one thinks, not what one thinks about" (2013, 1019), and I am therefore convinced that thinking with the tools provided by an intersectional approach can have a twofold contribution, both epistemological and ontological.

It is an epistemological contribution in that it forces us to address the state through multiple gateways. Such an entry complicates our understanding but helps us to better identify the structures of power and domination embodied in the state since its genesis. For this, it is a matter of not only seeing the state, or as James Scott (1998) proposes, "Seeing like a state," but also feeling the state, and feeling it through the emotions of those who suffer the oppression of all its hegemonic apparatuses. As Nancy Bereano writes, “The white western patriarchal ordering of things requires that we believe there is an inherent conflict between what we feel and what we think [...]” (2007, 9). With my work, I challenge this ordering of things by attempting to demonstrate the urgency of a feeling-thinking approach (see the following subchapter), even in

Marxist-oriented research focusing on violent political-economic power relations. In doing so, I align myself with the work of Mara Viveros (2016), who stresses the importance of reconnecting intersectionality to those who contributed most to the making of this concept, namely Black feminists and thinkers working to decolonize Latin America. In this epistemological procedure, in addition to the categories of race, gender, and class, I have added that of environment. As I argue, the environment itself not only has memory and feelings but above all, it is structured by the lives of the communities – including the guerrilla – that inhabit it.

The contestation of historical dichotomies such as environment and community, community and guerrilla, guerrilla and society, society and state, state and margins, leads me to the second contribution, the ontological one. As I hinted above, my suggestion is to regard the state not merely as a system of domination in the hands of the ruling classes, but by means of an intersectional reading of the multiple categories where domination operates, to grasp the spatiotemporal dynamism that allows the state to fix its sovereignty unequally within its borders.

Thinking through the lens of intersectionality also allow me to contribute to the many studies that exist on earlier Colombian peace processes – with the FARC-EP (in 1991 and 2012), as well as other guerrilla movements like the M-19 (in 1994) or the EPL (in 1991). Most of this research has taken a top-down approach and concentrates on the dialogue between decision-makers (e.g. Bergquist et al. 2001; Cardenas 2002; Esquirol 2000; Freeman 2020; Harbom et al. 2006; Maher and Thomson 2018; Rettberg 2003), thus overlooking the role of the ‘ordinary people’ who, being part of the communities or the guerrilla movement, are the ones experiencing the conflict on a daily basis. This lack of a bottom-up analysis may contribute to the misunderstanding of why many previous peace processes have failed (Bakiner 2019), or have not been properly implemented on the ground (Franco, de Oliveira, and Ali 2018). In a context of ‘neoliberal peace’ – i.e. the establishment of peace focused on the pacifying of territories attractive to foreign investments (Santos 2017)⁵ – understanding the role of the communities and the controversial relationship between them and the guerrilla movement is critical to grasp the functioning of local economies and social activities. In the case of the Colombian Pacific, the latter both influence and are influenced by politics promoting free

⁵ On this subject, it is interesting to follow the long and detailed talk by Luis Eduardo Celis, journalist and expert on the Colombian conflict. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUriM--9ys0>

market competition (Lunstrum et al. 2016; Oslender 2007; Velez-Torres and Varela 2014) in accordance to the importance the Colombian state has conferred on the Pacific region (Asher and Ojeda 2009), particularly in light of future investments (Zeiderman 2016).

In general, the literature on armed revolutionary groups is based on interviews with ex-combatants (Camelo 2020; Drouhaud 2008; Roldan Valencia, Giraldo, and Florez 2008), or books written by them (Medina Gallego 1996; Rodríguez Bautista and García 2017; Trinidad et al. 2013). There is a considerable amount of work published on the FARC-EP in Colombia (Carlo Nasi 2003; Ferro 2002; García Pataquiva 2009; Olave Arias 2013) and internationally (Labrousse 2005; K. Theidon 2009a; Van Broeck et al. 2019), as well as work that discusses the displacement caused by their transit (Helg 2019), demobilization (Salazar, Wolff, and Camelo 2019; Nussio 2012), or their life in prison (Bernasconi 2018; De Dardel 2016). The literature on the Colombian armed conflict is infinitely more extensive than the few authors so far listed. It is not my goal to provide an extensive bibliographical review,⁶ but I certainly cannot avoid mentioning the essential text "*La Violencia en Colombia*" (2005), where Priest Germán Guzmán Campos, and sociologists Orlando Fals Borda and Eduardo Umaña Luna, offer a detailed archaeology of the Colombian conflict discussing its temporality and authors.⁷ One topic covered in the second tome relevant to this thesis is that of abandoned childhood. As the authors write, "It is not just a matter of taking repressive action against adult criminals. There is something that has priority and is more important: it is a preventive policy for the defense of the social organism that must cover each and every one of the fronts of obligatory governmental assistance. The protection of minors is perhaps the most relevant of these topics" (ibid. 234). As we will see in this thesis, this is an aspect interpreted and applied differently by the guerrilla movement and the Colombian army. Another critical tool that can help anyone studying this conflict is the numerous texts and reports published by the Center for Historical Memory.⁸ Among them, central to the reading of this thesis, are Katherine Rojas López's (2017) on the recruitment of minors in the conflict and Rocío Martínez Montoya's on the inscription of the war in the body.⁹ Another key text is that of the Interethnic Truth Commission on the impact of

⁶ A detailed bibliographic review that is particularly interesting to this research since it provides an intersectional focus can be found in Juan Diego Mejía Estrada's degree thesis (2020).

⁷ Also elucidating is the more contemporary approach of Carlos Veladía, a former ELN guerrilla and now working as a lecturer and peace manager. See <https://www.publico.es/internacional/internacional-carlos-velandia-exguerrillero-eln-acuerdos-paz-colombia-han-rodeados-traicion-muerte.html>

⁸ See <https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/publicaciones/>

⁹ See http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/descargas/informes-accesibles/guerra-inscrita-en-el-cuerpo_accesible.pdf

the conflict in the Chocó department, analyzing the various subregions.¹⁰ Spanning beyond Colombia, there are two Special Issues of the journal "Participation and Conflict" that offer interesting analogies between various armed movements and their relations with social movements.¹¹ Nonetheless, although there are many interviews and reports with commanders of various guerrilla groups produced by journalists, accounts by scholars who have confronted daily life on a warfront are rare. Even where scholarly accounts exist, they are mostly based on a short stay of perhaps a few days, enough to get a taste for the logic that governs life in the forest, but not enough to contact the daily practices and social fabric of the guerrilla community, or the reality of war, the violence of which has profound repercussions on the implementation and constitution of an armed movement. The impossibility of a longer stay within a guerrilla group, however, is not only due to the researcher's will or to the risks linked to armed conflict, but is primarily influenced by the political conditions of the country concerned. In fact, the entire wide-ranging literature on Colombian armed groups is built on interviews with former combatants. This is because the Colombian government's political, media, and military repression is a drastic deterrent for anyone interested in studying insurgent movements. An interesting exception is the documentary "*Fusiles de madera*"¹² ("Wooden Rifles"), where two students had the opportunity to film an ELN political-military training school. This documentary shows the criteria to be fulfilled by those wishing to become guerrillas. It considers the view of the instructors and that of the participants. Offering images from inside an ELN front line is also the photographic work of Stephen Ferry,¹³ whom, as chance would have it, I had the pleasure to meet precisely during my fieldwork in the middle of the Pacific Forest.

For my part, the only reason I was able to carry out my research was because of my Swiss citizenship and residency. Without this identity, my work in Colombia would have landed me in prison or in a tomb long ago. Even so, as the Colombian justice system does not understand the importance of this research to the construction of peace, nor this work's strictly academic, I am now unable to go back to my country – for how long, I do not know.

The main objective of this work is to make use of my privileges to create a space for discussion about a topic that is permanently condemned or concealed by the Colombian

¹⁰ See <https://choco.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Info-impactos-%C3%A9tnico-territoriales-del-conflicto-armado-en-el-Choc%C3%B3.pdf>

¹¹ See <http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco/issue/current>

¹² See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mjJIQCA9xk&t=16s>

¹³ <http://stephenferry.com/>

government. I contest such a silence and argue that the reasons for the continued existence of this guerilla movement should be a part of debate in the public domain, as the presence of the ELN directly or indirectly affects the lives of thousands of people across the national territory.

My ambition is to provide a way to reflect on the ELN as an armed revolutionary movement that is evolving and transforming over time. Above all, my argument is that the boundaries between the ELN and civil society are not the clear line presented by the state: terrorists vs. society. On the contrary, my research shows that it is rather a porous zone, where people and information are constantly transiting, shaping the ideologies and practices of both spaces. Respectively, the ELN appears to be a snapshot of a wider social malaise that, due to an increasingly discriminatory economic system, is palpable in Colombia and globally.

My study sits at the intersection between three disciplinary fields of anthropology: the anthropology of the state, the anthropology of revolution, and the anthropology of neoliberalism. Combining the existing literature in these three disciplinary fields will have a double advantage: first, my research will address existing gaps in each of these areas; and second, such an integrative theoretical approach enables me to depict the capacity of the ELN to endure in its resistance and reveal its role as a multifaceted regional governing body, through different lenses of analysis. One factor that made the ELN an outstanding case study in the first phase of my fieldwork was its political context: a guerrilla movement loyal to its Marxist-Leninist origins, persisting in more traditional strategies of armed resistance, while simultaneously embracing a neoliberal peace process with one of the most right-leaning governments of Latin America.

The thematic core of my Ph.D. project concerns the anthropology of the state, including praxis at the margins (Das and Poole 2004; Jusionyte 2015a) and against the state (Clastres 2011 [1974]; Graeber 2009; Scott 2009). As a theoretical field, the anthropology of the state considers statehood as a heterogeneous entity, a hodgepodge of social practices, asymmetrical power relations, multiple institutions, and structures confining the coexistence among the myriad of actors that make up human society. Unlike perceptions that see the state as a historical process culminating in the exodus of nation-state, or as a political organization that can be conceptually simplified and translated into a homogeneously definable whole, the anthropology of the state is interested in the complexity that characterizes the state apparatus and its constant local transformations, as well as those related to the interactions of the state in the international arena. At this juncture, such a theoretical approach problematizes the state as a coherent unit

and studies the interactions between the various actors that compose it – for example between armed groups and civil society.

In analyzing the everyday practices that shape, transform, or deconstruct the state, my research shows that the ELN as a political-military organization is undoubtedly an actor that plays a predominant role in (re)definition of the state. This is especially true in the Colombian Pacific, a region recognized as historically and intentionally abandoned (Uribe 2018), often a victim of the state's criminalization and persecution (Doran 2017). This legacy of neglect and exploitation is linked to the region's immense richness in natural resources over which the state is set on reclaiming legal and political control through (now halted) peace talks and continuous military operations. Localizing and defining the margins of the state is of great importance because it is where the contradictions related to economic and social policies promoted by governments supportive of the neoliberal model materialize. In the margins, local populations live in a constant state of exception because said extractive policies are applied far from any institution that can control their practices.

Although various studies investigate the Colombian economy of war (Richani 1997; Suarez 2000; Sweig 2002) or its manifestation (LeoGrande and Sharpe 2000; McDougall 2009; Sanin 2008), only few texts – written by guerrilleros themselves (Arenas 2009; Hernández 2006; Corol and Obregón 2009) – portray the everyday life of the guerrilla. Here I must mention "Papá son los muchachos" (2017), the autobiography of Nicolás Rodríguez (known affectionately as Gabino), until a few months ago, the ELN's Maximum Commander. Not only in this autobiography does Gabino recount anecdotes that have marked the history of the ELN, such as the first march, of which today he is the only survivor, but with great lucidity, he analyzes the various political contexts that have characterized contemporary Colombia. However, what perhaps most relates his book to my thesis is that I discovered it during my fieldwork. In the study hours, when the guerrillas would group for discussions or collective readings, in addition to the Internal Regulation, it was Gabino's work that was read aloud, thus transforming it from a historical-political training text to a didactic exercise.

In order to illustrate the *modus operandi* of the ELN and its interactions with the communities against the Colombian state, I'll also draw from James Scott's classic study (Scott 1985) on everyday resistance. Such a focus illustrates the logic through which 'relegated people' engage in small acts of rebellion following 'hidden scripts' and practices of mutual aid (P. A. Kropotkin 1902), thus resisting the state without directly confronting it or challenging its norms. My analysis will be further enriched by comparisons with the work of scholars who have studied other guerrilla movements – like the Naxalites in India (Kunnath 2006; Shah

2013), the FMLN in El Salvador (Martín Alvarez and Cortina Orero 2014) or the Zapatistas in Chiapas (Mentinis 2006) – and their controversial relations with states, but also with the international community (Olesen 2004).

The second disciplinary field I engage with is the anthropology of revolution. The latter attempts to bring ethnographic evidence to bear on a literature mostly based on *parcours de vie* of revolutionaries and on analyses, often historical, of completed revolutions. One of the most classic examples of this is Crane Brinton's work, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (Brinton 1965), where he proposes a metaphorical analogy between revolutionary phenomena and disease, more precisely a fever. Through this metaphor, a revolution is divided into stages ranging from premonitory symptoms, to crisis, to convalescence. This leads us to question the very definitions of revolution or revolutionary movements, two concepts being used in a rather confused way, particularly in the common language. As Giordano explains about the word revolution, "There is hardly another term that has been so often and variously misused in political, agitational, everyday, and not least scientific language, such as among historians and social scientists" (Giordano 2000, 1). If history and sociology are interested in revolutionary phenomena in their entirety, it is the domain of anthropology to be interested in the small stories, the minor facts that add up to make up the large mosaic representing moments of radical change. Yet, according to Peter Worsley, "A survey of the social anthropological literature on rebellions and revolutions is a simple undertaking, for it is the absence of such analysis that is so striking" (Worsley in B. Thomassen 2012, 679). The most logical reasons for this deficiency might be simple to identify. First, anthropologists have historically tended to engage in the study of 'small societies' (Kuklick 2008), while revolutions generally take place in 'complex state-based societies' (B. Thomassen 2012). Second, anthropologists lean toward the study of everyday forms of political behavior rather than 'high politics' (ibid.). Lastly, only very few anthropologists have found themselves in war-like situations and decided to remain to conduct ethnographic research (ibid.). In this case, the peculiarity of an anthropological approach is its capability of focusing on social transformations correlated to the revolutionary project and not only to the action of violence associated with it (Holbraad 2018). Particularly, anthropologists should be able to pluralize the concept of revolution and relate its understanding to that of the very people involved in it (ibid.). In this sense, my ethnography aims to give a voice to the actors on the front lines fighting to carry out the ELN's revolutionary project. In doing so, my work will show the ideology to which the guerrillas refer in their actions – both military and political – and the social transformations hoped for through these actions. I hope to aid an

understanding of the practical and ideological changes and transformations that the ELN has undergone during its sixty years of existence.

James DeFronzo (2007) suggests that with the end of the Cold War and the fragmentation of the Soviet Union, worldwide Marxist revolutionary movements have changed their goals and practices. Many of these have shifted from classical revolutionary models of the twentieth century which centered on overthrowing the capitalist state through armed uprising, toward new models that revolve around ‘revolutions by constitution,’ as in the case of Bolivia (Goodale 2019). What makes the ELN a particularly interesting case is that for this politico-military organization, any past or upcoming negotiation with the state is seen as a tactical rather than strategic move – in other words: explore the possibilities for dialogue instead of assuming them to be the only way forward. For years the ELN has been looking for a peace agreement, but it has remained unwilling to open itself up to concessions – such as total demobilization – without its political integrity being guaranteed. In any case, despite these changes in revolutionary praxis, anthropology of revolution remains of great utility if we want to retain the capacity for thick description of the ideologies as well as the practices characterizing post-revolutionary movements (Bubandt 2009; Holloway 2019; Seymour 2006; Szokolczai 2015). Finally, if the task of anthropologists is to bring to light local phenomena, individual choices, and daily changes, the objective becomes more complicated when research is carried out in the midst of a conflict. Although other anthropologists have begun to collect evidence based on fieldwork directly in a warfront, this type of study continues to be marginal in the field of the anthropology of revolution. I aspire to help fill this gap, aligning myself with several previous studies like that of the Rojava armed movement (Schmidinger 2018), characterized by many as an avatar of a feminist armed struggle, and Alpa Shah’s *Nightmarch* (2018a) on the Naxalites in India.

More generally, my Ph.D. project will locate the ELN struggle in the broader context of global neoliberalism (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003), in which Colombia can be seen as a particularly important Latin American exemplar (Hristov 2015). The anthropology of neoliberalism will provide a framework for examining the ways in which ‘neoliberal peace’ (Santos 2017) becomes a mechanism that deepens inequalities, reinforces structural violence (Farmer 2004), and aligns with the logics of capitalist accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2005). Additionally, in order to uncover the consequences of this broader logic for the Colombian Pacific, I will take into account the work of scholars debating on this specific region – especially Arturo Escobar’s considerations on social movements (Escobar 2003; 2004a; Grueso, Rosero, and Escobar 2003) and their understanding of development (Escobar 2004b). Finally, Ieva Jusionyte’s analysis of what she calls ‘practices of camouflage’ (2015b) will be

crucial in order to unpack the manner through which the state disguises or hides its often-excessive use of violence against both the guerrilla movements and the local populations. Transposing my ethnographic research to a more global analysis that considers the role of the capitalist mode of production in the neoliberal order allows me to draw parallels with other similar cases around the world, thus reinforcing once again the overall objective of this thesis, which is to stress the importance of dialogue as the only desirable solution in conflict resolution.

HOW TO THINK-FEEL THIS TEXT

The concept of *thinking-feeling* (*sentipensar*) is often associated to the cosmivision of thinkers from the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, who, in their ontological struggle over a world in which many worlds fit, i.e. their struggle to foster the *pluriverse* (Escobar 2016, 13–14), emphasize the importance of *thinking-feeling* and therefore co-existing with the earth in a harmonious and mutually developing way. The term appears to have been introduced into academia by Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda (1984), who acknowledges having borrowed it from the "swamp communities" of the Bolívar Department, which they use it to explain their way of interacting with the environment using both, heart and mind.¹⁴ Subsequently, the term has also been adopted by professor Saturnino della Torre, who defines it as, "the fusion of two ways of perceiving and interpreting reality through reflection and emotional impact, until they converge in the same act of knowledge and action. *Thinking-feeling* is the intensely conscious encounter between feeling and reason."¹⁵ This concept was further popularized by the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, who, after hearing it as well from a fisherman in the "swamp communities," committed himself to writing and speaking in a feeling-thinking manner.¹⁶ As he wrote in his *Libro de los Abrazos* (2009) "I like thinking-feeling people, who do not separate reason from the heart. Who feel and think at the same time. Without divorcing the head from the body, nor emotion from reason."¹⁷ The idea, then, is to bring together two concepts, thinking and feeling, which, like those of humans and nature, have been dissociated by Western science over the centuries. For this reason, the term has become central to what Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar calls the *Epistemologies of the South*, i.e. a framework that "provides workable tools for all those of us who no longer want to be

¹⁴ See also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbJWqetRuMo>

¹⁵ <https://vibromancia.com/sentipensar-escuela-de-emociones/>

¹⁶ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUGVz8wATls>

¹⁷ My translation from the Spanish.

complicit with the silencing of popular knowledges and experiences by Eurocentric knowledge” (2016, 13).

My thesis fits within this Latin-American current of thought. While the present text is undoubtedly academic, it is one that must be felt. If anthropology is the science that studies human beings in their cultural specificities, I argue that the first thing that should be apparent to the ethnographers confronted with their fieldwork is that there is no culture without emotions, and no understanding without heart. Decolonizing anthropology, therefore, also means returning emotions back to the center of academic production. As Mexico's network of Indigenous Investigators (IINPIM A.C.) – profoundly inspired by the indigenous women's movement – write in their book *Thinking-Feeling Gender* [...],

“Our deep dedication is to return the heart to the forgotten cosmos and universe. It is therefore the act of looking at ourselves, to make an immersion to the center of our heart as a necessary and conscious fact of subjects-people, subjects-collectives [...]. It is necessary to re-think ourselves, *sentipensarnos* [thinking-feeling us], *sentisabernos* [knowing-feeling us] historical subjects that allow us to re-emerge as human beings and for this, un-apprehend the apprehended and un-think the system, out of it or otherwise” (Méndez Torres et al. 2013, 104).¹⁸

I therefore argue that in a society increasingly disconnected from the world in which we live, where incessant production seems to be the only end of humanity, the task of intellectuals must be to educate new generations by sharing and collectively building knowledge that enables us to evolve as humans – a race in a pluriverse of living beings.

Uniting the three fields of anthropology aforementioned is the analytical framework of intersectionality, a concept through which I aspire to translate and make legible the social complexity the guerrillas of the National Liberation Army navigate in the Colombian Pacific. To help me weave together the various categories analyzed in this thesis, I also draw on the work of philosophers Deleuze and Guattari, who in their *A Thousand Plateaus* (2013b), propose the concepts of *smooth space*, *striated space*, *nomadic society*, *state apparatus*, and *war machine*. Briefly, the *striated space* is that of the state and capitalism. Resisting it is the *smooth space* inhabited by *nomadic societies*. The *state apparatuses*, organized and structured as the state is, but also a movement such as the ELN, continuously try to capture and striate the *smooth space*, whose only defense is the *nomadic war machine*, in this thesis, epitomized by the spirit

¹⁸ My translation from the Spanish.

of resistance and the fuel that drives those at the intersection of various systems of oppression to fight for justice. This theory is an abstract model and therefore should not be understood as an exercise of structural anthropology that seeks to abstractly categorize a social phenomenon, but rather as a map that might help to better depict or codify the complexity of Colombian conflict on the margins of the state.

This work is divided into three parts. Part I is entitled “*We are not a vacation resort!*,” which recalled a discussion I had with Commander Marcos (see ethnographic vignette that opens Chapter 2) that nicely shows the struggles that I encountered during my fieldwork. In this first Part, Chapter 1 introduces the analytical framework of intersectionality, explaining why, in order to portray the ELN guerrillas, it is crucial to analyze their profile at the intersection of race, class, gender, and the environment. Chapter 2 interrogates the methodological aspects of this research. It opens with a section dedicated to the ethics and methods embraced during my fieldwork and in the writing of this thesis in order to address the security and the protection of the people involved. Three sections then follow, discussing i) the access to the field as a longitudinal ethnographic process based on contacts at different levels; ii) my positionality as an anthropologist and how this has been constantly renegotiated, and iii) the political and social compromise to which I adhere, inscribing my thesis in an engaged and decolonial anthropology. Finally, Chapter 3, offers a historical contextualization of the Colombian internal conflict, presents its main actors, and provides an understanding of the factors that make the ELN the most prominent guerrilla movement active at the national level today.

After this introduction to my research and contextualization of the ELN's struggle comes Part II, entitled “*We are going deep into the forest!*,” a reference to a conversation I had with Commander Ernesto (see ethnographic vignette that opens Chapter 4) before the months I spent with him throughout the Pacific basin. This second Part presents the ethnographic portion of my thesis in two chapters. Chapter 4 describes how the ELN guerrillas live in the Colombian Pacific, what their knowledge of the environment is, how they move, how they eat, how they sleep, what economies sustain them, and their interactions with the local rural/ethnic communities. Chapter 5 explains the construction of social cohesion that binds the guerrillas of this revolutionary movement. It explores the discourse and ideology the ELN uses to justify its presence as an armed actor, and the ongoing narratives that create a collective identity.

Part III is entitled “*We must liberate people from their oppressors and nature from capitalism!*,” which again, recalls an exchange I had with Commander Ernesto (see ethnographic vignette that opens Chapter 7), this time, regarding the environmental policy

embraced by the ELN. Part III closes this thesis with four chapters that frame and depict the intersectional categories used to ethnographically analyze the guerrillas and their interactions in and out the Pacific rainforest. Chapter 6 discusses the context of structural violence in which Colombian racialized youth are enmeshed before and after they adhere to the ELN. Chapter 7 includes the environment in the intersectional reading proposed by this thesis. It puts the political ecology of the ELN and ethnic communities in tension with the apolitical ecology of the state. Chapter 8 explains the relationship between race, class and ethnicity, and argues why these identity categories are fundamental for understanding the interactions between the ELN and the ethnic communities in the Pacific basin. Chapter 9 looks at gender relations in the guerrilla movement and describes the construction of concepts surrounding masculinity and femininity in the ELN. Finally, my conclusion brings together the various themes discussed in the thesis and sheds light on methodological and theoretical contributions in the various fields of anthropology addressed in this thesis, as well as its contribution in a broader political sphere.

In resonance with the idea of *thinking-feeling* expressed above, I present an ethnographic vignette at the beginning of each chapter. These are excerpts from my personal diaries, which have the aim of positioning the reader on my side, while I am entering, investigating, and sharing experiences with the ELN guerrillas moving around the Colombian Pacific. These vignettes reveal my emotions, my fears, but also show my vulnerability with regard to the goals proposed by this thesis. In fact, my reflections are still often imprisoned in a mindset drawn from the Western and masculine world, proving how the liberation of the academy from hegemonic preconceptions has as a condition the liberation of the ethnographer from his privileged reading that often participates in the systems of oppression that he himself wants to fight. Ultimately, these vignettes are echoes of joy, anger, internal struggles, and suffering, and as Rechtman suggests, "the process of writing these experiences should be like echoes bounced off the ethnographer" (2017, 140).

CHAPTER 1

INTERSECTIONAL REVOLUTION: MULTIPLE STRUGGLES AGAINST AND BEYOND THE STATE

“Feminism insists on methods of thought and action that urge us to think about things together that appear to be separate, and to disaggregate things that appear to naturally belong together.”
– Angela Y. Davis



Black guerrilla woman holding a flower – Photo courtesy of Commander Ernesto

Pacific basin, January 25th, 2020

Tomorrow I have to leave, and although I know I will be back to visit Commander Ernesto as soon as I have a chance, I have a feeling it won't be until August or December 2021, since ahead of me, I have an entire thesis to write. I had hoped to be able to play one more game of chess, at least to leave with the score at 22-22, but perhaps being down one game only leaves our challenge open. At the end of the day, just as debts should only be settled immediately with strangers or with those you no longer want to deal with, the same goes for a chess tournament, which I hope will last as long as my friendship with Ernesto.

I've finished reading my Dostoevsky, and I'm bored out of my mind. I don't feel like taking ethnographic notes, and I'm too tired to think, but once I'm back in the cold of Boston, I'm going to lock myself in the library and work on this idea of intersectionality. The more I think about it, the more convinced I am that it is necessary for my thesis. Nothing to do with that gender and political correctness to wash your conscience, this is about understanding and making people understand war. Other than right against left, or Marxism against capitalism, here it is the rich against the poor, the white elite against the Black and indigenous people, men against women, bulldozers against trees. Since I have time, I'll write down three anecdotes that are going around in my head and who knows, maybe I can use them in my thesis.

The first one I think I had already written down somewhere, but I keep thinking about it. If I'm not mistaken, it was just a year ago that I was moving around the communities with Angela. One day, I was finishing reading A Man, by Oriana Fallaci, when Angela sat down next to me and asked me what I was reading. I still remember the amazement and joy that hit me when, as if it was the most normal thing in the world, she told me that she had read it too. Of course, I was the ignorant one. I didn't know the book, and indeed I discovered it in my father's library two days before leaving, but I never expected that a guerrilla woman would end up reading the same book in Spanish in the middle of the Pacific rainforest. The anecdote, however, is that after discussing for a moment how compelling Papadopoulos' revolutionary adventures were, Angela was silent for a few minutes and then out of nowhere exclaimed, "Sometimes I wonder why these stories never feature a Black man, or a Black woman, as the main character? If that Greek had been black? If Ché Guevara had been a Black woman? Maybe everything would be different don't you think?" And then she added, "Sometimes it's tiring being Black." As she said these words her gaze grew sad, and I really struggled to hold back my tears.

Every time Angela spoke, I learned something, and more than anything, her reasoning always led me to confront my own limitations. It bothers me to admit it, but sometimes I think just like a white western man. I am so grateful to have met people like Angela in my life! Without her presence or those of other women guerrillas, Black and indigenous, I surely would have never understood the depth and complexity that lies beneath the Colombian conflict.

Now I feel only anger thinking about the other two anecdotes, so I'll write them down quickly and then I'm going to see if anyone has time and desire to play chess or chat. If not I'm going to see if I can help in the kitchen. To stay here in my hammock, I might as well put on an explorer's hat and read Levi-Strauss.

I would like to accompany Angela to give lectures around the world, at least it would silence a few people. First of all, the little student from the Colombian elite who came to Harvard after a bachelor's degree at Los Andes, and who at the conference a few months ago on the borderlands in Colombia came up with the forward-looking question: "But if we want to help these people develop and get out of poverty, how do we help them get out of their culture of conflict and teach them to think democratically?" Poor guy, after all, he never made it out of the upper echelons of Bogotá, but once he finishes his master's degree at Harvard it will be people like him who will govern. I wonder how we can help them develop and get out of their bubble.

And then that lady I talked to after a yoga class in Cali last month. Drinking tea, she asks me what I was studying and I told her Black communities in the Pacific. Her response, "Hey no young man, be careful around there – those people are monkeys!" Monkeys she told me! I wanted to throw the hot tea in her face, and I regret I didn't do it. I'm dumb to go to yoga in Cali, though. What did I expect? If she had seen me in the Chocó she wouldn't have even spoken to me, but being in a yoga studio apparently made me a different person, a civilized man instead of a savage. Cali is the second-largest city in Latin America with the highest Black population, but for the city's elite, it is a white space to defend against Black people's invasion. It's so sad that we still have to talk about race, class and gender in 2020. Strange thing these human beings. "What a rat race" as Bob says. In Angela's world with a Black woman Ché Guevara, we would also need a Bob Marley singing in Spanish, maybe Colombia would be different. Who knows!

Well, I've written enough for today. I'd better go see if Ernesto is free or if not, have a chat with some guerrillas. At least I'll learn something useful and maybe I'll be able to write some interesting and valid thoughts for the liberation struggle!

The purpose of the present chapter is to sketch the analytical framework of my research, that is, to explain how I make use of intersectionality within the anthropology of the state as a tool to expose and analyze the logics that undergird structural violence and ultimately the making of the ELN in the Colombian Pacific. I do not propose intersectionality as a theory, but instead as a framework to be used to interrogate predefined identities – i.e. categories – and reveal not only the tensions and contradictions that lie within such pre-established groups, but in particular to highlight the problems that a monolithic approach entails. Although in this research I often refer to the ELN, the state, and the ethnic communities, the very use of intersectionality (notably in Part III of this dissertation) serves to show how these are not homogeneous groups. For example, while I discuss the state as an oppressive apparatus, I'm aware that there are many people who work for and with the state with the vocation of doing good and helping in the social and economic development of the country. I doubt how possible this is within a structure that, as Bakunin (2016) explains, principally allows the domination of one class over others. But like any good anarchist, I too go voting and support any person who tries to make a difference from within the power structures. The opposite argument applies to ethnic communities, which are often romanticized or used as discursive categories (see Chapter 8). It is crucial to recognize that there are differences between these groups as well as within them. In every community, there are those who prioritize personal welfare over collective welfare. But more importantly, while alliances are often created in the defense of common interests, not all communities are advocating, for example, the same vision of both social and economic development. In this thesis, intersectionality plays a particularly central role in showing group heterogeneity in the ELN. Although there is constant ideological and structural transformation within this movement, patriarchal as much as racist dynamics are similarly present. For this reason, revolutionary ideals are felt differently depending on the age, rank, origin, and gender of the guerrillas. As a result, conflict itself is experienced differently on racialized bodies, particularly those of women. With this, the goal of this thesis is not to denounce these practices in order to discredit the ELN, nor to say that this movement should have a Black woman in its Central Command. Of course, that would be a wonderful thing, but my conviction is that policies of representation are only useful when they are followed by structural change. Hence, my suggestion is rather that the ELN recognizes the presence of these discriminatory dynamics within its ranks, and when possible, support those who are structurally marginalized in their political-military formation so that guerrillas from ethnic communities also have the same chance to advance in the ELN's structures as those from urban backgrounds. To be clear, this last argument of mine is not to be understood in favor of war, but on the contrary, in favor of

peace. I contend that better education and political training of young ethnic guerrillas will enable them to play a more active role in peacebuilding in the event of future negotiations.

My suggestion is to present intersectionality as an analytical framework that is simultaneously a liberating practice: liberating the anthropology of the state, the anthropologist who studies the state, and possibly liberating those who work for, with, and against the state. As Mara Viveros argues, “it is not enough to ask whether [*intersectionality*] is a theory, a method, a perspective, an analytical category or simply a legal one; it is necessary to formulate questions according to the objects of study” (2016, 15). Accordingly, my use of intersectionality is a response to my main research question: *how can revolutionary groups reveal conditions of social inequalities worldwide?* It is only by investigating the structural reasons that lead a certain type of youth – poor, Black, indigenous, etc. – to join armed groups, that it is possible to gain an understanding of what is really at stake in an armed conflict like the one in Colombia.

Despite anthropology's claim to elevate itself to a discipline that studies "others" through "the gaze of others," as I argue throughout this work, anthropology often remains a field that continues to interpret the world in its narrative and analytical ethics through the logic of Western thought inherited from the Helleno-European system (Dussel 2013). The pretense is to read the state through the eyes of the oppressed, but the power of translation remains in the hands of the oppressors, what Chandra Mohanty calls “the context of the global hegemony of western academia” (in Suárez-Navaz and Hernández Castillo 2008, 118).¹⁹ For Mohanty, particularly while discussing gender, “these works have political effects and implications beyond their feminist or disciplinary audience. One of these significant effects is that the dominant ‘representations’ of Western feminism huddles up [*confabula*] with imperialism in the eyes of particular women in the Third World” (ibid.).

As I admit in the vignette above, I am aware that Mohanty’s observations also apply too often to me. For instance, and it is imperative to state this, my original research plan did not involve the use of intersectionality, but rather adhered to a classic Marxist approach to an equally classic revolutionary movement. It was only once in the field, surrounded by Black and indigenous women, and amazed by their leading role, that I realized that a mere ideological analysis would not have reflected the world that was unfolding before my eyes. It was my fieldwork that imposed on me the use of intersectionality, and taught me to think in a different way. As the Zapatistas say, I had to unlearn to return to learning.

¹⁹ My translation for this article in Spanish.

The exercise I propose in this thesis challenges classical interpretations of the state and its antagonists, and at the same time is a constant recognition of the limits of the ethnographer in the search for another language. I see this as “[...] the first constitutive moment of the ethical process which is necessary in order to undertake the liberation of [anthropology]²⁰” (Dussel 2013, 52).

The central argument I develop is that in order to understand how the ELN has established itself as a primary actor in the Pacific basin, and to grasp the continued existence of a revolutionary guerrilla movement in the twenty-first century, one must move away from a purely ideological reading. Instead, I suggest we must favor an inquiry that investigates the relationships of the social fabric that gives cohesion to the group, as well as those that bind the group to the space that surrounds it – i.e. the environment and other communities in the territory. Through this analytical entry point, it becomes possible to illustrate how the ELN and the ethnic communities in the Pacific may be linked by familial, economic and social ties based on common needs of resistance to or survival in the face of the state. In addition to the categories of gender, race, and class, I argue that the environment is another factor that shapes collective identities and ideologies. While conducting research in a rural setting, the environment cannot be seen as a separate object of study. On the contrary, it is the constant interaction with the environment that shapes the agrarian and mining activities carried out by the communities, as well as the warfare activities undertaken by the guerrillas. For people that are intrinsically linked to their surroundings, the environment becomes an important identity trait. It shapes the cosmovision of the ethnic groups, and structures the environmental policies of the ELN. In this work, I juxtapose the environment with the categories of race, class, and gender, not as an additional category of intersectionality, but as the whole that contains, shapes, influences, and is in turn influenced by, the mentioned categories. Phrased otherwise, systems of oppression have a distinct effect on those, such as guerrillas and ethnic communities, who live in close relation to an environment that is itself oppressed by the state's exploitative economic policies, as is Colombia's Pacific region.

My approach is continuous with the goals that I present in chapter 2: decolonizing anthropology and fostering a deeper engagement with one's fieldwork. This approach assists in decolonizing through its emphasis on the historical power relations upon which the state is built, while going beyond a classical Marxist reading in highlighting the importance of racial and gender heterogeneity within the class struggle. Such an approach supports a greater

²⁰ *Philosophy* in the original text.

anthropological engagement insofar as it aims to make anthropology a tool in favor of social peace, and opens up avenues of reflection on the multiple facets that must be addressed in the search for this objective. Again, I embrace Chandra Mohanty's main claim, namely that of “the urgent political need to form strategic alliances that cut across national, class and racial boundaries,” and her contention that “It is not the center that determines the periphery, but the periphery that, in its limiting quality, determines the center” (in Suárez-Navaz and Hernández Castillo 2008, 151). Accordingly, displaying the Colombian armed conflict through the eyes of guerrilla youth who grew up on the margins of the state, allows me to, on the one hand, address the hegemonic identities to which the youth compare themselves (see Chapter 9), and on the other hand, demonstrate how the ELN's persistence in the Pacific basin or that of other armed groups globally are a response to what Mara Viveros refers to as “the systemic power of global capitalism” (2016, 13). To conclude, I would like to stress the importance of this approach to the production of subordinate knowledge that hopefully may one day assume a central role in moments of transition such as a peace process. For Du Bois (2020), the threat to the capitalist mode of production in nineteenth-century America lay in the periphery where the masses of Africans who were nothing more than enslaved peasants were located. Even if some argue that revolutionary armed struggle is becoming anachronistic, what is certain is that the ideologies that have long sustained it are transforming and emerging in new ways. They denounce from the margins and continue to influence the form in which knowledge develops in the center. In other words, the abnegation of otherness – the poor, the Black, the indigenous, those with different sexual orientations – is no longer possible even by those at the center of the structures of domination.

INTERSECTIONALITY AS A TOOL AGAINST OPPRESSION

In my use of intersectionality in the anthropology of the state, I'm drawing on an ongoing current of thought and resistance carried out by women, mostly Black and Afro-descendant, inspired by a concept coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw at the end of the 1980s (Crenshaw 1989).

For Crenshaw, the term intersectionality is a category that became necessary to give cognitive and concrete meaning to a long-ignored phenomenon, i.e. the interaction of race and gender as the midpoint for apparently distinctive discriminatory practices (140). According to Crenshaw, law courts offer an example of how the state systematically admits discrimination experienced by Black women only through recognizing one predetermined discriminatory category at a time, whether that of gender *or* that of race. For example, a woman can be denied

a manual job in a factory for being a woman,²¹ and an office position in the same factory for being Black, but since the factory can claim to hire both men and women and both Blacks and whites, it becomes difficult to claim discrimination on the basis of just one of these identity categories.²² A Black woman thus finds herself occluded by a conceptual blind spot. The notion of intersectionality offers a means to analyze a situation where Black women suffer simultaneously from multiple discriminations, but because of the intersection of these, they are unable to direct their accusations at a single target. Of course, over time it has become apparent that this concept does not apply only to Black women, but also to anyone who finds themselves at the intersection of discrimination due to multiple categories of identity, including race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and so on.

More generally, the use of intersectionality in this thesis can perhaps be seen as an indirect response to Judith Stacey's call for a feminist ethnography that "[...] advocates an integrative, trans-disciplinary approach to knowledge which grounds theory contextually in the concrete realm of women's everyday lives" (1988, 21), or more simply as a demonstration of the dynamism of *Black Feminist Thought* (Hill Collins 2000, 37). In this sense, intersectionality seems to demonstrate how "Black women's path to a 'feminist' consciousness often occurs within the context of antiracist social justice projects [...]" (ibid. 31), which increasingly include broader notions of gender, class, and relationships to the environment. As Patricia Hill Collins argues, it is precisely this multi-pronged reading that makes *Black Feminist Thought* a holistic and inclusive, rather than a separatist and exclusionary, approach (ibid. 37). While guerrilla women struggle against the patriarchal structures of Colombian society, discernable also within the ELN ranks, patriarchy itself has different effects on women when categories of race or class cross them (Curiel 2002, 1). For Black and indigenous guerrillas, the struggle is thus not limited to feminist claims, but to the inclusion of the latter in a broader resistance to state hegemony.

Expanding these claims to the scale of the entire guerrilla movement will lead us to touch on the four political approaches to intersectionality proposed by Mieke Verloo (2013), namely the *reactive*, the *pragmatic*, the *substantive*, and the *procedural*.

The first of Verloo's four approaches that aim to abolish intertwined inequalities is the *reactive*. This approach aims to expose governmental strategies that result in stigmatizing

²¹ I am alluding here to the case of Emma DeGraffenreid versus General Motors (Crenshaw 1989, 141–43).

²² See also Kimberlé Crenshaw's 2016 TED talk, https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality/transcript?language=es#t-313236.

targeted groups (2013, 901). An example related to my research is that of the government's media strategy that insists on accusing the ELN of forcibly recruiting youth in ethnic communities in the Pacific. For its part, the ELN and the communities themselves try to unmask this strategy in order to demonstrate that in addition to being false, it ends up stigmatizing the communities not only as merely victims of the guerrilla presence (and not of the discriminatory state economic system), but also as groups incapable of making their own choices, thus reinforcing racist dynamics.

The second approach, is the *pragmatic* one. As the adjective that describes it suggests, it is about “doing with what you have,” or as Verloo explains it, “[...] complex interferences between inequalities do not necessarily require complex new policy instruments or measures” (2013, 902). Although I am of the opinion that without structural change it is difficult to overcome historical injustices, I recall a phrase that professor and activist icon of the U.S. Black movement Angela Y. Davis said to me in Oakland in 2013 in an interview I did with her for my master's thesis on the resistance of a Black community against a river diversion project in the Colombian Northern Cauca. When I asked her how to counter a system with an absolutely lopsided power relation, she replied, “We have to act as if it were possible to radically change the world!” (2013). Her answer alluded to a need for pragmatism – by consciously adopting an attitude of potentiality as a prelude to constructive action in the world. Pragmatism, returning to Verloo's point, means doing exactly what the ELN and the community propose, namely to demand respect for already existing political platforms before trying to open new ones. An example is to demand the implementation of laws (such as the Law'70 for self-determination of Black communities) already signed by the government, but which for the moment only remains a beautiful text on paper.

This second approach, however, does not exclude a path with more radical goals, such as the third approach, which Verloo describes as *substantial* or *structural* (2013, 904). For example, in the 2016-2019 peace process, the ELN aimed to solve the serious environmental problems affecting the country through a radical restructuring of the extractive economic policies of the state, a position also supported by the various ethnic groups.

Finally, the fourth approach that Verloo identifies as necessary in the fight against intersectional injustices is what she calls *procedural*. For Verloo, it is about focusing less on proposals as such, and more on shaping political processes by paying attention above all on who is given voice (2013, 905). An example of this was the first point of the ELN's peace agenda which has as its goal the participation of civil society in the peace process. The active participation of the various groups, organizations, and trade unions would have given a more

open form to the negotiations and allowed for greater involvement of society in the path to peace.

These four approaches are only some of the proposals that assist in what Crenshaw calls political intersectionality (1989). The examples briefly presented here are also meant to elucidate the argument underlying this as well as the next chapters: namely that an intersectional analytical framework not only allows for a better understanding of how systems of the state's oppression function, but also reveals how the ELN's counter-hegemonic struggle is not limited to a classic class struggle, but extends across the multiple categories listed above. This highlights how the ELN, as a politico-military organization or social movement in arms, in its historical positioning beside oppressed groups, is "always shaped by [its] alliances and the connections [it] makes when acquiring the means to advocate [its] cause" (Verloo 2013, 907). In the third part of this dissertation I explore the mechanisms of oppression and their functioning in the four categories of analysis proposed, i.e. that of gender, race, class, and the environment. In many cases, the ELN reproduces within its own structures the same discriminations and coercive dynamics that characterize the hegemonic state apparatus.²³ Yet, investigating these contradictions through a spatio-temporal analysis shows how these contradictions fall back to the state. Also, the government's determination not to compromise with the ELN is due to the government's resistance to questioning the very structures on which the state bases its hegemony. Finally, intersectionality makes it possible to approach the exercise of power more pointedly, thus offering precise paths of resistance for those oppressed by it.

Since intersectionality is a concept increasingly in use in academia and especially in feminist theory, as Sirma Bilge points out, it is crucial to remember its origins in order to avoid what she describes as a grim irony, namely that "a tool elaborated by women of color to confront the racism and heterosexism of White-dominated feminism, as well as the sexism and heterosexism of antiracist movements, [has] become, in another time and place, a field of expertise overwhelmingly dominated by White disciplinary feminists who keep race and racialized women at bay" (2013, 418).

The problem is not only that of the subsequent formulation of theories about racialized groups built around white experiences (Crenshaw 1989, 154–55), but the loss of focus on the primary goal of intersectionality, namely that of demonstrating how political agendas that denounce race or gender discrimination become ineffective when the victims are racialized

²³ As Descola (1988) shows in his critique of Clastres, it is necessary to be cautious about minimizing the existence of power relationships within subordinate groups.

women (ibid. 1991, 1251–52). The subordination of intersectionality to hegemonic structures in the academy only disempowers its subversive force. As Bilge points out, the increasingly apolitical use of intersectionality in academia is what undoes this method, reducing it “into an overly academic exercise of speculative or normative musing” (411). Her criticism is fully shared by those at the forefront of this term, like Ochy Curiel, who stresses the need to reposition this method in a clear decolonizing posture,²⁴ as well as by Crenshaw herself, who states that the theorization of the concept she coined was never her primary concern (in Bilge 2013, 412).

An acknowledgment of these critiques is crucial to the positioning and legitimacy of the use of this tool in my research. My deployment of intersectionality for studying statehood harkens back to the initial vision of this concept, namely that of “[...] generating counter-hegemonic and transformative knowledge production, activism, pedagogy, and non-oppressive coalitions” (ibid. 405). For this reason, my use of intersectionality is not only analytical but also methodological. By this I mean the possibility to use this framework also as a practical – i.e. political – tool. Put otherwise, my goal is to show how the violence perpetrated and suffered by (racialized) guerrillas is not limited to unidirectional causes – towards and against the state – but must be interpreted and analyzed in a broader and more complex system of overlapping oppressions. Furthermore, it is my wish to suggest new concrete avenues and strategies of resistance for subaltern groups against the state and other hegemonic institutions, keeping in mind the concern emphasized by Bilge, and thus the importance of questioning “[...] what the introduction of this particular tool [intersectionality] does for similarly subordinated groups in the local context of its introduction” (2013, 408). Finally, this gives my approach a clear anti-capitalist stance, not only in the critique of a mode of production at the root of the struggles outlined in this thesis, but also towards the appropriation of terms such as intersectionality, development, and sustainability, to name a few, by a dominant ideology. As Bilge aptly describes it by linking back to Stuart Hall (in McClintock et al. 1997), “the flexible accumulation strategies of capitalism found ways to turn these new interests in local and minority difference into new market niches [...]” (2013, 409). Lastly, applying intersectionality to the study of the state enriches existing analyses by emphasizing the significance of a bottom-up approach (Crenshaw 1989, 167) that underpins the centrality of the interaction between gender and race as a prerequisite for asserting identities.

²⁴ See Ochy Curiel, *Sobre la interseccionalidad* (2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bmWZF0jH1Q>.

TOWARDS AN INTERSECTIONAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE STATE

I explained above how my use of intersectionality arose out of my fieldsite. In the next few lines I will present a succinct archaeology of the anthropology of the state in order to shed light on my initial approach, and how it has been complicated and enriched by intersectionality. I want to make clear that the next few pages are not intended to provide an extensive literary review on the anthropology of the state, but to provide a presentation of the authors and texts that have influenced my research. It was my encounter with guerrilla women, Black as much as indigenous, that forced me to open my theoretical horizons and to draw more from non-Western academic production.

Perhaps the first anthropological reflections on the state trace back to the fourteenth century with Ibn Khaldûn's history of civilization and analysis of the *asabiyyah*, or social cohesion (Khaldûn 2000 [1377]), continuing in the seventeenth century with Montesquieu's observation of Western costumes through the eyes of a Persian (Montesquieu 2015 [1721]), and Rousseau's romantic celebration of the *état de nature* as evidence of the original noble human nature (2012 [1755]). These early texts are particularly well-known because they offer an outside look at hegemonic societies, whether Western society as seen from "the Orient" or a "state of nature," or that of the Oriental Dynasties as seen from a nomadic gaze. With the emergence of nation-states and the establishment of anthropology as a discipline at the dawn of the twentieth century, scholars began to investigate the state by examining the systems within it, such as kinship systems (Morgan 1907), segmentary lineages (Evans-Pritchard 1940), and social organization (Fortes 1958). Other scholars were subsequently interested in the genesis of the state (e.g. Clastres 2011 [1974]; Leach 1970; Scott 2017), to the point of evading the dichotomy of state society versus segmented society (Balandier 2013). Unlike the first three authors mentioned earlier, these latter scholars begin to deconstruct the view of a society seen as a monolithic whole, instead focusing on showing its internal heterogeneity and complexity. In this process, they began to consider the role of "minorities" as well as that of women. Margaret Mead's (1973) work stands out during the first half of the twentieth with her study of sexuality in the Samoan islands that indirectly questions the vision Western white patriarchy continues to project about otherness, inside or outside its own geographic boundaries. Nevertheless, these are still works that do not radically question dominant power structures, and indeed, are mostly involved with the colonialist and imperialist projects of the time. More recently, as Akhil Gupta explains, anthropology has approached the state by "[...] focusing on two aspects for analytical clarity: everyday practices, and representations of the state" (Sharma and Gupta 2006, 5). These

two aspects include studies of forms of resistance to the state apparatus in direct (Graeber 2009), indirect (Scott 1985), or gendered (Brown 1995) forms; as well as describing the materialization of hegemonic politics into the everyday lives of those inhabiting particular sites such as the state's borders (Jusionyte 2018) and margins (Das and Poole 2004).²⁵ Although these more contemporary researches shed light on the heterogeneity of the state and illustrate vividly how the state unequally operates and operationalizes its institutions by privileging its economic centers and marginalizing areas of frontier or conflict, the intersection of class, race, and gender is not at the center of the proposed analyses.

Furthermore, to these anthropological readings must be added the analyses of the state carried out from a macroscopic perspective focused on the relations of production (Marx 1990),²⁶ the functioning of hegemonic structures (Gramsci 2015 [1951]) and ideologies (Althusser 2020), the dynamics of power (Bourdieu 2012) and their relation to the production

²⁵ The region from which I look at the state, its structural violence, and the armed conflict, is that of the Colombian Pacific basin and more precisely, the rural areas known as *aquatic space* (see Chapter 4). In other words, I am looking at the state from its margins. By margins, I mean those sites that are apparently beyond the direct control of the state, sites mostly devoid of institutions and services through which the state reminds its subjects of its existence, using the fleeting exhibition of its military apparatus. The margins are often located in the state's geographical peripheries, whether on an urban, regional, departmental, or national scale. However, they are not only territorial, but are also "sites of practice" (Das and Poole 2004, 8), where the legal, political, economic and social order longed for by the state is constantly questioned and challenged. Likewise, as Mariane Ferme points out, the margins are "increasingly porous, and can only be drawn in contingent and uneven ways" (2013, 958). Frequently, as in the Pacific, margins are excluded from the national designs of social progress but are central to global capitalist accumulation networks (Arrighi 2004), which mark them as sites of extraction. Because of this double contradictory nature as sites of exclusion that are simultaneously included in global dynamics, and for their intermittent presence at every scale of analysis, margins assume foremost importance in the study of the state. Inhabitants of the margins yearn for the state to solve their needs, but at the same time fend off its development projects that mask a logic of exploitation and domination. On the margins, consciousness is articulated around daily practices and orally transmitted collective memory. Moving swiftly through the state apparatus, the knowledge that circulates in the margins "anticipate[s] and internalize[s] the unpredictability of violence precisely through the predictability of physical sites where the state exerts its own seemingly arbitrary claims to sovereignty over territories that it clearly cannot control" (Das and Poole 2004, 18). In many ways, the margins resist the state (e.g. Clastres 2010; Graeber 2007; Scott 2009), they cannot evade it. Hence, the relationship between the state and its margins is violent, and in capitalist strategy, the population is nothing more than a pawn expendable to a higher end. As Arrighi explains, "in the territorialist strategy, control over territory and population is the objective, and control over capital the means of state – and war – making. In the capitalist strategy, the relationship between ends and means is turned upside down: control over mobile capital is the objective, and control over territory and population the means" (2010, 35). Aware of the role – superfluous yet central – that they play for the state, it is in the margins that strategies are developed to engage with it, and in one way or another, possibly change its form. What we can learn from the margins, especially when they are designated as war-zones, is how the state apparatus operates within its borders by creating zones of legal exception where the population and the environment can be sacrificed to sovereign power. It follows that the categorization of a given space as intrinsically violent becomes a mechanism that "allows disguising state violence in the form of accidents" (Jusionyte 2018, 212). Finally, an image that I suggest may well epitomize the significance of the margins is that of water on earth. An anthropocentric eye – that of power – sees the earth as continents separated by water. An alien reading sees a planet composed of 75% water that not only surrounds but above all crosses, a small percentage of land emerged. Like water, the margins are polluted, plundered, embanked, and canalized, and yet, they will never be entirely dominated. And it is from the margins that a flood can start at any moment, able to reshape landscapes and recover territories lost in time.

²⁶ My reading of *Capital* is based on the UTET edition in Italian (Marx 2009 [1867]). I refer directly to the Penguin Books edition in English (Marx 1990 [1867]) for all quotations used in this thesis.

of knowledge (Foucault 1994) in the creation of concepts such as race and ethnicity (Balibar 1991), as well as the localization of the state in the world state's system (Wallerstein 2011). Although the latter authors denounce the ways the hegemonic power of the state afflicts various social groups, their analyses lack an accounting of the manner in which various power structures overlap in specific places, and especially on particular individuals. My experiences in the field have opened my eyes to what Richard Wright describes as the necessity "that Blacks transform Marxist critique into an expression of their own emergence as a negation of Western capitalism" (in Robinson 2021, 299). For Wright, the white American proletarian class would not have – and I venture to say, will not have – any chance of success without the support of their Black counterparts. His main argument, applicable also to contemporary Colombia, is that Black people have a privileged position, namely that of a double vision through which they can see from inside and outside society simultaneously as both insiders and outsiders, due to their history of enslavement (ibid. 300). As we will see in Chapter 7, the forced displacement of Black people away from productive lands is a process that did not end with the abolition of slavery in Colombia. For this reason, as Cedric J. Robinson argues, "ineluctably, resistance [is] propelled toward new forms, new consciousness, and new ideologies" (ibid. 312). Due to the ethnic youth of the Colombian Pacific, this process now extends to the point of influencing the ELN's historical ideology.

Influential to my research is the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, whose study of the California prison system (2007) shows how capitalism sustains itself on the continuous reproduction of inequalities that affect those at the intersection of subaltern class, race, and gender. Although it is not my intention to draw a direct analogy between the U.S. state prison system and the ELN, two of Gilmore's arguments cut across the present research and help elucidate why an intersectional analysis, especially the study of race, is central to explaining the existence of the ELN in the Pacific basin. The first of Gilmore's arguments is that of the institutionalization of resistance, closely related to my explanation of the production of ideologies from the margins. As Gilmore writes,

"The professionalization of activism has made many committed people so specialized and entrapped by funding streams that they have become effectively deskilled when it comes to thinking and doing what matters most. What are the possibilities of nonreformist reform – of changes that, at the end of the day, unravel than widen the net of social control through criminalization?" (ibid. 242).

Possibly, a movement like the ELN, which does not have the ambition to institutionalize itself into a political party like the FARC-EP, is in a position to support such kinds of reforms,

particularly if these arise from interactions with the Black as much as the indigenous social base. The condition, however, is not to get caught in the trap of dehumanization through racism, long solidified in countries like Colombia. As Gilmore continues, “in the contemporary world, racism is the ordinary means through which dehumanization achieves ideological normality, while, at the same time, the practice of dehumanizing people produces racial categories” (ibid. 243). The form in which racism is used in the United States to justify a carceral population composed primarily of Blacks and Latinos has no surface correlation with the ELN, yet Gilmore offers tools to better depict what characterizes the ELN in the Pacific basin. The peculiarity of the Western War Front is precisely that it itself lies at the intersection of the two processes described by Gilmore, i.e. processes of dehumanization and the construction of racist categories. The justification of the war against this armed social movement relies on the dehumanization of its members who are represented as terrorists and/or military targets rather than human beings. On the other hand, the fact that this front moves in the Pacific basin and that most of its members are Black or indigenous gives the pro-government media apparatus the opportunity to produce and superimpose two discriminatory layers on one context: first, against the guerrillas, who because of their racialized bodies are shown as violent by nature and consequently as disposable bodies; and second, against local communities, who for their defense of their territory are accused of holding back the nation's economic progress, and voluntarily or involuntarily supplying young recruits to the ELN. The primary goal of my research is to think-feel and thus humanize the main actors of the Colombian conflict. My analysis of the ELN in the Pacific basin, however, allows us to go further, as humanizing the guerrillas in this region simultaneously implies fighting against the production of racial categories used by the media to stigmatize the Pacific's inhabitants as “underdeveloped,” and categories used by state militarism in its making and identification of an enemy.

Finally, following Chandra Mohanty's assertion that a cross-cultural feminist analysis must consider the systems of micro- and macro-politics and economics at play (2003b, 501), I argue anthropology can further benefit from geography and its emphasis on the politics of scale (Smith 2008). The use of intersectionality can thus unveil the workings of gendered scale politics (Klodawsky 2006, 371) through which the state exerts control over the racialized bodies of guerrillas and members of ethnic communities.

Although I wish to avoid categorization, my thesis remains embedded in Marxist and neo-Marxist lines of thought, while incorporating post-modern theorists to better understand the logic on which power relations are built and sustained. Yet throughout my dissertation, I also make reference to anarchist (or anarcho-communist) thought. Not only is anarchism historically

close to anthropology (Graeber 2004), but in its theory and practice it pushes Marxism outside its limits, especially in the analysis of gender, ecology, and above all, race. Like anarchism, intersectionality is also a method that preaches political action (Phoenix and Pattynama 2006), the search for new languages (Crenshaw 1989), and more universal truths (Mohanty 2003b). Both anarchism and intersectionality have a clear decolonizing posture. As Erica Lagalisse asserts in stressing the importance of dialogue between anarcho-feminist and ethnic movements, "Subverting coloniality means transcending secular political economic frameworks because there is more hope for resistance in an enchanted world" (2011, 674).

I also include the philosophers Deleuze and Guattari under the anarchist label, although they never explicitly identified themselves as such. Nevertheless, their work contains principles at the heart of anarchism (Van Heerden and Eloff 2019), and arguably, intersectionality. The two French philosophers propose a scheme for reading intersectionality that has micropolitics as its starting point – a term that came back into vogue in the late 1960s thanks to the feminist motto "the personal is political," emphasizing how every daily practice can be a site of struggle (Shulman and Moore 2021). Deleuze and Guattari come to the same conclusion when they argue, "[...] everything is political, but all politics is at the same time *macropolitical* and *micropolitical*" (2013b, 260). In the *oeuvre*²⁷ of the two philosophers, micropolitics define all practices at the interface between personal characteristics – what they call segments – and institutional micropolitics. Inspired by their readings of anthropology (such as the works of Lévi-Strauss, Evans-Pritchard, Balandier, and Clastres, to name a few), Deleuze and Guattari identify different types of *segmentarity*, i.e. ways through which individuals are classified. For the two philosophers, we are “*segmentarisés* [segmentarized] *binairement*, *circulairement*, and *linéairement*” (2013, 254). *Binary segmentarity* refers to assigned oppositional categories mostly related to issues of gender, class, or race. Yet, these categories are not always limited to two, but may display a pluralism of choices. *Circular segmentarities* are increasingly wide discs or crowns, which organize individuals into groups that can be nested into one another. In modern western societies, a classic *circular segmentarity* would go from the family, to the neighborhood, to the region, the nation, etc. In the Pacific region, a typical *circular segmentarity* goes from the family, to the extended family, to the community, to the territory – i.e. the environment. Instead of the nation-state, I argue that it continues, to the ancestral past which, depending on the ethnic group, goes back to the pre-Colombian landscape, or to the

²⁷ My reading of Deleuze and Guattari is based on the French texts of the Éditions de Minuit (Deleuze and Guattari 2013a [1972]; 2013b [1980]). I refer to English translations for the citations used in this thesis.

African continent. Finally, *linear segmentarities* refer to episodes or processes that people move through over the course of their lives that are associated with changes in status – from student to professional, from single to married, etc. What is central to this schematization is not so much the actuality of these *segmentarities* in general terms, but the fact that these figures, "[...] the binary, the circular, the linear, are taken within each other, and even passing into each other, they transform according to their point of view" (2013b, 254).

Returning to my fieldwork, in this superposition a guerrilla can be an Officer, young, white, female, mother, and therefore in a position with specific power relations vis-à-vis a man, a soldier, a Black female, and so on. As all these individual characteristics have the potential to be connected to other issues, so every *micropolitics* is interconnected to *macropolitics*, and has the ability to influence and transform the latter.

Through my positionality expressed in the introductory vignettes, I also bring into play my own *segmentarity*, i.e. the "I" of the ethnographer that is also transformed by and transformative of its surroundings. In my understanding of the anthropology of the state, I highlight the centrality of an intersectional theory, method, politics, and praxis of struggle, opening space for the embodied praxis of the fieldworker positioned in struggle with a contemporary guerrilla movement in the context of an ongoing war. The goal of this thesis is therefore to offer further engagement and refinement of the concept of intersectionality by inviting the reader to have a glimpse of the internal and affective world of the ethnographer in struggle. The affective struggle itself is a central component of this ethnographic work. I will disclose my internal struggle over how to comprehend an incomprehensible loss – death – and other aspects of injury that accompany the spaces I've been working in. I believe the ethnographer embedded in political struggle shares, to an extent, the affective horizon of her/his interlocutors, binding them together and offering embodied insights into broader social and political questions as they arise – questions that to be answered must first be located in their specific *segmentarities*, so that they can be brought back to the *macropolitics* and the systems of oppression that entangle them.

Ultimately, my use of intersectionality within the anthropology of the state expands my analysis to the massive space where the "I" of the researcher vanishes into the complexity of struggle which constitutes the fieldwork – itself as an intersectional lived and living experience.

CONCLUSION

The ethnographic vignette with which I opened the chapter highlights situations that led me to opt for intersectionality as an analytical framework for my research situated in the field of the anthropology of the state. The presence of so many ethnic women in the ELN, and especially the sharp worldview of guerrilla women like Angela, compelled me to enrich and complicate my thesis with this approach.

My argument is that in political anthropology and anthropology of the state, too often focus is placed on the analysis of only one aspect that causes inequalities, or one way for people to resist. While this may be a negligible failing in some cases, that is not the case in the study of social phenomena located in post-colonial states where race and environmental resource exploitation are predominant aspects in the economies and politics of oppression. In such contexts as interpreting the ELN in the Colombian Pacific, intersectionality aids an interpretation of the complexity of the historical relations that texture the landscape of a space in constant conflict. The analytical framework of intersectionality is also useful in deconstructing a category such as the armed group, as well as in understanding why youth from the margins of the state continue to be attracted to these violent movements. Understanding and considering the multiple *segmentarities* proposed by Deleuze and Guattari helps to illustrate that although, as evident in Chapters 4 and 5, the use of guns, donning a uniform, and access to three daily meals, can be motivations for joining the ELN, the cross-cutting and root reason for any personal motivation is much deeper. It is a social malaise rooted in a global political economy that disproportionately oppresses those at the intersection of multiple discriminatory patterns.

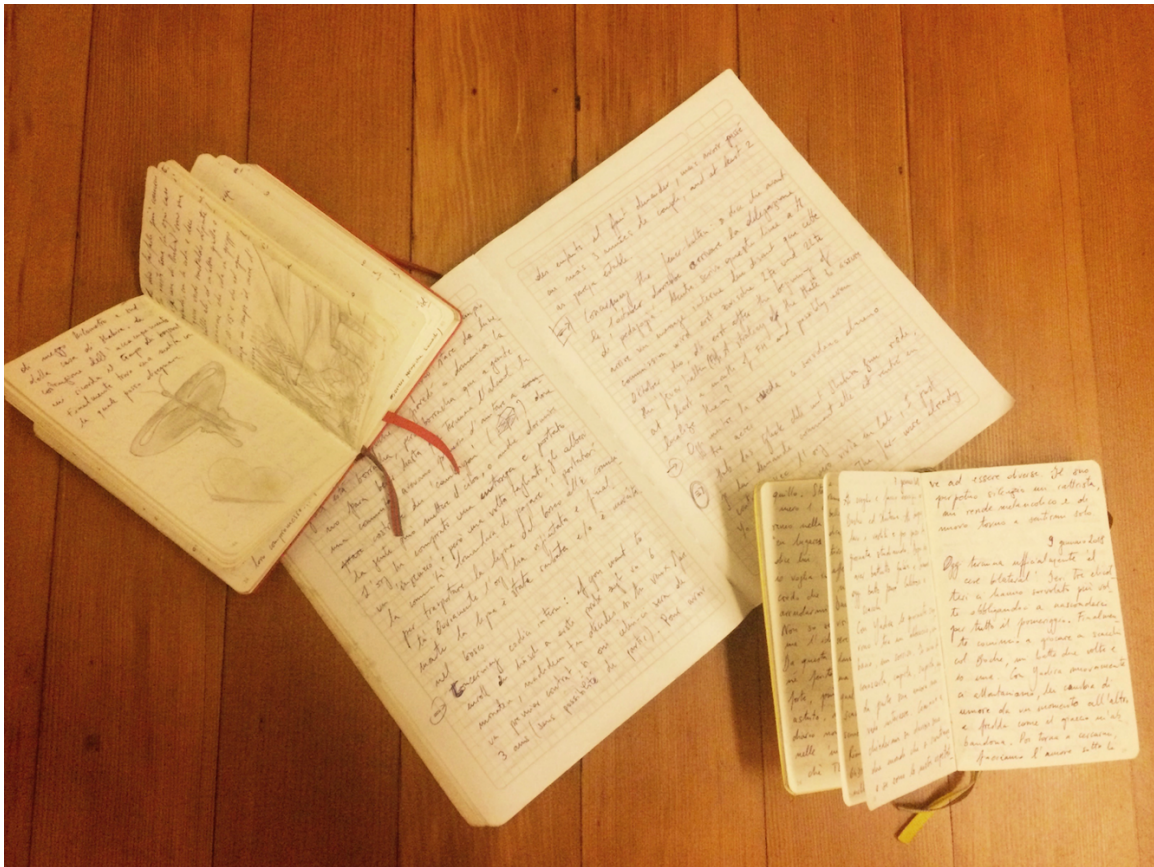
In the next chapter, we will see how my own *segmentarities* have led me to confront various struggles through my ethnographic work – struggles with my interlocutors, but perhaps most importantly, my own internal struggle over my multiple identities, with my fieldwork, and with the challenges present in the latter.

CHAPTER 2

ENGAGING FOR SOCIAL PEACE

*“Vive junto con el pueblo;
No lo mires desde afuera,
Que lo primero es ser hombre,
Y lo segundo poeta.”²⁸*

Atahualpa Yupanqui – *El Poeta*



My notes and diaries – Photo by the author

²⁸ *“Live together with the people; don't look at it from the outside, that the first thing is to be a man, and the second a poet.”*

Pacific basin, January 4th, 2019

After another exhausting day of travel, as the sun was setting, I finally arrived at the home of Francisco and Vanessa, a young couple who have become close friends of Commander Marcos. I had already spent about ten days in this house last year, at the time of my first meeting with the Commander. I was delighted to see Vanessa again. I had immediately bonded with her, and our discussions had allowed me to understand a great deal about how the ELN settled in the area a decade earlier, taking over the vacuum left by the FARC-EP. When I arrive, Marcos and his troop are watching a telenovela on a television far larger than the one in the house the year before.²⁹ Marcos gets up and greets me in a somewhat cold, almost indifferent manner. I realize something is wrong when I greet Paula, whom I had met and immediately befriended during my first encounter with Marcos. Paula studied and traveled in Latin America as well as in Europe, and probably for this reason, it was immediately easy for me to connect with her. She is not a guerrilla fighter but a young urban militant who, having a love relationship with Marcos, visits him several times a year, sometimes for a few weeks, sometimes for a couple of months. During my last stay I had laughed a lot with Paula, but this time, however, Paula greets me in an extremely cold way and with an air of absolute distrust. I sit down imagining that Marcos wants to converse with me, but instead he continues to watch television, and only at the end of the telenovela does he question me with a quick, "So, everything okay?"

After a bad night's sleep, the next day I spent the morning chatting with a young man from Medellin who, after a youth of militancy, decided a couple of years ago to take up the rifle. We go swimming on the island that has formed in the middle of the river that runs in front of the house, and when I think I have made a new friend, I am sad to discover that he was forced to leave in the afternoon. The bad news is, however, compensated by some good news: while he is preparing his backpack, Officer Angela arrives at the house. Angela is an Afro-descendent woman responsible for political work in the area. She is a wonderful person, at times cold and authoritarian, and the next moment sweet and shy. Gifted with enormous willpower and a keen intelligence, in the ELN Angela has learned to read, write, and study, until she became a beloved and respected officer. Around 6pm we had dinner and after having washed my plate, Marcos called me. He tells me to grab a chair and follow him, with Paula and Angela.

²⁹ As the plantation behind the house suggests, the television was bought with money obtained from the production of coca paste.

We set up on the riverbank and Marcos began his lecture telling me: "You arrived a year ago. Maybe you don't realize it, but very few people have the privilege of arriving where you did. We welcomed you here, fed you and treated you like one of us. You impressed and moved us with your personal story and your academic commitment, which is why I decided to let you stay. We coordinated a secure avenue of communication where I requested that you report regularly, let me know how your studies were progressing, and make yourself available if I needed any favors. I asked you to investigate the price of certain things because they are cheaper in Europe than here, with the promise that I would reimburse you for every pesos. I repeat, a year has passed and I haven't received a single message from you! Not one! You show up here again without what I asked for and expect to do what? We are not a vacation resort! We are not an object of study! I am not here to be studied like an animal in a zoo! Who do you think you are?! I don't need an anthropologist to come and study me so that at the university you all can mentally jerk off about how we live in the forest! Here we are at war, we risk our lives every day and we have no time to waste with people who come to study us without any commitment!"

Shocked and frightened I struggle to find the words to respond. I know he enjoys humiliating me in front of two women who worship him, but I don't understand how serious the situation is. After all, this is a military organization, what if he wants to shoot me, or send me home on my own? I try to explain to him that it took me six months to recover from the trauma of my last experience in the jungle, the army attack, the scorpion sting in my knee, the bombing... I tell him that for them this may be normal, but I grew up in Switzerland, a fairy-tale island, a Cinderella castle where people get depressed because of losing their cell phones. Upon my return, I had to cut off contact for my mental health. I tell him that it is true that my work is academic and that my thesis will perhaps be read by five people, maybe fifty if published in a book, but that it could become a useful book for the ELN, to spread the word about what it means to be a guerrilla, a human being fighting for an ideal and not a terrorist killer. I apologize for not buying him what he asked for, but on the one hand, it wasn't that easy to do, and on the other hand, although it wasn't something illegal, I was afraid of being stopped at the airport and having to answer questions about the whys and wherefores. The more I try to find arguments in my defense, the more I feel ridiculous, stupid. I feel ashamed in front of Angela on whom I wanted to make a good impression and I do everything to hide that I am shaking. I ask him what he plans to do with me and Marcos tells me that as far as he is concerned I am done with him, but that he is obliged to consult with the other commanders of the Front to whom he will write tomorrow and that we will see what they answer.

Humiliated and worried, I went back to my corner on the wooden floor of the stilt house, and here I am writing. I know that Commander Marcos is quite self-centered and when he wants to be, he can be very arrogant. But what he says is true. He has decided to dedicate his life to a cause, to abandon his comforts to come and live in the forest, to dedicate himself to the armed struggle against an oppressive state. Who are we anthropologists to pretend that our work really serves a purpose? That our books serve anything other than our egos, or as he says, to mentally jerk off among academics? Is it possible to be an anthropologist and an activist at the same time? How can I make my thesis something different? On the other hand, I don't want to write for Marcos, but for the thousands of young people who are in the ranks of the ELN because the state doesn't give a damn about offering them any opportunity for a better future since they are Black, indigenous, or simply poor. But what if I have to leave tomorrow? I am too tired to write any more. I try to sleep, hoping for one night, not to have violent dreams.

With this ethnographic vignette, I introduce the discussion of the working methodology used during my extensive fieldwork. The vignette offers a glimpse of the difficulties and the drawbacks I faced during my research and gives context to the description of the method used in the collection of my ethnographic material. The fears, hopes, and emotions that emerge from my personal diary depict the challenges that confronted me, and for which I had to find methodological solutions in the course of my study. In particular, this episode shows how I've been constantly forced to renegotiate my roles of ethnographer, anthropologist, Colombian, Swiss, male, Afro-descendant, student, and supporter of social justice. In particular, this vignette highlights two assumptions with which I was often confronted during my months spent within the ELN. The first, that of expectations about me on the part of commanders – especially Marcos – is a point I will discuss in depth in the following subchapter "Ethics and Methods in an Unconventional Fieldwork." I cover the second, that of gender and race relations in an environment strongly marked by *macho* attitudes (in English, *toxic masculinities*), in Chapters 8 and 9. What I would like to mention here, however, is a point that cuts across all the themes discussed in the thesis: nothing in life is static. People change, as do places, ideologies, power relations, and finally, war itself. The product of ethnographic research must refer to a distinct temporality, but it is up to the reader to feel-think the proposed analyses, and understand them as an evolving movement and mutual influence with the subject of study. For example, I recall that on the New Year's Eve before the event just narrated, Paula had come crying into my arms because she could no longer stand the *macho* attitudes of Marcos, with whom she had a

privileged relationship in the forest, but an open one when distant. Despite this constant internal conflict, however, over the years Paula had an enormous influence on many young women in the Front whom she had taught to read and write, and to whom she had conveyed the importance of a feminist vision and the need for dialogue between women and men to combat patriarchy. I think Paula played a huge role on how Marcos himself learned to see the world and his own powerful status in the eyes of others. On several occasions during my visits, he told me about discussions he had had with Paula and how they made him think. I remember when I saw him for the last time in 2020 he admitted to me, "You know, if this war ends I would like to have a stable relationship with Paula, a life plan together, I owe her so much!" It is the responsibility of the ethnographer to be careful not to judge or fall into ethnocentrism that may direct the analysis of certain situations in too radical a manner.

This vignette portrays the rigor of the ethnographic approach as a pillar of the discipline of anthropology that lies between the Weberian *Verstehen* and the *Erklären* of the natural sciences. Furthermore, this description clarifies how the interpretation (*Verstehen*) of a social phenomenon is strictly dependent on the different perceptions that the anthropologists have about themselves and their subject of study – “the others” – and those “others” have about the anthropologists.

The role of the anthropologist in the field has been a continuous topic of debate within the discipline ever since the Torres Strait expedition led by Alfred C. Haddon in the late nineteenth century, and especially since the anthropological turn brought about by Malinowski's *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* in 1922. A century after Malinowski stressed the importance of "pitching one's tent in the middle of the village" (cf. 1922) and thus being in daily contact with "the natives," anthropology now seems to be in search of a new turn, namely that of a necessary shift in the production of scientific knowledge and the benefits associated with it, from those who control the discipline to those who nurture it. It is true that in a discipline dominated for decades by the "western white man," more and more voices of women and researchers belonging to the widely studied "others," i.e. scholars from non-white, non-western cultures, are emerging. Yet, apart from the need to sustain cultural heterogeneity within the discipline, the real challenge seems to be closing the distance, if not physical, at least social, that continues to remain in force between the anthropologists and the people they study. In other words, the task of the anthropologist is no longer limited to the analysis and translation of his observations into a monograph published in a language (mostly English) that is foreign and inaccessible to his local interlocutors ("the natives"), but to find a way to ensure that the fruits of research are beneficial not only "to the observer," but also and above all "to the observed."

Otherwise, as Lila Abu-Lughod argues (2012, 137), “the observed” will remain in the role of spokespeople and instruments of power will stay in the hands of anthropologists. When the researcher’s work aims to reveal, denounce, or assert a situation of social injustice, it is imperative that such research does not remain a document devoted to fomenting an academic debate, but that, in discussion with its interlocutors, it may become a useful tool in the struggle of those who suffer injustice. But such a task can entail several difficulties, both technical and ethical. In the practical case of my field, I have been confronted with the limits that the ethnographic method entails, notoriously in terms of the efficacy and possibility of participant observation, as well as with the obstacles related to my positionality and engagement. Consequently, the introductory vignette shows the vulnerability of the anthropologist in sensitive terrain. I agree with Wacquant when he argues, “[...] we can and should work to become ‘vulnerable observers’ in our practice of fieldwork – and not on paper, in ‘writing vulnerability’ by injecting large doses of ‘subjectivity into ethnography’” (2015, 4–5). If nothing else, the vignette functions to prove that “I was there,” the only fact useful to demonstrate the ethnographic authority proclaimed by Clifford (1983), a presence that proves that nothing was invented, and that although the experiences of the field cannot be reproduced, they recount a series of elements – what Malinowski calls *the inponderabilia of actual life* – that are found elsewhere and are therefore generalizable. These are not absolute truths, but an open-ended process in research and theory development. Ethnographic vignettes are about showing how everything I have lived and observed was done so by my own eyes and experienced through my own senses. However, all experience is filtered by the subject who lives it. As Bourdieu underscores in his *Distinction* (1979), every understanding, as for example that of taste and aesthetics, are always referable to a class, or intra-class (as in the case of the “dominated fraction of the dominant class”) social context. In other words, if ethnographic representations are always “partial truths” (James Clifford in Abu-Lughod 2012, 136) as Abu-Lughod contends, it is important to recognize that they are posited truths (ibid.).

Similarly, and this is especially true in a field like anthropology that gives absolute importance to the milieu, “The trajectory merges not only with the subjectivity of those who travel through a milieu, but also with the subjectivity of the milieu itself, insofar as it is reflected in those who travel through it” (Deleuze in Biehl 2013, 574). This is especially pertinent when the anthropologist analyzes a territory that, like the Colombian Pacific, is made by the accumulation and sedimentation of cultural symbols resulting from the different activities carried out by a community in space and time. Yet, this thesis is not a reflection on the relevance of ethnography as a scientific method of study. Here, I embrace Laura Nader’s point that

"Ethnography [is] itself as well as its explanatory use a theoretical endeavor" (in Biehl 2013, 52). Nevertheless, unlike the simple yet complex *erklären* of the natural sciences, in its theoretical endeavor, "Ethnography is not just proto-philosophy, but a way of staying connected to open-ended, even mysterious, social processes and uncertainties – a way of counterbalancing the generation of certainties and foreclosures by other disciplines" (Biehl 2013, 590). I am persuaded that ethnography can produce theory under the condition of recognizing its own terrain with all its constituent elements as the theoretical source.

Like most of the authors quoted in this chapter, I too have a research goal to collaborate in the decolonization of anthropology. This project implies a change in representations, of both the discipline's subjects of study and those who depict them. A representational shift is crucial because it may be the key to deeper change in the very perception that "the observed," trapped in power relations dictated by class, race, and gender, may have about themselves. As Frantz Fanon (1975) explains, the colonized and the colonizer identify with these roles in their psyches, and therefore it is necessary to work within the mental imaginary to change certain patterns. In anthropology, the observed, must therefore learn how to be not a mere object, but a subject of study, and therefore a person with agency and the capacity to formulate theories that can (or must!) contrast with those developed by the observer. The observer, in turn, must learn to get involved and to break with the power relations that have protected him for too long. Accepting that the people we interact with are not objects implies opening the doors of ethnography to them (Denzin and Lincoln 2008), allowing them to become their own ethnographers and collaborators not only in the field, but also in the process of production and especially dissemination of research once it is completed. It is certain that ethnography is interpretation, but the latter must be structured in harmony between the voice of the researcher and those of their interlocutors, and not at the service of a hierarchical power structure.

This paradigm shift implies a break with extractivist ethnographic practices, that is, with a colonial anthropological approach that conceives of the ethnographer's terrain as a mine of raw materials, a well from which to extract "[...] the minutiae from which Euromodernity might fashion its testable theories and transcendent truths" (Comaroff 2012, 114). Embracing a new way of doing anthropology implies breaking with the discipline's colonial past and abandoning the privileges that continue to sustain it, a process that should not be seen as a threat, but as a learning opportunity. It involves embracing a model that "[...] implements collaborative, participatory performative inquiry [and] forcefully aligns the ethics of research with a politics of the oppressed, with a politics of resistance, hope, and freedom" (Denzin and Lincoln 2008, 19). An example can be taken from the cosmology of the Nasa indigenous people in Colombia

and their use of the spiral. As for many other indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples, the spiral is a symbol with a deep spiritual meaning regarding a return to origins, the development of the different stages of life, and the relationship with the territory. The spiral's symbolism also contains practical meanings. Unlike the lines and points of Cartesian geometry, the spiral reveals how to approach life in a more harmonious and collaborative, rather than competitive, way. The spiral teaches how to include rather than exclude, and consequently, to return to intellectual production, to incorporate and value what Jean and John Comaroff call a *Theory From the South* (2012), i.e. on the one hand, accepting that Africa, Latin America, and therefore Colombia and more specifically the Colombian Pacific have a "[...] modernity [which] exists *sui generis*, not as a derivative of the Euro-original," (2012, 126), and on the other hand, recognizing that the so-called Global South has long taken over in the modeling of the world, as well as in the production of social scientific theories (2012; 2012). Finally, if as Geertz proposes, the "Aim of anthropology is the enlargement of the universe of human discourse" (2002, 14), said discourse must be integrative, collaborative, and politically orientated toward the encouragement and promotion of a pluriverse of knowledge" (Escobar 2014); a pluriverse, which, as the Zapatista movement defines it, is the creation of "a world where many worlds fall."

Although this thesis draws on my personal ethnographic experience, it is not an autobiographical narrative. But in order for my testimony to be situated within an ethical framework of collaboration and decolonization, defining my methodological approach is of utmost importance. The introductory ethnographic vignette is not only meant to show that "I was there," but it is meant to show that "I was there" with all my emotions. After all, if as Commander Marcos shouted to me, "very few people have had the privilege of getting where I got," it is because I was given access, a contact, a meeting place, and all of this not because of my academic references or a passport issued in the "global north," but because of a trust created over the years through the simplest of human interactions. Accordingly, in the next pages, I first discuss the ethical codes I followed during my research. Second, I write about how I gained access to the field in relation to my positionality. Third, I explain my process of collecting data and my ability to participate by observing. Finally, I will examine the limitations of my engagement with my interlocutors. These discussions allow me to contextualize the ethnographic experiences discussed in PARTS II and III of this dissertation.

ETHICS AND METHODS IN A CONTESTED FIELD SITE

Because of its colonial past, as well as its support for projects of supposed civilization and imperialism, anthropology is now the discipline within the social sciences most confronted with constant self-reflection. The role of anthropologists from the "global South" is increasingly preponderant; at the same time, marginalized communities that have long lacked access to the results of research conducted on them, now have more opportunities to stay in touch with researchers and investigate the latter's proposed analyses, largely on account of the Internet. For these reasons, today's ethnographers are confronted with the vision of those others, who from objects of study have finally become subjects, that is, human beings recognized as having their own agency and the ability to discern whether or not an anthropologist's work is faithful to their way of conceiving complex social realities.

While I have undoubtedly been influenced by methodology seminars taken during my undergraduate and graduate years, my experiences on the ground among Afro-descendant communities, beginning with my master's research, formed the basis of my personal ethnographic ethics.³⁰ I met extraordinary people in these communities who, without feigned diplomacy or fear of hurting my sensibilities, confronted some of my ways of thinking imbued with ethnocentrism, and my practices characteristic of the "Global North." I still remember with shame my second day at the home of a woman who has become like a dear sister to me. We had finished dinner, her mother had picked up my plate, and I had gotten up to go write in my diary when she scolded me saying, "This is not Europe, this is your second day here, my mother cooked, but now it's your turn to wash the dishes!" Similarly, back in Colombia after I had already shown the documentary made in parallel with my thesis (see the previous footnote) at a university event in Switzerland, this friend of mine (to whom I had sent the link to view my work on the Internet) said to me, "So when are you planning to show it to the community? Look, people here also want to see it. We may not be anthropologists, but we are still the main actors in your film!" These are but two anecdotes among many others when I was reproached for not following up on my words and promises with actions. But if today I am still welcome in these communities, and if over time I have forged bonds of affection and deep friendship, it is because I have been made to understand that despite good intentions, one is often a victim of one's own experience and the place in which one was socialized. Gender, citizenship, race, social class, and level of schooling are all elements that can hide privileges not recognized as

³⁰ See for example, the documentary I filmed and produced, "Tierra Negra : A Journey into Afro-Colombian Territory": <https://vimeo.com/112225349>.

such because they are experienced as habits, as norms, and to a certain extent as part of one's identity. Changing power structures and inequalities means first of all unlearning in order to learn anew. Especially in rural Colombia, I have been fortunate over the years to surround myself with wonderful people who have opened my eyes and taught me to read life from other perspectives, who have allowed me to relearn, and who are still teachers of life for me today.

In addition to these constant lessons, I refer to three main documents for the ethics and methodology that govern this research: The Ethical and Deontological Think Tank (EDTT) of the Swiss Ethnological Society;³¹ the Statements on Ethics of the American Anthropological Association (SE-AAA);³² and the Ethical Principles and Guidelines of the Belmont Report (BR).³³ These three documents start from the principle that research serves to "develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge" (BR), that the "dissemination of anthropological knowledge [has for goal] to solve human problems" (SE-AAA), or as EDTT explains, "Our aim is to anchor the ethical question in a dynamic response that makes it possible to reconcile the epistemological specificities of the ethnological approach, its scientific rigor and its responsibility to the people it involves in its research in the field." Following the seven principles of professional responsibility expressed by the SE-AAA, in this subchapter I will explain how I applied them in the course of my research.

1. *Do no harm*

As the SE-AAA explains, "Among the most serious harms that anthropologists should seek to avoid are harm to dignity, and to bodily and material well-being, especially when research is conducted among vulnerable populations." Although some may debate whether ELN guerrillas fall into the category of "vulnerable populations," I argue that they do, especially in the form in which they are presented in my work. Because of this, I have consistently paid attention to two main points in my research. First, to not create conditions that could lead to the physical harm of the people with whom I interacted. I always did the best I could to leave no trace of my movements, and I always checked my belongings repeatedly to make sure that no one implanted a microchip in them (see Part II). Such carelessness could have revealed my location to military intelligence, which, because of my contact with front commanders, would have contained the

³¹ See https://www.sagw.ch/fileadmin/redaktion_seg-sse/dokumente/EDDT_Ethical_Statement_of_the_SES.pdf (last accessed, May 18, 2022).

³² See <https://www.americananthro.org/LearnAndTeach/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=22869> (last accessed, May 18, 2022).

³³ See <https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/belmont-report/read-the-belmont-report/index.html> (last accessed, May 18, 2022).

necessary information to launch an attack. Likewise, my position could have indicated in which communities the ELN moves, thus opening the door for the military to seize and force members of these communities to reveal information. Second, throughout this dissertation, I have made every effort to prevent people inside and outside the guerrilla movement from being identified, just as I have tried to remain as faithful as possible to their accounts and versions of events. As the BR explains, the ethnographer must try to "maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms." The intention of this research is to emphasize the importance of a fair and open dialogue between ELN members, ethnic communities, and the state – a dialogue that must have as its aim the welfare of racialized communities and youth who, for lack of alternatives, have embraced the rifle – of the ELN or other armed groups.

2. Be open and honest regarding your work

As the SE-AAA announces, "Transparency, like informed consent, is a process that involves both making principled decisions prior to beginning the research and encouraging participation, engagement, and open debate throughout its course." As I will repeat in the following subchapter related to access, in my work I was honest and transparent with all my interlocutors from the very beginning. I always explained to the political prisoners who put me in contact with the Western War Front how my work was exclusively academic research, on which I would write a thesis that I would later turn into a book. Just as clearly, I explained that my goal would not be to support and praise the armed struggle, but rather to promote peace by revealing an aspect of the war – the human aspect made up of personal relationships in the territories on the margins of the state – that is not discussed in the media because it would lead people to doubt the necessity of the belligerent policies promoted by the Colombian right. I also made it clear that both my doctoral thesis and the possible book that will come out of it will be the academic products of a young researcher, and therefore unlikely to have a major political or social impact. I similarly stated my intentions clearly with the Front commanders, as well as with Commander Pablo Beltrán, a member of the ELN Central Command, whom I was able to interview in Cuba in his official role as Head of the Peace Delegation during the process that later ended in 2019 – his public "legal position" at that time is the only reason why I was able to use his real name. Since "the manner and context in which information is conveyed is as important as the information itself" (BR), I always took the necessary time to clarify my objectives and answer any questions or concerns my interlocutors might have.

As is recognized by the SE-AAA "there are situations in which evidence or information may be minimally modified (such as by the use of pseudonyms) or generalized, in order to avoid

identification of the source and to protect confidentiality and limit exposure of people to risks." I use pseudonyms for all the people mentioned in this thesis, taking inspiration in the chosen names of important revolutionaries such as Ernesto (Ché Guevara), Marcos (Sub-Commander of the EZLN), Esther (Commander of the EZLN), Assata (Shakur), Benkos (Biohó), Monika (Ertl), and so on. None of these pseudonyms have any direct connection with real people. Although the precise area of my research, as well as the names of the main commanders might be easily recognizable by anyone familiar with the Colombian conflict in the Pacific, my main concern in writing this dissertation was to avoid revealing details that might indicate the identities of the lower-ranking guerrillas or the locations of the communities where the ELN is present. In transparent discussions with the Front commanders, they told me they did not wish to be anonymized (although I later chose to do so), but they advised me to invent pseudonyms for the lower ranking guerrillas as well as change the names of localities. For this reason, the only real place names in this thesis are those of Colombia's main cities, Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali. The names of all other towns, villages, rivers, and tributaries are pseudonyms. I remain vague about the exact periods I spent on the war front. To protect the safety of my Colombian non-guerrilla friends, I did not inform any of them about my movements in the Pacific basin, and none of none of them have any connection with the National Liberation Army.

Finally, as the EDTT acknowledges, "ethics in ethnographical inquiry is akin to a kind of gamble that the researcher must make but whose success is never guaranteed. It is ultimately clear that the dissymmetry that sometimes characterizes the research relationship does not always work in favor of the researcher." This is exemplified in the ethnographic vignette introducing this chapter. Commander Marcos accepted my presence as an academic who wished to understand and explain the conflict in the Pacific rainforest from first-hand experience. Our relationship, friendly and one of mutual respect, had been built on long political discussions where we both learned from each other. His only initial request had been to stay in touch even from a distance, to inform him about my academic activities related to the present research, and if possible, to check the price of some desired commodities in Europe. Almost a year passed between our first and second meetings. During the interim period, I returned to Switzerland and began suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Between anxieties, fears, depressive phases, and a growing inability to come to terms with the contrast between two worlds – that of war in the Colombian Pacific and that of everyday life in a country with one of the world's highest living standards – I was unable to fulfill Marcos's requests. Because of this, our relationship cooled for some time. However, being able to count on Commander Ernesto's invaluable support, I was allowed to continue my investigation and

eventually return to good standing with Marcos as well. In time, Marcos realized that I was not a guerrilla under his orders and that, despite his position, he could not expect me to respond to all his wishes. At the same time, I understood that my not showing up for almost a year was a serious mistake. During this gap, Marcos interpreted my absence as a lack of respect, or as the typical attitude of an "extractivist anthropologist" who, once he had obtained the desired information, disappears without returning the results of his work. Marcos may have also interpreted my silence as a betrayal. Given the constant infiltration of the army and its use of informants, Marcos's attitude is justified. I am glad that we were eventually able to explain ourselves and return to a good relationship of mutual respect and friendship. The lesson I learned from our altercation described in the introductory vignette, however, was that it is always better to communicate than to remain silent.

3. *Obtain informed consent and necessary permissions*

Another key protocol that the ethnographer must follow is to make sure that all people interviewed or "observed" are openly informed about the nature of the research and agree to take part in it, even if passively. As the SE-AAA explains, "Informed consent does not necessarily imply or require a particular written or signed form. It is the quality of the consent, not its format, which is relevant." Commanders Ernesto and Marcos are the people who agreed that first, I would conduct my "participant observation" within the War Front; second, that I would conduct interviews and participate in open dialogue with the guerrillas; and third, that I would film the interviews, as well as the locations and activities conducted. In the first weeks I spent with Marcos, most of the time I myself was the object of study, not only by him but by all the guerrillas on that commission. I was initially surprised by their curiosity and forced to constantly self-reflect. Once, after explaining what a university research project in anthropology is, Ramona asked me sarcastically, "I see, but what do we get out of your research?" I was silent for several seconds and then in all sincerity answered her, "I don't know." I added, "Let's talk about it, how do you think I can make this work useful for you, too?" And she, seriously, almost immediately answered me, "Well, once you've written it down you should read it to us because like this I can't give you an answer." With that, I agreed to get my finished research to the commanders, and they would socialize it, i.e. read and discuss it, with all the guerrillas during study hours.

Months later, I left for the forest with Ernesto. On our second day together he gathered the entire commission and introduced me. He explained that I was an anthropologist, that I was there to do my research on the ELN, and then he had me describe what this entailed. I explained

that I was going to observe and conduct interviews, but that in general, whatever we were going to talk about even in informal discussions, they could always tell me if it was confidential information that they would prefer I not put in my notes. This agreement did not assume the guerrillas were obliged to talk to me, to be interviewed, and even less to be filmed. For each interview with the guerrillas, I asked permission first. Several guerrillas who did not feel comfortable talking in front of a camera quietly refused without suffering any consequences. The same method applied for voice-recorded interviews and informal interviews. I conducted every interview (filmed, recorded, or informal) in private, away from others.

Similarly, in the exchanges I had with people in the communities, whenever possible I explained that I was a researcher working not for the ELN but for my own doctoral research. Some of these people openly revealed to me their doubts about the guerrilla presence, others praised it, while still others avoided the conversation. Throughout, my aim was to consistently tell the truth about my research plans and intended outcomes.

4. *Weigh competing ethical obligations to collaborators and affected parties*

The SE-AAA argues, "Anthropologists have an obligation to distinguish the different kinds of interdependencies and collaborations their work involves, and to consider the real and potential ethical dimensions of these diverse and sometimes contradictory relationships." For this reason, from the outset I have radically separated my friendship relationships and long-term commitments with Afro-descendant movements and communities from my research and contacts with the ELN. As the BR recognizes, it is indeed important to consider not only individuals with whom one is in contact, but also their families and their being part of larger social networks. Furthermore, the SE-AAA states, "Anthropologists must not agree to conditions which inappropriately change the purpose, focus, or intended outcomes of their research." Confronting Commander Marcos was important in this regard so I could maintain my line of work and renew our contract in the most transparent way.

5. *Make your results accessible*

Making the results of one's research accessible means not only disseminating them in the form of articles or a book, but whenever possible, discussing them in advance with one's interlocutors. The interpretation of ethnographic observations remains in the hands of the anthropologist who, regardless of the opinion of his interlocutors, has the right to explain and describe his own fieldwork through his individual perception. At the same time, especially in sensitive projects such as the present one, discussing one's findings before they are published

is essential to ensure the consent and safety of all people involved in the research. When I discussed and shared my observations, my interviews, and especially my videos with Commander Ernesto, it was not to ask his permission to criticize dynamics that I had observed and that had disturbed me (such as the patriarchal and sexist attitudes of some commanders, see Chapter 9), but to make sure I did not reveal information that could have endangered the safety of guerrillas or even worse, their family members living in ethnic communities. I left all my videos to Commander Ernesto, including the interview I did with Commander Pablo Beltrán. He hugged me and thanked me as both of us knew this was not just academic material, but visual memories of people, who in the bitter reality of war, we risk never seeing again.

I plan to make my research accessible on four fronts. The first is the international academic world, through the publication of this dissertation and the book that will follow. The second is that of Colombia, where I plan to have my dissertation translated into Spanish so that it can circulate and be accessible to those who do not read English. In addition, I will look for a university publishing house willing to publish in Spanish, and at least I will work to quickly publish at least one article in that language. The third front is the Pacific communities, where through collaboration with several ethnic movements, I will disseminate at least part of my research through workshops and collective discussions. Finally, I will circulate this dissertation among the ranks of the ELN, and plan discussions in which I respond to criticisms, comments and questions.

6. Protect and preserve your records

As I explain in the next subchapters, I have always made efforts to keep all my data – notes, diaries, interview recordings, videos, pictures, etc. – safe and private. In my academic presentations, I often use interviews or images that I have had permission to disclose from both Commanders Ernesto and Marcos. Although unfortunately I have no control over whether audience members take pictures with their cell phones during a conference, and even less over people taking screenshots in presentations held online, I always make sure to the extent possible that the material presented stays within the space in which it is discussed. All the data that I no longer need, and especially all the sensitive data, have been encrypted and stored in external hard drives secured in a vault.

7. Maintain respectful and ethical professional relationships

Finally, the last principle put forward by SE-AAA is to maintain professional ethics and respect over time. Although it is recognized that "Anthropologists may gain personally from

their work" (SE-AAA), I agreed ahead of time with Commander Ernesto that the day I publish a book on this thesis, whatever financial gain I may make from it, I will pour it into a social project that contributes to improving the living conditions of a community in the Colombian Pacific of my choice. Of course, I plan to honor my word.

It is also true that not all gains are economic. I am aware this research gives me academic prestige, and hopefully, and may one day lead to a career. People in my situation, dedicated to their work with the goal of contributing to social change in the places where we have left part of ourselves, we need to consider "[...] that we are not merely conducting research, but are connected to the places where we work through familial ties, diasporic relationships, and investments in political struggles, all of which hold us accountable even after our departure" (Berry et al. 2017, 540). Zen Buddhism teaches that gratitude is not a single act, but a quality that must be practiced daily, so that although it is possible I may never be able to reciprocate all that I have been given by the people with whom I have interacted in the course of my research, my commitment is to acknowledge their support and teachings whenever possible. At the same time, I feel compelled to pass on this work ethic to all the students with whom I have been, and will continue to be, fortunate enough to work.

To summarize this subchapter, my ethics as an anthropologist overlap with my thinking-feeling philosophy. If, as Majakowsky says, *Love is the heart of all things*, when mind and body are connected, ethnographic research can be a process of mutual learning between human beings, and between all other beings inhabiting the pluriverse.

THE TRAJECTORY TO ACCESS A GUERRILLA WARFRONT

In order to protect the safety of the people who allowed me to carry out this research, I cannot give details about the web of contacts I had to pass through over the years. What I can explain, however, is how access to a National Liberation Army War Front was the result of two parallel processes: my personal interest in Colombia and knowledge of the Pacific region on the one hand, and my political commitment on the other. These two processes are closely linked to my position, not so much as an academic, but rather that of a person of Colombian origin with a strong commitment to the struggle against injustice, systems of oppression, and a capitalist system that is at the root of the destruction of the social, economic and environmental fabric worldwide.

My interest in Colombia stems from the fact that it is my country of origin, but my interest in the Afro-descendant communities, and consequently in the Colombian Pacific, has a deeper

reason. Adopted as a child, I grew up in Switzerland, a country where I was educated and schooled in several languages, but also a place where, from an early age, I experienced what it means to live with racism. When in 2010 I began my master's degrees, one in anthropology and the other in geography at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland), I immediately took the opportunity to deepen my understanding of my origins and those of the country where I was born. I got in touch with a Colombian based association working with Black communities (which I prefer not to name in order to avoid false linkages with my current work), which generously welcomed me, and with which I have continued to work until today. Once there, however, I quickly discovered that being despised as “a Negro” in Switzerland has nothing to do with being Black (or “negro” in Spanish) in Colombia. In a country marked by centuries of ethnic mixes, I am considered mulatto, mestizo, or even, by some, as white.³⁴ I will return to this ethnic aspect of my identity several times since it is a factor that has had an influence on all of my research, both master's and doctoral. The color of my skin has facilitated my relationships with some members of the association, thanks to whom, over the years, I have been able to discover the complex reality that characterizes the territories inhabited by Black communities in Colombia – places mostly on the margins of the state, but rich in natural resources and for this reason, often at the heart of the Colombian internal conflict (Ross 2004, 33). For a decade I have been engaged in Black communities' strategies of resistance and self-determination, first on the Caribbean coast, where the Afro-descendant population suffers invisibility (Helg 2011), then in the Pacific region, the site where Blackness is most asserted.

My collaboration with the association is what has allowed me to visit communities (such as Río Yurumanquí, Alsacia, and Alto Mira y Frontera) and towns (such as Tumaco, Guapi, and Timbiquí) with problematic access due to their location (hours and hours of travel by bus, or boat), but also and most importantly due to the violence that surrounds these territories. In the Pacific region, probably the main scourge on communities is coca. As we will see in the following chapters, coca plant cultivation is a type of agriculture that destroys all community tissue and whose production is fomented, often by coercion, by paramilitary groups and drug cartels, but also by other armed groups, such as the FARC-EP dissidents, as well as by the ELN. While the ELN does not seem to directly control coca production, the guerilla movement supports it indirectly by financing itself through the collection of taxes on drug traffickers who

³⁴ Historically, *mulattos* are those people of mixed black and white ancestry, while *mestizos* are those of mixed *indigenous* and white descendants (Zermeno-Padilla 2008). However, in the common language in Colombia, *mulattos* are those with recognizable African lineaments, but a lighter skin color, while *mestizos* are people who, like me, have lighter skin, and less obvious lineaments.

move in the area. Growing up in Europe, for years my knowledge of the Colombian armed conflict was limited to that reported in the international media, and thus, the FARC-EP's struggle. Even once in Colombia, the first visible signs of the existence of guerrilla groups I could observe were in graffiti and signs covering the walls of some public universities such as the National University of Bogotá, or that of Antioquia in Medellín. On the other hand, it is no coincidence that the Colombian people themselves, mostly from an urban stratum, completely disregard the conflict, or have a distorted and manipulated vision of it, namely the one propounded by big media such as Caracol and RCN. It was my experiences and months spent within Black communities that allowed me to get a clearer picture of the various armed actors and economic interests that comprise the landscape of Colombia's ongoing internal conflict. Once this interest was aroused, the problem was that no one, neither in the communities nor in the association I was working with, was ever willing to explain to me clearly what interactions the guerrilla groups had in the territories, and even less to give me any kind of contact that would allow me to get closer to the guerrillas. Over the years I have realized that most of the people with whom I have friendships of trust with do not have any kind of direct relationship with the revolutionary groups, and if some of them had indirect contacts they would not share them with me to protect me, themselves, and their families. So, although my experiences in conflict zones have enabled me to better fathom this reality and learn to move discretely within it, my first real contact with guerrillas came when, six years ago, I began visiting ELN political prisoners in a Colombian jail.

Due to an incalculable domino effect, my knowledge of the community territories in rural Colombia became the key to a relationship of trust and friendship with the imprisoned people I met. Some of them had actually worked in various regions of the Pacific for years where they had been in close contact with the ethnic communities living there, both Afro-descendants and indigenous. Needless to say, however, direct contact with a war front was not given to me overnight, but after three years of visits, often related to my research, but often also due simply to the pleasure of spending time with people deprived of their freedom and forced to survive in an oppressive and depersonalized prison system aiming to replicate the US model of maximum security (De Dardel 2016; Bernasconi 2018). During my visits, I have always been honest and straightforward about the intentions and motives of my research, academic (writing a thesis for a doctoral degree) as much as personal ones (the desire to better assess the Colombian conflict and make use of my privileges by describing and humanizing those who are presented under the single category of "terrorists").

What is important to realize is that access to an illegal armed group implies both responsibilities and risks, for the ethnographer as well as for his interlocutors. Returning to methodological considerations, especially in the decolonizing framework to which I adhere, it is necessary to emphasize the repercussions, often ignored, that ethnographic research can have on community dynamics, family, work, etc. For these reasons, the negotiation of access to the field should therefore be considered "The reversal of status between observer and observed, whereby the observer becomes the object of observation by the natives, who seek to determine if, and to what extent, they can trust him/her" (Bruni 2006, 145). In the case of the National Liberation Army, and even more so when it concerns a war front of this organization, opening the doors to a "foreign" researcher does not only entail risks for the integrity of the ethnographer, but also for the ELN itself. Obviously, it is easier to imagine the dangers and difficulties faced by the researcher who could take advantage of the situation to profile and present himself as a "cowboy anthropologist" (Almeida 2018), especially in the Western academic world. This is not my case as I did not undertake this investigation out of a desire for an adrenaline rush, and although ethnography is becoming more and more autobiographical (Biehl 2013, 19), focusing on my personal impressions would mean omitting those of other people who came forward to support me during the process. If something had happened to me during my research, such as becoming the victim of an army attack, thanks to pro-government media support, this would surely cause further damage to the ELN's increasingly fragile public image. A much greater problem would have been faced by the person or persons responsible for my security vis-à-vis their superiors, since in the politico-military organization of the ELN, such a scenario would have implied an internal investigation with possible repercussions on one or more persons if they had committed serious errors. Finally, perhaps the most serious risk to the ELN as an organization would have been the leak of information on my part. If at any military checkpoint I had decided to sell information,³⁵ I could certainly have contributed to the capture, or worse the killing, of several of my interlocutors, whether they were ELN members or villagers in the region who were militants for the organization. In short, there is an ethical dimension related to field access, and as Bruni argues, "[...] negotiating access is also a way to

³⁵ For providing information on ties to communities, or the location of middle/high ranking leaders, I could have asked for at least USD 5,000. For information on the four commanders of the War Front, the reward would have started at least USD 10,000 (see <https://www.eltiempo.com/unidad-investigativa/cabecillas-de-las-bandas-que-hacen-presencia-en-bojaya-450974>). Bounties on the heads of commanders are one of the strategies the army uses as a military intelligence tactic. However, it is a method that seldom works, as people know very well that daring to be a spy means putting their lives and those of their families in danger. For example, the man who sold the information that led to the killing of one of the commanders I was in contact with, was executed shortly afterwards by members of the ELN, even though he was already out of the country.

problematize the role of the researcher, who has the opportunity to reflect on the ethical implications of his/her presence and research activity" (Bruni 2006, 149). To sum up, access to sensitive fields such as that described in this thesis must be inscribed in a multifold reading. First, it is not a unilateral entry, or in other words, it is not the penetration of the researcher into his field, but a mutual opening of the observer and the observed with the various risks and compromises that affect both. Second, in order for this mutual openness to be beneficial to both parties, it is incumbent upon the anthropologist to be transparent with their use of the data obtained and the discussion of the latter with the interlocutors themselves. To do this, if possible, it is desirable to return to the field. In my case, each time I returned to the guerrillas, I brought the material elaborated in the previous months in order to discuss my analysis, ask new questions, and accept criticism. It always seemed important to me to share with the people in charge of the front line the interviews I had conducted as well as the short films taken during my stays. At first, I thought they requested footage mainly to check on what I was doing during my discussions with the soldiers, those with less political awareness and ability to express themselves. With time, I have come to realize that the real reason why the commanders were happy to get hold of my videos was to have a graphic memory of people who one day might not be there anymore. I don't know if I will ever be able to return to the Western War Front – or to Colombia for that matter – and even less do I know who I may or may not meet again. Yet fieldwork always seems to call one back, as if every interview, every observation, was closed only in order to be reopened, reevaluated, re-discussed. For this reason, as Biehl argues in his discussion of ethnography, I also feel "That I owe these returns, and the unfinishedness they sustain [...]" (2013, 577). Ultimately, an ethnographic terrain is negotiated with a network of actors, to whom one must adapt by demonstrating flexibility, but from whom one must also gain acceptance by demonstrating transparency and an ethical compromise that involves making one's results accessible. One of the advantages of living in an interconnected world is precisely that it is no longer possible for the anthropologist to carry out his research in an exotic faraway imaginary, hoping to then disseminate it in an equally exotic and imaginary West, without his words or his work ethic being able to be verified, one way or another. In conclusion, I agree with Bruni when he states that "access is a trajectory," which is why, "[...] it is consequently important that the researcher interrogate him/herself on how that trajectory should be constructed" (Bruni 2006, 150).

NATIVE OUTSIDER OR FOREIGN INSIDER?

Hand in hand with a discussion of access is one about positionality, as the two mutually influence each other. As Kirin Narayan (1993) debates in her article provocatively titled "How Native is a 'Native' anthropologist?," the connotation of "native" anthropologist appears to be in contradiction to that of the "classic" and somehow "real" anthropologist of the colonial era. Perhaps one of the first who could be categorized as a "native" anthropologist is Zora Neale Hurston. She was advised, as a Black woman and anthropologist, to interview Kossola, possibly the last African-born enslaved person still alive on American soil (Hurston 2018). How her skin color, or the fact that she shares a common origin with Kossola, makes Zora Neale Hurston a "native" is questionable, but as Narayan explains (1993), for colonial-style anthropology, what matters is the kind of information such a researcher can get from her field. The belief is that for the "native" anthropologist, the experience, and consequently the data collected, will be more authentic, more truthful, and perhaps consequently, easier to obtain. Implicit in this argument is that the research of the classical anthropologist, the white westerner in a far-away exotic land, will be more objective because it is not biased or distorted by emotional relationships, and is ultimately more scientific. Although these assumptions steeped in colonialism are fading over time, the distinction between "native" and "classical," "real" or "outsider" anthropologist continues to cause controversy. On the one hand, there is a call for more "native" anthropologists in the academy. On the other hand, there follows a contestation – when and how are we "native"? Discussing one's positionality as an ethnographer in the field is paramount to the deconstruction of stereotypes and preconceptions. But, I will argue that even more than gender, origins, social class, or skin color, it is the ethics to which the researcher adheres that makes her or him, more or less, a "native" anthropologist. As Hale argues, "doing analysis from the 'native's point of view' [...] carries no inherent impetus to unlearn the privileges associated with the scholar's ultimate control over the research process and sole authority to interpret its results" (2008, 18). Having stated these initial considerations, I will now clarify my position in the field as this has influenced my access, the collection of my data, and also my perception of my role as an anthropologist in the field, as well as in the academic world.

Because of my Colombian origin, but being raised in Switzerland, I am what Kirin Narayan (1993) and later Lila Abu-Lughod (2012) call a "halfie," or someone between a "native" and a "non-native." In addition to a constant renegotiation of one's subjectivity, being a "halfie" implies a more complex relationship with one's interlocutors, who in turn are forced to negotiate

how to categorize the researcher, and thus determine how to relate to her/him. Perhaps, easier to establish for both the observer and the observed is whether the latter is an "outsider" or an "insider," but even in this case, the delimitation between the two categories can quickly become porous and ambiguous, especially with the passage of time and the change of perceptions that the various actors may have among themselves. The relevance in discussing these categories lies not so much in their description, but in the influence they may have on the research work. For instance, when during my first meeting with Commander Marcos I told him about my desire to one day find my biological mother, I did not realize how much this personal story of mine might have influenced his decisions about me, and it was only when the following year he told me, "You have impressed and moved us with your personal story and your academic commitment, that is why I have decided to let you stay," that I realized how much my story had affected him. In other words, being a "halfie," or a "semi-native" in search of my roots apparently facilitated my entry into the war front. Digging into my notes and memories, I realized how much each person has their own story and each story has an effect on those who hear and tell it. One day, during the historic bilateral ceasefire between October 1, 2017 and January 9, 2018, I asked Commander Marcos if he had any contact with his parents or whether he was going to meet them. He replied that he had gotten a note to his mother, but that he didn't think she would have come. I remember being struck by the way he answered me, with a melancholic tone, as if I had touched a chord that was as painful as it was deep. I've seen that same look again and again when I've asked guerrillas about their families, as if separation were one of the sacrifices necessary to embrace the armed struggle, but remained tied to a sorrow impossible to make fade into the greens of the rainforest.

While my adoption may have positively affected my access to the ranks of the ELN, my Colombian and especially Afro-descendant background had repercussions that were less easy to determine. As Patricia Zavella suggests, being an "insider," or as in my case a "somehow-insider," can be a constant dilemma, for the ethnographer as well as his or her interlocutors (in Wolf 2018). One of the dilemmas of the "insider" is surely that of a closeness that can result in the "[...] serious danger of romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their position" (Haraway 1988, 584). Several times during my fieldwork, I actually wondered how I could remain true to my observations and not fall into the temptation of consciously evading aspects that might have put my interlocutors in a bad light. For example, observing at various times arrogant or almost bullying interactions between guerrillas and civilians, I wondered how I would have evaluated them if instead of ELN members they had been paramilitaries, or if I had been a resident of one of those villages. Since

ethnography is based on comparisons between "us" and "others," between "native" and "non-native," between "observer" and "observed," it is crucial to locate and be explicit about one's comparisons as well as one's experiences. As Laura Nader argues, "making our assumptions explicit often leads to surprising insights and conclusions not only about others but about ourselves" (2013, 75).

Being of Colombian descent meant that I could bond more easily and be viewed with less suspicion by my interlocutors. At the same time, being treated with more closeness has the consequence of not having access to the privileges that a "true outsider would have." I have never had extra food rations or additional hours of sleep, and I have repeatedly found myself in high-risk situations without my position benefiting me in any way. Certainly, the color of my skin and my previous interest in the Black communities living in the area had an influence on the way I was perceived by the group. As we will see in this thesis, two centuries after the abolition of slavery in Colombia, the social hierarchy based on a pigmentocracy that long characterized slave societies still seems to reign. Despite the fact that in the Pacific basin I appear objectively more white than black, my Afro hair immediately brings me closer to the Black communities rather than the white mestizo population. This, in addition to demonstrating how an identifying hairstyle such as an Afro is more political than biological, meant that I was able to establish a certain empathy with my groupmates, the vast majority of whom were black or indigenous. Certainly this is also the reason for my academic engagement, which, as Hale puts it, comes down to a basic principle: "for people who feel directly and personally connected to broader experiences of oppression and to struggles for empowerment, claims of objectivity are more apt to sound like self-serving maneuvers to preserve hierarchy and privilege" (2008, 3). Finally, not having automatic access to "white privilege" allowed me to connect more easily with young soldiers, and in this way to better grasp the dynamics that characterize the ELN, not only "from within," but also "from below." The last aspects that need to be mentioned while discussing my position as an ethnographer are my physical characteristics and sexual orientation. As Ruth Behar writes, "In anthropology, which historically exists to 'give voice' to others, there is no greater taboo than self-revelation" (1996, 26), but given the role these aspects have played in my fieldwork, it is not possible for me to leave them out. I consider myself a physically fit person, but clearly, I cannot compete with young guerrillas who have grown up in the forest and spend hours every day making enormous physical efforts. One day, perhaps a few weeks after my arrival, I went to wash up at the river and didn't realize that a group meeting had been called. In order not to miss it, I ran there with only a towel on. When I was in line with the other soldiers, I noticed that three girls began to smile. After a moment, they couldn't

hold back any longer and burst out laughing in my face. I still don't know if they laughed because of my physique, not as muscular as that of the young soldiers, or because of my ridiculous appearance covered only by a towel. Besides the profound moment of embarrassment, while discussing it in the evening with a comrade, he told me that the girls thought I was gay. This anecdote is one of the aspects that prompted me to write Chapter 9 on the role of masculinity and femininity in the guerrilla movement, because at that moment I realized the importance of conforming to the group's implicit gender norms. My heterosexuality has been relevant in my integration with the group. By no means am I saying that the ELN would not have accepted me had I had another sexual orientation, but certainly my integration would have been more complicated. As Berry et al. (2017) make clear, there is no such thing as gender-neutral fieldwork, or to put it in their words "activist anthropology must deconstruct the performance of gender neutrality [in fieldwork]" (558). Finally, these elements are also part of the process of decolonizing anthropology, where historically the objectivity of the observer has implicitly rhymed with the view of the anthropologist – man, white – while any other objectivity is perceived as situated knowledge (Haraway 1988). Decolonizing the discipline is therefore not about moving toward an anthropology from the South only. Rather, in a field where the object of knowledge is an actor and an agent (ibid. 592), it is crucial to localize and ground the production of said knowledge, whether the ethnographer is a "native/insider," a "non-native/outsider," or, like me, someone who is situated between a "native/outsider," and a "non-native/insider."

THE LIMITS OF PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION IN WARFARE?

As Ruth Behar writes, "Nothing is stranger than this business of humans observing other humans in order to write about them" (1996, 5). What characterizes anthropology, however, is the somewhat perverse obsession with getting closer to the subject of study. Unlike the famous *Prophet* of Kahlil Gibran, the anthropologist does not observe human interactions from a distance, but he mixes, interacts, touches them with his own hands. It matters little whether what is being pursued is a "thin" (J. L. Jackson 2013) or a "thick" (Geertz 2002) description, what matters is that the result is built on fieldwork based on participation in the activities under consideration. Unlike other disciplines such as political science, geography, or to a certain extent even sociology, participant observation is the key pillar of the methodological approach characteristic of anthropology, to the point of being able to claim – perhaps hyperbolically – that anthropology is methodology.

While trust may be established even through interviews with former combatants who may disclose personal narratives about tragic experiences such as killing (e.g. Civico 2016; Theidon 2009), it is only participant observation that is able to unveil everyday practices and social operational sequences (Beer 2003), such as interaction of people with work, friends, community, family, and lovers. Participant observation not only facilitates relations of trust, but also allows the anthropologist to experience first-hand what cannot be conveyed orally. As in my case, the smells of the tropical forest, the bites of mosquitoes, or the long hours spent doing nothing, seemed to encapsulate profound truths about warfare. Participant observation also reveals emotions that can be observed, but also felt, like the "echoes of death" (Das and Han 2015) I had the sadness to experience after a bombing by the army (see ethnographic vignette in Chapter 6). As we will see shortly, participation can cover different degrees of engagement, more active or passive, but always linked to a sharing of social activities and consequently to a certain physical proximity. Since participant observation is ethnographer-dependent, and therefore not arbitrarily repeatable (Beer 2003), as argued above, the position of the researcher plays a preponderant role in his or her ability to observe by participating, to compromise emotionally or politically with a group, and finally to give importance to one subject over another. The more the ethnographers are able to participate in the various activities proposed by the people they observe, the more material they will have on which to base her/his analysis since, as Malinowski pointed out a century ago, "the collecting of concrete data over a wide range of facts is thus one of the main points of field method" (1922, 9).

Participant observation is not only critical in the exploratory phase of the research, in understanding the context and adapting to it (Beer 2003; Fetterman 2020), but it is key throughout the course of the fieldwork as it allows for constant readjustment of the goals set by the research questions that over time may turn out to be less relevant than expected. At the same time, as much as closeness to one's subject of study may be advisable, it can also make the relativizing of lived experiences more difficult, as well as the relativization of the researcher himself within his own experiences. To explain it in Bourdieu's words,

"[...] what needs to be objectivized, then, is not the anthropologist performing the anthropological analysis of a foreign world, but the social world that has made both the anthropologist and the conscious or unconscious anthropology that she engages in her anthropological practice [thus] her particular position within the microcosm of anthropologists" (Bourdieu 2003, 283).

According to Bourdieu, every experience should be objectified on several levels, first of all, that of the researcher himself as an actor-subject through which ethnographic research passes.

Enunciating one's own positionality is part of the process of objectification of research as well as of the production of knowledge deriving from it. Yet, even the rationalization of lived experience, as well as that of the actor immersed in the experience, are not sufficient to overcome the limitations that may be imposed on the experience itself. In many cases the anthropologist is driven by a desire to learn, participate, and involve themselves as much as possible in their field (e.g. Emerson 1995; Graeber 2009; Narby 1998).

I identify all of my previous research among Black communities along these lines. Yet, once I found myself in a guerrilla war front, I was confronted with the limitations of such an approach. Certainly, I was interested in the sensation of holding a rifle, but if just doing research in the ranks of the ELN runs the risk of legal repercussions in Colombia, the risk of being seen with a rifle in my hand would have aggravated my situation considerably. Of course, I would have been interested in observing a combat up close in order to grasp its dynamics and accompanying emotions, but besides risking my life for participant observation, wouldn't that be extremely perverse? Without going that far, one activity that all guerrillas are required to participate in is keeping watch, day or night. While in most cases, this does not involve exaggerated risks past the struggle against sleep or boredom, should something happen, as has been explained to me many times, the guard is "the first to shoot, and often the first to be captured or killed." These are just three amongst dozens of examples I could give of activities, ranging from preparing explosive devices to simply cleaning a rifle, for which my participation has been prevented by legal as well as, more importantly, ethical reasons. If there is one thing the ELN has taught me, it is the awareness of my limits, physical and psychological, but also moral. In more drastic terms, just as only those who live in affluence can romanticize poverty, and relish in experiencing it from time to time as if it were an adventure, so only those who have never experienced war can idealize it, to the point of being eager to see a slaughtered corpse.

Therefore, participant observation can and does have its limits, which must become part of the research and define its methodology. It is then up to the ethnographer to be flexible and adapt his investigation and, if necessary, readjust its objectives. In an article on qualitative research in dangerous places, Daniel Goldstein (2014), offers six recommendations for those who want to embark on this type of research: planning, contextualization, alertness, interviewing, equipment, and confidentiality. Under "planning" Goldstein recommends securing exit routes, maintaining contact with those outside the field, and even, as Patrick Coy suggests (in D. Goldstein 2014, 6), making a will. I was unaware of Goldstein's article before I began my research, and reading it afterwards, it made me smile to discover how intuitively I

had followed the same suggestions. With every move I made in the rainforest, I tried to memorize the route I took and to never mentally lose my location relative to the main rivers. This point also relates to the third item, “alertness,” i.e. maintain a state of steady watchfulness, of being alert to details (ibid. 8–9). Contact with the outside world was not possible due to the prohibition on carrying a cell phone, but as explained in the first pages of this thesis, I had warned a couple of trusted friends in Switzerland about the time I would spend in the field and told them to sound the alarm to my friends in Colombia if they did not hear from me after a certain date, or in the most extreme case, to alert the embassy. Finally, I don't know if it was out of superstition or rather, I think, out of love for the people who are closest to me, but every time I returned to the rainforest, the night before, I made a testament. I never thought of dying as a possibility, but I think it always reassured me to leave behind a small message for family and friends.

Regarding the type of interviews conducted and the level of confidentiality established with my interlocutors, I am certain that my access and positionality discussed above are the factors that allowed me to advance my observations even where I was unable or unwilling to participate firsthand. The fact that I immediately entered into excellent relationships with the commanders in charge and easily made good contacts with the Black and indigenous youth at the base of the military hierarchy meant that I was able to establish friendly and intimate relationships with several members of the group. This enabled me to spend every day in the forest, engaging in endless informal discussions. In this way, I was able to get not only detailed information about activities in which I did not participate, but especially different points of view about the same activity, the same episode, or similar emotions. In presenting my preliminary results, I was asked on a few occasions if being on good terms with commanders had not affected my relations with the guerrillas, or more precisely if the guerrillas had not felt obliged to tell me only positive things about their life in the ELN. With absolute certainty, I can say that this was not the case. As I will discuss in Part II of this dissertation, once in the rainforest I found myself spending weeks and sometimes months in small groups of six to eight people, and in such a setting, after a couple of days, one enters into such intimacy with each member of the group that no relationship is any longer false or in any way distorted. It is obvious that there are times where one is tired, where one argues with other group members, or where someone wishes to go home. Unlike what it was in the FARC-EP though, no one is obligated to stay in the ELN forever, so no one has to fake emotions they do not feel. Moreover, it is certain that my good relationship with Commander Ernesto was in front of everyone's eyes, but likewise, so were my equally

deep and sincere friendships with other members of the group, young women and men without any hierarchical rank.

More complicated was the collection of data assembled during the extended discussions. As we will see in more detail in the second part of this thesis, nothing can be planned with certainty in the tropical rainforest, as times are dictated by the military context, while other factors are determined by the surrounding natural elements. In the best of cases, once the conversations were over, I would take refuge in my hammock and write down everything I could in my notebooks. At the end of each stay, I would have to pass through one or more checkpoints to get out of the red zone and I never knew how meticulously the military would search me, so I always made use of my good fortune as a polyglot, and I always wrote my notes in five or six languages at the same time. Particularly if the information was extremely sensitive, I would use several languages in the same sentence, trying to use Swiss German as much as possible, a language that unlike Italian or other Romance languages, I was almost certain no soldier would understand. Using my Dictaphone for self-recording was not an option for two reasons: the first was that I didn't want to leave an audio trace of myself that could end up in the wrong hands, and the second was to avoid using batteries and risk running out of power if I was called in for a spontaneous interview. In many instances, however, things did not go according to my intended plan. Often, after a prolonged discussion, it was time for dinner, or a shower (in the river, of course) – two activities that had to be done at a moment's notice if you didn't want to go to bed hungry or dirty, leaving me no time to record notes. At other occasions, during the day and never at the same time, the army would begin to fly overhead, so that as soon as one shouted "airplane," in the space of a few seconds one had to run to retrieve the clothes left to dry in the sun and hide any object that could be sighted from above. When the cry was "helicopter," within a minute you had to be at attention, bag on shoulder, ready to go. These kinds of interruptions were particularly annoying when I was engaged in long chess games with Commander Ernesto, the number one Commander of the Western War Front, and the most important ELN Commander on Colombian soil – the others being in Cuba or Venezuela – until his killing under suspicious circumstances on September 28, 2021.

From our first meeting, Commander Ernesto was never a simple interlocutor for me, but also a friend and a father figure for whom I will always have the most profound admiration. Although his loss is a painful wound still fully open in my heart, I am able to smile when I think back to our games of chess, which besides being moments of relaxation for both of us, were also periods of friendly and confidential exchange, sometimes about the ELN, sometimes about our families, and sometimes simply of gossip and laughter. Every now and then, after a game,

I would want to go and write some notes, but if he lost, he would call me back in a solemn tone and say, "Where do you think you're going? Now you sit here and finish what you started!" and with a mischievous smile he would add, "That's an order!" Chess games with Commander Ernesto were certainly an important factor in my access to the entire war front, and for the record, when I bid him farewell for what I never thought would be the last time, he was leading our personal tournament by 22 wins to 21.

Another factor that often delayed the writing of my field journal was simply the fall of darkness, which in the Chocó occurs between five and six o'clock in the evening, and in the lower levels of the dense forest, always half an hour earlier. Unlike other places, once it gets dark it is forbidden to light any kind of light, be it a candle or a lantern because of the risk of being found by a night flyover, or by land exploration troops. In such risky contexts, as Goldstein suggests, "a good memory is an invaluable tool" (2014, 13–14).

In spite of these challenges, in one way or another I almost always managed to write down my observations and get my field notebooks out safely, a total of thirty-seven notebooks in all, plus eight personal journals. When I arrived in the city, however, my ethnographic odyssey was not over, since in order not to put other people at risk, it was important to organize, encode, and rewrite all the information as quickly as possible on a computer, then encrypt it, and quickly destroy the notebooks with the most sensitive information.

The coding of my notes was done by following the steps for analyzing qualitative data proposed by Froschauer (2003) and Mayring (2000). Once I identified the major themes present in my notes, I followed a deductive category application. I established a dozen categories of analysis into which I thematically grouped the information obtained from the various informal discussions as well as my observations (participatory and non-participatory). This allowed me to compare and evaluate the veracity and relevance of my data. Similarly, I catalogued and later analyzed the formal interviews,³⁶ which were conducted in a semi-directed manner (Blanchet and Gotman 2007) following the form of a colloquial dialogue as much as possible in order to put my interviewees at ease. Especially when I was talking to rank and file soldiers not accustomed to this type of exercise, I would cut the interview whenever I realized that my research participant feel uncomfortable (D. Goldstein 2014, 10). I emphasized that anything could be cut out, edited, or deleted before their eyes if they realized that they had said something they would rather not reveal. If the dialogues and interviews with commanders clarified my

³⁶ Over the years of my thesis research, I conducted around one-hundred-fifty interviews, fifteen of which have been video recorded, thirty-seven audio recorded, and the remaining have been in the form of informal discussions.

understanding of the ELN's politico-military implementation, hierarchical structure, and objectives at the local and national levels, it was the discussions with the soldiers that opened my eyes to the social dynamics within the organization. Thus, I was able to grasp the daily concerns, the learning processes, the relationships with other group members and superiors, and in particular, I was able to elucidate the everyday relationships between guerrillas and the ethnic communities living in the region.

Of all the formal interviews recorded, fifteen people allowed me to film the interviews. To avoid putting people under pressure or embarrassment, these people were selected through snowball sampling (Beer 2003; Blanchet and Gotman 2007; D. Goldstein 2014), where the first people willing to let me film them indicated who they thought would be available for this type of interview. These visual recordings add up to the hundred or so hours of recordings I made during my stay, sometimes of activities, of daily and nightly movements along the various waterways, and often just of the camps and the surrounding landscape. All of these clips fit into the framework of visual anthropology, a field of anthropology that began in the early 1970s (Grimshaw 2001) and formalized after the IX ICAES Conference held in Chicago in 1973, followed by Hocking's publication *Principle of Visual Anthropology* (2003). The various clips obtained from the multiple recordings serve a threefold function. First, that of allowing me to check and demonstrate my results (Jacknis 1988). Second, to analyze or challenge aspects of the research that are difficult to summarize in writing, since as MacDougall remarks "[Images] evoke the life experience of social actors, and also experiences of fieldworks that always remain prior to anthropological description" (in Banks and Morphy 1997, 264). And third, these are valuable visual testimonies that will facilitate and make more intelligible the spreading of my research in the future, thus allowing me to strengthen my engagement not so much with the guerrilla armed struggle, but, on the contrary, with the peace-building process to which the ELN claims to aspire.

ENGAGING WITH THE GUERRILLAS' STRUGGLE FOR PEACE

When embarking on ethnographic field research, especially that which focuses on under-served communities, there is always a level of compromise. In some cases, such as the one in this research, the commitment is towards one's interlocutors who may use such research as a tool in the common search for social peace. In other cases, the engagement is towards the academy and the promotion of intellectual debates. For others still, the commitment is only towards oneself and one's academic career. In most cases, then, the ethnographer's field is the

result of a personal choice, arising out of an interest, a curiosity, or a cause that one wants to defend. However, not all researchers have the possibility to venture into terrain far from the institute with which they are affiliated. A Swiss anthropologist can easily decide to carry out her/his research in Colombia, while a Colombian anthropologist is unlikely to be able to overcome the bureaucratic and, above all, economic barriers that would guarantee her/him access to Switzerland. Arguably, the physical and cultural distance between the world of the observer and the observed make the separation between knowledge and practice easier, which indeed, "[...] is more pronounced in academic settings in the global north than in the global south, where establishing relationships between the two is often seen as more urgent" (Kirsch 2018, 6). At the same time, this asymmetry in the world of research lies at the root of the unevenness in the production of knowledge and epistemologies, and is therefore attacked by those who promote a decolonization of the academy, "[...] making Western knowledge the object of critique and inquiry" (Denzin and Lincoln 2008, 7). Moreover, these uneven opportunities, to be added to other identity factors such as citizenship and the gender of the anthropologist, show how in most cases, having a choice means being in a position of privilege and consequently, facing responsibilities. If for some, the privilege is taken for granted, others try to respond to it as did the young Tolstoj (2010), who going to visit his landed estates thought he could help the peasants only with his presence or with some generous act (by donating a horse, the materials to renovate a courtyard, etc.). Whatever the scenario, as Nancy Scheper-Hughes argues, doing ethnographic research in under-served or oppressed communities comes with ethical obligations, since: "if anthropologists deny themselves the power [...] to identify an ill or wrong and choose to ignore [...] the extent to which dominated people sometimes play the role of their own executioners, they collaborate with the relations of power and silence that allow the destruction to continue" (1995, 419). My choice is to make use of my privileges to give voice and humanize those who have decided to embrace the fight against injustice with weapons, and for this reason find themselves categorized as terrorists. This decision is certainly related to my political commitments, but before anything else, it is a human commitment towards peace, since catching a glimpse of war has strengthened my desire to engage.

Stuart Kirsch defines *engaged anthropology* as a project that "share[s] a commitment to mobilizing anthropology for constructive interventions into politics [...] making anthropology relevant and useful" (2018, 1). Thus, with a similar commitment toward the discipline, I understand my project on the ELN guerrillas as a powerful tool for political engagement in revealing inequalities and the construction of peace. In the realm of engaged anthropology, which includes the fields of public (Besteman 2013), militant (Scheper-Hughes 1995), and

applied (Van Willigen 2002) anthropology, to name a few, Charles Hale makes a distinction between what he refers to as "activist research" and "cultural critique" (2006). For Hale, the separation is primarily based on methodological grounds, where the former is promoted by an anthropologist's engagement with the academy on the one hand, and with political struggle outside the university on the other; while the latter is embraced by anthropologists who "[...] strive for intellectual production uncompromised by the inevitable negotiations and contractions that these broader political struggles entail" (2006, 100). Inevitably, one of the main criticisms directed at engaged anthropology is that of a lack of objectivity due to too close an involvement with its own field. In his distinction, Hale defends "cultural critique," stating that it is precisely the trust and long-term interaction between the anthropologist and his interlocutors that makes the research process even richer (2008, 2). Conversely, Hale distances himself from activist research in that, although he acknowledges its possibility for scientific objectivity, he claims it is "[...] simplistic, unproblematized, and undertheorized" (2006, 101). Michal Osterweil (2013) rejects the dichotomy proposed by Hale, and using as an example her field within the Italian alter-global "Movimento dei Movimenti," states that assuming "[...] that the *raison d'être* of movements or activists is to suspend complexity in order to take action [...] rests on a limited or positivist conception of action, subsequently overlooking forms of action that involve thought, complexity, contemplation, or problematization" (602). Osterweil continues by appealing to a talk given by Giorgio Agamben (2005), stating that we shouldn't situate a social movement as an entity exclusively linked to the "real world" and in antagonism with the "theoretical world" of the academy. Furthermore, the action of social movements in the "real world" has as its purpose precisely that of creating theories capable of offering alternatives to current problems (Osterweil 2013, 606). These points are well taken by Jacqueline Urla and Justin Helepololei, who summarize Osterweil's words by saying that "critical reflection, analysis, and deconstruction are taking place in social movements [...] and it should be our task to recognize it, collaborate in this, and, very importantly, find ways of spelling out the implications of this critical epistemological work" (2014, 444). In addition to myself, there are many others (Escobar 1992; 2018; Graeber 2009; Snow et al. 2018) who support Osterweil's view of the capacity for critical reflection on the part of social movements and their ability to formulate "[...] new [scientific] knowledge, new theories, new questions" (Urla and Helepololei 2014, 109). Finally, as Kirsch argues, the gap between those who recognize themselves in the realm of engaged anthropology and those who feel more comfortable moving into its periphery should not necessarily be exaggerated (2018, 48), however in a world where disparities only increase manifesting themselves, I can only embrace

Victoria Sanford's point that compromising ourselves with our research and especially with our interlocutors "[...] reminds us that all research is inherently political - even, and perhaps especially, that scholarship presented under the guise of 'objectivity,' which is really no more than a veiled defense of the status quo" (in Sanford and Angel-Ajani 2006, 14).

In the eyes of engaged as well as activist anthropology, the scientific commitment remains unaffected, as both are built on rigorous ethnographic knowledge (Kirsch 2018, 223), while containing the added value gained precisely as a result of the ethnographer's proximity to the field. Advocacy rather than neutrality (ibid. 33) is what allows the ethnographer to navigate sites where people are justifiably reticent to share experiences and impressions with those who are more interested in the information than in the context – and therefore also the person – from where the information comes. Classical or colonial anthropology is in this sense extractive, because behind neutrality, it has a research methodology of obtaining data only useful to the anthropologist and not to the communities for which the latter says he feels empathy. To be interested and committed to the subject of study, and therefore to the actors that make it up, does not mean – or does not only mean – participating in their emotions, but letting oneself be guided by their cosmovision. As Aurora Vergara Figueroa et al. (2018) explain it, "binding ethnography and compromise implies investigating critically for the structural processes that determine the living conditions of the communities we work with" (64).

A rigorous, transparent, and engaged methodology becomes even more essential in research conducted in conflict zones or with actors who do not enjoy public favor, and hence the researcher himself can easily become the subject of criticism (Urla and Helepololei 2014, 436). Although I do not work with actors recognized for sowing terror through violence as in the case of the paramilitaries (Civico 2016; Sanford and Angel-Ajani 2006), the ELN is not well regarded in Colombia, especially given the control of the media apparatus by the succession of right-wing governments. However, the main criticism I've been confronted with while discussing my research has been whether my proximity to members of the ELN war front was contradictory to my prior and long-term engagement with Black communities. The short answer is no, as my engagement is first and foremost with the rigorous methodology discussed so far, and with my responsibility stemming from my privileges as an anthropologist affiliated with universities in the global north. Furthermore, although I may have doubts about the viability of armed struggle and I am aware (as I repeat several times in this thesis) that the first victims of any armed conflict are the civilian population, and in Colombia, the ethnic communities, the political and social peace program to which the ELN aspires moves toward the recognition and strengthening of the autonomy of ethnic communities and not toward their oppression. In the

territories on the margins of the state, politics clash with military activities, whose choices can – and surely must – be criticized. But in a scenario where every armed actor is eager to show its hegemony in order to achieve an ideal, it is nonetheless the state that marks and opens the territories under the flag of a neoliberal ideology, an ideology that the ethnic groups living in those territories define as the “politics of death.”

As Natalia Escobar García states, "Doing research in contexts of armed conflict, as well as inhabiting these territories, is not an easy task: it involves political compromise" (in Velásquez Prestán et al. 2018, 84). Her testimony, in conjunction with that of Aurora Vergara Figueroa and María Eugenia Velásquez Prestán, led the three authors to delineate four distinguishing principles of engaged anthropology, which they describe as reflexive, bold, chameleonic, and peremptory. The first tenet encompasses a collaborative approach and a call for an anthropology that is more focused on social engagement with the people of the field than on our personal interests of accumulating academic success (ibid. 86). This idea reconnects with the methodological principles of decolonizing anthropology, based on ethical criteria of transformation and participation (Denzin and Lincoln 2008, 2). The objectives of the research must therefore be primarily pedagogical in the Freirian sense of the term (Freire 1996) and not aim at a production of knowledge as an end in itself or for its author. Consequently, a constant self-reflection on one's positionality is imperative (Faria and Mollett 2016). The second postulate, boldness, echoes Veena Dass's concept of ethnographic writing as a body of writing. As explained at the beginning of this chapter, it does not mean purposely putting oneself in dangerous situations, but accepting that if the subject of research is a sensitive field, being rigorous in one's methodology also means sharing experiences that force us out of our comfort zone. By chameleon anthropology, the Colombian researchers mean taking an attitude that generates the least impact possible in the life of the community (Velásquez Prestán et al. 2018, 87), and thus making a show of flexibility and adaptation. In other words, the ethnographer cannot become an exaggerated burden for the people who host him, since his being a stranger to the morphological and social landscape will inevitably make him already the object of special attention. Finally, a peremptory anthropology means to make a recurring self-criticism towards oneself and towards the academic world in which we move in order not to forget that behind every publication of ours there are people who have devoted time and attention to us, in most cases, without asking anything in return.

These postulates are pillars on which to base the anthropology of today and tomorrow – an anthropology that wants to be decolonizing and engaged, and that distances itself from a vision of the ethnographic field as an aseptic object of study from which to methodically extract

information for the mere accumulation of scientific capital. Moreover, "the sensitivity of the field is acquired by walking the territory" (Velásquez Prestán et al. 2018, 69), that is, crossing it in a thinking-feeling manner (Escobar 2014) and thus paying attention to the interconnectedness of the various elements that compose it, human as much as natural and temporal. It is understanding the history of our subject of study that empowers us to convey knowledge of it. But in order for the latter to be "embedded in the landscapes through which we travel" (Denzin and Lincoln 2008, 8), it is our duty to position ourselves and engage within our journey.

Doing research in the midst of an armed group in a conflict zone has permanently challenged me and made me confront my limitations – psychological and physical, as much as ethical (Low et al. 2010). Yet, perseverance in this project has enabled me to walk, thinking-feeling in the Colombian Pacific basin in the company of young people who, although in many cases have never seen a city or read a book in its entirety, have taught me to appreciate humanity through the humble gaze of those who every day are ready to give their lives to help a fellow human being, even if it is a semi-extraneous anthropologist with a bizarre accent, as in my case. The months I spent in the ELN also opened my eyes to a theoretical understanding of political anthropology, making tangible the call of Michal Osterweil, i.e. that "it is crucial that we revision – topographically and ontologically – how we see ourselves in relation to our "[su]bjects of study," and that we recognize the common political and epistemological space in which we are situated" (2013, 617). Having gained a deeper comprehension of the morphological, historical, and social space in which the ELN moves has forced me to modify my preliminary approach, and as we will see in the third part of the thesis, to take an epistemological step, i.e. to include intersectionality as a method within the field of the anthropology of the state.

To conclude, engagement is not measured by one's affiliation to a group or an ideology, but in following a rigorous methodology whose main purpose is to support the studied group in the diffusion of its cause. This ensures that "the value of engaged anthropology may extend beyond the immediate goals of a project, making it possible to contribute to larger debates" (Kirsch 2018, 135). Collaboration, can also occur through institutional processes (Le Meur 2015) and in the case of my research on the National Liberation Army, should a peace process reopen in the future, it is my hope that this work can prove to be a tool in promoting social justice. To speak of the ELN is not only to deconstruct the category of "terrorist" by humanizing its face, but also to deconstruct the understanding of an armed conflict and its actors, direct and indirect. I agree with Maya Berry, Claudia Chavez Argülles, Shanya Cordis, Sarah Ihmoud, and

Elizabeth Velasquez Estrada (2017) when they state that "activist research that does not pursue epistemological decolonization will [...] inevitably reproduce the very hierarchies of power that it seeks to help dismantle" (538).

CONCLUSION

Every research should be bound to ethical and methodological principles, but when research is carried out in a contested field site, and if it has the declared goal to contribute to an engaged and decolonial anthropology, its ethic needs to be impeccable. Otherwise, this would not only delegitimize the advancement of this scientific field, but would lead to endangering the integrity of the interlocutors; or in situations such as those in the Pacific basin, that of their families or acquaintances. An ethic based on respect and transparency also involves openly explaining the trajectory taken by the ethnographer to arrive at the results presented. In my case, this was necessary to clarify that none of my Colombian friends were ever aware of my contact with the ELN. My initial meeting with this guerrilla group was made in a Colombian penitentiary where I was able to visit political prisoners for years, and my access to this space was given to me by political refugees who still had some contacts with the ELN and who have been living in Europe for years.

Discussing access to the field is key because it highlights the advantages and disadvantages of the theme discussed in the fourth section of the chapter, namely that of the ethnographer's positionality. In my particular case, it was of utmost importance to elucidate how much my multiple identities of Colombian, Swiss, Afro-Descendant, male, and student have influenced my fieldwork and my relationship with its actors. Yet, while conducting research embedded in an armed (illegal) group, the ethnographers must continually revise their relationship to the space in which their research is not only physically inscribed but also intellectually situated. Any anthropological research involves power relations, and the impending need to decolonize anthropology can only be successful on the condition that researchers assume these relations transparently, and with the goal of transforming them.

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF A TIMELESS CONFLICT

*“Deme una novela bien triste,
con mucho sufrimiento a causa del amor,
y con un final feliz.”³⁷*

Luís Sepulveda – *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*



Sunset over the Pacific rainforest – Photo by the author

³⁷ “Give me a very sad novel, with a lot of suffering because of love, and with a happy ending.”

Hundreds, if not thousands of books have been written about the Colombian conflict. Most of these books date the beginning of the conflict to 1948 when the period known as *La Violencia* started. However, given the decolonizing approach embraced by this thesis, it is crucial to bear in mind that for a vast percentage of the Colombian population, i.e., the ethnic communities, the conflict started with the European invasion in the middle of the sixteenth century. This is not merely historical data but supports the claims – such as the need for historical reparations³⁸ – that are continuously made by ethnic movements. These claims are sometimes conflicting, yet often supported by guerrilla groups, as in the case of the ELN, or even more so in the case of the Quintín Lame, the only “indigenous guerrilla movement” ever active in Colombia. On the other hand, this decolonial narrative of the conflict collides with the centralized republican Colombian state model, which seeks to promote a national identity framed within the boundaries of multiculturalism. The ELN, as well as the ethnic communities inhabiting the regions in which the ELN operates, argue that lasting peace must come from within the territories and will continue in the territories only with increasing autonomy and independence of the ethnic communities in their governmental bodies. The following historical introduction reveals how the state has never been willing to negotiate its post-colonial arrangement.

What this history shows is that the conflict is not limited to one or more armed groups, but rather involves a multitude of actors, ranging from traditional Colombian parties to the US department of foreign affairs, which have no interest in changing the structures that brought about the conflict in the first place. It could be argued that with the peace process and the following demobilization of the FARC-EP, the cycle of violence of revolutionary guerrilla groups born in the wake of the Cuban revolution has ended. Hence, it is reasonable to state that a new cycle of violence, with the ELN as a precursor, has started. This new cycle of violence can be read as revolutionary, but its objective is no longer that of a classical revolution, but rather that of armed resistance.

This chapter contextualizes the Colombian conflict as the background of this thesis, rather than providing an exhaustive account of all the events and actors characterizing the most protracted ongoing internal conflict in the Western Hemisphere. Here I draw on secondary literature, particularly the work of Darío Villamizar (2017), on the history of the Colombian guerrilla movements. I also make use of primary sources to enrich the discussion and open it to

³⁸ For Black Colombian communities, reparations imply both the recognition of the historical damages related to the enslavement of their ancestors and the damages related to the Colombian internal conflict, primarily the forced displacement from their ancestral territories as a result of the capitalist policies of exploitation by the elites (see for example the page of PCN, Black Communities Process, www.renacientes.net).

complementary perspectives. In addition to historical events, I also present a series of ethnographic observations. Reinforcing anthropological specificity, I want to stress the importance that everyday episodes have in the shaping of history and the critical understanding of mainstream narratives. A goal of this chapter is to display the temporal and spatial interconnections between people, movements, and state policies, including the role of US policy on Colombia which helps to explain the ELN's resistance to the state and its dependence on its northern neighbor. In this chapter I employ the terms "strategy" and "tactic," as well as "objective and subjective conditions (to revolution)." Already in the fifth century B.C., the famous Chinese general Sun Tzu wrote, "Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory, [while] tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat" (2021 [5th B.C.]). In a warfare context, a strategy must be understood as the overarching plan, while a tactic is the sum of particular actions undertaken to achieve the strategy, i.e., the overall goal. When the plan is revolution, the major challenge is not to overthrow the government, but to establish a new one, or, to recall Crane Britton's celebrated *Anatomy of Revolution* (1965), the "Thermidorian phase." Accordingly, there are objective conditions (i.e., the presence of a strong party or unions able to take over the work of the revolutionaries) and subjective conditions (i.e. the capacity to militarily overthrow the government) to consider before taking actions. In the case of Colombian guerrillas, and particularly the ELN, the evaluation of these conditions has been influenced by the legendary Commander Ernesto Guevara. For him, the subjective conditions (i.e., the motivation of the insurgency) were primary to the objective ones, and if met, they are able to influence and generate the latter (cf. Guevara 2014 [1960]). From this consideration, Commander Guevara developed what journalist Régis Debray would later refer to as the *foco theory*. For Guevara a little guerrilla group (*un foco guerrillero* in Spanish) has the potential to spread like wildfire and lead to the uprising of the masses and popular revolution. For Comandante Guevara, this theory was mainly applicable in the less developed countries, and could only work if the first guerrillas had the peasant class as their social base. The ELN has ascribed to this theory for decades, and has thus cultivated relations with the peasant class, but also and above all, as evident in PARTS II and III of this thesis, with the various Colombian ethnic groups.

This chapter unfolds in three main parts followed by an appendix at the end of the dissertation. In the first section, I sketch a brief history of the conflict, its main actors and most significant occurrences. In the second part, I summarize the multiple peace processes between the government and various armed groups, and the questionable successes of these attempts. Here, I will highlight the peace process with the ELN that officially began with the government

of Juan Manuel Santos in 2016, but was later frozen – in the midst of my ethnographic research – by the Iván Duque government in 2019. These two sections should provide sufficient background to the complex landscape in which the guerrilla movements operate and interact with the state. The third section of the chapter then provides a short history of the ELN, from its origins until the present.

TIMETABLE OF THE COLOMBIAN CONFLICT AND ITS CONTEXT³⁹

| | |
|-----------|--|
| 1492 | Beginning of the European invasion of the Americas |
| 1550 | Designation of the Kingdom of New Granada which included part of the present territories of Colombia, Panama, Ecuador and Venezuela |
| 1553 | The first enslaved Africans are brought to the Kingdom of New Granada to supplant the indigenous labor force decimated by disease and the <i>Conquistadores</i> ' violence |
| 1810 | Colombian Declaration of Independence |
| 1820 | Treaty on Regulation of War |
| 1899-1902 | Thousand-day War |
| 1948 | Assassination of Liberal presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán followed by <i>El Bogotazo</i> |
| 1948-1958 | Period known as <i>La Violencia</i> |
| 1951 | Women begin to exercise right to vote in Colombia |
| 1958-1974 | Period of the National Front |
| 1959 | Cuba celebrates its independence from decades of North American rule |
| 1964 | First march of the National Liberation Army (ELN) on July 4 th |
| 1964 | Foundation of the Southern Guerrilla Block on July 20 th |

³⁹ This timetable is not exhaustive and is only meant to facilitate the reading of the present chapter. For more information about some of the groups mentioned in the table (ex. the M-19), see the Appendix at the end of the thesis.

| | |
|-----------|---|
| 1966 | Death of the priest Camilo Torres in combat |
| 1966 | The guerrilla detachments of the Southern Block unite and form the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) on May 5 th |
| 1967 | Foundation of the People's Liberation Army (EPL) |
| 1967 | Assassination of Commander Ernesto Ché Guavara in the Bolivian mountains on October 9 th |
| 1973 | The Colombian government launches the Anorí Operation which almost annihilates the ELN |
| 1974 | Foundation of the M-19 |
| 1982 | The FARC add the abbreviation -EP (People's Army) to their name following its 7 th Conference |
| 1984-2002 | Political genocide of the Unión Patriótica |
| 1985 | Foundation of the Quintín Lame Armed Movement (MAQL) |
| 1991 | The New Colombian Constitution is promulgated on July 4 th |
| 1991-1992 | Peace talks between the Colombian government and the Simón Bolívar Coordinating Board (CGSB – including the FARC-EP, the ELN, the M-19, the EPL, and the PRT) |
| 1998 | Peace talks between the Colombian government and the ELN take place in Spain and Germany |
| 1998 | Discussions begin between Colombian president Andrés Pastrana and US president Bill Clinton on what will become the <i>Plan Colombia</i> |
| 1999-2002 | Failed peace process of San Vicente del Caguán between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP |
| 2001 | US president George Bush Jr. launches his global war on terror |
| 2006 | The ELN ratifies its will for a political solution to the armed conflict during its 4 th Congress |
| 2012 | Beginning of a new peace process between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP |

| | |
|-----------|---|
| 2012 | Beginning of a new peace process between the Colombian government and the ELN on October 10 th |
| 2016 | Signing of the final peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP on November 24 th |
| 2016-2020 | Following the peace agreement with the FARC-EP, between 600 and 800 social leaders are systematically assassinated in Colombia |
| 2019 | President Duque definitively closes the negotiations (hence the peace process) with the ELN |
| 2020-2021 | The Colombian government launches several military operations in the Chocó Department in which the leading commanders of the ELN's Western Front are assassinated |

MULTIPLE ACTORS, SAME OLD STORY

For the indigenous and Afro-descendant communities,⁴⁰ the conflict in Colombia started long before the Republic came into existence. For the indigenous people, the conflict started in the first half of the sixteenth century, when Spanish conquistadores invaded their land with exceptional brutality, killing thousands and forcing those who survived to work in the mines. For the Afro-descendant communities, the conflict began around fifty years later at the end of the sixteenth century when they were brought in chains from Africa to substitute the dying indigenous labor-force.⁴¹ Neither of these two ethnic groups ever wholly recovered from the

⁴⁰ In this thesis, I use the term “ethnic communities” to refer to indigenous and Black communities. In agreement with the Colombian National Indigenous Organization ONIC (<https://www.onic.org.co/pueblos>), there are almost a hundred indigenous communities living in the country that differ in language and culture. Black communities are divided into three main categories, Black, *palenquere* (who inhabit San Basilio de Palenque, the first liberated area of the Americas), and *raizales*, who inhabit the islands of San Andrés and Providencia. I use the terms Black, Afro, Afro-descendant, and Afro-Colombian communities interchangeably throughout this thesis. Outside of common parlance, there are some differences worth explaining. When talking about Blacks, or Black communities, the racial aspect and the recognition of a relationship of subordination and resistance that originated with the Atlantic trade is highlighted. The term Afro or Afro-descendant emphasizes the political aspects of this identity. In other words, one can be Black in skin color but deny his African past, while one can be mulatto (having one white parent and one Black parent) and, as in my case, define himself as Afro-descendant in order to reinforce the claim to an African past and adherence to a politics of liberation. For some, the term Black is too closely tied to racial symbolism, while for others, both Black and Afro are both emic notions to be associated with a past and present of struggle and resistance (about this discussion see for example <https://pacificocolombia.org/negros-afros-afrocolombianos-o-afrodescendientes/>). Finally, I try to avoid the use of the term Afro-Colombian, which I see as an *etic* definition of the Colombian government intended to homogenize and include diversity in its political project of building a national unity that can contribute to capitalist accumulation.

⁴¹ As Bartolomé de Las Casas (2019), defender of the “Indian’s cause,” testified, “*Nay they threw into them Women with Child, and as many Aged Men as they laid hold of, till they were all fill’s up with Carkasses. It was a sight*

European invasion and subjugation, and as we will see throughout this thesis, their struggles and claims are paramount in understanding the Colombian conflict.

Once independence from the Spanish crown was signed in 1810, a long series of internal major and minor wars started: 54 between 1863 and 1884 (Alape 1999). Each of these wars inherited matters of the previous one and gave reasons for the following one. The same causes (Liberals against Nationalists first, and Liberals against Conservatives later) led to the bloody Thousand-day War at the beginning of the nineteenth century, initiating the period known as *La Violencia* – the primary starting point of the ongoing conflict – in the middle of the twentieth century. Villamizar summarizes the problem as including: "The possession and distribution of land, centralism and the always forgotten provinces, fiscal difficulties, crises between the parties and the conflicts within them, the separation of the Church from the State and secular or religious education" (2017, 93).

I will not dwell further on these first wars, except to highlight two anecdotes related to more recent events. The first dates to November 26, 1820, when Simón Bolívar, president of the newly formed Republic of Gran Colombia, agreed to the Spanish commander Pablo Morillo's War Regularization Treaty.⁴² The Treaty, "first of its kind in the history of humanity, [...] contemplated the cessation of hostilities between the patriot and Spanish armies, the obligatory exchange of prisoners, and the consideration of 'the inhabitants of the towns'" (Villamizar 2017, 95). I mention this anecdote, because the 'humanization of war' will continue to be a constant concern of guerrilla groups, particularly for the ELN. The second anecdote concerns the Thousand-day War,⁴³ and is "a little-known facet that historians sometimes [...] prefer to overlook: the application of guerrilla warfare as a form of struggle" (ibid. 101). Although between the fighting groups of the time there were only a small fraction of guerrilla groups without a unified political direction, this second anecdote offers several curious parallels with contemporary history. The first one is that guerrilla member Avelino Rosas inspired the insurrectional liberal fronts with the Maceo Code, "the first manual on the tactics of guerrilla

deserving Commiseration, to behold Women and Children gaunched or run through with these Posts, some were taken off by Spears and Swords, and the remainder expos'd to hungry Dogs, kept short of food for that purpose, to be devour'd by them and torn in pieces. They burnt a Potent Nobleman in a very great Fire, saying, That he was the more Honour'd by this kind of Death. All which Butcheries continued Seven Years, from 1524, to 1531. I leave the Reader to judge how many might be Massacred during that time."

⁴² On this Treaty, see also <https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/S0020860400015679a.pdf>.

⁴³ The Thousand-day War lasted 1,130 days, from October 18, 1899, to November 21, 1902. In this lapse of time, it is estimated that in a population of 3,700,000 inhabitants, between 150 and 160,000 died. The Thousand-days War later inspired Gabriel García Márquez's masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

warfare in the history of Latin America" (ibid. 104).⁴⁴ Moreover, Avelino Rosas was from Cauca, a department where Manuel Quintín Lame was active at the time. Quintín Lame was an indigenous leader fighting for the creation of an "Indian Republic" and whose deeds inspired the Quintín Lame Armed Movement, a guerrilla group that rose in Cauca in 1984. The Maceo Code was written by Antonio Maceo, a general of the Liberating Army fighting for Cuba's independence – the first of many influences the island had on Colombian guerrilla groups.

Moving forward to more contemporary events, April 9, 1948, the date that the charismatic leader and presidential candidate for the Liberal Party Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was assassinated, marked the beginning of the current Colombian conflict. As Villamizar points out, this tragic event "represented a new moment in the struggle between rich and poor, more than the liberal-conservative confrontation that would always find political formulas of understanding to strengthen the establishment and maintain the status quo" (ibid. 139). The Colombian oligarchy has always found subterfuges to maintain its hegemony. One proof is the National Front – a power-sharing agreement struck between Liberals and Conservatives in which the two parties were alternating the presidency between 1958 and 1974. Likewise, every Colombian president has been the grandson, the nephew, or a close relative to a former president – a trend still present today.

Gaitán's assassination started "Bogotazo," a massive riot that left much of the downtown capital destroyed. The riot was described by Fidel Castro, who happened to be in Bogotá that day, as "a popular spontaneous uprising [*carried out by*] the people of the street, the common folk, simple people that launched itself in all directions screaming, furious, furious" (Alape in ibid. 142). This was the beginning of the period later called *La Violencia* (The Violence), an undeclared civil war lasting about thirty years, leaving at least 200,000 dead (possibly over 300,000), and two million people forcibly displaced.

In the elections following Gaitán's assassination, the Liberals took advantage of municipalities and departments. As a response, the outgoing president Mariano Ospina Pérez took control of the media and limited political gatherings. Consequently, without any opposition candidate and due to the Liberals' abstention, the conservative Laureano Gómez Castro was elected to the presidency on November 27, 1949. This thesis suggests how Colombian political

⁴⁴ The Code advises to "*Dress up to go to town as a peddler, coalman, etc. and get news. Carry food for at least two days, hide others in safe and dry places, known only to the guerrillas. Do not leave behind what can serve the enemy, not even footprints. Never march in a platoon and always a single person walks in front to sound the alarm. Give assaults and surprises at night, leaving horses in safe spots that serve as a retreat. If the enemy is not numerous, you can wait for hours in ambushes. In close combat, a man with a machete is worth more than three with a rifle; and if it's far, one with a rifle is worth more than ten with a machete*" (in <http://www.juventudrebelde.cu/cuba/2012-12-06/el-guerrillero-es-un-general-de-si-mismo>).

vicissitudes do not go unnoticed, nor are they marginal to the world political chessboard. Here, Colombia is not a simple pawn but rather a knight overlooking the Latin American field. As a knight, Colombia is subordinate to the monarch's plans who uses its pieces to maintain control of the subcontinent. If Latin America is characterized as "Uncle Sam's farm," Colombia has earned the nickname of "the Cain of America" for its subservient role vis-à-vis the northern power. As Villamizar points out, "in his possession, on August 7 of the following year, Laureano stated that his government would have been a pro-United States and anti-communist one" (ibid. 145). His mandate spurred armed repression, and violence in the country reached high levels. One of the recurring radiographs made by the North American intelligence on the Colombian political situation at the time states the following:

Lawlessness has become progressively more widespread in Colombia in the past three years. Despite strong government efforts to control the situation, there are no signs that law and order will be restored in the near future. Lawlessness seems to have resulted primarily from the bitterness of the political controversy between the Liberal and Conservative parties; the Colombian Communist Party as such has not been a contributing factor.

Continuance of the present state of affairs will seriously impair the stability of the present government – which has been more cooperative with the US in matters concerning the UN police action in Korea than any other Latin American country. Furthermore, the recent extension of disorders to the Department of Chocó, which borders on the poorly-patrolled frontier of the sparsely-settled eastern section of Panama, jeopardizes the security of the Panama Canal.

[...]

Disrespect for law and order seems to have begun at the time of the Bogotá riot in April 1948 when the assassination of the popular leader Gaitán led to widespread rioting and looting. These illegal activities were regarded as primarily political and those involved were in large measure punished. The attitude that political motivation excuses illegal actions has subsequently become widespread among the people.

Central Intelligence Agency, Office of Current Intelligence, 2 July 1951. General CIA Records. Approved for Release 07/11/2006

Laureano's presidency will be remembered as four years of bloody despotism amidst his constant health problems that confined him for most of his residency. On June 13, 1953, Colombia had three presidents: Roberto Urdaneta in the morning, Laureano again in the afternoon, and finally, General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla in the evening. Once again, the new president reiterated his loyalty to the United States. General Rojas Pinilla prohibited any political activity of international communism, and under his mandate, thousands of Liberal guerrilla fighters demobilized. Once the problem was partially resolved, the oligarchy regained power due to a plebiscite that supported the agreement of the National Front in which Liberals and Conservatives agreed to alternate the presidency every four years. As Camilo Torres Restrepo remembers it, "the Colombians approved the reform put in their consideration. Thus they gave hints of popular support to an agreement of the oligarchy. This is one of the few times that the national reality is reflected in the laws because there were no substantive differences that justified the division of Colombians into two political groups led by the same caste" (Restrepo in Hernández 2006, 19). The plebiscite of December 1, 1951, also coincides with the first time women exercised their right to vote in Colombia. By comparison, in Switzerland (another country that plays a significant role in current Colombian affairs), the right to vote for women came precisely twenty years later, and in the canton of Inner Appenzell, only in 1990 – under pressure from the Federal government!

Four presidents alternated throughout the National Front period, but the economic, political, and social problems due to an exclusionary and oligarchic political system not only remained unresolved, but worsened. In 1961, to try to pacify the hearts of the people and to maintain a minimum of social cohesion, president Alberto Lleras Camargo proposed an agrarian reform, the results of which remain negligible. During his mandate however, global geopolitics underwent a major upheaval. On January 1, 1959, after five years, five months, and six days of revolutionary struggle, Cuba celebrated its independence from decades of North American rule that had transformed the island into the Caribbean brothel for its marines. The deeds of Fidel and Raúl Castro, and above all those of the Argentine doctor Ernesto Guevara, forever marked the imaginaries of all the leftist movements worldwide. The success of the Cuban revolution did not need newspapers to spread. Rapidly through word of mouth, the news of the revolution reached every corner of Colombia and the rest of Latin America. As former ELN commander Milton Hernández narrates:

"The impact of the Cuban Revolution shook the Latin American continent and filled the youth with ideas and reasons to embark on the right path to fight oppression and for independence. In Colombia, the Cuban Revolution began a profound historical turn. It

forced us to rethink the strategies and tactics that the revolutionary organizations, mainly the communist parties, had developed: from the accumulated mass work and political experience, made possible to win freedom, it was understood that without the development of the military, linked to a political project with popular roots, it was impossible to achieve the proposed goals" (2006, 25–26).

At this time, the guerrilla movements began to gain strength. In the absence of political solutions and anxious to regain control of an increasingly unsteady national territory, President Guillermo León Valencia launched "Operation Sovereignty" under the advice and supervision of US officers on May 18th, 1964. The Republic of Marquetalia, an area bordering the departments of Huila, Tolima, and Cauca, controlled by peasants who were led by Pedro Antonio Marín Marín and a Luis Alberto Morante Jaimes, were attacked and bombed with napalm. Although hundreds of peasants were killed, their leaders managed to escape unscathed through hidden paths invisible to aviation. Shortly after, Marín Marín, known by the pseudonym *Tirofijo* ("Sureshot") or Manuel Marulanda Vélez (recalling a communist leader killed during *La Violencia*), and Morante Jaimes, known as Jacobo Arenas (another communist leader killed under the same circumstances), founded the FARC. On July 4th of the same year, the ELN was born. The CIA report on these events reads as follow:

I. In Colombia, Communists and other leftist are continuing their efforts to turn the widespread banditry of the back country into a coordinated guerrilla insurgency serving political ends.

A. In the past, concerted army efforts have ultimately won effective—if incomplete—victories over guerrilla leaders who professed and in some cases demonstrated ties to Castro. The latest such campaign was against a bandit known as Tiro Fijo, or “Sure Shot,” leader of the Communist enclave in the Marquetalia area, who the Colombian Army finally claims to have “neutralized.”

B. A small urban terrorist organization of about 100 men, calling itself the Army for National Liberation or ELN, however, now threatens to become the nucleus for a new attempt to coordinate insurgency in Colombia.

Central Intelligence Agency, For the House Appropriations Committee, 5 February 1965. General CIA Records. Approved for Release 1/2005

While the first guerrilla groups – the FARC-EP, the ELN, and the EPL – originated during the '60s following the wake of the Cuban revolution, the Quintín Lame Armed Movement (MAQL) rose in the mid-'80s in response to the systematic killing of indigenous leaders, while M-19 arose during the mid-'70s. The birth of the M-19 was preceded by events that have had repercussions for Colombia, and others affecting the whole Latin American subcontinent.

The first of these occurrences took place on October 9, 1967 in a small school of La Higuera, a village located in the Bolivian mountains where Ernesto Guevara, “the Ché,” was assassinated by Bolivian army rangers who were trained and supported by the CIA. As Paco Ignacio Taibo II, author of the most recognized biography of “the Ché” points out, “It was an assassination. “The Ché” wasn’t killed in combat, but murdered in cold blood.”⁴⁵ According to Ignacio, on that day, a man died and a legend was born. Aware of the risks that being a revolutionary may imply, “the Ché” left a letter to his biological children, but perhaps also intended for those who, over time, have adopted him as a father of the Colombian guerilla movements:

"[...] If you ever have to read this letter, it will be because I am not among you anymore. Your father was a man who acted as he thought best and who has been absolutely faithful to his convictions. Grow up as good revolutionaries. Study hard to master the technique that allows you to master nature. Remember that it is the Revolution which is important and that each one of us, alone, is worth nothing. Above all, always be able to deeply feel any injustice committed against anyone anywhere in the world. It is the most beautiful quality of a revolutionary. Until always my children, I hope to see you still [...]."⁴⁶

Fifty years after his assassination and still a significant figure, the ELN's front faction in which I carried out my fieldwork is named Ernesto Ché Guevara Front. Here, the deeds of Commander Guevara continue to inspire the members of the ELN, who, as I have been told many times, would like to accomplish the goals that Ché had set for himself in Bolivia. In the Bolivian mountains, he who had been a doctor, minister of industry, and director of the Bank of Cuba, decided to create international guerrilla fronts that would make Argentina, his native land, and other countries, ready for a revolution. History, however, is not made with ifs.

In 1968, the world was in turmoil. In Vietnam, Commander Guevara’s influence was an important factor in the National Liberation Front’s unexpected attack on the imperialist troops.

⁴⁵ The death of "the Ché" would anger thousands of people, including the woman who avenged his death – Monika Ertl, who in 1971 in Hamburg killed Roberto Quintanilla Pereira, one of those responsible for the assassination of "the Ché" and the one who gave the direct order to amputate his hands (Villamizar 2017, 312).

⁴⁶ This letter is discussed in the documentary *El hombre nuevo* (The New Man), of Aldo Garay, probably the most accurate account of the life of Ernesto Guevara.

The US responded with the My Lai massacre in which 128 civilians were killed – women and children included (Villamizar 2017, 312). Soon after, public opinion turned against the US, and millions of young people shouted anti-war slogans during May 1968, in both Europe and the United States itself. Protests against the Vietnam War were also supported by millions of African Americans. Their rejection of the war can be summarized in the words of iconic heavyweight world champion Muhammad Ali, who, while refusing the draft said, "No, I am not going ten thousand miles from home to help murder and burn another poor nation simply to continue the domination of white slave masters of the darker people the world over." The words of Ali (who later visited Bogotá in 1977) and the global uprising against imperialism were perceptible in Colombia, where the guerrilla movements were in their last phase of expansion before a severe crisis that would affect them shortly after.

In 1970, the most contested election in Colombia's history was about to designate the last president of the National Front coalition. The mandate fell to a conservative. The Liberal Convention opted for the candidate Misael Pastrana Borrero. However, ANAPO (National Popular Alliance), a party founded in 1961, launched a campaign to elect General Gustavo Rojas (former president from '53 to '57). At this time, Richard Nixon was president in the US. In response to the protests against the war on "little brown people," as Nixon once called the Vietnamese, he decided to strengthen political and military support for allied nations. Wars expanded to other countries, but efforts were being made to reduce the death of American citizens. Colombia remained at the center of US interests, as evident in the conclusions of the Weekly Special CIA Report:

The circumstances surrounding the election make it clear that a strong president will be of paramount importance if the National Front is to be kept intact until it must be disbanded in 1974. Certain Conservative politicians believe that the country is not ready to return to full democratic processes and are urging that the Front be extended. Liberal Party leaders oppose such a suggestion because their party is the largest in the country and they stand to gain the most in open elections.

[...]

If the new president is unwilling or unable to deal forcefully with such a development, there may be mounting pressure within the military for a take-over of the government. The military probably would rule until another arrangement such as the Front could be established. In any event, it appears that whoever emerges victorious will have a difficult presidency. Should Pastrana win, he would govern with the full support of the National Front machinery, but even so, his presidency probably would be the most difficult in the Front's history.

Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence Weekly Summary, 23 January 1970. General CIA Records. Approved For Release 14/8/2009

The ballot box closed at 4 pm on April 19, 1970 (the same date M-19 was founded). The first polls indicated that General Rojas was ahead of Pastrana by 14,000, then 20,000 votes (it should be noted that abstention was 53.6%). General Rojas, neither a Liberal nor truly Conservative, was about to become president again. As Villamizar narrates, "panic seized the government, and 'mysteriously,' the electoral transmission on the radio was suspended" (2017, 335). From the following day, the polls began to put Pastrana in the lead, and as established by the oligarchy, he was elected president on August 7th. It was the country's most significant election fraud.

Under Pastrana's mandate, only the FARC continued to grow, albeit minimally. The EPL lost its leaders. In August 1973, the Anorí operation began, almost entirely annihilating the ELN. Further south, the coup d'état in Chile took place on September 11th, and dictator Augusto Pinochet brutally replaced the socialist leader Salvador Allende. During the last year of Nixon's presidency, "In the Southern Cone, Operation Condor and the Phoenix and Aquarium plans were underway. Code names of the projects establishing collaboration between the dictatorial regimes of Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Bolivia, with ramifications towards Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, and Peru, to end the left opposition" (ibid. 365). The force behind said operations was Henry Kissinger, Nixon's national security advisor, whose council observed that, "If United States could not control Latin America, it could not expect to achieve a successful order elsewhere."⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Quoted in Noam Chomsky's lecture on "History of US Rule in Latin America," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKwJI9axblQ>.

In Colombia, 1974 was the year of the "dolphin elections," where the household relationships among the oligarchy were more evident than ever before.⁴⁸ The candidates were children of three former presidents. Alfonso López Michelsen won with the proposal for a "clear mandate," during which, in 1977, the ELN, which had not yet recovered from the Anorí operation, would come to suffer the "Febrerazo." The latter was a new operation to dismantle the ELN's urban network in Bogotá. Nicolás Rodríguez Bautista, the maximum commander of the ELN until 2021, only narrowly escaped capture during this operation.

In sum, from 1950 until the present, over thirty guerrilla groups have taken up arms in Colombia. Although for the Latin American left, and in particular for the Colombian guerrilla movements, the mid-1970's would seem to be the end, the continuing presence of the ELN, as well as that of dissidents from the FARC-EP and some factions of the EPL, demonstrate the extent to which armed struggle continues to be embraced by insurgent groups in Colombia and worldwide.

To clarify the context in which the ELN has been operating over the last fifty-six years, the Appendix offers a historical portrait of the major five guerrilla groups that have, or still are, fomenting the Colombian internal conflict. These are the FARC-EP, which until their demobilization in 2016 have undoubtedly been the guerrilla movement with the greatest influence, number of fighters, and territorial presence; the EPL for being the country's third guerrilla force, for their role in the 1991 peace accords, and their mostly conflictual relationship with the FARC-EP and the ELN; the M-19, who distinguish themselves from other armed movements by their urban location and some spectacular actions; and finally the Quintín Lame Armed Movement (MAQL), the first and only truly indigenous guerrilla group ever active in Colombia.

PAST AND PRESENT PEACE PROCESSES

So far, this chapter has covered a brief history of the origins of the Colombian conflict and the main revolutionary movements that developed in the second half of the twentieth century. Each of the groups listed above was ultimately demobilized through peace agreements with the

⁴⁸ To help elections and promote a democratic Colombia, Pastrana removed the state of siege guaranteed by article 121 of the Constitution. Over the course of his four years in government, Pastrana removed the state of siege for only ten days.

government. In this section, I offer an overview of the main peace processes and their outcomes. In the course of providing the backstory to the peace processes, I clarify the relationships of each of these movements with the protagonist of this thesis, the ELN. I will also provide an overview of the 2016-2019 peace process with the ELN – the last guerilla movement militarily active in Colombia. Once I lay out the present form of the ELN and its relationship with other groups, it will be easier to review the ELN’s history, understand its developments, and plunge into the core of this thesis: exploring how this group survives in the Colombian Pacific basin.

Since the presidency of Belisario Betancur (1982-1986) there has not been a single Colombian president who hasn’t attempted to establish negotiations with one or more guerrilla groups. The first real negotiation effort for a political exit to the armed conflict began through the Uribe Agreement,⁴⁹ signed on March 28, 1984, between Betancur and the FARC-EP General Secretariat. The agreement called for a bilateral ceasefire, the suspension of kidnappings, and the opening of political spaces for the guerrilla.⁵⁰ The following year, the FARC-EP presented its “political wing,” called Unión Patriótica, or more simply, UP. The UP Party's history is another well-researched Colombian tragedy that needs to be mentioned here as it reveals patterns of the state’s repression relevant for understanding the present moment. The party which gradually become independent of the FARC-EP was the victim of the *Baile Rojo* (“Red Dance”) plan, a political genocide orchestrated by an alliance between state security agents, paramilitaries, members of traditional parties, and drug traffickers. According to the National Center of Historical Memory,⁵¹ between 1984 and 2002, 4,153 UP members or sympathizers were assassinated, kidnapped or forced to disappear. Among them were two presidential candidates and five congressmen. Thirty years later, history repeated itself: from the peace agreements with the FARC-EP in 2016 until 2020, about 200 former members of the group and more than 700 social leaders have been killed. This systematic killing continues amidst the almost total indifference of the government and the media, both national and international.

Going back to the time of Betancur’s presidency in 1985, the National Guerrilla Coordinator (CNG) was created to support dialogues surrounding the Uribe agreements with the Betancur

⁴⁹ The name of the agreement is derived from the place where it was signed, i.e. the municipality of La Uribe, in the Meta.

⁵⁰ See the whole agreement at https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/CO_840328_Acuerdos%20De%20La%20Uribe.pdf.

⁵¹ See the entire report, "Everything happened before our eyes. The genocide of the Unión Patriótica", at <http://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/todo-paso-frente-a-nuestros-ojos-genocidio-de-la-union-patriotica-1984-2002/>.

government. The CNG was composed of the M-19, the EPL, the PRT,⁵² the MAQL, the MIR-PL,⁵³ the CRF,⁵⁴ and the ELN. The absence of the FARC-EP, however, did not allow a great deal of progress in the negotiations. The power relations with the government changed in two years when the FARC-EP agreed to join what became known as the National Coordinator Simón Bolívar (CNSB). The CNSB included the FARC-EP, the UC-ELN (a merger between the ELN and MIR-Patria Libre), the M-19, the EPL, the PRT, and the MAQL. The CNSB proposed an agenda of four main points: the struggle for the right to life, the impulse for a mass movement for national sovereignty, the struggle for political freedoms, and the struggle for an authentic agrarian reform that would return land to the peasants (Villamizar 2017, 797–804). It was imagined that the union would allow for greater cohesion, but the disagreements between the groups on the strategy to follow soon created the first internal disruption. With Virgilio Barco's arrival in the presidency (1986-1990), Carlos Pizarro, Commander of the M-19, was convinced that the conditions were favorable for the revolutionary movement and that the government could be removed and replaced through a clear proposal from the CNSB (ibid. 529). However, the other guerrilla groups were not as convinced of this initiative. In 1988, only the M-19 formally entered into dialogue with the government. As Villamizar points out, 1988 ended "with a balance of violence rarely seen in Colombian history: but also, [with] the point of political negotiation of the armed political conflict settled in the discourse of guerrilla organizations" (ibid. 557). On March 8th, 1990, a few months before the end of Barco's mandate, the M-19 finally abandoned its weapons to become a political party – the Democratic Alliance M-19. It was a significant moment since, "for the first time in the history of Colombia and Latin America an agreement was made for the disarmament and demobilization of a guerrilla movement and its re-incorporation into political, economic and social life" (ibid. 573). The newly formed political party enjoyed widespread support, and ex-commander Carlos Pizarro even ran for president. But once again, the Colombian oligarchy felt threatened. Within two months of surrendering his 45-caliber pistol wrapped in a Colombian flag, Pizarro was killed, possibly by the Administrative Department of Security, DAS – the Colombian CIA.

On May 27th, 1990, César Gaviria Trujillo won the election for the following presidency of the republic. On December 9, the vote for the Constituent Assembly took place. On the same

⁵² The PRT, Revolutionary Workers Party, was a minor guerrilla movement which will not be discussed in this thesis.

⁵³ Like the PRT, the MIR-PL, Revolutionary Integration Movement-Free Fatherland, is another minor guerrilla movement which I won't discuss in this thesis.

⁵⁴ The CRF, Comando Ricardo Franco, was another small guerrilla movement born out of a dissident faction of the FARC-EP.

day, Gaviria launched Operación Colombia, a large-scale attack by land and air, on the FARC-EP headquarters. The attack did not go as expected and resulted in the following statement from the FARC-EP: "This government has squandered the opportunity offered by the country to make the National Constituent Assembly a scenario of peace. With [...] its intolerance it managed to reinitiate a war of unpredictable consequences for the country" (Villamizar 2017, 584). In the wake of this crisis, the FARC-EP took another year to resume negotiations, while this was not the case for the EPL and MAQL. The former signed a peace agreement with the government two months after Operation Colombia, though only half of the group submitted to the pact.

MAQL, signed its final peace agreement three months later, on May 27th, 1991. Within the eight-chapter agreement, the MAQL demanded and, subsequently obtained, the government's involvement for regional development works in seventeen municipalities under its influence. The reaction of the Colombian political right quickly followed the peace obtained after seven years of struggle. On December 16th of the same year, the conservative government surprised the ethnic movement with the Nile massacre, where 21 Nasa indigenous people refusing a new forced displacement were killed. Only the dissident of the EPL, the UC-ELN, and the FARC-EP remained part of the CGSB. Determined to reopen dialogues with the government, on April 20th, 1991, a delegation from the CGSB appeared unarmed at the Venezuelan embassy in Bogotá. To avoid a diplomatic incident, the government was obliged to engage in dialogue, and a first-round of conversations were held the following June in Caracas, Venezuela. It was "the first time that the UC-ELN as such, or the ELN, [sat] down at a negotiating table" (Villamizar 2017, 595). The negotiations then moved to Tlaxcala, Mexico the following year. However, this new peace process took place under different conditions as compared to those with the M-19, part of the EPL, and the MAQL. The atmosphere was tense, the Congress was preoccupied with the National Constituent Assembly, and the process was now detached from negotiations with the previous groups. On the timeline, Alfonso Cano pointed out to the government that they "could have started this negotiation 5,000 dead ago" (ibid. 597). The dead on the path to peace, though, continued to rise. On March 10th, 1992, with the pretext of kidnapping and killing a former defense minister, the government definitively suspended peace talks. A faction of the ELN known as the Socialist Renewal Stream (CRS) continued the dialogues and signed their peace agreement on April 9th, 1994. History books will remember Gaviria for facilitating the reintegration into civilian life of the members of five armed groups.⁵⁵ In contrast, much of

⁵⁵ The PRT was also present along with the M-19, the EPL, MAQL, and the CRS.

Colombian society will remember him for his compromises with "opening reforms in matters of tariff, labor, exchange, tax, foreign investment, and foreign trade. Reforms made at the cost of the 17 million poor people present in Colombia, according to the 1993 census" (ibid. 613).

Ernesto Samper succeeded Gaviria from 1994 to 1998. In an effort to "humanize the war," under his government, Colombia signed the Geneva Convention Additional Protocol II, related to the protection of victims of non-international armed conflicts. Discussions with the various groups who were still armed resumed. But unlike previous governments, under Samper it was clear that negotiations could take place in the midst of the conflict. In June 1996, the third Congress of the UC-ELN decided that the organization would start working with the intention of a political solution to the armed conflict. Two months later, the FARC-EP occupied Las Delicias military base, capturing 60 soldiers. The release of the hostages successfully took place in June of the following year. This opened the door to the Caguán peace process, but also forced the government to a new *modus operandi*, given the now indisputable warlike capacity of the FARC-EP (Villamizar 2017, 637). This new approach became evident from Andrés Pastrana's election to the presidency on June 21st, 1998. Not only did Andrés Pastrana talk about peace with social justice, but for the first time in history a meeting between a president of the republic and a guerrilla commander was on the presidential agenda.⁵⁶ Pastrana agreed to demilitarize an "extension area" over five municipalities, including that of San Vicente del Caguán, where the peace process began on January 7th, 1999. The peace process began with the controversial episode of the empty chair left by Manuel Marulanda, who fearing for his safety, did not show up for the 1,500 guests invited to the event. This peace process was characterized by the aphorism that "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed" – an aphorism that resurfaced in the peace process with Santos – and for the high number of public hearings – 38 between 2000 and 2001 (Villamizar 2017, 675). Pastrana's idea of social justice envisaged drawing up a "Marshall plan" for peace that would guarantee the country's economic development in the midst of negotiations. The Plan, later known as Plan Colombia, was supported by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the World Bank, and the United States. Due to the close friendship and common understanding of "development" between Pastrana and American President Bill Clinton, the economic and social plan turned into a military plan. Of the initially estimated USD 7.5 billion given in development support, 93.3% was converted into military

⁵⁶ In reality, Pastrana had already met with Manuel Marulanda and the Mono Jojoy on July 9th, 1998, a month before assuming the presidency.

aid to fight drug trafficking, transforming Colombia into the leading recipient of US military and police assistance to date (Noam Chomsky et al. 2000).

The intentions of Plan Colombia became clear in the following years as the USA installed seven military bases in Colombian territory, officially to guarantee safe economic and social development in Colombia and its neighboring countries. Likewise, the fight against drug trafficking became a war against insurgent movements. It is certain that since the '80s, the FARC-EP, the EPL, and indirectly the ELN, have benefited from cocaine trafficking, but I argue that the repressive military response intended to solve this problem was ineffective. As FARC-EP commander Simón Trinidad explained during the Caguán dialogues,

"16 chemicals are needed to process cocaine. None of these chemicals are produced in Colombia. They all come [by ship or plane] from Europe and the USA. [...] Everyone knows who is dedicated to this shop, where they live, where the shops are located. [...] The authorities, the state, the military, [...] the police [...], the financial sector, the industrial sector, the landowners, they are all involved" (Garrido 2001, 53).

More importantly, cocaine's production – which has become the primary source of support for farmers not considered in the multi-billion-dollar development plan – is fought with aerial fumigation. Glyphosphate – the fumigant used to kill coca plants – also affects all other crops found nearby, causing severe health problems to the farming communities (see Chapter 7). After years of intense debate, aerial fumigation was suspended in 2015. In March 2020, however, President Duque was given permission to resume fumigation of coca plants by his North American counterpart, Donald Trump, who simply stated, "Well, you're going to have to spray. If you don't spray, you're not going to get rid of them. So you have to spray."⁵⁷ Despite Plan Colombia leading to an increasingly massive military intervention by the United States, the Caguán peace process progressed, and in June 2000, the ELN joined the negotiations with the government. The ELN has a particularity, "the consultation and presence of civil society in its [ELN] approaches, dialogues and negotiations with the National Government are a norm that, according to its appreciations, support its proposals" (Villamizar 2017, 683). France, Cuba, Spain, Norway, and Switzerland facilitated this second process. Accordingly, the first meeting in July of the same year took place in Geneva, Switzerland. While the process with the FARC-EP was in crisis, according to them, due to the government's failure to commit to combat paramilitarism, the negotiations with the ELN seemed to be taking a good turn.

⁵⁷ See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-51722456>.

The global war on terror launched by American President George Bush in 2001, however, complicated both negotiations. Public opinion modeled by the Colombian media embraced the idea of zero tolerance towards groups like the FARC-EP and the ELN, classified as terrorists. The FARC-EP probably lost their last remaining public support when, in January 2002, they kidnapped congressman Jorge Eduardo Géchem and, three days later, the presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt. The dialogues with the ELN were also at risk. The negotiation table was moved to La Havana, and on several occasions, it was the facilitation by commanders Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro that saved the peace process from coming to an abrupt end. The ELN even managed to sketch a draft agreement "For the progressive construction of peace." On both sides, the efforts to continue towards peace were increasingly becoming unsustainable. Public opinion was exasperated by the many ups and downs, and little by little the voice of the presidential candidate Alvaro Uribe Vélez made room for a plan of democratic security (the militarization of all the main arteries of the country), which publicly despised any dialogue with the insurgencies. When Uribe won the presidential elections on May 26th, 2002, Pastrana definitively suspended the dialogues with both the FARC-EP and the ELN (Villamizar 2017, 698).

Although Uribe continued to deny the existence of an internal conflict, under his dual mandate (2002-2010), US military support reached USD 6 billion. The total-war policy against guerrilla movements was evident in the carpet fumigations and paramilitary advance throughout the territory. During Uribe's second term, the paramilitaries were demobilized, and when those responsible for the multiple massacres began to unveil complicity with the government, the president ordered their extradition to the United States. Meanwhile, both the FARC-EP and the ELN tried to reopen negotiations. In 2005, the ELN started an exploratory round, again in La Havana. In its Fourth Congress in July 2006, the movement ratified its unyielding will to look for a political solution to the armed conflict. However, for eight years, the only real dialogues between the government and the guerrilla movements were about the disarmament of the latter. Again, the primary victim of the ongoing conflict was the rural population, who, confined between cycles of violence, continued to count its dead. Uribe and his defense minister Juan Manuel Santos, remained indifferent to the constant appeals of civil society, and above all of the ethnic movements that continued to condemn the atrocities that were perpetuated in its territories. Given this belligerent policy, no one suspected that it would be the same ex-minister Santos, in the second year of his presidency (2010-2018), who would initiate the last peace process with the FARC-EP.

In reality, Santos' political trajectory (for the record, the great-grandson of two ex-presidents) has not been very different from that of Uribe, and squarely fits that of the Colombian oligarchy he represented. In a nutshell, the stance of these leaders was the prevailing economic model must be defended, the subordination to US foreign policy maintained, and while sitting in an armchair, one can speak of peace while giving orders to kill and bomb. The policies of Santos and Uribe only diverged on the economy of war. Santos, a partisan of neoliberalism, wanted a peace agreement with the FARC-EP because, as he emphasized at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, "peace brings huge investments."⁵⁸ The first big step towards the economy of peace, on August 26th, 2012, was the signing of the "General Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Lasting Peace." Negotiations with the ELN took off more slowly, mainly because the ELN military structure is less hierarchical than that of the FARC-EP, and any decision of strategic importance must be taken by the Central Command (COCE) in its unity. Furthermore, the ELN, aware of not having the same international recognition as the FARC-EP, nor the same military capacity on the national territory, was not willing to accept second-class treatment. Santos himself publicly acknowledged on several occasions that peace without the ELN was not a "complete peace." In December 2013, the two highest commanders, Timochenko of the FARC-EP and Nicolás Rodríguez of the ELN issued a statement to the Colombian people. In the joint statement, they paid tribute to Nelson Mandela and reiterated,

"If someone in Colombia wants peace, it is precisely the insurgency. More than fifty years have passed since we resisted this war. Be this the opportunity to express openly three basic criteria that, in our opinion, will allow us to achieve it: A peace process is successful if it has the active participation of the entire society, or at least of its vast majority. Peace means justice, social equity, and democracy. Colombian guerrillas are fully willing to take on the challenges that such peace requires of us."⁵⁹

Exploratory dialogues with the ELN started the following year, but it wasn't until October 10th, 2016 that the official announcement of the public phase was made, when negotiations opened in Quito, Ecuador. As can be seen in the following table, the two peace processes followed similar agendas, but logistical, economic, and media support, both national and international, were never the same.

⁵⁸ See <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/01/23/davos-2018-protectionism-will-hurt-us-most-colombias-president-says.html>.

⁵⁹ See the entire joint statement at <http://www.cedema.org/ver.php?id=5991>.

| FARC-EP | ELN |
|---|--|
| 1) Land reform 2) Political participation 3) Disarmament 4) Illicit drugs 5) Rights of the victims (Peace deal implementation) | 1) Participation of the civil society 2) Democracy for peace 3) Transformations for peace 4) Victims 5) The end of the conflict 6) Guarantee for the exercise of political action |

The negotiations with the FARC-EP had a relatively linear course, and in La Havana, the government and the insurgency delegations were installed on the banks of a lake, about twenty minutes' apart from each other, facilitating a fluid communication. In addition to excellent logistics, the vertical military structure of the FARC-EP allowed for faster decision making, which was, however, severely criticized by ethnic movements. In fact, decisions were made at the negotiation table without consulting the communities, such as the creation of "village zones" – i.e. the areas where the demobilizing guerrillas converge – in Afro and indigenous territories. As usual, the voices of the ethnic communities were not heard, and although they are indisputably the primary victims of the armed conflict, a chapter of just three pages addressing ethnic communities was included at the last hour among the 310 pages of the final agreement. If the law '70, or Afro-Colombian law, was included in the 1991 Constitution on account of the indigenous movement's pressure, the ethnic chapter in the peace agreement owes its presence to the FARC-EP commander Jesús Santrich, as it was not a priority for the government. If the opinion of ethnic groups is historically ignored, that of the party of ex-president Uribe will have to be heeded. On October 2nd, 2016, Santos, certain of the widespread consensus for peace, launched the plebiscite for the final agreement's ratification. Not only did the abstention reach a record level of 62.57%, but the few voters allowed a narrow victory (50.21% to 49.78%) for those against the ratification of the agreement. The campaign launched by Uribe ultimately won, on the one hand, claiming that the agreement would deliver the country to the "Castro-Chavism,"⁶⁰ and on the other hand, criticizing the gender focus highlighted by the peace agreement. As he maintained a few months later in a campaign against gender education, "To

⁶⁰ With the concept of "Castro-Chavismo" the Colombian right-wing intends to say that to agree with the guerrilla movements, and more generally to let the country be governed by the Left, means to abandon the state to totalitarian and dictatorial policies.

say that you are not born as a woman or as a man, but that this is defined by 'society,' is an abuse of minors, and a disrespect for nature and family."⁶¹ After 53 days of negotiations and changes to the document, the historic peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP was finally signed on November 24th, 2016, in the Colón Theater in Bogotá. After exactly 50 years of armed struggle, the largest Latin American guerrilla group demobilized to become a political party: the FARC, or Common Alternative Revolutionary Force.

With the ELN, negotiations were progressing slowly, and in 2018 there were further complications. First, the Ecuadorian government decided to no longer allow Quito as a site for the dialogues. A few months later, the new presidential election in Colombia was around the corner. Ivan Duque, a protégé of Uribe, was elected and proposed an economic development plan based on large mining and increasingly monoculture agricultural exploitation. For Duque's government, the dialogues with the ELN, already transferred to La Havana, as well as the follow-up to the post-agreements with the FARC-EP, were not a priority. Although the agreements obtained by Santos did not involve any structural change in the country's economic policy, the armed conflict reduction was not a part of Uribe's plans and, consequently, of his protégé's. Duque withdrew funds from the reintegration programs, and chased the UN High Commission Office out of the country. After only a year of presidency, a large part of the FARC-EP re-armed under the leadership of Iván Márquez, and the peace dialogues with the ELN were permanently frozen.

After a decade of chasing peace, Colombia has fallen back into a cycle of violence. This time, however, away from the media's spotlight constantly in search of new headlines, international consensus has archived Colombia as a country formally at peace. In the new constellation, following the demobilization of its "bigger sister," the ELN has become the last major guerrilla movement active in Latin America. For this group, a political solution to the conflict remains a priority. As they wait for a new government to reopen the peace dialogue, if peacebuilding is to be continued, it is urgent to discern why negotiating with this guerrilla group is so complicated. One possible reason is that the ELN is not a "Marxist-orthodox" revolutionary army like the FARC-EP, but rather a kind of "armed social movement." To understand the nature of this statement, however, we are obliged to go back in time to the origins of the group.

⁶¹ See <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/alvaro-uribe-en-contra-de-la-educacion-de-genero/485160>.

THE ELN

If the FARC was conceived on the central cordillera of the Colombian Andes, the ELN originated in the middle of the Caribbean Sea, or more precisely, on the island of Cuba. At the beginning of the 1960s, sixty young Colombians arrived in Cuba. They belonged to the three principal Colombian student movements: the Communist Youth (JUCO), the Peasant Student Workers Movement (MOEC), and the Youths of the Liberal Revolutionary Movement (JMRL). The Cuban revolutionary government had among its main objectives to promote education and health, and to offer international scholarships to bring people to the island to experience first-hand the country's ongoing progress. Of the Colombian delegation, seven young people were especially interested in starting the revolution at home. While in Cuba, besides studying, they received intense military preparation (Hernández 2006, 30–31). It is said that once seeds are sown, fertile soil is needed to germinate them. Thus, the Santander department was chosen for its "extension of jungles and mountains inhabited by poor farmers, and its relationship with the Magdalena river [Colombia's main river] which converts it into a socio-economically strategic area" (ibid. 37). Peasants from the region were gradually added to the initial group, and on July 4th, 1964, the first guerrilla march of the National Liberation Army began. In the guerrilla group was Nicolás Rodríguez Bautista, affectionately called Gabino, who was 14 years old at the time. Commander-in-chief of the ELN until 2021, he is the only survivor of that fateful march that he remembered in the following way:

"When the day came, I was a little heartbroken to see the weapons we were carrying. I had seen the army and police weapons, and we, 'what a disaster!' [...] They were single cartridge shotguns, like the ones my dad had at home. There I also saw my dad's revolver, which he had lent to a boy. It was an old revolver that he had fixed when he was a blacksmith and had put a spring on it and had to be shot with two hands" (in Hernández 2006, 46).

With time, the group continued to grow, preparing itself militarily and politically until, on January 7th, 1965, it made its first official public appearance by occupying the town of Simacota. During the occupation, the following manifesto summarizing the nascent ELN's political proposal was read:

SIMACOTA MANIFESTO

The reactionary violence unleashed by the oligarchy and continued by the corrupt Guillermo León Valencia-Alberto Ruiz Novoa-Alberto Lleras Camargo regime has been a powerful weapon of domination in the last fifteen years.

Education is in the hands of businessmen who are enriched by the ignorance in which they keep our people; the land is exploited by peasants who have nowhere to drop dead and who give all their energies and those of their families for the benefit of the oligarchies who live in the cities like kings; the workers work for starvation wages, subjected to the misery and humiliation of the big foreign and national businessmen; the professionals and the young democratic intellectuals are surrounded and are in the dilemma of giving themselves up to the ruling class or perishing; small and medium producers – both in the countryside and in the city – see their economies ruined in the face of such cruel competition and hoarding by foreign capital and its henchmen selling off their homeland; the wealth of the entire Colombian people is plundered by the U.S. imperialists.

But our people, who have felt on their shoulders the whip of exploitation, misery and violence, are rising up and are on a war footing. The revolutionary struggle is the only way for all the people to overthrow the present government of deception and violence.

We, the members of the National Liberation Army, are fighting for the liberation of Colombia. The liberal people and the conservative people will stand together to defeat the oligarchy of both parties.

Long live the unity of the peasants, the workers, the students, the professionals and the honest people who wish to make Colombia a worthy homeland for honest Colombians!

Liberation or Death!

National Liberation Army

Simacota, 7 January 1965

According to commander Milton Hernández, author of the book *Rojo y Negro* ("Red and black") as well as a member of the ELN delegation in the dialogues with Gaviria's government in 1991, the Simacota Manifesto represents a search for unity with all the social sectors of the country. For Hernández, no other group before the ELN had proposed the revolutionary struggle with a similar content of theoretical-practical unity (Hernández 2006, 60). The program that

arose with the Simacota Manifesto proposed 12 points: the seizure of power for the popular classes; an authentic agrarian revolution; economic-industrial development; a housing plan and an urban reform; the creation of an accessible credit system; organizing a popular public health plan; drawing up a plan for roads; a reform of education; the incorporation of the indigenous population into the nation;⁶² freedom of thought and worship; an independent foreign policy; and the formation of a permanent people's army. With a program as vast as it is specific, the ELN attracted not only peasants tired of the National Front's false promises, but also many students and intellectuals fascinated by the organization's humanism. Among the latter, one outstanding name is that of Camilo Torres, a priest who left a deep mark on Colombian history, as well as that of the ELN.

Camilo Torres was born into a Bogotan aristocratic family which allowed him to travel to Europe where he obtained a doctorate in sociology in Belgium. From a young age, he was sensitive to injustice and was attracted to social and revolutionary movements, such as the Algerian one, of which he befriended some members in Paris. After his return to Colombia, he became a professor at the National University of Bogotá, where he founded the sociology faculty. As a priest, Camilo embraced Liberation Theology, a Christian philosophy emphasizing the Gospel's privileging of the poor. Camilo's criticism of the high ecclesiastical spheres left no room for ambiguity. In a 1965 radio interview, he was asked, "Father Torres, if a revolution were accomplished by force, would you be part of the expropriation of the Church's assets?" Camilo, who was forced to renounce his priesthood shortly thereafter, responded, "I am a party to the expropriation of the Church's assets even if no type of revolution has taken place" (in Villamizar 2017, 250). Already recognized and loved by the public, Camilo also founded the United Front. The goal of this organization was to unite the opposition against an oligarchy that, with the pact of the National Front, was closed off to dialogue with Colombian society. Camilo enjoyed widespread support, but during a peaceful demonstration organized on October 1st, 1965, "it appeared clear that there was no respect for his condition as a former priest or political leader: without contemplation, the demonstration was repressed by the public force, and Camilo himself became an object of the aggression" (Villamizar 2017, 253). Curiously, even the CIA discussed the event. Its "Review on Insurgency Problems" states: "The far-leftist

⁶² It stands out that the Afro population is not mentioned. Racism, notably that with colonial roots, follows a hierarchy based on pigmentation. Simply put, the darker you are, the lower you are on the scale. Furthermore, if at the time of the Americas' invasion, some wondered if the natives had a soul (see Las Casas, cited work), the prevailing belief was that Black Africans, in contrast, did not, and were mere merchandise. These beliefs are still present today, and it is interesting to see how structural racism in Colombia has always been present even in the most progressive spaces.

renegade priest, Camilo Torres, held an illegal rally in Bogota on 1 October. The crowd was reported to be disappointingly small and, in spite of an obvious inclination to rowdiness, was restricted by police to very little damage, mostly limited to broken windows.”⁶³ A few weeks later, Camilo joined the ELN. He chose not to accept privileges based on status, and his desire to participate in every task led him to the only combat of his lifetime where he was killed by the army on February 15th, 1966. Thousands of Colombians mourned his death, but he was also a source of criticism within the ELN. Notably, Jaime Arenas, wrote,

"Camilo was not valued in its true magnitude. In the guerrilla, he was never called to meetings of the Major State, nor was he assigned any responsibility. He, who was the most important Colombian popular leader, did not go from being a simple soldier in the ELN ranks. [...] Because Camilo, like Gaitán, we could say that ‘he was not a man but a people.’ It is no slander to claim that the ELN chief [Fabio Vásquez] was unable to understand Camilo's political and strategic importance" (Arenas 2009, 115).

What is certain is that although Camilo was a guerrilla fighter for only 115 days, his presence will forever mark the ELN flag.

Camilo's death was a severe psychological, political, and media blow to the ELN, a fact that did not escape the eyes of the CIA. The agency’s special report of 22 July 1966 observed:

At this time, rebel priest Camilo Torres joined the ELN guerrillas. While a faculty member at National University in Bogota, Torres had begun a reform movement which became increasingly leftist oriented. In mid-1965 his political activities brought him into direct conflict with the church hierarchy, and the dispute became a cause celebre which vaulted him into prominence as a national leader. His decision to join the ELN gave the guerrillas a brief psychological and propaganda boost, but ELN activities practically ceased with the death of Torres during a clash with an army unit in February. The ELN may now have as few as 50 men in the field.

Central Intelligence Agency, Currently Intelligence Weekly Special Report, 22 July 1966. General CIA Records. Approved for Release 08/30/2006

⁶³ Central Intelligence Agency, Intelligence Memorandum, Review on Insurgency Problems, 6 October 1965. General CIA Records. Approved for Release 2006/3/17.

To fully understand the impact of Camilo's death on the ELN, it is necessary to understand the structure of this organization, and notably its fundamental difference from the FARC-EP, with which the ELN is too often simplistically compared. Although the reality is much more complex, it can be said that the FARC-EP was mainly a military organization (an army) with a political (institutional) objective carried out semi-independently by a party, the CCP, the UP, and more recently, the FARC. In the case of the ELN, it is not possible to draw a clear separation between political and military action. Certainly, the ELN has always supported various social movements and unions, but it would be misguided to believe that only one of these movements represents, the "political arm" of the group. The ELN is itself a "political and military arm," and as Hernández explains, "the two aspects cannot be opposed, because in practice they are infinitely related, they belong to the same universe, they are an inseparable whole" (2006, 123). However, the ELN configuration implies certain ideological complications, and the contradictions between the members of the urban and intellectual stratum and those with a vision tied to the countryside are on a continuum. For the former, such as Víctor Medina Morón, Ricardo Lara Parada, and Jaime Arenas, the main problem was the founding commander Fabio Vásquez Castaño. Castaño was accused of having a vision limited to the military aspect of the organization and for leaning on excessive authoritarianism. These accusations were not entirely false, as the internal executions ordered by Castaño over the years prove (cf. Arenas 2009). It is also true that the subordination of the urban movement to the rural one, with the consequent lack of autonomy of the former, negatively affects the ELN's urban structures. An example of this is the massive military operation of 1969 that ended with the arrest and trial of 215 members or sympathizers of the ELN in Bogotá. Nevertheless, despite internal problems and state repression, the ELN's political-military project continues to fascinate new recruits with its humanist principles – undoubtedly part of Camilo's legacy. Furthermore, in 1969 two new figures of international importance joined the organization: Manuel Pérez Martínez and Domingo Laín, Spanish priests who were members of the Golconda (a Catholic clerical association linked to Liberation Theology). Yet, Pastrana's arrival to the presidency in 1970 coincided with a period of profound crisis for the guerrilla group. In 1972, following a fight in which the army managed to retrieve the Castaño sack containing information on urban fronts, a new wave of arrests hit cells in various cities. However, the blow that threatened to annihilate the ELN project definitively was Operation Anorí. With the deployment of 33,000 soldiers, Operation Anorí exceeded any previous military operation, including Marquetalia. Amid this devastating offensive, the ELN lost Manuel and Antonio Vasquez Castaño, brothers of the commander Fabio, and the priest Domingo Laín. In homage to Laín, an ELN war front adopted

his name in 1980, "converting from that moment into one of the organization's most powerful structures" (Villamizar 2017, 362). At the end of Operation Anorí, Pastrana announced the ELN's total liquidation to the national media (Hernández 2006, 211). Although the president himself had to later reconsider his assertion, the organization was catapulted into an unprecedented crisis. Morale was low, and the government took advantage of this with Machiavellian subterfuges leading to numerous desertions. In November 1974, Fabio Castaño was sent to Cuba because of health problems. In the absence of Castaño, the organization had the chance to reflect critically on its mistakes, as well as on Fabio's totalitarianism. From that moment on, Gabino took over as head of the organization.

Under Gabino, the ELN gradually reorganized itself. But in 1977, it suffered the "Febrerazo" – the backlash that marked the end of the organization's darkest years. In the mid-1980s, the "national dialogue and ceasefire" with the M-19 and the EPL, and the "Green House" agreements with the FARC (which became the UP in 1985) were signed under the Betancur government (1982-1986). The ELN regained its vigor, as demonstrated in an article published in 1984 entitled, "Only with social justice there will be peace." This article states,

“The ELN maintains its position not to negotiate. More than for ideological reasons or in principle, for the same current political situation that requires an independent revolutionary solution supported by the organization and autonomous struggle of the working class and the other popular sectors. We reject any illusion that the problems of these sectors will be resolved in a negotiation done from above, between guerrilla and government” (in Hernández 2006, 281).

In these years, the ELN saw a 350% growth in number of fighters in the rural fronts, which began to have a presence in the Chocó department (ibid. 296). A fusion of different Colombian guerilla movements took place for the first time in 1987 when the ELN and the Revolutionary Integration Movement-Free Fatherland (MIR-PL) joined forces, resulting in the Camilist Union Army of National Liberation, UC-ELN. This new acronym lasted until the Third Congress (in June 1996), where "the name of the National Liberation Army (ELN) was resumed, and the Camilist Union was detached – but not without first putting special emphasis on the "validity of Camilo thought" (Medina Gallego 2019, 629). Between 1987 and 1988, new fronts were established and strengthened, including the Ernesto Che Guevara Front.

In 1988, the ELN kidnapped Scandinavian-American anthropologist Bruce Olson, an episode worth mentioning because it demonstrates the ELN's social view or its "anthropological ethics." Olsen was supported by the Shell oil company and was preaching the

Bible while aiding in the death and displacement of hundreds of indigenous Motilones. After the kidnapping and a popular trial, the UC-ELN issued the following verdict:

"Mr. Bruce Olson has deliberately and irresponsibly incurred in severe crimes by carrying out an exploitative and colonizing activity, decimating a third of the [Motilones] population during the years from 1963 to 1970. For the veracity of the charges made, we consider him guilty of a crime against humanity against the Colombian Motilones ethnic group, and consequently, we condemn him to the death penalty."⁶⁴

But Olson eventually escaped his judgment and was released. This incident revived public debate on "anthropological colonialism" – questions that remain relevant today. Although we can undoubtedly find dozens of cases where practice contradicts theory, this example demonstrates how the political-military ideology of the (UC-) ELN included not only a class struggle but also, more than any other guerrilla group (except for the obvious case of the MAQL), the valuation of ethnic diversity.

In 1989, the UC-ELN organized its Second Congress. After the Congress, three major voices emerged in the UC-ELN: that of the Central Command (COCE) and the National Directorate (DN), that of the Domingo Laín Front (opposed from the beginning to the merger with MIR-PL), and that of the "renovators" who in 1991 separated into the Socialist Renewal Current (CRS) and demobilized in 1994 under Gaviria. With the Second Congress, the ELN opened up to dialogue with the national government. Commander Gabino and Commander-priest Manuel Pérez Martínez proposed to humanize the war through an intense correspondence with former president Alfonso López Michelsen, which led to the dialogue with Cravo Norte and the subsequent negotiations in Tlaxcala, Mexico, and Caracas, Venezuela. As previously mentioned, under Samper, in December 1994, the Colombian government signed the Geneva Protocol II. But Samper's fostering of neoliberalism and the maintenance of a belligerent policy against guerrilla groups did not facilitate the negotiations. Despite constant obstacles, on February 9, 1998, the ELN signed the Preaccord of the Palazzo di Viana in Madrid, Spain, and "for the first time in its history, the guerrilla of the ELN [...] sits to arrange with government delegates; they come to agreements and sign a document" (Villamizar 2017, 642). Five days later, Commander Manuel Pérez died of liver disease. The government and the ELN had formed a pact that their agreement would remain a secret until a new meeting was held in Colombia. Yet, when the news was publicized by the Spanish newspaper ABC, the ELN decided to

⁶⁴ Semana magazine contains another (institutional) version of the facts, where Olson's missionary attitude is defended, and consequently, so is "colonial anthropology." <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/pena-muerte/12082-3> page consulted on June 2020.

suspend the agreement in order to not show favor to any presidential candidate in the upcoming elections. Four months later, the son of President Misael Pastrana Borrero (1970-1974), Andrés, was voted in. Three weeks prior to handing over the presidency to the Pastrana family, Samper managed to destroy the new agreement known as the "Puerta del Cielo Declaration" ("Heaven's Door Declaration"), signed in the Himmelspforten Convent in Mainz, Germany. The declaration was divided into three related parts: participation of civil society, humanization of the war, and National Convention.⁶⁵ However, once Pastrana proposed a political agenda focusing more on demobilization and surrender of weapons than on the realization of the National Convention (Hernández 2006, 456), the dialogue faced complications until it ended in May 2002. What entangled the discussions was that the ELN had no interest in becoming a political party, and for them, the primary objective of the negotiation was not whether or not to surrender their weapons, but to solve the social problems that were and still are the root causes of their militarization in the first place (ibid. 443). As Currea-Lugo explains, "Regarding DDR (disarming, demobilization, and reintegration), the ELN has a very countercurrent discourse with the peace manuals and the paternalism of academic theories" (2014, 20). For them, disarmament is not a necessity. Demobilization is a meaningless concept "because the move from political-military to political is only a change in the form of political mobilization, not its denial" (ibid.). And finally, they laugh at the word reintegration because the ELN's social and community nature "requires a permanent relationship with the rest of society" (ibid.).

Between 2005 and 2008, a conversation with the Uribe government was unsuccessfully sought again. Yet the first meeting between Commander Antonio García and the High Commissioner for Peace Frank Pearl took place in Caracas only in December 2012. The official exploratory phase began in 2014, with the former defense minister Santos' re-election for a second presidential term. During this phase, a peace agenda was established between Cuba, Brazil, Ecuador, Chile, and Venezuela. The announcement of the public phase came in 2016 from Quito, Ecuador. Commander Pablo Beltrán, a member of COCE since the Second Congress of 1989, and Santos' brother-in-law, Mauricio Rodríguez, head of the government delegation, announced the news. For the government, which was in the international spotlight, the priority was to reach a final agreement with the FARC-EP. As a result, discussions with the ELN did not enjoy the same media attention and political or military interest. It seems that the

⁶⁵ With National Convention, the ELN suggests a dialogue with the nation to be held in public and secret meetings in its main territories. Also, as Hernández explains, "The international space will be another stage to join the International Community's efforts in the process. Talking with the political movements and parties, with the social organizations, the unions, [...] we will give shape to that great national convocation that we call the National Convention" (Hernández 2006, 414).

government's logic was to measure insurgencies in terms of threat. Therefore, it began conversations with what it considered to be the most significant threat, leaving aside the one which did not endanger national security, while planning to later subordinate the ELN to the agreement obtained with the FARC-EP (Currea Lugo 2014, 39). Once the agreements with the FARC-EP were concluded, however, these plans fell apart.

In 2018, with the Nobel prize in his pocket, Santos was sharing his experiences with the students of the Harvard Kennedy Government School, while in Colombia, Duque reestablished Uribe's belligerent policy. The bomb that the ELN detonated in a military school in January 2019 gave the government an excuse to close the negotiations definitively. The question I will address in this thesis is not why this new process with the ELN has failed, or when a new dialogue will start again, but rather, why is it so complex to negotiate with this particular guerrilla movement? Answering this question means revealing the intimate bond between this organization and the territories, and therefore understanding that a negotiation over the latter without the participation of the actors who reside there, cannot be accepted by the ELN for a straightforward reason: this guerrilla group legitimizes itself through its relationship with social movements. Negotiating without them would delegitimize the ELN's history and existence. For this reason, the primary difference between the ELN and the FARC-EP's peace process lies in the agenda's first point, i.e., the participation of civil society. Just as the slogan devised at the organization's origin stated, "*Siempre junto al pueblo*" ("Always with the people"), the ELN not only wants, but in order to prove coherence with its ideology, needs to negotiate "with the country, and not, on the country" (Currea Lugo 2014). As Commander Gabino explained in a letter from 2015,

"We advance more and more the conviction that a peace process that does not involve the bulk of the population in terms of design and democratic participation will not be successful. Of course we are not absolutist, but having practical sense cannot go through elite agreements. We refuse that. And if the population today cannot participate in the peace process, it is simple: that process will lack something essential, which does not make it possible" (Gabino in Currea Lugo 2015, 13).

In contrast to the FARC-EP, weapons only represent the tip of the iceberg for the ELN, while their entire political agenda lies underwater. Additionally, while the FARC-EP's project was certainly revolutionary, it did not fundamentally challenge the State model. In contrast, the ELN opposes the very structure of the republican State. The ELN project can be understood as a confederation of projects (Currea Lugo 2014, 19), which by their nature, collide with the centralism of the Colombian State that, despite preaching multiculturalism and the

enhancement of its regions, keeps its margins in constant underdevelopment (ibid. 160). Especially under the governments of Uribe and Santos, the greatest threat to local economies – notably the ancestral mining practiced by Afro-descendant communities – is the encouragement of large-scale mining and the energy industry, both of which are controlled primarily through foreign capital. As the environmentalist lawyer Rafael Colmenares explains, "the adequacy of the [Colombian] legislation to the interests of the transnational mines has gone so far that the activity has been declared of public and social interest, a rank that does not even keep the production of food" (ibid. 83-84). The ELN may be the only actor with the ability to force the government to regularize this industry. But perhaps it is precisely for this reason that a negotiation is hardly imaginable. What is certain, as recognized by the retired Infantry Marina General Brigadier, is that "the confrontation between the guerrilla groups and the public force has left: more poverty, massive displacement of the peasants, parcels of abandoned crops, death, pain, wounds, frustrations, destruction, abandonment, desire for revenge, fracture of the social fabric, rivalry, weakening of governments and local institutionalism" (ibid. 56). To better understand the relationships between the ELN, the communities, and the environment, we must travel into the Colombian mountains and forests, especially into the Pacific basin, where the Western War Front operates: the setting of this thesis' following chapters.

CONCLUSION

For indigenous and Black communities, the Colombian internal conflict did not begin in 1948 with the assassination of Gaitán, but much earlier. For the indigenous people, the conflict began with the European invasion of their lands at the dawn of the sixteenth century. For Black communities, it began slightly later, in the second half of the same century with their forced arrival in the Americas as commodities transported from Africa in chains. Outlining this "other" history of the country is key to understanding the claims that ethnic groups make to the state in contemporary Colombia, but also the claims they make to the ELN. To fully comprehend the complexity of the Colombian political landscape and the country's ongoing conflict, one must also unpack the functioning of the ruling class and highlight the influences of international policies, especially those of the United States. Understanding these relationships provides insight into how the Colombian government is constituted by a "democratic aristocracy": power alternates among the usual families while maintaining a conservative ideology. Accordingly,

the current Pacto Histórico of Petro and Francia Márquez is the only left-wing political proposition that could come to the presidency after Gaitán.⁶⁶

Insight into the functioning of the ruling class in Colombia also allows for a clearer appreciation of the development of various peace processes that have taken place between government and guerrilla groups during the past decades. It suggests reasons why Colombia's internal conflict has lasted so long, and explains why my ethnographic research, which corresponded with the beginning of a promising peace process, has ended with a violent return to war. These vicissitudes not only affected my access to and interactions with the guerrillas, but also the relationships between the ELN and the ethnic communities. The political work that was strengthened during the peace process is now debilitated by the intensifying conflict. The current presidential elections will decide whether the next few years will be marked by a new openness to dialogue or whether they will fall victim to further violence. Whatever the scenario, the National Liberation Army is demonstrating how it is a movement continuously capable of adapting to the national and international political context, while recovering from military blows that attempt to annihilate it.

For more information on the Colombian internal conflict, see the appendix “Broader Insurgent Landscape” at the end of the thesis. This appendix offers a historical account of the four guerrilla movements aside from the ELN that have most marked the Colombian insurgent landscape over the past seventy years, namely the FARC-EP, the M-19, the EPL, and the MAQL.

Inspired by the Zapatista cosmovision, it is my desire that the reader may glide through the following PARTS II and III of this thesis with the intention of *caminar preguntando* (“asking as walking”), *senti-pensando* (“thinking-feeling”) the ethnographic experience, and most importantly, *pensando con el corazón* (“thinking with the heart”).

⁶⁶ I am writing these lines on May 29, 2022, the presidential election day in Colombia. Therefore, whether my research will be published at a historic moment of change in Colombia, and consequently in Latin America, only the reader will know.

PART II

**“WE ARE GOING
DEEP INTO THE
FOREST!”**

CHAPTER 4

GOVERN WHILE PLAYING

HIDE-AND-SEEK

“They who seek war, is because they don’t know it.”

– Saharawi Proverb



Commander Ernesto reading in the forest – Photo by the author

Pacific basin, October 2nd, 2017

Last night the bilateral ceasefire came into effect. In recent weeks, I had often discussed this with Commander Marcos, who was against any truce with the enemy. "A ceasefire so they can fuck with us? So that they can regroup and then attack us better? The ceasefire is just one of the many political games of the government, I'm not in favor of any truce! Let them put the ceasefire up their ass!" I remember that these words of his had disturbed me, and inside I had told myself, "Yeah sure, it's easy for you to be belligerent because it's your young soldiers who are being attacked and dying at the front, not you." I then wondered if his was the vision of the entire ELN. But last night, instead I was amazed to see with what happiness Commander Ernesto ordered a dozen beers to celebrate, at midnight, the beginning of the ceasefire. Sitting with him were myself, Commander Esther, and Commander Pepe – the two others responsible for the war Front in addition to Commander Marcos. Ernesto handed me a bottle of Poker, saying, "Let's celebrate, that for a few months we can relax and sleep easy!" At the end, no one actually drank more than one beer, and before one o'clock we were all in bed.

Today, I finally have time to think about what I've experienced in the last few weeks, and more than anything, I recall my first night in the jungle. The camp was prepared during the day, and I only got there before sunset, accompanied by Marcos and Paula. Arturo, a young combatant originally from the area prepared my place. He cleaned a couple of square meters of leaves and shrubs, stretched a canvas two and a half meters high to protect me from the rain, stuck a sturdy tree trunk in the ground to serve as a backpack holder, and even built me a small table that he cheerfully shows me saying "Since I saw that you always write I made you a small table, so you can work comfortably." Then, seeing that I pull a flashlight out of my backpack he tells me, "You can't use this one though, it's forbidden. You can't shine it at night or the enemy will see you. They also fly over at night." I answer him that there is no problem, but when the sun goes down I get a little panicky. I have the impression that my boots are sinking into the mud at every step I take, and in the ten meters that separate me from Marcos's tent – where I remained after dinner to discuss with him and Paula – I lose the path at least five times. When I finally manage to lie down in the hammock under the canvas that serves as my roof, I catch a glimpse of an insect as big as my hand. I have the impression of being in the Jurassic, any plant or animal that I have ever seen in Europe or other parts of the world, here is ten times larger. I have showered with anti-mosquito spray and yet I get stung all the time. In the previous days, I have heard so many stories about snakes that I find it hard to fall asleep with the impression that they could get into my

hammock at any moment. In the middle of the night I wake up with the urgent need to urinate, but the idea of venturing in the dark into that world of mysterious sounds that surrounds my hammock stops me for about ten minutes. When I realize I'm considering the option of peeing in my pants, I pull myself together, and boldly get ready. I wrap my lantern in a t-shirt so that only a trickle of light can filter through. I take my boots one at a time and turn them inside out until I'm sure there are no snakes or spiders hiding inside, and once on my feet, I move a couple of meters outside my personal camp. Suddenly I see fireflies as big as lanterns flying by, but what amazes me the most are phosphorescent lights shining all over the place. I feel like I'm in the movie Avatar, and the analogy seems to make sense. Then I hear some strange noises, and after spending a few seconds wondering what kind of animal it could be, I realize that it's Marcos and Paula on one side, and Ricardo and his partner on the other side, both couples letting themselves go in acts of love. Smiling I go back to my hammock, I never expected anything like this on my first night in the forest.

Today, however, talking to Commander Ernesto, referring to Marcos's urban past, he tells me that he (Marcos) is still very "urban" even after many years in the region, and that for this reason he is allowed many comforts. Then he looks me in the eye and says, "When the cease-fire is over, you come with me, and there you'll see, we'll go deep into the forest, to some very exotic places!"

Of course, I don't deny that I'm a bit scared, but Commander Ernesto for his kindness, his calmness, and especially his sharp intelligence, is one of the most fascinating people I've ever met. For me, he is "the last Ché Guevara," and inside I know I am ready to follow him anywhere.

A few days before writing these lines, we were attacked by the army (see the vignette that introduces Chapter 9), and while crouching in the hollow of a large tree to hide from a helicopter that was flying over us at low altitude with its machine gun drawn, I was stung by a scorpion on my knee. As the days went by, the bite swelled, and when I began to be unable to bend my leg anymore, I decided to leave the forest early – also since I had to go to Chile for an academic conference. Upon my return, Commander Ernesto was waiting for me, and thanks to him, I finally had the opportunity to spend some time in the middle of the rainforest, participating in the community's daily activities, and observing the actions that structure life in a guerrilla war front.

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the logic and dynamics that define the functioning of the ELN in the Colombian Pacific. To do this, I will describe several typical moments

organized around three themes: that of the construction and control of territoriality in the space run by the guerrilla movement; that of economic and social relations between the ELN and indigenous communities; and that of ideologies, discourses, and feelings of collective belonging.

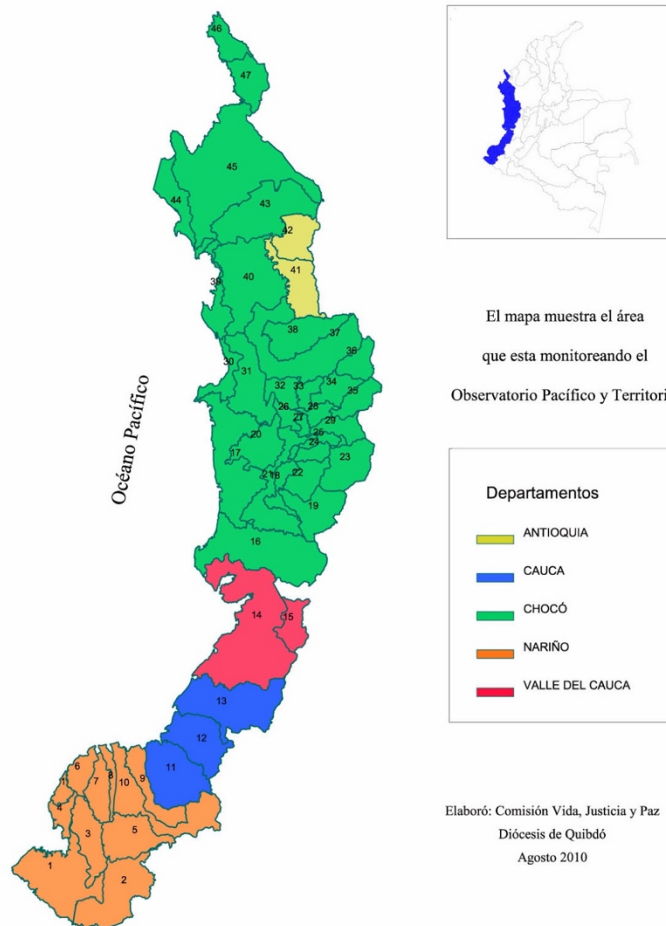
As I approached intersectionality previously, I will again articulate my analysis using the work of philosophers Deleuze and Guattari, as their notions of *smooth space* and *striated space* apply perfectly to my work. In their model, Deleuze and Guattari define smooth space as elusive because it is infinitely vast, without a clear end and a clear beginning, but above all without points of reference to order it. For the two authors, *smooth space* is that of the sea, the desert, the steppe, and the fractal, but agreeing with Escobar (Escobar 2015, 117), I too consider that the tropical humid forest of the Pacific basin falls into this class. Moreover, the *smooth space* is the one inhabited by nomads, which in our case are not the guerrillas, but the local inhabitants. Nomads move according to their needs, affections, and desires. This space is free, open, and has no borders – it is by its nature a deterritorialized space. The *striated space*, which is that of modernity, capitalism, and the state, continuously tries to overlap the *smooth space*. *Striated space* is codified by rules, laws, geometry. In the smooth space there are points, but for the nomads they are only a consequence of their movement. In this space, the nomads trace lines that erase and move with their journey, since their life lies in the *intermezzo* (Deleuze and Guattari 2013b, 471). *Striated space*, on the other hand, is made up of dots, and the lines serve to codify, order and territorialize it. Significantly, “the two spaces in fact exist only in mixture: smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space. In the first case, one organizes even the desert; in the second, the desert gains and grows; and the two can happen simultaneously” (ibid. 2013b, 474–75).

In our case, the rainforest continues to be captured and codified by state apparatuses. State apparatuses of the Colombian government, but also the ELN, as apparatuses are distinguished as organizations that perpetuate or preserve organs of power (ibid. 2013a, 441). As we will see in these two chapters (4 & 5) of Part II, the ELN organizes and stratifies smooth space by attempting to capture it – along with the “nomadic” populations that inhabit it – before it is captured by the state. I use Deleuze and Guattari's schemes because they help make tangible the dynamics observable in the Pacific basin. It is not my intention to apply their theory, as abstract as it is complex, squarely to my own fieldwork. On the contrary, I think the diversity encountered in my research, may rather serve to show the limitations of their theoretical work, and offer insights to refine it, or go beyond it. For example, that between the ethnic communities

of the Pacific and the nomadic societies described by the two philosophers is but a juxtaposition. Although there are similarities, I argue the smooth space of the rainforest is not as free as that of the desert, nor are its inhabitants. Another example is what we will see in Part III of this thesis, where again inspired by the two philosophers, I talk about the *war machine*, which in my research will represent the spirit of resistance of those who find themselves at the intersection of various systems of oppression, fighting for their own justice.

MAP OF THE PACIFIC BASIN WITH ITS POLITICAL DEPARTMENTS⁶⁷

Municipios del Observatorio Pacífico y Territorio



⁶⁷ Source: <http://socialesmimundo24.blogspot.com/p/regio.html>.

ALWAYS ON THE MOVE

Something I realized after a few days in Commander Ernesto's group was that neither the reading of Ché's various diaries and writings nor the weeks spent with Commander Marcos had prepared me in the slightest for what guerrilla life in the Colombian rainforest is all about.

The bilateral ceasefire ended on January 9, 2018. For the ELN Front, which during the three-month ceasefire had almost all regrouped in the same area, it was time to separate again into dozens of small groups – called commissions – that, like satellites, would continue to move through the forest following specific constellations. The first thing I learned was that the day and time of the move is decided by the head of the commission and is communicated to the members of the group only at the last second. I often tried to wring out information in advance because I was getting anxious waiting without knowing when the next move would be. However, the answers I received were always more or less the same: "I think we're moving today or tomorrow," or, "I think we're leaving in a bit." Once among the guerrillas, every action, whether it's going to do your business, washing a shirt, or cleaning up, has to be planned according to the group's timeline. This is because at any moment, the commander can give the order to move, and in the space of three minutes you must be ready to go. For this reason, the backpack of a guerrilla must always be organized in the most efficient way. The essentials, a change of pants, one or two pairs of underwear, a pair of socks, two T-shirts, soap, toothbrush and toothpaste, a hammock, a blanket, must all be placed in plastic bags (given the constant rain) and ordered inside the backpack so that everything can be easily found even in the middle of the night. I remember it took me a while to figure out how best to store the computer, hard-drive, camera, recorder, and my journal so that I didn't have to empty half the backpack every time I needed something. In my case, as with the Commanders (the only ones with access to electronic equipment), it was also important to consider the most appropriate time to use the computer. Due to the very high humidity, computers and cameras must be wrapped in several cloths and plastic bags, which implies a very different amount of time required for their use from what I am accustomed to in my daily life. In addition to the backpack, Commander Ernesto also sent me to buy a fanny pack. When I showed it to him, he gave me a bag with salt, one with sugar, and a couple of energy bars. He told me that I should always have the fanny pack with me, and if I had to run away from an attack and found myself alone in the forest, with a little salt and a little sugar I would be able to survive just enough to find help. His explanation was simple, "As you see a stream follow it in the direction the water flows, with that you will get to a river, and at each river, sooner or later you will find a home." In the fanny pack I added

my personal journal, a lighter, some tobacco and some rolling papers. I had never really smoked in my life, and in any case I hadn't done so since I was seventeen. However, when Commander Esther offered me a Piel Roja (typical unfiltered cigarettes common in Latin America) after the attack on September 27th, I gladly accepted one to calm my stress. From then on, I never stopped smoking while with the guerrillas because even on the calmest days, in life on a war front, there is always a latent tension that accompanies you day and night.

On January 10th, when after sunset I had consoled myself by thinking we would stay in the village where we were for at least one more night, I began to unpack my computer and camera to download some videos. As soon as I did so, Assata, a Black sub-Officer who grew up in the region, entered the room where I was and said, "Let's go!" I asked her, "Now?," to which she responded nervously, "Of course. Now!" As quickly as possible I tried to bumble my work tools and retrieve a t-shirt and socks I had left to dry, put on my boots, close my backpack and walk toward the meeting point. Before sunset, I had noticed other guerrillas leaving, and since we had not joined them, I was sure that we would stay one more night. With time, I understood that Commander Ernesto (as well as Marcos, Esther, and Pepe), are always the last to move due to security concerns. Likewise, they never move along the rivers during the day. Particularly when leaving a village, it is crucial that no one sees the commanders leave. Although there is some amount of trust in the local population, there is never any certainty that there are not spies – *frogs* in common jargon. In the Colombian Pacific, everything moves along rivers, and just as water is never the same flowing down a stream, so too the guerrillas' movements are never the same. That evening, we traveled for a couple of hours along the main river before entering a tributary, and from there continuing for another twenty minutes or so to a hut hidden between two giant trees. Ever since the first boat trip, I've always wondered how it was possible to find a small tributary in almost total darkness: while the driver was heading there without hesitation, I could only see the entrance a few meters away. One day I asked Patrizio, a guerrilla whose story I will tell in the next chapter and who was always designated a motorist, how he could find his way in the dark. He replied that,

"Well, one knows. For example, I know that in that direction, one hour from here, there is the indigenous community of Cucupí, and before we get there, there are two houses on the right side of the river, that of Mrs. Amelia, and that of Edoardo, Adelmo's uncle, while on the left side there is the farm of old José. Between Don José's house and Edoardo's, on the right side, the Marioso River runs, and right before, almost already entering the Marioso, there is a small tributary called Tutusí and that's where we have to go."

At which I asked him, "Okay, but how do you see the entrance to the Marioso, or figure out where we need to stop once in the Tutusí?" Patrizio, smoking the tobacco I had just handed him, answered with all simplicity, "Well, one looks and recognizes. It's the trees. That big tree there is found only there. For example, at the entrance to the Marioso, there is a tall pointed one, you will see. And so, one recognizes." Amazed, I answer him that compared to him I feel like a blind man during the night. Laughing, he says "No, I don't see much. Go once with Felipe. He from here to there (he indicates the other side of the river about twenty meters from us) is able to make you see the outline of a snake on a tree!" I know that what he tells me is true, and I am astonished. "By dint of spending hours in front of the computer, in a few generations we will all have two-dimensional and monochromatic vision," I think a little saddened.

A few days later we completely separated from the other groups, and I find myself alone in Commander Ernesto's commission, which includes myself, his companion Cecilia, Assata, and five other guerrillas. After lunch, Ernesto sends for me and proposes that I accompany him on an exploration along with two other combatants. He explains to me that we are far from every village and dwelling, which is why we can dare to move during the day, but not by river because it is too risky. "Have you ever used a GPS?" he asks me. I answer yes, whereupon he hands me one and says, "Good. Then you guide us so you can practice." I still struggle to walk without feeling like I'm going to fall at every step, but Ernesto, as well as the other guerrillas are extremely considerate, and several times they stop to give me advice on how to move my steps, on how to recognize where the ground is hardest and where there is a risk of getting sucked in. Ernesto shows me various plants, explains which ones are edible, which ones quench your thirst, which ones are poisonous, which ones attract snakes, and which ones are useful for making beds, kitchens, and tables. I wish I had had my camera with me to record all that knowledge. After an hour or so, we stopped and he told me, "This is a good place, you see, there is a stream with clear water, in that direction about fifty meters away is the Tutusí, and the vegetation is thick enough not to be spotted by a simple flyover. This is also where the FARC-EP used to camp when they were in the area. We'll camp here tomorrow night. Now I'm going to teach you how to build your first guerrilla *cambuche*!"⁶⁸ He finishes his statement while laughing. Each tree has its own purpose, first you have to find four sturdy trunks with a "v" shaped fork that will be buried in the ground for at least half a meter and will be the legs of the bed. Then you need to find four or five more logs that are a little less thick, but just as sturdy

⁶⁸ In Colombian slang, the word *cambuche* is used to define an improvised shelter made with the materials at hand. In guerrilla life, it means a bed built with wooden poles and leaves in the middle of the forest.

for the bed frame. Four for a single bed, five to have a supporting log in the middle in the case of a double bed. Once that's done you need to find the right bark to be used as ropes to tie and stabilize the bed frame. With my student hands, it takes me five times longer than others to cut down any tree with a machete. I get teased, but always helped. Once the structure is created, it's the turn of the palms, whose long canes, once the leaves are ripped off, are used to build the mattress. These are easier to cut than tree trunks, but it takes dozens of them. Two days later, in a dead moment during the afternoon I decide to cut some palm trees and plant them around my *cambuche* to make it prettier and create some privacy for myself. Assata, who was passing by at that moment, stopped and with a disarmed look shouted at me, "What are you doing?" Hearing my explanation she replied coldly, "We are at war here, nothing to do with nice and privacy. Take those palms off so that if we have to run you won't fall on them!" I feel totally stupid. Annoyed and frustrated, I destroy the work I had dedicated myself to for over an hour. I still didn't understand what war was, because although it is omnipresent in the daily actions and decisions that guerrillas make, you rarely meet it face to face. I will meet it in the following weeks, and my life will never be the same.

On the day of the construction of my first *cambuche*, we all got dirty and sweaty and went back to our camp consisting of a farmer's hut along the banks of the river. We all went to wash up and I sat down with Ernesto to share a coffee and get ready for one of our endless games of chess. It's his turn to start with white, and each time he opens the game by attempting what he calls the "Shepherd's Check," in English known as the "Fried Liver Attack," where a quick coordination of knight, bishop, and white queen checkmate the black king. I've already lost several games this way and still haven't found the right defense. Like me, Ernesto loves to win and hates to lose. When I lose, to humiliate myself to the end, he forces me to make my king fall, which makes him explode in a loud and joyful laugh, saying, "You know why I love to see you lose, to see your king fall? Because you in Europe still have kings!" That day, however, on the second move, a fisherman appears out of nowhere. Cecilia walks up to him and they chat a bit, while Ernesto takes refuge behind a tree. He tells me to pack my chess board, "He saw me, we can't stay here. Get ready we're leaving, we'll continue the game tomorrow."

We are always on the move: the rule is never to spend more than two nights in the same place. Just being seen by a farmer, being flown over by a helicopter or plane, and in a few minutes, you have to be ready to move. That evening, seeing the farmer nearby, Ernesto sends Patrizio by boat in one direction and tells him to arrive at the camp only after dark. We hurriedly got ready and set out to reach the camp built in the afternoon before darkness fell. This continuous state of alertness, besides being extremely malignant for the nervous system, also

has constant repercussions on the organization of one's daily life. That day, for example, I had just washed my clothes and put them in the sun to dry, happy that no recognition plane had yet passed by. When this happens, in a second you have to run to hide any object that can be spotted from above. Given the immediate departure, I had to pack my still-wet clothes, and so during the march to camp, I would have to take absolute care not to soil the only dry change of clothes I had on me. Given my difficulty in moving through the rainforest, this time with a heavy backpack on my shoulders and with the onset of darkness, I arrived at the camp covered in mud. The next day, in the cold of 5 o'clock in the morning, I had no other option but to put on my wet clothes washed the day before. Furthermore, we were no longer near open spaces where we could put our clothes out to dry, and a rainstorm accompanied us from seven in the morning until three in the afternoon. Over time, I learned to manage my clothing better, but situations like this kept recurring.

Commander Ernesto clarifies to me that the war has changed radically because of the Plan Colombia, conceived by President Pastrana and his ally Bill Clinton and implemented by Alvaro Uribe. Uncle Sam's support for his farm in South America was not limited to economic support, but was also accompanied by material support with which the entire Colombian military was armed, and above all by logistical support of training and intelligence. As Ernesto elucidates to me, the *avioneta*, or Boing Insitu ScanEagle, an American-made recognition plane, takes high-resolution photographs and can pick up radio waves. For this reason, every time we hear it flying, we must immediately turn off our computers and radios, and hide clothes or objects that can be recognized from above. Drying clothes is always a challenge. We are in a place with dense vegetation, so we must look for a small clearing, cut down a couple of shrubs that interfere with the sun's rays, and then lay the clothes on the leaves and branches close to the ground. Since the clearing cannot be attached to the camp, there is always a "person in charge of the clothes," who must be ready to collect them all in case of a flyover, and then put them back ten minutes later – an exercise that is repeated frequently. Ernesto explains to me that when the *avioneta* picks up a signal, it circles around it, triangulates it, and once the coordinates of a guerrilla camp have been established, the army sends the Kfir or Super Tucano to bomb it. The bombing generally occurs between four and five in the morning, when the guerrillas are in their deepest sleep. In order to avoid discovery, Ernesto forbids any kind of electronic objects in his camp, especially phones and tablets – an exception made in my case as all my electronic devices had been bought outside of Colombia and therefore would not contain

possible chips.⁶⁹ In order to avoid this kind of incident, whenever his group or members of his group have stayed overnight in a community, they are obliged to have all their equipment checked in detail by a superior upon their return.

War is omnipresent, but most of the time, it is a phantom actor from whom the guerrillas constantly run and hide, feeling only its noise or its silhouette high in the sky. However, when the ghost arrives and touches you, if you come out alive, you can hardly go back to being the same person. The bombings are definitely one of those touches that, if they don't tear your life away, they tear that innocence, that peace, and that tranquility of the soul that one can cultivate for years, and lose in a second. I began to grasp the meaning of this during the long discussions I had with Thomas, who, along with Ernesto, was one of the people who helped me understand the dynamics of war the most. Thomas is an urban youth who chose his alias (internal nickname within the ELN) in honor of Commander Thomas Sankara, the "African Ché." Thomas had been an ELN militant for years, but had only joined the war front a few months earlier. He grew up in the city and had a college education. I think because of this, he was highly regarded by Commander Ernesto, and it was easy for me to quickly become friends with him. Thomas was once the companion of Assata, who in his own words, was his strictest teacher in the ELN. One day while sitting and smoking a Piel Roja, Thomas confessed to me,

"You know Assata, you've seen her right? She is so beautiful, but she is so harsh. She keeps treating me cold and sometimes I think it bothers her that I'm so nice to her. She's just not used to it. To kindness, I mean. Her life is one of trauma, of violence. One day she confessed to me that her greatest fear is bombs. In a bombing years ago she lost her best friend. Do you know what it's like to imagine your best friend being blown to pieces? It must be horrible!"

Weeks later, when at ten o'clock at night I hear my first bombing a few miles away (see introductory vignette in Chapter 6) I will understand the true meaning of Thomas's words. To be honest, I will realize only several days later how much the terrible event of that night has upset me. This is because a violent event, like any high stress situation, puts the body in a state of alert, and it is only the high production of adrenaline that allows us to continue functioning. It is only when the body feels that it is out of danger that it lowers the state of alert, and that the trauma arises. In my case, the trauma arose when about ten days after the bombing, I returned

⁶⁹ As Ernesto explained to me, the army often finds out which stores the guerrilla movement buys radios or telephones from and randomly inserts chips capable of emitting radio signals into the electronics sold at those shops. If one of these signals appears in the middle of the forest, it is very likely that that object is in the hands of a guerrilla. The historic FARC-EP Commander Alfonso Cano was found because of a chip that the army had managed to hide in a pair of boots.

with the commission of Commander Marcos who is rarely found in the forest and camps mostly in the huts of peasants and fishermen. It was then that I realized the state of shock I was in. The first night in that hut, as well as the following ones, not only did I wake up every hour, but due to some automatic survival mechanism, in the space of a few seconds, I found myself sitting next to my sleeping mat with my boots in my hands or already on my feet. I didn't understand what was happening to me, and when I told Marcos about it he replied that it was normal, that I had suffered a trauma and that sooner or later it would pass. For years, my mind was never truly at peace, and my body never truly rested. But, on the positive side, I learned to appreciate every moment of happiness, every laugh with a friend, every good meal, and every day I'm still alive.

It actually took more than a year before the anxiety attacks during the night stopped. The nightmares and violent dreams, on the other hand, still haven't disappeared four years later. My house in Bern is located under the flight line of the Rega helicopters that land on the roof of the Insel Spital, one of the biggest hospitals in Switzerland. Several times, most recently a few days ago (I am writing these lines at the end of October 2021), I have awakened with a shock upon hearing the rhythmic noise of the approaching propellers. My first reaction is to run away. Then I realize I am at home in Switzerland, but my heart is beating wildly, I am sweating, and it always takes me at least half an hour before I can calm down and eventually go back to sleep. After the bombing at Commander Ernesto's camp on September 20, 2021, every single morning I wake up, and still in bed with my eyes closed, my mind only pictures that fateful incident. As chance would have it, the bombing took place in a camp where I myself had been in the company of Ernesto. The images and memories in my head only accentuate what the fantasy in that state between sleep and wakefulness projects, preventing me from getting up, but also from continuing to sleep. All I can do is breathe deeply and open my eyes, even though the images and feelings of helplessness and pain keep rekindling each time I sit down to write this dissertation.

Just as Plan Colombia and the U.S. support for Colombian weapons development and military intelligence radically changed the symmetries of war, so war changes people. Again, I think back to a story told by Thomas, perhaps one that marked me most during my months in the ELN. One night, he came looking for me in my *cambuche*. Knowing that I had brought some tobacco and rolling papers from Switzerland, which he was crazy about, he said, "Hey, you wouldn't happen to want to roll me a cigarette? Do you want to talk for a moment?" I was about to go to sleep, but I realized that he was eager to tell me something, and since I had already spent some time in the forest, I had learned the importance of living in the present

moment as you never know if there will be another opportunity. I made room for him and we started smoking.

"Brother, something happened to me today that left its mark. Do you remember when I was put on guard duty for three hours this afternoon? Up there on the wire (the ridge of the hill)? All it did was rain. Well, at one point I had the strangest feeling, I was convinced the army was coming in front of me. I can't explain why, but I was sure of it. So, I knelt down, grabbed my rifle, checked that I had a round in the chamber and took aim. The army could only get to my twelve o'clock. For a moment, I studied where I could run, what trees would protect me. Then I realized that if the army appeared, I would be forced to fight. And so, I began to imagine the soldier who appeared in front of me, a negrito (a young Black guy) from the region, there in front of me. I should have shot him directly in the forehead. One second of hesitation and he would have shot me. I had no choice but to kill him. But I have never killed anyone. If I got in the way of Uribe, I would kill him laughing. Duque, the same. But a soldier? A young man who probably comes from the community next door. Those sons of bitches who give the orders are my enemies, but not a soldier. An American soldier, maybe, because wars are waged outside their shitty country, and they are invasion wars. Then again, maybe I'm contradicting myself, but who cares. The point is that if a soldier had appeared in front of me today, I would have had to shoot him in the forehead, kill him right there on the spot, and I don't know if I could have recovered from the guilt. What a shit war is. Luckily there were some blue and red frogs hopping nearby and then, I didn't tell you. I saw a toucan. First one since I've been here. You always hear them, but they're always so high up like monkeys that you never see them. But today at one point I heard a flapping of wings and there it was, a toucan appeared, there at five meters. It was beautiful. Maybe it was the toucan of life among my thoughts of death, who knows?"

That chat with Thomas still rings in my head. In time, I too had begun to read the rainforest in that way: a tree is not more beautiful for being big, but it is big and therefore can be a shelter against bullets; a rainstorm is not the water that makes the forest live, but it is rain whose noise makes it more difficult to hear if the enemy is approaching; a toucan or a hummingbird can become signs of life, while a spider or a snake can symbolize the approach of death. In some ways, the Pacific rainforest is reminiscent of Gastón Gordillo's description of the Afghan mountains: "[...] those mountains were not an inert, passive background to combat but objects with the power to negatively affect the most powerful military on Earth" (2018, 53). Just as the morphology of Afghanistan proved hostile to Soviet troops first, and American troops later, the

rainforest continues to be problematic for those of the Colombian army. Not only is it a terrain impossible to read from above, but also from below, since the constant weather shifts alter its surface. Typically, the rise and fall of the waterways allow the guerrillas to calculate the times when the army might risk exposure by river and when the lack of water does not allow movement for the army's heavy boats. The same can be said for dense vegetation, which offers such protection that "When insurgents "melt into the [*forest*⁷⁰]," imperial militaries often have no other option but to target, randomly and blindly, the terrain" (ibid. 56). Indeed, the technological supremacy of the Colombian army (effectively an arm of the U.S. military) is undoubtedly capable of delivering surprise blows even in the middle of the forest. However, the guerrillas' use of this terrain, becoming a single movement with its shapes and structures in constant dynamism, makes its reading incomprehensible. For this reason, as Gordillo ends,

"The reach of the surveillance technologies of the present would seem to contradict the principle of the intrinsic opacity of terrain only if one fails to see these technologies for what they are: efforts to fight the opacity of the countless forms, atmospheres, encounters, and lines of flight that make up the terrain of planet Earth – and that will continue nourishing the rebellions to come" (ibid. 61).

Finally, in the war zone, the territory is made up of space and time. Space is defined by GPS coordinates, by reading the environment, the weather, and the movements of the army that you have to avoid, or sporadically attack. Everything is therefore movement. Time also works in its own way. In war you prepare, you hide, you run, you have to be fast, you're always ready. But then there are suddenly those dead moments of boredom that last an eternity, as well as those chats with friends that you hope would last forever.

To recall Deleuze and Guattari's analysis, in the tropical forest, the ELN is both state apparatus and nomadic population at the same time. To resist the state, the guerrillas hide, move, and leave only erasable traces behind them. The points are nevertheless fixed on their GPS, in the computers of the commanders, and in case of an attack, these are objects that cannot be lost to the hands of the enemy. At the same time, as we will see in the next pages, the ELN as an apparatus codifies and territorializes the smooth space of the nomadic populations, drawing lines between points already fixed in space (villages, communities, houses), or marking points on the GPS where before there were none.

⁷⁰ *Mountains* in the original text.

BUILDING TERRITORIALITY IN THE AQUATIC SPACE

While some of the movements in the war zone are related to running away and hiding from the military, others have the purpose to *capture* and to exchange with local communities, as in the Pacific almost no one lives in complete self-subsistence. In the region where the ELN's Western Front moves, I identified six types of inhabited areas. The first are the urban centers of Buenaventura and Quibdò, where the guerrillas have no permanent presence. These are places where the guerrilla movement has an indirect influence related to the control of exchange zones, such as the port of Buenaventura, where money, weapons, and above all, drugs, circulate every day. Behind these large urban centers, there are small towns here and there, such as Rima. Here, too, the ELN has no permanent presence, but the town is a satellite from which to control a whole series of information. This information ranges from the arrival of an army battalion to that of a new boat service, the management of which it is essential to know in detail, in order to establish agreements or relationships of trust. The towns have road connections to the rest of the country. Much of the Pacific region in general, can best be depicted as *aquatic space* (Oslender 2016⁷¹), where rivers take the place of roads, and boats the place of cars. In this water maze, most of the villages can only be reached by boat, but everywhere one can find small stores selling basic necessities. Unlike the two areas previously described, the guerrilla movement has a permanent presence in the villages. In the villages are people who constantly move in and out of the armed group: some are militants who carry on a normal civilian life, others, civilians who for a day, a week, or a month, pick up their rifle and follow the group into the forest. These villages are located along the main rivers while the fourth and fifth inhabited areas are the communities located along the tributary waterways, those populated by indigenous and those by Afro-descendant peoples. The communities consist of anywhere from ten to fifty houses, and unlike the villages or urban helmets, here the ELN is trusted to enter and stay, even for a few days. In the next chapter, I will discuss in more detail the kinship relationships that bind the ELN to these communities and make the guerrillas feel confident that they can move into these spaces without the fear of discovery by the army. Finally, the sixth type of inhabited area in the aquatic space are the individual houses. Among these, I include both inhabited houses and uninhabited huts. The inhabited houses where the ELN stay overnight belong to two

⁷¹ For Oslender, the *aquatic space* is a “particular assemblage of spatial relations that results from human entanglements with an aquatic environment characterized by intricate river networks, significant tidal ranges, labyrinthine mangrove swamps, and frequent inundations” (2016, 47). Moreover, for the author, the *aquatic space* relates to *local aquatic epistemologies*, i.e. “the particular ways of knowing a profoundly aquatic environment and how these both produce and are produced by specific temporal and spatial relations with that environment” (*ibid.* 48).

types of people – those with family ties to ELN members, and those with economic ties, namely the production of coca, which I will discuss shortly. The uninhabited huts are usually of two types – those that serve as shelters for fishermen or hunters, and in which one sometimes encounters some cooking utensils and perhaps some rice or tuna cans, and those, called *cambuyón*, that are used for the production of coca paste. Several times we slept in different *cambuyón* that looked as if they had been abandoned for months, but given the necessary gasoline and the various acids and liquids that are used to prepare the coca paste, it took me some time to get used to the strong smell and finally be able to sleep in those places.

In the months I spent with the guerrillas, I noticed three ways to approach an inhabited space. These are not formal rules established by the ELN, but rather my own personal observations. The first type of approach is to villages, which consists of guerrillas first stopping at the edge of the settlement to change their clothes and enter dressed as civilians and without weapons (or only with hidden guns). The guerrillas never stay long in such places, and neither the commanders of the War Front nor those immediately below them in rank ever go there. The only two times I observed guerrillas enter a village armed was at night and they left the village before sunrise. The second type of approach to a populated area is to a community. Here I have seen guerrillas come in during the day as well, and enter armed. Medium rank commanders are trusted to enter the communities, but only during the period of the bilateral cease-fire did the Front commanders also venture there. In Chapter 8, I will discuss more precisely the ethnic aspects that characterize these places, but what I wish to note here is the peculiarity with which the ELN approaches the communities. For security reasons, but also out of respect for the privacy, customs, and traditions of the inhabitants, the guerrillas stay on the outskirts of the community while only one person is sent to scout ahead – an Afro guerrilla if it is a Black community or an indigenous guerrilla if it is an indigenous community. In Black communities, the process has always seemed generally easier and quicker to me, perhaps because these communities have easier and more frequent communication with the outside world, and also because of a shared language. In the indigenous communities which are smaller and more secretive, the waiting time for disembarkation has always been longer. When I arrived one day at the edge of an indigenous community, I found myself sitting in the boat waiting alongside Commander Ernesto. After about twenty minutes I asked him why the young guerrilla girl who had been sent ahead was taking so long. Ernesto smiled at me,

"Now this is one of those interesting things that you anthropologists like. In indigenous communities, you have to talk to the *cabildo* (the community leader). It is he who decides if they want to host us or not. Women can't make that decision, and if the *cabildo* isn't

there, you have to wait for him to come back or go look for him. We can't just walk in without asking because if the guy isn't there and we enter his house without permission, we break the trust and that's a risk we can't afford. Let's wait a little longer, then if anything, we'll go and camp somewhere else."

The third type of approach, that of single dwellings, is the most direct. These are sites deep in the rainforest where one can arrive unannounced. Frequently next to such houses, there is a small cabin built for guests, seasonal workers who help during harvest periods, or especially, the guerrilla. As mentioned earlier, the people who live in these isolated dwellings generally have two types of relationships with the ELN: either they have a family relationship with one or more members of the front, or else they have a small plantation (which I have seen reach more than a hectare) of coca plants that they trade with the help of the guerrilla movement. The single houses are the only places where the commanders of the front stay, even if rarely. Clearly, the relationship of trust must be established over a long period of time and must be reciprocal. While I was with Commander Marcos, I often found myself staying for several days in a house like the one Vanessa mentioned in the introductory vignette of the previous chapter. In contrast, with Commander Ernesto, such a stay only happened once. In the evening he explained to me,

"There are only two houses where I stay for one or two nights a year – this one and one that is much further north. I have known the owner of this one for a long time. Years ago, there was a bombing in the area, and the farmer who lives here managed to bring three wounded guerrillas to safety. When they told me about this fact, I wanted to meet him, so a year later I came to visit him. He is a humble man who works hard in miserable conditions. I liked him and from there we became friends. Several times I offered him help and he never accepted it. I like simple people. One can trust simple people. And then his wife is a wonderful cook!"

he concluded laughing.

BETWEEN MORAL ECONOMIES OF SUBSISTENCE, COOPERATION, AND CO-DEPENDENCE

In the rainforest, almost no one lives in complete self-subsistence, least of all the guerrillas. In fact, contacts with communities have to do mainly with the supply of food and basic necessities, the most important of which is gasoline. From a nutritional standpoint, the diet of the guerrillas can neither be defined as very healthy nor varied, although I was fascinated to see

how thoughtful especially Ernesto and his partner Cecilia were about ensuring that a minimum of fruits and vegetables were always consumed in their commission – a message not easy to get across. Since today's warfare forces the guerrillas to be constantly mobile, there is neither the time nor the means for them to produce their own food, which they have to purchase in the area.

In a troop, the *ranchero* is in charge of the kitchen, while the sub-minister, is responsible for rationing food and alerting the commander when a food item begins to run out. While the role of sub-minister can last up to a dozen days, that of *ranchero* is generally changed every three to five days. Everyone in the troop other than the commander alternates these roles regularly. Another task that all members of a troop perform is that of the watch, which can last up to three or four hours during the day and generally no more than one or two hours at night to minimize the risk of people falling asleep. While one is designated *ranchero*, in order to have time to prepare food, he or she has reduced guard shifts and never those shifts after midnight. This is because the first task of a *ranchero* is to prepare coffee for everyone at six in the morning. Once coffee has been served, the *ranchero* must prepare breakfast, which has to be ready by eight in the morning at the latest. Almost always, breakfast consists of eggs accompanied by an arepa, the typical Colombian corn bread, or rice. Occasionally, hot chocolate is also served with breakfast. Lunch is around noon, while dinner is normally served between five and six in the evening. Rarely, snacks are prepared in the afternoon, but if so, only a very frugal dinner is still served. Lunch and dinner usually consist of rice accompanied by a piece of fried meat (almost always pork), beans, or yuca. When chicken meat is available, or less often, fish, a *sanchoco* is usually prepared, a meat stew made of potatoes, yuca, onion, tomatoes, and herbs. Greens are rare and rot quickly, so when salad is announced it is usually chopped onions along with tomatoes and sometimes a cucumber.

Troops moving near populated areas often provide food for groups, such as Commander Ernesto's, moving into more remote areas. The needs are communicated by radio,⁷² and one or two people are sent by boat to a meeting point to retrieve the goods. Sometimes, Ernesto moves to places that are difficult to reach, so during my first trip with him, I was completely surprised

⁷² In the forest, since cell phones are forbidden, the only means of communication between troops is the radio. Each troop has its radio operator. Usually, the latter's task is to tune in to the operations center of the war front and ask to be connected with the desired troop. Each troop is assigned a number, but it changes every three months so that the enemy cannot follow a particular person for too long. Each troop must return to the central station at least once a day. The communications are made in code, and I remember that it took me at least a month before I began to guess what the topics discussed were. Also, in order to leave as few traces as possible, the Front's commanders only infrequently speak directly to the radio. As Commander Ernesto explained one day, "The enemy is always listening and knows perfectly well the voice of the commanders, as well as those of the main officers. That is why one lets the radio operator do the talking. For the same reason, at least once a year, all the troops are scrambled so that the enemy cannot connect a certain radio operator to a certain commander. Here it is habits that kill you!"

to see that we had a real refrigerator with us. This was run for a few hours a day so as to keep the food cold the rest of the time. At the beginning, our camp was only a few hundred meters away from the village. But as the days went by, we got to the point that when two people were sent on a supply mission they would leave in the morning and return only in the evening or even the next day. Ernesto, not so much for being the primary Commander in the Front as for having diabetes, had a somewhat special diet and was spoiled at times with small delicacies lovingly prepared for him by his partner or whoever in the group was particularly good in the kitchen. On several occasions, during lunch or dinner, Ernesto would send for me and affectionately share with me an avocado, an apple, a sauce that had been given to him, and a couple of times, even some cheese. He was always happy to share his little privileges with me. "It's not that I don't want to, but what am I going to do offering a piece of cheese to Patrizio will who look at it and ends up telling me that yuca tastes better!" he told me one day with one of his contagious laughs.

Once, we brought a piglet with us that we killed about ten days later and that provided us with meat for a few weeks. Occasionally farmers would give us a chicken or eggs, and more often the ELN would give sacks of rice or bags of milk powder to the farmers, but beyond these acts of mutual generosity and cooperation, food is usually purchased in the villages. The ELN is dependent on local suppliers to survive and move around the area, and the local suppliers, if not totally dependent on the ELN, would almost certainly lose their main customer in the area without the guerrillas. Food and gasoline to get around by boat, run a refrigerator, and run a generator to charge the computer, are the ELN's two greatest needs. Unlike individual farmers deep in the Pacific basin, nothing in the villages is given away for free, so money is another necessity for the guerrilla movement. I will not go into detail here about the origins of the ELN's economic sources, but suffice it to say that the two main sources of revenue come from taxes levied on commodity trades such as gold, oil, or wood, or on illegal trades such as coca, and from money generated through kidnapping and extortion. While I do not intend to expand on this last point, I will dwell for a moment on the taxes levied on the three main economies in the region I studied, namely coca, the wood trade, and the gold trade. The reason I want to shed some light on this issue is because unlike the simplistic image repeatedly conveyed by the Colombian media, at least in the area where I did my research, I observed that rather than the ELN forcibly imposing economic control, the reality revealed a more complex relationship from which the ELN certainly benefits, but so do the local communities. All three economies were present in the area before the arrival of the ELN whose role has been to assume a position of supervision, management, and control upon existing economies rather than to forcibly initiate

them. As we will see in Chapter 7, gold mining activity in the region dates from the arrival of Black communities following the European invasion. The wood trade developed shortly thereafter, but coca cultivation for cocaine production arose much later in the 1970s and 1980s, growing exponentially in the last thirty years. Except for a couple of situations in which, almost by chance, I found myself witnessing the levy of a tax or the organization of the sale of a load of coca paste, most of my knowledge on this subject comes from secondary sources. My intention in the next few lines is not to offer a detailed explanation of the amounts levied by the ELN or how these exchanges are carried out, but rather to focus on the kind of impact these exchanges have on Pacific communities and their relationship to the guerrilla group.

I was able to discuss with local miners on only two occasions during my research, yet these meetings revealed much about the subject. The mode of production that communities call ancestral, and that is done on a small scale in the communities, is increasingly threatened by the medium- and large-scale mining of the capitalist mode of production. Although the ELN tries to present itself as a defender of community cultural traditions, it does not openly fight foreign mining, as it does in the case of oil. The mines, in the hands of small and large companies based mostly in the department of Antioquia, are established in the territory and extract gold with the help of bulldozers and machinery, creating enormous environmental damage especially because of the huge quantities of mercury used to separate gold that ends up leaching into the rivers and polluting the waters. As Angela (one of the people responsible for the ELN's political work in the area) explained to me one day,

"We try to ban the use of mercury, but we don't have troops to do permanent surveillance in the whole territory. It is impossible to control all the mines, especially because the bulldozers often work at night. Didn't you hear it last night from across the river? The whole night it has been going on, but there is a town nearby, probably some military, I mean, what do you want us to do? So that, well, we try to give our directives and we levy taxes, three million (pesos) a week per bulldozer, and that's how it is."

The ELN also levies its taxes on the wood trade, but more importantly it plays the role of manager of environmental resources. If, except for some natural parks that are showcased for tourists, environmental protection is in no way among the Colombian government's priorities, it is even less so in a war zone where a review of natural resources involves moving between armed actors. For this reason, it is difficult to estimate what the plant population is within these territories.⁷³ While the industry of wood is centered on timber, the two large trees cut by the

⁷³ See Perea Pandales et al. 2018.

communities for their daily use are *Huberodendron patinoi* (the one under which I hid from the helicopter and where I was stung by the scorpion) and *Hymenaea oblongifolia*. Both are as valuable for their wood as for the role they play in the biodiversity of the Pacific's tropical forest. Because of their large size, they can take hundreds of years to grow, are home to dozens of birds, reptiles, and mammals, and are critical to the balance of sustainable forest growth. In addition to levying a tax on their trade, the ELN enforces sustainable logging by setting a number of trees that can be cut per person, and most importantly by prescribing prohibition periods (called *veda*), i.e. months during the year when logging is prohibited. These prohibition periods are discussed with the communities, who although sensitive to the environmental discourses of the ELN, often complain that these rules mean economic losses for them. As I witnessed in one of these meetings, it is up to the ELN to approach the needs of the communities and negotiate alternatives, such as increased economic support for other activities during the prohibition periods, most notably the coca paste trade.

Hundreds of texts have already been written on this last plant, and in the following passage I will therefore focus on what I was able to see and hear firsthand, centering my reflections not so much on the role of drug trafficking on a national and global scale, but on the impact this economy has on local communities. Although I will begin with a brief introduction to contextualize this illicit trade, I would like to point out that my observations do not necessarily apply to other territories in Colombia in which I have not spent sufficient time to venture an analysis.

The surge in the consumption of recreational drugs at the end of the 60's created the conditions that lead Colombia to become one of the foremost producers of narcotics in the world. It was the cultivation, sale, and consumption of marijuana that familiarized Colombia with the culture of drug trafficking and the immense profits associated with it.⁷⁴ The coca plantations are located in the same territories where marijuana was and continues to be cultivated. The United States has remained the primary consumer of both marijuana, and later cocaine. Like marijuana, the main problem with coca is not so much its environmental impact as the subsequent destruction of the social fabric that unites communities in the Colombian Pacific. More and more young people are attracted to the easy and quick money that can be made from illicit cultivation, and coca outweighs the interest of marijuana because it is easier to transport, allows for higher earnings, and most importantly, it can be harvested three times a

⁷⁴ On this subject, refer to the lecture (2011) of anthropologist Alfredo Molano at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEBf3eNx7Ms>.

year. The violence associated with its trade, however, is unparalleled. It is a violence carried out by all the actors that circulate around it, from drug traffickers, paramilitaries, and guerrilla groups, to the state and its repressive apparatus. The price is paid, as always, by the communities and the hundreds of young people who every year are snatched from their lives for being enchanted by the gains surrounding a drug born in blood and violence, and offering only blood and violence.

The production of cocaine consists of three stages: the cultivation of the coca plant, the harvesting of the leaves, and the transformation of the plant into what is known as cocaine base paste. Generally, communities or individual farmers who engage in this production are limited to growing the plant and processing the harvest into base paste. This process is as simple as it is toxic. The shredded leaves are mixed with water and kerosene. Once this mixture is decanted, the leaves are separated and discarded and filtered, after which sulfuric acid, lime, and ammonia are added. What remains is a blackish paste with a nauseating smell, the base paste. Approximately 130kg of coca leaves are needed to produce 1kg of base paste, meaning that a 1 hectare plantation can produce between 1 and 2kg of base paste. With the ELN as an intermediary, this is what farmers in the area sell to drug traffickers for around USD 500 per kilo. Outside the area where I conducted research, I assume the ELN controls laboratories where, through new baths of the paste in acetone, hydrochloric acid and ethyl ether, cocaine, or more precisely, cocaine hydrochloride, is obtained. Unlike, for example, the FARC-EP, the ELN does not control cocaine trade routes to the United States or intermediary countries such as Panama or Mexico, which is why it refuses to be considered a narco-trafficking guerrilla group. Although we can debate at length how true this statement is, it is well known that every intermediary makes money in the drug trade, but where the money multiplies is at the crossing of international borders, especially between producing countries like Colombia, and consuming countries like the United States.

Returning, however, to the area in which I moved with the guerrilla movement, it is never entire communities that are involved in the cultivation of coca and its transformation into base paste, but rather single individuals who, for this reason, are frowned upon by the communities and often decide to live isolated in the forest. The internal rules of the indigenous and Afro-descendant communities do not allow illicit cultivation within their collective territories, and this is why the management of a plantation, even a small one, becomes difficult for an individual living in the community. Of the many plantations I was able to visit, the largest one measured perhaps two hectares, while in general, most of the plantations I saw in the area ranged from one to one and a half hectares. This data is important because if we go back to the figures

presented above, it means that a farmer with a small to medium sized plantation and a *cambuyón* where he prepares the basic paste can earn around USD 3,000 per year. In a territory where basic needs (such as food, soap, and a few cooking or working utensils) can be purchased with USD 100 per month, USD 3,000 may seem like an outrageous income. But one should not forget that in the aquatic space everything moves by boat, and gasoline remains the most expensive commodity. Greater purchasing power therefore means, above all, greater mobility. Travelling through this space, it is easy to notice who benefits from drug money. But while the multi-million dollar profits remain in the hands of those who control the international trade, all the local farmers can show off is a big TV, a fancy stereo system, and perhaps, a slightly more powerful engine for their boat. I do not mean to defend the coca economy as something benign or sustainable. My argument, which I share with the ethnic communities and at least officially, with the ELN, is that a policy of repression and "the war against drugs" such as that carried out by the Colombian government with the support of the United States, is extremely counterproductive. First, it increases the spiral of violence surrounding this business, and second, it takes away the farmers' only real source of income. While there are discussions around the legalization of drugs, and there are more and more examples of policies that push for the replacement of illicit crops rather than their eradication by force, unfortunately these remain marginal policies that are difficult to implement.⁷⁵

This section on the economic ties between the ELN and the communities, on how these actors move through the territory and what the meeting points are, what social ties are necessary to sustain these exchanges, and the importance of mutual trust, contributes to two main arguments. The first is that the economic and social relationships between the ELN and local communities are one of cooperation and co-dependence. The guerrillas help the peasants solve their daily problems and facilitate their access to the coca economy and other economic inputs that facilitate their precarious living conditions, and in return, the guerrilla movement guarantees itself an economic income to finance its own war-related needs. Above all, except in rare but not entirely isolated cases, the peasants have an interlocutor with whom they can discuss and make more or less acceptable compromises. Clearly, the ELN has weapons on its side, so we cannot say there is an equal balance of power, but, as I have heard repeatedly, even from people who are not necessarily in favor of the guerrilla movement, without the ELN (and before them, the FARC-EP) the Colombian Pacific would be in the hands of paramilitaries,

⁷⁵ On this subject, see for example, Zorro Sánchez 2005.

armed actors with whom no dialogue is possible, and who are known for sowing terror and imposing their own laws of violence. Since the communities cannot count on the protection of the state, they rely on the ELN to defend their integrity. For its part, the ELN takes advantage of this situation to maintain economic control in the area. While bonds of friendship, mutual aid, and cooperation are created between individual peasants and the guerrillas, what unites the ELN to the communities is a moral economy (Rogan 2017; Scott 1976) of subsistence and dependence, a bond that has little to do with a shared ideology.

The second argument I wish to make is a critical contribution to the literature (e.g. Buscaglia 2001; Otero-Bahamon, Uribe, and Peñaranda-Currie 2021) that portrays the ELN or other guerrilla groups as a state within the state, or a state where there is an absence of the state. In the Pacific basin, the ELN fulfills the sovereign functions of the state, such as security, justice, and economy. In recent years, with the demobilization of the FARC-EP, the ELN has only strengthened its presence in the territories, thus increasing its economic revenues. My argument, however, is that the ELN does not aspire to be a state, much less to act like one. As political anthropology shows us, it is not the state that is the only apparatus capable of maintaining order, security, and managing the economy of a group of people. The ELN needs economic revenue to fund its military structure in war against the state, but its political structure is not designed to govern, but to let govern. As Commander Ernesto explained to me one day when he was in a very good mood after beating me at chess,

"See, it's like chess, I don't take away your king to put in another, I take away your king to let your pawns rule. To get back to your question from this morning, the answer is no, we are not a state, but we fight against the state to leave power to communities and the people. Above all, the state is capitalist, and we are not. We don't steal from the people, from the poor people."

At this point, I interrupted him, "Yes Commander, but despite the good intentions, the communities suffer in the midst of the conflict and it is utopian to think that one day the state will disappear and the communities will be able to govern themselves autonomously in their territories. If you eat my queen, I will try to make a new queen with my pawns, not another pawn." He replied with a mischievous air, "First, you have just lost the game so I don't think you are in a position to make chess analogies. Second, what you say is true, the state will not disappear nor will we be the ones to hijack it, however we fight according to the needs of the people, and if that involves being a queen, fine, as long as it is necessary, we will assume the role of queen." I wasn't satisfied with his answer, but in that moment, I felt it wasn't necessary to insist. The point, however, is that defining the ELN as a state is an argument that not only

fails to reflect the reasons that keep the ELN up in arms, but fails also to acknowledge the possibility and capacity for social movements, armed or unarmed, to create alternatives to the state. Similarly to the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, the ELN is horizontally structured in order to avoid an accumulation of central power, and despite its Marxist-Leninist line, the ELN has for years centered its politics on supporting social movements, especially ethnic ones. The ELN therefore certainly plays the role of a governmental body, but differs from the state in its mobility, structure, and logic of operation.

It is the very role that the ELN adopts as a governmental body that allows me to connect the two arguments just made. Indeed, the support that the ELN offers to communities does not follow predetermined logics such as those dictated by the state's institutional frameworks, but can vary depending on the region, ties to communities, to individuals, or from external relationships such as the dynamics of war. Most importantly, unlike the way the state or even many NGOs operate, the ELN in most cases cannot impose its development agenda on communities, but rather is required to follow the opposite process. Particularly in periods of low conflict intensity, it is the communities – though never as a political unit, but rather as single families or individuals – who ask the guerrillas for support in solving certain issues. For example, in the community of Tururí where I had gone to buy fruits and ended up sitting and discussing for a couple of hours, a farmer told me,

"You know, for years we've been looking for an NGO to finance a soccer field for us. We wrote letters, called, but nothing. Then there are some people here who went to talk to the ELN. I don't know what they discussed, but the next month several guerrillas began to do the work and now we have a soccer field. One here tries not to have anything to do with the guerrilla movement because you know, there are risks! However, if no one listens to you, what can you do? At least now the young people have a soccer field and they can distract themselves and practice, and that's good."

In the community of Beranó, on the other hand, I heard that the ELN had tried to help with a waste management project, but due to the lack of socialization of the project, it was not very successful in the long run. One event that I was present at, however, was when Commander Marcos had a dentist and his assistant arrive in a village, and stay there for three days, visiting guerrillas as well as villagers or anyone in the area who wanted a visit free of charge. I remember one elderly woman came out of the room excitedly, saying that she had never seen a dentist in her life. I conclude, with one last anecdote that again involves Marcos. It was on January 2nd when he called a young guerrilla girl who had grown up in the area and gave her 250,000 pesos (with the exchange rate at that time being about USD 80) and said,

“Do me a favor, you know that coming down from here [pointing to the river] live five old women, Mrs. Elmira, Mrs. Piedad, Mrs. Cesaria, Mrs. Eleonora, and Mrs. Hilda. Well, when you go down to the village later you stop at each of these ladies and leave her 50,000 pesos New Year's money. Mind though, you give it to them and not to the husbands. In fact, if the husbands are around you go out with the ladies and give them the money secretly okay? Because otherwise you know how it is, they take the money and go drink it and an hour later there's nothing left. Got it?”

I was writing in my diary sitting a few steps away from Marcos, so I know he didn't do it only to show off in my presence. It is also true that offering 50,000 pesos to an elderly woman (although it should be noted that in the Pacific 50,000 pesos have the same purchase value as 50 USD in America) is not a long-term project. But it is still important to note that Commander Marcos paid special regard to the older women in that area, and not for political, ideological, or propaganda purposes. Except for Marcos, the guerrilla girl who delivered the money, and me, who sat nearby pretending not to notice, no one knows about this episode. Those ladies, all around ninety years old, did not need to be convinced of anything, so Marcos's gift was simply a gesture of respect and humanity toward people, who despite having worked all their lives could never get out of a state of extreme poverty.

These three anecdotes thus serve to show some of the day-to-day relations between the guerrilla movement and the communities. They show how when legality reproduces injustice, people are forced to find individual solutions at the margins of the law. The ELN does not publicize these actions so as not to put local populations at risk. For their part, local populations cannot publicize these kinds of actions because they would end up incriminating themselves. At the same time, the state itself cannot admit that these interactions take place because it would mean acknowledging that its institutions do not work or, better said, are not being made to work in certain parts of the country. And so, as James Scott describes in his celebrated *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), "Everyday forms of resistance make no headlines. [...] The nature of the acts themselves and the self-interested muteness of the antagonists thus conspire to create a kind of complicitous silence that all but expunges everyday forms of resistance from the historical record" (ibid. 59).

Lastly, in its economic relations with communities, the ELN is committed to supporting and promoting its anti-capitalist discourse. In the search for legitimacy in the territories, however, this discourse is not always sufficient to create social cohesion, which is why, as we will see in the following chapter, the ELN employs various strategies to create a feeling of collective belonging.

CONCLUSION

With PART II of the thesis, I invite the reader to move through the Colombian Pacific basin alongside me. Right from the introductory vignette, the reader is projected into the rainforest in the company of the ELN, and is encouraged to navigate these pages by *thinking-feeling* with me, with the guerrillas, with the communities, and with the surrounding environment. Here, I reveal the variety of emotions this journey has caused me, as an ethnographer, and particularly, as a human being entering a completely new reality, sometimes magical and surreal, but mostly tragic, dramatic and impactful.

In this space, everything is in perpetual motion – the weather, the water streams, the people, and even the turbulent emotions that punctuate time in a war zone. Here, to use the words of Deleuze and Guattari, the ELN is constantly trying to avoid being captured by the state, while at the same time, it continuously attempts to capture the smooth space and the nomadic population within it. The ELN avoids being captured by its ongoing mobility, yet it tries to capture with the construction of territoriality in the aquatic space. Here, the ELN moves through different types of inhabited areas, each of which is approached differently. In this region, the ELN engages with three main economic activities, namely gold mining, logging, and coca paste production. It does so by levying taxes, but also by discussing possible economic solutions with local inhabitants. Most residents have no relationship whatsoever with the guerrilla movement, but when relationships are established, they are not so much based on ideological sharing as on codependent economic relationships. In such exchanges between the ELN and the communities, references to Marxism-Leninism is absent, as it also is within the movement itself. The next chapter explores what mechanisms are capable of creating social cohesion and feelings of collective belonging among ELN members in the absence of a coherent dominant ideology.

CHAPTER 5

SOCIAL COHESION AROUND FOOD, TRAUMA, AND ONGOING NARRATIVES

*“Que la lora al verse herida
Le gritó al uniformao:
Siendo que vusté es del pueblo
¿Por qué está del otro lao?”⁷⁶*

Jorge Velosa – *La lora proletaria*



Guerilla members sharing stories during the “study hour” – Photo by the author

⁷⁶ “As the parrot was hurt, she shouted at the man in uniform: Since you are from the people, why are you on the other side?”

Pacific basin, January 17th, 2020

I would like to have the whole morning to write, but it's already 6:30 and I have to wash clothes before breakfast because then I proposed to give a small history lesson to some guerrillas who asked me to explain what colonialism is. The other day I had suggested to Commander Ernesto that I could do a brief introduction to Marxism during study hour, but after thinking about it for a few seconds he concluded that, "No, if you really want to be useful, first explain a bit of history. In the meantime, we could read together The Capital that you gave me (in Chile, I had found a beautiful edition that I had brought with me), and maybe later mention it to the guys. Ask them what they feel like studying, but remember that they are not university students, so take it easy." Effectively, colonialism seems easier for me to explain than Marxism, but it feels weird to be the one teaching these topics in the ELN. In any case, I now have at most twenty minutes to quickly reproduce the stories that I heard last night and that I would have loved to record or even film! In fact, for a few hours I found myself sharing those moments that are the dream of any anthropologist, the narration of life stories and popular legends. However, going to look for my dictaphone would have destroyed the magic of that moment, which was one of sharing, and not of that intrusion of anthropology-journalism that does not respect people and their spaces. Understanding the guerrillas often means understanding myself, and participating in an intimate moment under a tent in the middle of the night only reminds me that I am indeed an anthropologist, but first and foremost, I am a human being among human beings, and this is the most important thing.

Anyway, I had just brushed my teeth and was walking toward my cambuche when José, Commander Ernesto's personal doctor, whispers to me to join him under his tent where I glimpse the silhouettes of two other guerrillas. "Roll us some cigarettes. I've just finished mine and here's a good discussion!" he tells me as I look for a stool to sit on. Silently, I pull out the tobacco and in the dark begin to roll a couple of cigarettes while Estebán, a handsome guy with a reserved and intelligent air who had stayed behind me to observe a chess game I had with José in the afternoon, takes up the conversation. "Well, as I was explaining, I grew up in the North of Santander, and when I was a kid, my father and I used to transport gasoline there. One would cross the border [with Venezuela] and then come back this way loading the mules. Sometimes I had to run ahead to see if the military was present. In fact, once they were waiting for us in the village, so we had to go all the way up the mountain to get down another side. They were difficult hikes and one would go with a mule, sometimes two, sometimes three. That's why when I joined the ELN there were only two of us in my group who knew about animals..." Whereupon José interrupted him and asked, "But did you

go during the day or at night?" Estebán replied, "One went at night so that he could come back very early in the morning, but phew, I didn't like going at night!" Handing him the cigarette that I had finished rolling I asked, "And why didn't you like to go at night?" Peering at me in the dark he replied, "Well, for the fireball, the llorona (the weeping lady), and those things." Whereupon Raúl, a small Black man who up to that point had remained silent interjected, "Hey, why do you believe in those things?" Intrigued I wanted to know more, so that Estebán continued, "No, I have never seen them. But my father told me about the time he saw the fireball. It follows the lone travelers in the night. He was on his way home when he turned around and saw it. One knows not to pray or it will come at you. So he started to run, but it was getting closer. So he laid down on his head for a moment and after a while it was gone. He got up again and ran without stopping until he reached the hut of a farmer nearby, but after a moment he realized that the fireball was following him again. He managed to get to the hut and he had to stay there until morning because the fireball kept showing up in the vicinity of the hut." "And you Raúl, did you know this story?" asks José. "Of course. To me the fireball never happened, however, once when I was standing guard I heard the llorona." "And who is it?" I ask curiously. "Well, the legend as it stands I don't know. It seems to be about a woman who drowned her children and one hears her because she cries. I don't know, however, I was standing guard that night when I heard her. Hii, hiiii, crying and crying. I at first thought it was a companion in the cambuche nearby, but then I realized it wasn't because the crying was moving from one side of the forest to the other so, quickly. Ui, it scared the hell out of me. But I was on guard so I couldn't move or turn on the light, so I crouched down and stood there quietly. Twenty minutes later I didn't hear her anymore, but I remembered that when you hear a cry, it's because something bad is going to happen, so I got scared and couldn't sleep because I was afraid that that night we would be bombed. Didn't they attack Iván's commission the next day?!" "Yes, I remember when they attacked Iván, they almost kill them all. Ui no, with these things you have nothing to joke about!" interjected Estebán. "That's when Ana died. They say she fought hard until the end. She was good, that woman!" "We're all going to be there..." Raúl said resignedly. José asked him why he was so negative and Raúl's words struck me, "Well, it's war. That's what we got ourselves into." Raúl's answer somehow changed the pleasant atmosphere that had united us until that moment. We tried to downplay it with a few jokes, but no one felt like going on with storytelling anymore, so I went back to my hammock a little thoughtful and bitter. The guerrillas fill the jungle with joy and laughter, but what unite them, I sometimes feel, is an underlying sadness that hurts my heart.

I chose to begin the chapter with this vignette because it contains the elements that constitute the feeling of collective belonging around which the members of the ELN huddle. Estebán and Raúl's stories are not mere tales, but reflect moments in their lives marked by traumatic events. In addition, the certain death predicted by Raúl closes a joyful and mystical evening with a quick landing in the reality of war. I had already heard about this reality from the mouth of Diego, an indigenous official who sighed to a commander on January 2nd, 2018, "Another year is gone, and so far we have come. We'll see who's still here next year." Finally, the vignette shows how popular legends can intertwine with lived experience in war and thus take on meanings and values that allow the guerrillas to interpret reality. In this chapter, I discuss how these meanings circulate in ongoing narratives that reinforce group feeling.

In an asymmetrical war like the one between the Colombian state and the ELN, it is crucial to inquire into the factors and dynamics that allow for social cohesion, a feeling of belonging, and the maintenance of the group over time. If joining the ELN means abandoning one's identity, family, and friendships to go and live in anonymity far from any comfort, without any money or special privileges, why do thousands of young people in Colombia continue to be attracted to this political-military project? My analysis is based on my experience in the Western War Front, in the Colombian Pacific, not in urban centers. This clarification is key because if one can make a number of analogies between the FGOc and other rural fronts, it is more difficult to weave parallels between them and the urban fronts. In the cities, most militants have a school education, often even a pre-university or university education, and political work is the primary task of these fronts. In the rural world, on the other hand, political work, although remaining fundamental, takes a back seat to the primary needs related to survival and war. To understand the reason for this difference, a brief socio-economic explanation of the area I studied is instructive. According to Colombian Reports (independent online monitoring), as well as DANE (the national department of statistics), in the Pacific, 70% of the population lives below the poverty line and 30% in extreme poverty. These figures contrast sharply with national statistics, in which the poverty index hovers around 25%, while that of extreme poverty is around 7%.⁷⁷ The figures become even more manifest if one looks only at the department of Chocó,⁷⁸ where unlike the department of Cauca, the figures are not distorted by a hinterland containing an important city like Cali. In Chocó, 60% of children under the age of 5 live in

⁷⁷ See <https://dane.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=54595086fdd74b6c9effd2fb8a9500dc>.

⁷⁸ See <https://colombiareports.com/choco/> , <https://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/otras-ciudades/las-cifras-que-tienen-indignado-al-choco-28264> , <https://colombiareports.com/colombia-poverty-inequality-statistics/> , and the following governmental portals: <https://geoportal.dane.gov.co>.

perpetual malnutrition, while the maternal mortality ratio is three times the national average. Similarly, infant mortality is twice the national average, and about 40% of children die before reaching their first year of life. In addition, the department's hospital infrastructure in rural areas is non-existent, lacking staff, facilities, and often essential medicines. The department's capital, Quibdó of nearly half a million inhabitants has only one hospital. Education statistics in the area are equally dire. Schools do not have the means to meet the needs of large numbers of students, so education remains mediocre, and most students do not have the opportunity to continue on to higher education. The lack of infrastructure and the low number of teachers willing to work in unstable conditions for minimum wages have drastic consequences on the level of school education. According to the Saber test, which evaluates secondary education nationwide, of the 20 worst performing municipalities for ninth grade in the country, 14 are from this department.⁷⁹

This social landscape is the framework for discerning the fragments of life stories that I will present in the next pages. In this chapter, I show the process of incorporation into the ELN, including the difficulties that limit political work and the production of a dominant ideology, and ultimately, address the mechanisms that create social cohesion and a sense of collective belonging amongst the ELN in the Colombian Pacific. My research in the Pacific serves to help explicate the continuation of armed conflicts, not only in Colombia, but throughout the world. The racial diversity of the Pacific population and the alarming indices just listed, stand to show how in the sites where capitalism shows its most aggressive face – extractivism, environmental racism, monocultures – the structural inequalities are most pronounced and most felt by the population. Put another way, it is in the places where natural resources and ethnic groups are concentrated that solutions to conflicts must be found. Solutions, however, are only possible through the active participation of those who inhabit these places. Otherwise, as we will see in this chapter, movements like the ELN will continue to produce practices and ideologies capable of attracting anyone who yearns to escape the grim reality of the margins of the state.

SOME HAVE MONEY, OTHERS AN IDEOLOGY. WHAT ABOUT THE ELN?

To begin, I wish to clarify why I use the term incorporation, which is the term used by the ELN, instead of recruitment, which is the term used by the government. The choice of the term

⁷⁹ See <https://www.eltiempo.com/opinion/columnistas/oscar-sanchez/educacion-en-el-choco-columna-de-oscar-sanchez-293414>.

recruitment implicitly alludes to the idea of forced recruitment, an internationally denounced practice prohibited by the Convention on the Rights of the Child through its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict,⁸⁰ as well as by Optional Protocol II to the Geneva Convention,⁸¹ which states that children under 15 years of age may not be recruited and still less, may not take direct part in hostilities. The government's complaint against the ELN is that it is recruiting minors, and therefore not respecting the rules stipulated by international law on armed conflict. For its part, the ELN defends itself against these accusations through the use of the term "incorporation," which implies a voluntary decision on the part of the young minor who decides to join the guerrilla group. I witnessed the inclusion of minors, 15 years of age in the ELN, just as it is certain that not all minors of 18 years of age join the movement with the consent of their parents – as stipulated by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Yet, I would suggest that the ELN does its utmost to abide by international law and that forced recruitment is not part of its social or military policy. Again, my affirmation is based on what I could witness and hear, and not only from commanders, but also from young soldiers, who like Alexa, a fourteen-year-old indigenous girl who I met during one of my first stays in the commission of Commander Marcos, admitted to me while having breakfast,

“I have been asking Marcos for a year to send me to fight. I am ready, but he tells me that until I am at least fifteen years old he cannot do it because if I am captured or killed and the army finds out that I am fourteen, they can make a scandal based on I don't know what international law. So I have to wait another seven months!”

she concluded smiling. I remember in that conversation trying to figure out what it was that made Alexa want to participate in a fight. I hope the stories I report in this chapter can shed light on her reasons.

The exchanges I had with Thomas and Commander Ernesto are instructive in this matter. Both discussions revolved around Valeria, a young girl who was in our group, who despite claiming to be 15 years old, appeared no older than 13. One day, I told Thomas with whom I knew I could openly expose even my most critical views, that I was a bit shocked by the presence of Valeria. He looked at me thoughtfully and after taking his time to reflect he replied,

"Well brother, the way I see it, yes and no. That that little girl should not be here is for sure, but then she should be in school building her future, and not trying to survive in a village. The state denounces forced recruitment, but don't they do the same thing? Of

⁸⁰ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/opaccrc.aspx>.

⁸¹ See <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/ihl/WebART/475-760008?OpenDocument>.

course they do, the difference is that those pigs have money. So the army recruits young people from communities that have no future and sends them to the front to die, but because they have money they can sell them their certain death as something attractive. And again, because they have the money they can afford to recruit only 18-year-olds, but if they didn't have the money do you think they wouldn't recruit even 10-year-olds? Of course they would! The other day I was reading an article about how it works in America. They have so much money that they will pay for you to go to a USD 50,000 a year university just to get you to sign up to go die at the front in an unknown country. If they have so much money why don't they invest it in education? If the Colombian government doesn't want the Pacific youth to end up in the conflict, why don't they invest in education, in health? In Colombia, public education is shit, and in the Pacific let's not talk about it! But there is always money to buy new planes, helicopters and weapons! These things make me angry! You don't want Valeria to be in the ELN, fine, then give her a scholarship so she can go to the Universidad de los Andes to study with the same opportunities as the children of the Colombian elite! Hypocritical bastards!"

I saw that the topic enflamed Thomas's soul quite a bit, as he seemed to have a visceral aversion to injustice. I decided not to exasperate him any further, but it was certain that his answer, although it did not justify Valeria's presence in the group, opened an old debate that relevant past Colombia's borders. Worldwide, military spending in 2020 grew by 2.6% compared to the year before, reaching a total of USD 2 trillion. Among the biggest spenders, the United States is the first with an expenditure of USD 778 trillion, accounting for 39% of the world's spending.⁸² On the other hand, estimates say that with an expenditure of USD 330 billion over the next nine years, it would be possible to eradicate world hunger by 2030.⁸³ In other words, one-sixth of what is spent annually on armaments would be enough to develop and finance a program that over ten years would allow every human being in the world to live without the risk of starvation. Despite the economic restrictions due to Covid-19, in 2020, Colombia managed to spend USD 9,216 million on armaments, placing it second in the American subcontinent behind Bolsonaro's Brazil.⁸⁴ In addition to not implementing the peace agreements signed with the FARC-EP, the Duque government has done nothing but increase a

⁸² See <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2021/world-military-spending-rises-almost-2-trillion-2020>.

⁸³ See <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/13/ending-world-hunger-by-2030-would-cost-330bn-study-finds>.

⁸⁴ See <https://www.asuntoslegales.com.co/actualidad/colombia-es-el-segundo-pais-la-nivel-latinoamerica-con-mas-inversion-en-gasto-militar-3160701>.

policy of military expenditure, making young people like Valeria even more likely to end up in the ranks of armed groups.

Above all, what was hard for me to understand, especially at the beginning, was what the ELN gained from having young people in their ranks who they could not send to fight and who ended up being dangerous ballast in the constant flee and run of the forest. One day, I took the liberty of making this observation to Ernesto,

"Commander, I actually imagined that the group accompanying the number one in the Front was made up of the military elite of the ELN, and I am amazed to see young people like Valeria or Marleni (Valeria's best friend) who are young girls. If you get under attack, they are the first to run screaming in fear and I don't see them engaging in combat, which is not wrong at all given their age. I don't understand!"

Although he never told me so, I am sure that Commander Ernesto liked my questions, because they provoked him, forced him to think, and allowed him to engage in discussions different from those he was used to. With his usual calmness he answered me,

"Well my brother, there are two things. The first is that we need people, so whoever wishes to join the ELN, welcome it is. Unlike the government, we can't pay people to join us, so we accept those who are willing to be part of our revolutionary project. Now, what am I going to do with a Valeria? With us there is a period that we can call "trial" of two years. After these two years one is free to leave. A Valeria, as well as any other young person coming in, has the potential to one day become a good officer or commander. So that in these two years, I take care of training her and preparing her politically and militarily for what life in the ELN means. Now, on the second point, who is on my commission? We are not a combat commission like Commander Esther's, those are in areas with paramilitary presence where there is regular fighting. Here it can be that we clash with the enemy, but it is more likely if they attack us. So, in my commission I like to have some good soldiers who can defend a possible retreat, and some young people like Valeria, who I can take the time to train."

Although the conditions described by Thomas and Commander Ernesto are indeed those of ELN guerrilla warfare, it is nonetheless difficult for an outsider such as myself to accept the presence of teenagers in an armed group. One thing that made an enormous impact on me was seeing how much Valeria had changed when I met her again, two years later. Surely adolescence is an age at which one matures quickly, but when I spoke to her again, instead of the shy, awkward little girl, I was answered by a well-groomed, confident young woman who had learned to read and had decided she wanted to become a nurse. For Ernesto, training did not

mean preparing someone for war, but giving opportunities to a young person coming out of poverty to create a dignified life as a human being.

The war in Colombia today forces the ELN into continuous movement. For this reason, it is difficult if not impossible to organize any real in-depth political work among the troops on the war fronts. As several commanders have explained to me, up until about twenty years ago one would stay in a camp for weeks, sometimes even a month, and thus have the possibility of organizing what is known as a "political school," or a course lasting several days in which one would learn the basics of Marxism, study world geopolitics, and the history of Colombian politics. Today, however, this is no longer possible, so that training is reduced to a few sporadic courses, such as the officers' school, or to the daily study hour which, however, given the lack of political cadres, is increasingly limited to reading the community regulations. The ELN is thus faced with an internal contradiction imposed by the new modalities of war, that of being a political armed movement where politics finds less and less space.

For this reason, what holds the ELN together is less and less an attachment to a socialist ideology such as Marxism-Leninism, and more and more an ideology shaped around the daily needs of the people, discourses on identity politics, and a global struggle against capitalism. Because an ideology must be internalized and locally appropriated in order to function (Deleuze and Guattari 2013b), the ELN cannot afford to remain adamant around Marxist doctrine primarily for two reasons. The first is that in the Colombian context, the Marxist class struggle has lost relevance with the rise of identity politics carried out especially by ethnic groups since the 1991 Constitution. Identity politics, as we will see in Chapter 8, have become one of the ELN's workhorses; a fact that demonstrates how the social movements that this guerrilla group aims to defend are capable of influencing the ELN's internal politics. The second reason is that the ELN does not have a mass media apparatus (Fattal 2018), nor the control of a symbolic materialism such as that present in communist countries (Vais 2016), factors that make it difficult to promote an ideology, especially when this ideology is constantly demonized by those in control of the media apparatus, as in this case, the Colombian state. Despite the fact that in the last twenty years the Colombian media has managed to push the following analogies, Marxism = communism = Castro = Chávez = dictatorship = terrorism, for its neoliberal policies that promote mass extractivism, the current Colombian Duque government is continually faced with harsh criticism. The ELN demonstrates awareness of the fact that ideologies are used to create and shape political consciousness, especially in times of crisis (Medushveskii 2015). In order to legitimize its position of armed resistance, the ELN is careful to include in its discourse

the heterogeneity of the claims of groups resisting state hegemony (L. Thomassen 2005). One topic that cuts across all such claims is the struggle against the capitalist mode of production.

Current debates about how to approach ideology are divided between those who propose studying them at the macro level as a discourse imposing itself on actors (Laclau 2006), and those who look at it from the site of production at the micro level (Bourdieu and Boltanski 2008). My argument is that the ELN works its ideological production on three levels that are in constant interaction and mutual influence. The first level is that of discourse at the macro level that the ELN runs through its political programs, its press or radio releases, and in the platforms it has participated, such as what is the now frozen peace process. This is a discourse that relates to struggles carried out globally against capitalism, imperialism, and in favor of identity and recognition policies that support ethnic movements, LGBT matters, etc. The second and third levels – the ones most relevant to this thesis – are the local level, and the internal level.

By local level, I mean that of the territories controlled by the guerrilla movement in rural areas inhabited mostly by ethnic groups and peasants. Here, as in the case of the Pacific, what unites the ELN and the community is primarily a common struggle against landlordism in which Marxist postulates and the demands of ethnic groups are intertwined. If for the ELN the resistance against national and multinational corporations is part of a struggle against the primitive accumulation described by the German philosopher, for ethnic groups it is a matter of the will to remain in what are defined as ancestral territories, lands on which these groups have lived since before the European invasion – as in the case of indigenous groups – or since the forced arrival in the new continent, as in the case of Black communities. To consolidate this rapprochement between Marxist ideology and ethnic cosmovisions in the common goal of permanence in the territory, there are also the economic relations of co-dependence presented in the previous chapter, which create bonds of mutual support in daily activities.

Finally, by internal level, what I will focus on below, I mean the level of relations within the guerrilla group. The next few pages are structured as follows: first, I examine the reasons people join the ELN. Reasons that are in part related to the acquisition of daily needs, and on the other hand, to the sharing of traumatic biographical traits. Second, I describe what motivates young militants to remain in the guerrilla group. Here I describe the construction of common narratives, as well as the symbolic aspects that intensify the feeling of belonging. My descriptions, reflections, and analyses are centered on the war front in which I've been embedded and are not necessarily adaptable to other contexts such as urban fronts or fronts in which ethnic aspect is negligible.

THE CHARM OF UNIFORMS AND RIFLES

If for a high school or university student like Commander Marcos or Thomas it was easy to find ideological reasons to join the ELN's struggle, the same cannot be said for the young people in the Colombian Pacific who grow up in communities where basic education is mediocre and access to higher education impossible. What attracts the youth of the region to the ELN's revolutionary project is therefore not so much the ideological program of the organization, but rather the presence in the area of a group that offers concrete possibilities for improved living conditions. During the course of my time in the forest, I investigated members' reasons for joining the ELN in numerous interviews, as well as in the many informal discussions I had with guerrillas. The answers quickly began to repeat themselves, making it clear that there were common biographical traits that fell into two main categories: backgrounds marked by inequalities and unmet basic needs, and histories of traumatic experiences during childhood and early adolescence. With respect to the first category, all the guerrillas I had the opportunity to discuss with grew up in families living in poverty or extreme poverty. Emblematic is the story of Alirio, a nice young man who, as soon as he had the chance, would start listening to salsa and show off his dancing skills. When I formally interviewed him in front of the camera, he told me in a few words that he didn't like to study and that rather than stay home and do nothing, he joined the ELN. That evening while we were cooking together, I happened to have turned on my Dictaphone to record the sounds of the kitchen. As we were chopping potatoes and onions he suddenly said,

"No, about today's interview. I mean, it's not true that I didn't like studying. I struggled, but I liked it. I would have liked to study. I have a friend whose parents sent him to Buenaventura to study. I, however, as I tell you. Well, you have to tell the truth, I come from a very poor family. Sometimes I feel ashamed to say it, but it's the truth. My father died when I was eleven, and I have six other brothers. My mother couldn't pay for my studies, there was no way, and at home I was just another plate of food. I felt bad about it, I felt guilty for my mother, so one day I made the decision and told her that I was coming to the guerrilla movement. She told me that she was sad, but that it was up to me to know what I wanted to do. She told me to think about it, but that the decision was mine. I couldn't ask her for money to study and I felt useless at home, so I came to the ELN. Here I have my food three times a day and I feel useful. I keep learning things, like washing clothes, cooking, reading, using weapons, and every now and then, the ELN also sends a little financial help to my mother, so that being here feels like the best choice."

As with Alirio, poverty is a common denominator to the reality of rural Colombia. The ELN offers an easy-access escape route to what appears to be a social determinant for those growing up in these regions. Alirio's account also sheds light on the Colombian government's lack of social projects that focus on supporting and improving conditions in communities at the local level. While those who belong to the poorer classes in Colombia do have some access to various scholarships and discounts on university matriculation (e.g. Ocoró Loango 2018), those who are not fortunate enough to have family members or contacts who can support the student to sustain themselves in the city soon find themselves having to abandon their studies. In rural Colombia, having family members who have migrated to the city seems to make the difference between those who can aspire to move away from a state of self-subsistence, and those who are relegated to a state of poverty. This analysis is reflected in the words Valeria said to me one day when, in the company of her friend Marleni, I asked her if they had ever dreamed of a different life: "Well, if one doesn't know anyone, where do you want us to go? If we knew people we would have gone to the village or the city, but if one doesn't know anyone anywhere, where do you want to go? So one leaves for the guerrilla movement, because where else to go?"

Clearly, the three daily meals are the most practical and obvious benefit of choosing to join the ELN, but there are other factors that make this organization so attractive to young people in the region. Although secondary to the basic necessity of food, one factor compelling adolescent-aged youth of poor class and rural origin toward the ELN is the opportunity to escape hard agricultural or domestic work. As we will see in the third part of this thesis, the intersectional aspects of class, race, and gender also play an important role in the choices of youth and on their perception of guerrilla space. For example, for many Black or indigenous men, the ELN means an escape from the grueling world of subsistence farming that requires enormous work with no guarantee of reaping the hoped-for fruits. For many girls, becoming guerrillas means the ability to leave behind what they have often portrayed to me as a doomed destiny limited to fulfilling domestic tasks. In Angelica's words, joining the ELN is seen as "[...] something better, because here one doesn't work like a slave. I mean, here, for example, they tell you to do a certain thing, I go, I do it, I come back and I rest. It's not like in civilian life where they make you work all the time like a donkey. Here one works little by little, and one feels better."

In addition to these motivations of a pragmatic nature related to situations of inequality, many guerilla biographies as reveal traumatic experiences. The most common trauma guerrillas shared with me from their lives before joining the ELN, was that of domestic physical and psychological violence, often coming from an authoritarian father. Such traumas stem from the Colombian *machist* culture, which as we will see in Chapter 9, still follows patriarchal logics.

According to these sexist attitudes, the man of the house must be dominant and can enforce his authoritarianism through verbal abuse that often turns into physical violence. Although several male guerrillas also told me that they were frequently beaten by their father, the story that best sums up the traumatic experiences leading many guerrillas to find liberation in the ELN is that of Angelica and Camila, two friends who ran away together from an indigenous community to seek a better future in the ELN. Shyly, alternating speaking, they shared their story with me: "No, it's just that my father used to beat me a lot..." "Mine did too. Sometimes he would tie me up and leave me there for hours." "Yes, and because for example he didn't want me to talk to two Afro boys who were walking by." "That's right, they don't want us to mix with Afros because they say we lose our culture." "Uhi, one time my dad found out I was at the river bathing with that boy. I mean we were just bathing, we weren't touching or anything, but he saw me and beat me hard. That's when I decided I wanted to leave." "Me too, the last time my dad beat me I said, I'm going to the ELN. And so ,we came here." "So that's it, one night we ran away and we came for the ELN."

These traumatic experiences of abuse, especially during adolescence, reinforce the vision of the guerrilla movement as a space in which a young person can find some emancipation and independence. The more practical reasons for joining the ELN are fortified by multiple symbolic aspects. In the third part of the thesis, I delve into how these factors are perceived and experienced individually depending on gender. But first, I focus on how symbolic aspects are perceived collectively, participating in the creation of a group that young people are eager to join. At the same time, I will show how shared traumatic experiences make it possible to visualize a common enemy against which the guerrilla group takes a side. From what I have been told, what most fuels the feelings of emancipation and independence are the break with abusive family ties, and the feeling of power given by the handling of weapons. The stories I heard repeated, often accompanied by great laughter, almost all resemble those told to me by Mariluz and Jorge. Mariluz shyly confessed to me, "the truth is that I used to see the guerrillas pass by, and they were beautiful with their rifle, their vest, their uniform... and then one day I started talking to one of them and I liked him. Every time he came to my village I would talk to him, listen to his stories, and eventually, well, I fell in love and decided to follow him." When Jorge told me his reasons for joining the ELN, I was in the company of Commander Marcos and five other comrades. At first, Jorge was explaining to me how he had become a guerrilla to fight for the poor people, but when Marcos, who seemed intent on reading some documents, overheard him, he interjected and told him to tell me the truth. The other men next to us seemed to already know the story because they began to laugh, forcing an embarrassed Jorge to reveal

the truth to me: "Alright, nothing, one day there were guerrillas near the village. I wanted to go to the river to wash some pants and when I got there, there were three guerrilla girls who were washing. I mean, all naked, and no brother. If that's how people lived in the ELN, I wanted to be there too." Indeed, nudity, as well as sexuality in the ELN are expressed freely, to which I was told it is difficult to adapt at first, but is later perceived as liberating to those raised in a society with deeply Catholic values. I remember one day when Commander Ernesto said to me, "Come, let's go bathe at the river." As I saw that he was taking off his boxers, without hesitating for a second, I too undressed and began to bathe. Not only did I play basketball all of my adolescence and thus have the habit of showering with other teammates, but the years I lived in the German-speaking part of Switzerland freed me from the Catholic prudishness that characterizes the Italian-speaking region where I grew up. When we returned to camp, Cecilia looked at me mischievously asking, "Did your first bath in the river go well?" To which Ernesto interrupted her laughing, "No, these Europeans are all hippies. They don't mind being naked!" I told them such attitudes were mostly present in the Nordic countries, to which we all ended up laughing at Cecilia's joke: "Yes, but one of those Nordic blondes will melt here in this heat!"

Through these stories of love, seduction, and escape from abusive lives, it is clear to see how the ELN has the ability to solve or improve prohibitive living conditions. Above all, through the symbolism of weapons and the ideas of power and equality linked to them, this organization is able to promise the youth of the Pacific a taste of improved social status. As Jorge summed up for me on a rainy morning, perhaps wanting to show me that despite his anecdote, the three guerrilla girls were not his only reason for joining the ELN,

"No brother, the truth is that one has to look around. In my village those who studied either had someone who supported them and allowed them to leave for the city, or despite their studies, they went back to work in the fields with machetes. I have no support, so why study? To end up with a machete in my hand anyway? No, then better guerrilla warfare where one with good discipline can succeed in becoming a good officer."

Although there are strong practical reasons for Pacific youth to join the ELN, a shared ideology and common enemy are also necessary to justify the ELN's armed presence in the territory. I explained at the beginning of the chapter how it is increasingly difficult for rural fronts to have politically trained guerrillas, but this does not mean that basic values, such as fighting injustice and defending the most vulnerable populations, are not embraced. Although those who join the ELN initially commit themselves for a period of only two years, the person is required to share the values of the organization which are explained along with the history of the ELN and an introduction to the internal regulations. It is certain that given the difficulty in

structuring deep political training work, the values that led to the founding of the ELN are often not enough to convince the militant to commit further. The vague answers I received during my interviews and informal discussions when I asked who they were fighting against suggested that the ELN's enemies, such as the state, oligarchy, imperialism, or capitalism, resonate as rather abstract concepts to young guerrillas. On the other hand, as I listened to the many life stories of young people who grew up in the area, it quickly became apparent to me how much they share an imaginary, a memory, and that collective experiences unite them. It is through this shared experience of mostly violent and traumatic events that the ELN's enemies are frequently identified as the two actors who primarily oppress Pacific communities: the paramilitaries and the army. The following testimony of Patrizio is emblematic in this regard, reflecting a collective experience leading many young people to join the ranks of the ELN. As he revealed to me during a long interview on a hot morning,

"Well, at the time.... It was like the late nineties. Even at that time there were many, many paramilitaries. All over the region there were paramilitaries. So I joined the ELN because I saw that it was still an injustice to the people. At that time, there were many massacres of children, right? The paracos, the paramilitarismo, whatever it's called, was killing children, the elderly and so on. So I was very afraid, because at that time people were running away, hiding in the mountains. The peasants and so on made me very sad. You could no longer have roosters or dogs. Because the peasants were hiding in the mountains, and if the paramilitaries heard the rooster crowing or the dog barking, they would go and kill the peasant. So the farmer was very afraid, and that's why he would kill his animals, so he wouldn't be discovered. I was very sad about all this. One heard many horrible stories in this era, how in the river appeared plastic bags with pieces of bodies. And then I got excited about the ELN, because I heard about their politics and their fight for the people. I heard that they were defending the peasants, the poor people. So I thought it was a good thing, to fight with them."

Patrizio's testimony is part of the childhood memories of all the guerrillas who grew up in the region and are now over 30 years of age. The presence of paramilitaries and the various massacres that have taken place in the area (e.g. Clara Inés García et al. 2016; Lara Rodríguez et al. 2019; Nicolás Espinosa Menéndez 2012; Romero Vidal and Ávila Martínez 2011) have indelibly marked the social fabric of the inhabitants of the region. The phenomenon of paramilitarism, ubiquitous at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, began to diminish or take less brutal forms between 2008 and 2015, only to return to the forefront in the last six years. The presence of paramilitaries in the territories undoubtedly facilitates the

legitimization of the armed struggle of the ELN guerrillas, who are seen as the only defenders of the communities, as in the common imaginary influenced by witnessing continuous scandals (Grajales 2017), the Colombian army is perceived more as an ally of the paramilitary groups than of the population. Even for guerrillas who were born after Patrizio, the paramilitaries and the army remain clear enemies that justify the ELN's ideals of struggle.

In the first part of this chapter we saw how in the difficult context of the Colombian Pacific, the ELN is an attractive option for young people because it allows them to meet daily needs and offers perspectives on life different from those in which many adolescents who grew up in the region feel imprisoned. Traumatic biographical traits are another reason youth join the ELN, and such traumatic experiences take on symbolic meaning in the ongoing construction of a common narrative. Following this previous discussion surrounding reasons youth join the ELN, I now turn toward an examination of why members remain in this group.

WAR UNITES, AND IS INHUMANE

The ELN differs from other organizations, such as what used to be the FARC-EP, in that it does not force a lifetime commitment. Instead, those who wish to join the ELN must commit themselves for a period of only two years. As many have explained to me, the first two years are often complicated because one is confronted with the reality of guerrilla life, which does not always meet the expectations people have when deciding to bind themselves to this group. On one of my last stays, I met Marleni in a village, who to my surprise had actually left the ELN to return to her civilian life in the village where she had grown up. I asked her why she had left the group and if she didn't miss it, to which she replied, a little shy and a little irritated, "I learned a lot but no, it wasn't for me. Too much discipline. I thought of going to the villages, but with Ernesto we stayed thirteen months in the jungle without seeing anyone. My boyfriend already didn't want me anymore, I asked to change my group, I went to another commission, but I didn't feel well. So after two years I said no, enough, it wasn't for me." I nodded smiling, imagining Ernesto's exasperation, but on the other hand, I understood Marleni perfectly. Life in the rainforest, especially the one led by Ernesto, in addition to the constant movement and difficulties discussed in the previous chapter, requires extreme discipline and submission to internal regulations. I remember that during the time spent with Marleni in the group, Assata complained about her, saying that although she did her best to teach her, Marleni was not receptive, and persisted in not taking care of herself, constantly bringing dirty clothes with her because she did not feel like washing them, and at night she was caught several times not doing

her guard duty in the established place. In addition, she was constantly leaving her rifle lying around, which is why, at the third call, as per the regulations, she was forced to carry a wooden rifle for a period of eight days. As Commander Marcos revealed to me, a lack of discipline and willingness to accept the rules of a military structure are the main reasons why people leave after the first two years, especially in the case of younger members.

According to Marcos, those who decide to persist after this trial period find their motivation in the learning opportunities offered by the group. Seeing comrades who have grown up in the same conditions and who learn to read, write, use a radio, shoot a rifle, and who enjoy a certain independence, who can live their sexuality according to their own desires without having to respond to the expectations or prohibitions of their parents, all contribute to motivating members and keeping alive the attraction the group holds. In agreement with Hammond's study (1998) on the insurgency in El Salvador, I argue that the ELN offers a popular education that not only provides basic literacy, but also by teaching multiple skills, strengthens the self-esteem and self-confidence that allow guerrillas to grow as people and the ELN to strengthen its organization as much politically as militarily.

The personal motivations thus become part of a collective discourse in which individual goals of success acquire a common ethos, that of belonging to a group in which it is possible to grow individually and collectively. As Thomas analyzed it in one of those moments when the war seems to disappear and you can afford to get lost in the flight of a beautiful turquoise butterfly,

"That's why you feel at home in the ELN. Do you see that butterfly? We are all like butterflies here. Everyone has a chance to learn how to fly. Each in his own way. I am one of the few who has studied and so people respect me for that, but I came here without knowing anything about the war and I respect my comrades because they are teaching me everything. Here one completes oneself. You are also learning. One day you'll write the book you're telling me about, but you'll also be a better person because you'll write from the heart, thinking of us, of this forest, of these butterflies. This is what the ELN teaches you, to commit yourself, because without commitment you can write all the books you want, but you will never be anyone. Here everyone learns to care for each other, to help those in need. You too can learn and teach here."

Then he ended up laughing and remarking, "All this emotional crap comes out with you. You see, plus in war one learns to speak with depth!" Without adding anything else, he walked away leaving me alone with the echo of his words and a sense of peace brightened by the flight of that enormous turquoise butterfly which was still zipping around.

My argument is that if the motivations for remaining in the ELN seem to be linked to the possibility of personal growth as well as increased confidence in oneself and one's own means, intensifying the feeling of collective belonging is the construction of a continuous emic narrative made by the sharing of traumatic experiences. In his *Politics of Storytelling* (2002), Michael Jackson argues, "In every human society, the range of experiences that are socially acknowledged and named is always much narrower than the range of experiences that people actually have. By implication, no worldview ever encompasses or covers the plenitude of what is actually lived, felt, imagined, and thought" (ibid. 23). Below, I relate the story of Patrizio and his encounter with the army, where he was almost killed, but survived and then returned to join the ELN. Although this is a personal account, it is emblematic of the uncountable experiences I heard from guerrillas. This story suggests how personal narratives, despite their specificity, can be extrapolated into building a common symbology, a "socially acknowledged experience" in which everyone can recognize themselves. In this case, Patrizio's story points to a common enemy, the army, depicted as a figure that abuses and despises guerrillas. Furthermore, the fact that Patrizio sees no other path than to return to the ranks of the ELN reinforces the feeling of belonging to the group, the only place where one is given a chance, where one is supported, and where one will always be accepted. Patrizio shared his story in front of my camera on a warm January morning, sitting hugging his machine gun, next to a huge coca plantation we were careful to avoid capturing in the frame. His story is as follows:

"Well, so one day I was walking with some units.... Then the next day, when the sun came up, it was about 5:50 in the morning, and I was there with my people, and at that same time, at 5:50, we heard a boat go by. So I left the people there in the field and went to look, because I was the one with the most experience.⁸⁵ And I went to look, and I went down the road, and two of them yelled at me, "Quiiiiiiiiiet!" and "Quiet, quiet, quiet, don't move! You've got two minutes to hand over your vest and rifle!" And I told them not to kill me because I was handing things over to them, and when I looked around like this, there were about fifty soldiers, all pointing and holding me there. So what I thought there was death, and then I unbuttoned my vest and threw it at them. But I was waiting

⁸⁵ Patrizio explained earlier how he had already experienced twenty-seven fights, yet he still remembered his first: "My first fight was with the paramilitaries, I already had what, a year of guerrilla warfare, and at that moment I knew a little bit about what they had already taught me. That this was so and so, how to cover up, how to lie down, because they give you a lot of training, you know. So when they told me no, that you have to go and fight, I said well, I'm going, because how do you learn? I go, without fear, I go! Later, when you get to where the enemy is, you feel nervous. Why should one tell lies? One feels! But after you have formed combat, you get more encouragement from comrades who are already old there, who are trained. They shoot, so you stick to those who know, and those who know instruct you how to do, well this is so and so, so you learn. I felt a little bit of fear the first time I fought, but because I was on the side of those who knew, they encouraged me, and I started to learn."

for the soldier to bend down to pick up the vest, and he never bent down to pick it up. He just held me there. Then he kept saying, "You have two minutes to hand over your rifle!" and that's when I panicked, broke out in a sweat, and was already thinking about death. I knew they were going to kill me right there. So I shot the soldier, and he shot me twice, and when the soldier fell, I took my rifle and ran. I ran about fifty yards, and at fifty yards I was already stunned. Now that I was dazed, I touched myself. When I looked at my hand, I saw blood; I was full of blood. I told myself that I was killed because I felt so bad, and no spirit, no strength, and my eyesight, well, it wasn't very good, because how I was hit in the jaw, and I was already bleeding.... And there was like a coconut palm tree nearby, and so I lay down under the coconut palm tree, and I was getting sleepy. I was already weak when I heard, "No, there's the piece of shit, there it is, there it is!" the soldiers were saying. And I was listening, so at that moment I took out a magazine and put it in the rifle, and I fired, and there I fell on one side, and the rifle fell on the other side, and the world went away. About fifteen minutes later, I had already been dragged, about twenty yards from here to there, dragged. After fifteen minutes, I came to my senses, reacted, and looked. They had put me on my knees, naked, and they stuck a picture on my face and said, "Do you know this man?" And I never said anything, the only thing I said was, 'I don't know anybody, I walk alone, I walk with my people!' Then what I felt was the blow. Pam! I was hit and the lights went out again. Again I got up and so, I was shot again. Again I fell from the shot, then I came to my senses, and I fell again. When I heard, "No, I'll call the helicopter! A helicopter to transport a dead man, a dead guerrilla? That doesn't make sense! No, in half an hour we'll land there!" I was half asleep when the helicopter arrived, and when the helicopter arrived, I got up to run away, and they shot me twice more, pam pam! They said, "Ah, that piece of shit was alive, that piece of shit!" And then the world disappeared. I no longer realized what had happened in the world. When I woke up in the hospital, about ten days later, I reacted again. The people in the hospital, the doctors, told me it had been ten days. And then I came to, I saw that white house and I said, well, where am I? When I looked like that, some policemen took me into custody. And then, about five months later, a lawyer came in. The lawyer was already making contacts there, and they let me go, already in Medellín, they let me go. They took me one way, they took me the other way, and they took me to Cali. And in Cali they took me here and there. Then a man came, I don't know his name, and he said, "No, let's go to your family," and I said, "What, man?" "No, let's go!" He gave me lotions, clothes, socks, he gave me everything. And from there we left, and I came here and here I am, committed

again. There, in Cali, I didn't understand how it happened brother [laughs]. I don't know how it happened! What I do know is that no, people from outside were asking me if I would go back to the guerrilla movement. And I told them no, because out there one does not know who is who.... But the thought in my mind is that I really like the ELN. And I didn't say anything, but in my mind, I was going back. I have to be in the ELN because I am from here, and here is my family! In the city I don't have anybody, I'm nobody. Here is my family and I have everything!"

Patrizio's story of being shot seven times by the army, once in the jaw, but without being killed, is just one of the many traumatic anecdotes I have heard in the months spent with the guerrillas. These are stories that they share in moments of togetherness, especially in those of a reencounter. In the forest, the guerrillas are separated into small units called commissions that can remain unchanged for months without any real exchange with the outside world. When groups get together, in addition to the inevitable joy of reunion, there is the possibility of exchanging information through relating experiences lived in person or heard. The same happens in moments of condolence, after someone has been killed. In this case, too, the person is remembered for his or her deeds, or for moments shared in his or her company. Stories don't always have to be tied to tragic moments, and it is common when talking about the deceased – martyrs, as they are defined by the ELN – to prevail are anecdotes that highlight the qualities of the person. It is common knowledge handed down orally through stories, experiences, hearsay. Each episode is not a simple fact, but a world full of details that open onto other stories: a several days' march through the rainforest, the sighting of a rare animal, a falling in love.

However, it is the sharing of traumatic narratives that unite and create a sense of belonging. Patrizio's drama is emblematic in this regard, as it captures an individual event to which a collective meaning is attributed. Patrizio takes the risk of going to see who is coming by boat because he is the most experienced person and it is, therefore, his duty to set an example and take care of others. In his encounter with the enemy then, he is despised, treated like an animal, and insulted. It is true that,

“While storytelling may help us reconcile fields of experience that are, on the one hand, felt to belong to ourselves or our own kind and, on the other, felt to be shared or to belong to others, stories may just as trenchantly exaggerate differences, foment discord, and do violence to lived experience. For every story that sees the light of day, untold others remain in the shadows, censored or suppressed” (M. Jackson 2002, 11).

It is indeed true that I do not know the version of the story from the perspective of the soldier whom Patrizio shot, just as it is certain that I have chosen to report this story out of many others,

even more tragic, that I have heard. But this particular story not only reconciles me with my own ethnographic experience – the days spent with Patrizio and the sharing of laughter as well as profoundly emotional moments – but it also reconciles Patrizio’s lived experience with a narrative that translates into a feeling of belonging amongst the ranks of the ELN. In other words, an inhuman enemy only strengthens the bond between those who fight against it. The more a story highlights how the army has no respect for the lives of guerrillas, the more it allows them to justify a violent response and ultimately, armed struggle. Patrizio is not only despised by the military, but also indirectly by civil society, which through doctors and other people judges him for being a guerrilla and asks him where he wants to go to make sure he does not want to return to the ELN which they regard as a terrorist group. At the same time, Patrizio receives no concrete help from the outside world, no prospects for his life, no support to start something new, so the ELN is once again the only organization ready to support him and welcome him back into its ranks. As Jackson continues,

“[...] stories have the potential to take us in two very different directions. On the one hand, they may confirm our belief that otherness is just as we had imagined it to be – best kept at a distance, best denied – in which case the story will screen out everything that threatens the status quo, validating the illusions and prejudices it customarily deploys in maintaining its hold on truth. On the other hand, stories may confound or call into question our ordinarily taken for granted notions of identity and difference, and so push back and pluralize our horizons of knowledge” (2002, 25).

I think Patrizio's story goes both ways. For the guerrillas, it helps confirm the imagery of a hostile and vengeful enemy. For the reader, on the other hand, this story may serve precisely to deconstruct a false imaginary of the dynamics of war, and offer an additional element in the deconstruction of pre-established categories and the associations that are made of them, i.e., armed groups, terrorists, and murderers, versus army, legality, and respect for the "rules of the game." Moreover, it doesn't matter how faithful Patrizio's story is to the exchanges he actually had with the outside world, or how much it is based on his subjective perceptions. His story, once it begins to circulate among the guerrillas, sets up a contrast between an internal world, that of the ELN, and an external world, that of the army, of the paramilitaries, of the so-called civil society. For the guerrillas, the internal world is acknowledged as based on mutual aid, on the highlighting of human values such as solidarity, and on the support for the poor and the weak. On the other hand, the external world is described as individualistic, violent towards the guerrillas, and prohibitive for anyone who grew up in rural Colombia. It doesn't matter if it's called state, army, or capitalism; for the ELN guerrillas, the enemy is the one who bombards

on starry nights or attacks suddenly, maybe just before dawn. And it is seen as a cowardly enemy because it attacks from a position of greater power and hides behind the metal of a helicopter or a military boat. To take up Jackson once more,

“Stories and storytelling may, more than any other form of art or artifice, provide crucial insights into the human struggle to overcome the felt opposition between two counterpointed realms of symbolic determinacy and power, the first focused on the self and the life world with which it most intimately and immediately identifies, the second focused on the not-self and on all that is considered foreign, inimical, and unfamiliar to oneself” (2002, 35).

In agreement with Jackson, I am also of the opinion that there is no need to concentrate on the difference between these two domains, but rather “to focus on the ways in which storytelling mediates between them, providing strategies and generating experiences that help people redress imbalances and correct perceived injustices” (ibid. 36). In this way, Patrizio’s story gives further meaning to the struggle embraced by the ELN as it captures a sense of injustice viscerally felt by every guerrilla, particularly those like Patrizio who because of their race are discriminated against and relegated to a condition of survival on the margins of the state. Through his story, Patrizio, and all the guerrillas who heard it, identify themselves as victims, but at the same time discover their agency by becoming actors in a resistance toward the army, the state, and all the systems of oppression the latter represents.

Just as the war persists, so the stories and anecdotes only add up, and in their continuous circulation in the guerrilla space, from narrative they become collective memory. Episodes experienced or known by hearsay take on a collective meaning. Personal experiences are united and fixed in the symbolic imagery of the ELN, thus becoming a single shared traumatic experience, around which the guerrilla ideology is structured. The reasons that lead young people to join the ELN, such as the perception of being rejected by a society that does not offer opportunities to those who are poor, Black, indigenous, and of rural origin, are only reinforced and validated through collective storytelling once they become part of the guerrilla movement.

Finally, social cohesion and the feeling of belonging to the National Liberation Army are built into the daily practices and narratives that continuously circulate in this organization. As Commander Ernesto explained to me in the only formal interview he granted me, sitting in full uniform in front of his *cambuche*, while holding Puki, his small and faithful dog,

"What do we offer? We lay out the reasons that gave rise to the conflict and the reasons that exist. Anyway, those who are making war on the people, the people feel it in their realities, in their regions, in their homes. And I'm not just talking about the war of bombs and bullets, but the war of ignorance, hunger, and the many things people suffer. The reasons young people get involved with the ELN are ambiguous, they vary. There are those who do it for political reasons, for experiences in social processes, and those who do it for lesser reasons, which can be the weapons, the uniform, or because we are friendly, because we are supportive, and because we steal their hearts [...] It is then the task of the guerrilla leaders to qualify the conditions of each revolutionary so that he can begin his political-military career. And according to the individual's profile, this may focus more on the military aspect, or on the political aspect, so he will be sent to the officers' school, to the war school, to the national cadre school, etc. And so, it is how we qualify and structure the political and military life of the organization."

The ideology of the ELN continues to remain attractive over time, since instead of remaining static on Marxism-Leninism and the class struggle, it is capable of shaping thoughts and objectives that embrace contemporary needs, concerns, and issues which affect a large part of the Colombian population. For these reasons, in the third and final part of this thesis I will introduce intersectionality as an analytical framework. In addition to the classic categories of race and class that I discuss in Chapter 8, and that of gender, discussed in Chapter 9, I add a discussion on the environment. This last topic, set forth in Chapter 7, offers a political ecology of the ELN, for whom the Colombian Pacific is not only the place where conflict is experienced, but is a territory that is itself conflict. Social cohesion and feelings of collective belonging are ideologically consolidated precisely because, as we will see in subsequent chapters, they respond to practical and symbolic individual needs, such as feelings of independence, freedom, and emancipation.

CONCLUSION

After describing in the previous chapter how guerrillas move and survive in the tropical rainforest, in this chapter I explain the reasons that lead hundreds of youths to join and remain in the ELN.

The structural problems that characterize the Pacific basin, such as the lack of healthcare, education, and infrastructure for local economies creates the perfect conditions for a general malaise that the ELN presence in the area is able to partly absorb. Here, the social class, race,

and often the gender of the adolescent inhabitants become determinants in the choice to join the ELN. For those who do not see opportunities or a future outside of their community, especially if they have direct contact with physical or psychological violence, the ELN becomes an alternative that promises freedom, emancipation, independence, and possible social ascension.

Although Marxism-Leninism remains the ideology undergirding the ELN, apart from the commanders or the few soldiers who have benefited from a higher education, in a rural war front like the Western one, I argue that cohesion is mostly constructed around ongoing personal narratives. These stories, which recall tragic experiences like Patrizio's, or the one in the ethnographic vignette with which I will open the next chapter, are transmitted orally through the guerrilla group and take on collective meanings. This leads to the strengthening of a feeling of rejection by society, the construction of a common enemy perceived as holding values asymmetrical to those of the ELN, and the perception of the guerrilla movement as the only space of acceptance and opportunity. The telling and repeating of these stories becomes an act of collective resistance that adds new values and interpretations to the ELN's historical ideals, thus constantly renewing the social cohesion that allows this group to endure over time.

In the next and final PART III of this thesis, I show how, unable to base its attractiveness on Marxism-Leninism, the ELN's ideological production increasingly draws on identity politics embraced by ethnic communities, as well as a narrow environmentalist stance. After some words on the structural violence that frame life in the Colombian Pacific (Chapter 6), it will become clear why understanding the ELN today requires understanding its complexity surrounding the race, class, gender, and relationship to the environment of its guerrillas.

PART III

**“WE MUST LIBERATE
PEOPLE FROM THEIR
OPPRESSORS AND
NATURE FROM
CAPITALISM!”**

CHAPTER 6

FACETS OF STATE VIOLENCE

*“Dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact,
is not a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the
oppressors,
which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed.”*

– Paulo Freire



Coffins of Benkos and Monika – Photo by the author

Pacific basin, January 30th, 2018

Yesterday, at 21:48 I go out to pee. I look at the stars that begin twinkling in the sky after several hours of heavy rains. It had been a while since I saw the stars. In the jungle, contrary to what I imagined, the thick vegetation rarely opens up wide enough to allow one to admire the sky. And how beautiful are the stars!

While standing in contemplation, I think about the words of a comrade, said only a few weeks before. While watching the same sight, she explained to me, "Starry nights are the most dangerous. It is when they attack us." I remember that her words made me deeply sad, I had never thought that someone could associate the stars with a dangerous situation.

Now, gazing at the sky, I tell myself that nothing will happen, not on such a wonderful night.

All of a sudden, I hear an airplane approaching. We are under an international flight route, so I initially think that it is only an airbus. But while I keep listening, the noise becomes stronger, much stronger, too strong. I get scared, and suddenly I remember the words of a young indigenous guerrilla, who at seventeen already survived three bombings, losing all of his friends, one after another. He was telling me, "When they bombard us, you first hear the whistle of the bombs falling, pheewww. Brother, if you hear that, run away as fast as you can."

Immobile, I listen closely, and the plane flies over us, then silence returns. After an endless minute, three bombs fall a couple of kilometers away. Boom... boom... boom. The earth shakes while a deep sound that I'd never heard before keeps echoing in my ears. Boom... boom... boom.

Five minutes and we are all awake, with our backpacks on. Silence. A mix of innocence and terror makes me ask if we shouldn't go to help. "Later," they answer. After ten or fifteen minutes, we hear two helicopters approaching, and the firing of machine-guns. My comrades explain to me that the army first drops the bombs, then sends the helicopters to shoot everything that moves. Finally, the special troops land, to retrieve the dead and the wounded bodies – if any.

Nobody can sleep anymore. We all want to know who the victims of the attack are, but we have to wait for the first radio announcement at 7am to receive news. They killed Monika, Commander Benkos, five dead in total. The news changes at every new announcement. Desolation, hope, then desolation again.

Apparently, Blandina, a young indigenous girl with whom I remember drinking a beer on New Year's Day, was brought in a helicopter to the hospital of Buenaventura, where she had

*two legs and an arm amputated. What will remain of her life? Can we still call it a life? The bombs – this is what real terrorism looks like!*⁸⁶

The day goes by incredibly slowly, and grieving makes even the birds numb, leaving the jungle in a dramatically surreal atmosphere. In the troop, everyone joins together in small groups. The Afro-descendant soldiers mourn Monika and Benkos, also Black: Monika full of life, and Benkos a promising commander. Together, a happy couple. The indigenous members tell of Blandina and her sweet, cheerful innocence. Commander Ernesto, on the other hand, opens his computer and searches his archives for images of the deceased, almost as if he wanted to keep them alive a little longer, or perhaps, just remember them in moments of joy, before they were ripped open by bombs.

While people remain there, sharing tears and memories of the departed ones, I feel completely alone, and lost. I'm going to sit along a little river and try to draw the surrounding wilderness. I can't focus and for some reason, I start to imagine the families of the victims. Benkos's parents, Natalia's parents. I'm sure they heard the bombs from some village in the area. And Blandina's parents – will they have already set out to find her in the hospital? How will they find the money for the trip? And once in Buenaventura? The mother probably doesn't speak Spanish and has never ventured outside her territory. And how will the parents have taken the death of their children? Will they remain resigned in their Afro and indigenous communities because that is what Colombia is like when you are poor and belong to a marginalized ethnic group?

And now, how can I go on with my research after a tragedy like this? From which angle can I write a thesis about people dying? About young people traumatized for life? About people whose lives are considered insignificant? About people whose racialized bodies don't count? I wanted to see the war and I saw it. What else do I want? What am I here for?

More shots at a distance. I am scared. I wanted to write about politics, about the state, about the peace process, and this required me to understand the war. There is something that I surely understood: war is just the showcase of social and racial inequalities worldwide. Hence, if we want to build peace, the first condition is to abolish such inequalities!

In the two years that have elapsed since that tragic night, first under President Santos's orders, and later Duque's, the army has dropped dozens more bombs on guerrilla groups, while only

⁸⁶ As I would discover weeks later, Blandina was transported in a military helicopter to the Santa Sofia Pacific Clinic where her two arms were amputated as a result of the bombing, along with multiple traumas to her chest and internal organs. She would die in the hospital two days later, at the age of sixteen.

one has been detonated by the ELN (see chapter 3). Officially, all bombs are directed at so called military targets. But in reality, all bombs kill human beings, most of them children of the Colombian lower-class,⁸⁷ often belonging to ethnic minority groups. The following questions arise: How can the state bomb at will while if the ELN does the same, it is considered an unforgivable terrorist act? In other words, why is the state's violence accepted and acknowledged, not only as inevitable but as just and legitimate? How does the state justify its means? And by virtue of what logic is the state's violence allowed and the insurgent's condemned? These questions may seem rhetorical since it is generally accepted that whatever violence the state applies to counteract violence against itself is legitimate insofar as it is necessary for the maintenance of a given social, economic, and political order (Weber 1976). Nevertheless, I find it troubling to note that some acts of violence enjoy multi-level media attention, while others – mostly those promoted by the state – are deliberately ignored.

When I came out of the rainforest a few weeks after the bombing, I looked for an account of the attack in the newspapers, probably as a therapeutic act against an emerging trauma. What struck me was that there was no trace of the incident in the leading newspapers, as if nothing had happened. In fact, the only reason why the bombing was mentioned on a few websites,⁸⁸ was because the ELN reported the incident to some local media as a "bombing in indigenous territory." I remember thinking how paradoxical it was that because it was the territory of some rural indigenous communities, it could be bombed indiscriminately, while at the same time, it was precisely the fact of being indigenous territory that allowed the communities to denounce the incident. What puzzled me even more was that to leave the war-zone, I had to take several boats and buses, and everywhere I heard people whispering and wondering about what happened, as if the news were flowing only through oral and informal channels.

What these incidents reveal is that the state's violence operates at uneven scales of power that affect people throughout multiple geographies and temporalities. What might be of absolute significance locally and widely discussed regionally may be barely reported nationally and

⁸⁷ It should be noted that in the bombing carried out by the army against a FARC-EP dissident camp on August 29th, 2019, of the fifteen victims, eight were minors. A few months later, when a journalist asked President Duque for explanations, the latter's pithy answer was, "What are you talking about old man?" See, <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/politica/de-que-me-hablas-viejo-asi-respndio-duque-a-pregunta-sobre-bombardeo-en-caqueta/>. Yet the same story repeated itself with the bombing against the camp of Commander Ernesto in September 2021. In response to the denunciation brought forward by Senator Iván Cepeda, Defense Minister Diego Molano replied that the minors in the ranks of the ELN are "war machines that attack against Colombian society." See https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/colombia-conflicto_denuncian-muerte-de-4-menores-en-bombardeo-del-ej%C3%A9rcito-colombiano-al-eln/47010444.

⁸⁸ See, for example, <https://www.amnistia.org/ve/noticias/2018/02/4732/colombia-bombardeo-cerca-de-un-territorio-indigena-en-el-choco>.

completely omitted at the global scale. On the other hand, what is considered a national priority, like the ELN bombing in Bogotá, may be converted into global news, having strong repercussions in regional and local surroundings, even in places that may have no direct relationship to the agenda imposed by the government. For example, after the ELN's bomb exploded in Bogotá, the tension was palpable in the Pacific, especially among the ethnic inhabitants of the region. In a conversation I had with a local fisherman about the event, he told me, "We have to be careful now. They say the army is on the move, they want to take revenge for the bomb. The guerrillas are retreating into the forest and the soldiers are taking it out on us. You will see!"

Accordingly, I suggest that the gap between those who enact and those who are affected by violence assumes a spatial, social, racial, and temporal dimension. Spatially, the state's violence moves outwards from one or several central sites where decisions are made, toward the margins where these decisions materialize. Generally, these margins overlap with geographical peripheries firmly bounded to specific social and racial contexts. In Colombia, as in most post-colonial states, those who inhabit marginal areas are the unserved rural, racialized populations who live mostly by self-subsistence through a combination of the cultivation of a few agricultural products, and some extra income brought in through mining, wood cutting, and sometimes, coca cultivation. Finally, by evoking the temporal dimension of violence I suggest the capacity of the ruling class to convert a single event into common knowledge through the control of the media. When an event is repeatedly reported, in time it can shape public opinion, further marginalizing those most afflicted by the state's violence. As Ieva Jusionyte points out, "news production relies on thematic, logistical, economic, and political frameworks that reduce the physical and social geography of the country into a legible narrative" (2015a, 65). Those reading the news at the center might not know much about the Pacific region, but will still conceive of it as part of the national territory which must be freed from the presence of terrorists. For those directly affected by violence however, the temporality and the legibility of pain is not dependent on the news, for traumatic experiences travel endlessly through the body and become fixed in collective memory.

For instance, General Jorge Salgado, head of the 7th Division of the Colombian Army at the time of the bombing, asserted that the ELN would "make the two dead bodies disappear."⁸⁹ What is not clear is whether the bodies were made to disappear to protect them from the animals

⁸⁹ <https://www.radionacional.co/noticia/proceso-eln/miembros-del-eln-habrian-entregado-informacion-a-ffmm-ubicacion-de-campamentos>

of the jungle, or rather from the army so that they would not be displayed in the media inside plastic bags as a trophy of a successful military operation – what is normally the case when a commander is killed, demonstrating how post-colonial states have their own “economy of death” (Mbembe 2006, 391).

Certainly, what I know and what I saw does not coincide with the version of the General reported by the media. What I do know is that Natalia, under shock as a result of the bombardment, fell into a river trying to save herself and drowned, only to be found lifeless by some fishermen a few kilometers downstream. Benkos, on the other hand, managed to reach the home of a local inhabitant who tried to treat his serious wounds and feed him. Probably as a result of internal bleeding, he died in that same house in the early afternoon. What I saw was that the two bodies of Monika and Benkos were buried in a village in the area after a funeral attended by about sixty people, almost all of them civilians. Not only had the bodies not been made to disappear, but the number of people present and the affection shown during the funeral were hardly compatible with the images circulated by the army and the Colombian government of ELN guerrillas as bloodthirsty terrorists and enemies of the region’s inhabitants. For the people attending the funeral, the state’s violence was not located in the news or in some distant scenario, but situated and palpable in their own communities. Here, I argue that the concept of community must extend to include the territory in which the people live, socialize, and develop their economic activities. Hence, since the environment is a reference for ethnic communities in their identity construction, and at the same time a site of interest for capitalism, it must be taken into account by an intersectional approach. Consequently, the introductory vignette containing the story of Blandina, Benkos, Monika, and the three bombs that still resonate in my memory, stands to show how at the margins of the state, gender, race, social class, and environment are essential components in understanding the underlying logics of a conflict that goes beyond ideological clashes between a Marxist guerrilla group and a right-wing state.

Bombing is the most striking form of violence, the “extraordinary one” (Coronil and Skurski 2006). It is the tip of the iceberg indicating the presence of a much larger piece beneath the surface. For the ethnic-rural communities of the Colombian Pacific, not only a military operation, but also indiscriminate crop fumigation, or the destruction of the tropical forest to make room for large-scale mining or monocrop agricultural exploitation, are direct attacks on their capacity for self-subsistence. In the capitalist mode of production, violence guarantees the reproduction of the mechanisms that support the preservation of the system, among these, the Marxist relations of production (*Produktionverhältnisse*) that ensure the economic structure of society (Marx 1990). However, if Marxism allows us to analyze the political and economic

structures underlying oppression, intersectionality has the benefit of unraveling the functioning and impacts structural violence (Coronil and Skurski 2006; Farmer 2004) exerts on subaltern groups in their specificity of race, class, and gender. As we shall see in the following section, structural violence is as latent as it is ubiquitous, it precedes exceptional violence and can consequently be depicted as inherent to the genesis of the state.

STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AT THE INTERSECTION OF SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION

The aim of this subchapter is to depict the submerged side of the iceberg and consequently unmask the everyday life of the Colombian conflict. Unlike the imagery shared in economic and political power centers, such as the Colombian metropolis, the conflict rarely takes extraordinary forms. Although exceptional incidents are the ones reported by the media, most of the war unfolds through minor violent deeds, that take place with systematic consistency, far from the spotlight. Moreover, in the war-zone, violence linked to armed conflict overlaps with the state's violence endemic to the margins, making it difficult to draw a distinction between the two. The state implements violence through a complex mechanism that is methodically structured and yet largely concealed. An anecdote that highlights people's discernment of this process is the one told by the President of the Truth Commission,⁹⁰ Francisco de Roux, in Currea-Lugo's book (2015). Together with the Bishop of Cali, de Roux was the guarantor for the release of a Canadian engineer kidnapped by the ELN Western War Front in 2014. As de Roux narrates, "In the final moment, when we were about to board the helicopter with the Canadian, [Commander] Marcos⁹¹ addressed him with these words, which affected me deeply: "Forgive us, brother, but we are all trapped in this son-of-a-bitch war!" (25). Like a spider's web from which one cannot escape, the feeling of being trapped suggests that "this son-of-a-bitch war" does not consist only of bombing and military operations. Rather it is perceived as a substratum of violent acts linked to each other and supported by an entity, the state, capable of operating simultaneously on several levels. Once violence becomes an integral part of the

⁹⁰ The Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-repetition, commonly known as Truth Commission, is a state entity created through the final Peace Agreement with the FARC-EP. The Commission, "seeks to clarify the patterns and causes that explain the internal armed conflict in order to satisfy the right of the victims and society to the truth. It promotes the recognition of what happened and the coexistence in the territories. It contributes to laying the foundations for non-repetition, through a broad and pluralistic participation process. It aims for the construction of a stable and lasting peace." See <https://comisiondelaverdad.com>.

⁹¹ In this case the name of the commander really was Marcos. He was also killed in a military operation some years ago.

apparatus that produces it, it can be defined as structural violence, or as Galtung puts it, “violence [...] built into the structure and show[ing] up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances” (1969, 171).

Defining structural violence and explaining how it manifests is a necessary condition for understanding the context in which the armed conflict occurs. In Colombia, structural violence and armed conflict cannot be separated, since they act interchangeably with each other, becoming each other's cause and effect.

Violence becomes structural when its use, physical or symbolic, becomes an integral component for the normal functioning of the state apparatus. Structural violence is not only endemic to totalitarian states where it is certainly more visible, and for this reason, perhaps more easily addressed. The problem also arises among states, like the Colombian one, that are supposedly democratic and egalitarian, and masks their brutality beyond the rule of law. The use of force to pacify society has been long debated. A partisan on this subject is undoubtedly the philosopher Hobbes (2000 [1651]) who defends the need for a coercive apparatus to prevent a *bellum omnium contra omnes* (a “war of all against all”). Structural violence, however, is not limited to coercion but is a type of violence ensuring the integrity of mechanisms that generate and maintain inequalities without them being perceived as such. As Coronil and Skurski stress, “the view that violence is distinct from the civil order tends to legitimate everyday forms of violence and to reify its extraordinary occurrences, placing them outside the social rather than recognizing their continuities with quotidian practices” (2006, 3). An example of this is the methodical murder of social leaders succeeding the peace agreement with the FARC-EP in 2016 where between 600 and 800 people were killed depending on the source. According to INDEPAZ, the National Institute for Peace and Development, 170 social leaders have been murdered between January 1st and July 20th, 2020. To these must be added the 30 former FARC-EP fighters, also murdered during this period.⁹² Yet, President Duque not only denies the genocide by minimizing the number of deaths, but accuses the ELN of being the perpetrator.⁹³ As Coronil and Skurski alert, “if there is a certain risk in seeing violence as an inherent component of modern state orders, there is a larger danger in accepting statist narratives that deny its presence” (2006, 27). Most of the murders are disguised as crimes of passion or settling of scores, i.e. motives accepted in Colombia as part of the everyday realm.

⁹² See <http://www.indepaz.org.co/paz-al-liderazgo-social/>.

⁹³ Duque's accusations against the ELN were not made at random, but are part of a well-defined media plan against guerrilla warfare (Fattal 2018). In a country intentionally kept in ignorance, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, a large part of the population bases its opinion on the news offered by dominant media. As I have heard for myself, many people believe it is actually the ELN that is killing its own social leaders.

Ultimately, the extermination of social leaders is undoubtedly an example of the state's structural violence as it is part of a pattern – that of the physical elimination of political opposition to the ruling classes which is methodic, cyclical, and denied or concealed behind the exhibition of "extraordinary" acts of violence that deviate public attention. It must be emphasized that structural violence does not affect the whole population equally. Instead, it crystallizes at the margins, acting upon "everyone who belongs to a certain social order" (Farmer 2004, 307). Just as people rarely die of acute alcohol poisoning, but more often because of the complications that alcoholism brings to various organs, structural violence does not always kill directly. Instead, it generally creates the conditions for its victims to succumb indirectly, or forces a life marked by constant complications. In the margins, as Sheper-Hughes points out, "structural violence 'naturalizes' poverty, sickness, hunger, and premature death, erasing their social and political origins so that they are taken for granted and no one is held accountable except the poor themselves" (2004, 13).⁹⁴ Blaming the poor for their poverty is an essential stratagem for maintaining a system based on inequality, particularly if it becomes a discourse adopted by the poor themselves.

At the Colombian margins, poverty coincides with ethnicity, and the problem becomes further entrenched when misery is accepted as a natural effect of the negative cause of one's skin color. "I am poor because I am black," or the more common saying, "He/she had to be black!" become everyday expressions that transpose the responsibility of the state's violence to the same people who suffer it. Race and ethnicity become the vectors through which the cause and effect of violence are linked. This reasoning feeds itself at the margins, I argue, through an antithetical mechanism. On the one hand, there is the process of reification of violence, where the former "emerge[s] in public consciousness as an independent cause of destruction" (Coronil and Skurski 2006, 1). Violence transmutes from an abstract concept to an object invested with a will of its own. On the other hand, its originator, the state, goes through a reverse process. From an entity normally palpable through services, institutions and infrastructures, it dissipates into an abstract idea, into an omnipresent apparatus, yet almost utterly invisible, and for this reason, hardly blamable.

⁹⁴ An example that emerged while I write these pages is that of the Colombian vice-president Marta Lucía Ramírez, who, in a speech on the economic situation during the COVID-19 pandemic, said that the virus is more problematic for the poor because they have no savings. In other words, if the poor learned to save money, they would have the resources to support themselves during the pandemic. Consequently, they would not be a burden to the nation, which, to recall another similar observation from the vice-president, would not be forced to give them "gifts." See <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/marta-lucia-ramirez-sobre-trabajadores-informales-sin-ahorros--noticias-hoy/686577>.

In this way, structural violence creates the conditions for the generalization of armed conflict, where the two feed and build on each other. The two become components of the same mechanism, that of the state apparatus of capture, which elastically brings them together and moves them away at will – in its discourse as well and its practices. In this way, the two forms of violence not only generalize but also trivialize each other. As Pécaut explains, this system of cyclical violence can be prolonged because "It affects individuals [in the margins], but almost does not interfere with the economic and social functioning of society [in the core(s)]" (1997, 924). Those affected by the armed conflict are the same people who are already suffering structural violence, which is why "if violence disrupts the social fabric as well as institutional regulations, it only moderately alters macroeconomic and macro-social dynamics. This is one of the reasons for its 'viability'" (ibid. 925).

Whatever explanation the current government has for the armed conflict's various facets, it does not have serious adverse effects on the ruling class' functioning. On the contrary, the war-system (Richani 1997), incorporating economic and political interests at multiple levels, serves to mask the mechanisms reproducing the inequalities that ensure the functioning of the state.⁹⁵ One of these mechanisms is what Goldstein (2012) describes as an "absent presence." As he puts it, "[...] the state, its laws, and its instruments are virtually present [...], affecting local life even as they remain difficult for the living to perceive. In this sense, they are phantoms or ghosts, neither fully present nor absent, but somehow in between, their absent presence felt in a host of daily encounters and requirements" (118). Here, I would like to enrich Goldstein's argument with the specificity of the Colombian Pacific case. I agree that, as in the neighborhood studied by Goldstein, in the Pacific the state is virtually omnipresent with its laws and instruments such as population censuses, schools, and run-down health centers. Physically, however, I found that the state is present in three ways; one sporadic, and two permanent. The first occurs every four years at election time. As if by magic, during this time in the urban centers of the Pacific, presidential candidates arrive to sell development policies that are never followed up on, and representatives of the various candidates arrive even in the most remote villages to negotiate votes, mostly in exchange for favors. Even more so is the army, which

⁹⁵ Here, I wish to underline that most of the killings in the country are not political but linked to what is defined as "common violence": 11,630 murders in 2019, for an average of 32 homicides per day. Both the armed conflict and the "common violence" are the product of a society based on inequality – as I am arguing, an inequality supported by mechanisms of structural violence. According to the GINI Index of the World Bank, only Brazil (53.9) and a few African countries such as South Africa (63.0 - the worst in this ranking), surpass Colombia (50.4) in the systematization of disparities. Curiously, like Brazil (and South Africa), Colombia confronts its social problems through a constant strengthening of its repressive apparatus. See <https://www.vanguardia.com/colombia/32-homicidios-se-registraron-por-dia-en-el-2019-BL1937344> and https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=CO&most_recent_value_desc=false.

with its checkpoints and patrols does everything to show the presence of the state. The army is dedicated to warfare, but it shows itself as a protector of the population against an enemy – the guerrilla movements. Finally, the state maintains a constant presence amongst the population, particularly in the more peripheral areas, through its media apparatus and its constant propaganda conveyed by the two television channels Caracol and RCN. Through these channels, the state sells its products which go in an instant from an imagined national identity to an idea of family, beauty, security, and unity through sports or the presentation of multiculturalism as a common value. Yet, the structural violence in which the media apparatus is certainly implicated is perpetrated on the margins' occupants through the state's absent presence, and the resulting privation of economic and social resources ends up being a double-edged sword. Confronted with its exclusion, the population must resort to alternative solutions to meet their needs. One possibility is the reliance on humanitarian aid provided by national and international NGOs that often foster dynamics of welfarism. A second solution, as in the Bolivian barrios described by Goldstein, is "[...] to leave the state out of things entirely, [and turn] to much more local sets of resources to resolve [the] problems [...]" (2012, 119). However, as he points out, "the results of these strategies and techniques [...] are profoundly uncertain, often leading to a deepening, rather than a lessening, of insecurity in its many forms" (ibid.).

In the Colombian Pacific, for those who, like Blandina, exist at the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination and are therefore afflicted by structural violence in an asymmetric, disproportionate way, leaving the "state out of things" might mean allowing the guerrilla movement in.⁹⁶ The schema of micropolitics proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (see Chapter 1) can help us better understand Blandina's positionalities and her relationship to the state. Blandina's *binary segmentarity* was that of a woman, a teenager, and a poor person. In her *circular segmentarity* she was part of the small indigenous community of Chaclara, and the Wounaan ethnic group. At the same time, she was also a member of the National Liberation Army. In her *linear segmentarity* she was a recruit, no longer in her family, but not yet fully a guerrilla. In her intersectionality, Blandina was somehow a *line of flight*, not yet captured by the apparatus of the state, nor by that of the ELN. Eventually, not even her mutilated body was

⁹⁶ As Pécaut writes, in Colombia, the ease with which people resort to entities other than the state has a historical origin. For decades, it was the traditional liberal and conservative parties that forged forms of collective identification. As the sociologist explains, even during the years of the National Front, the division between the two parties "has been decisive enough that the state, perpetually divided between factions and subfactions of one or both parties, could not think of building society. Even less so in claiming unquestioned authority over it" (1997, 905).

captured, for since she could no longer draw *mutant lines of flight*, she remained a *pure and cold line of abolition* (Deleuze and Guattari 2013b, 281).

I suggest that the spirit of resistance and rebellion – the fuel that drove Blandina and the other inhabitants of the *smooth space* – can be read as a *war machine*, that is, a *nomadic invention* (ibid. 519) that stands in resistance against the state apparatuses – of both the Colombian government and of the ELN. As the two philosophers explain, "the war machine is of another species, another nature, another origin than the State apparatus" (ibid. 2010, 4). Both the state and the ELN want to appropriate the war machine, each in its own way: the state through structural violence, law, and its institutions; the ELN by making it part of its ideology. "The capture of the war machine by the State apparatus took place following two paths, by encasting a society of warriors, who arrived from without or arose from within, or on the contrary by constituting it in accordance with rules corresponding to civil society as a whole" (ibid. 97). The difference, however, is that the ELN allows itself to be influenced by that fuel, from that indignation that burns in all those at the intersection of state systems of oppression. In other words, the ELN allows that spirit of resistance to remain a war machine – *mutant flux*, and *quanta of deterritorialization* (ibid. 2013a, 280). The state, on the other hand, wants to control the nomadic war machine, and it is therefore through its acts of capture that the war machine *takes war as its goal* (ibid. 280), becoming a *suicidal war machine*.⁹⁷

In the end, joining the ELN throughout her *circular segmentarity* is what brought Blandina to a site of direct confrontation between state apparatuses, that of the state, and that of the ELN. Blandina grew up as a *nomad* in a *smooth space* with great resources, which for that reason is under the interests of those who wish to capture and *stratify* it. In her emancipatory journey, the transformations in her *segmentarity* have made Blandina a victim of both state apparatuses. Keeping with Deleuzo-Guattarian language, it can be argued that Blandina was doubly captured: on the one hand by the ELN which tried to make her a guerrilla by offering her

⁹⁷ In these lines, I refer to the passage in "Micropolitics and Segmentality" where Deleuze and Guattari discuss the danger for the *lines of flight* of "[...] turning to destruction, abolition pure and simple, the passion of abolition" (Deleuze 1987, 232). In their words, "The assemblage that draws lines of flight is on the same level as they are, and is of the war machine type. Mutations spring from this machine, which in no way has war as its object, but rather the emission of quanta of deterritorialization, the passage of mutant flows (in this sense, every creation is brought about by a war machine). There are many reasons to believe that the war machine is of a different origin, is a different assemblage, than the State apparatus. It is of nomadic origin and is directed against the State apparatus. One of the fundamental problems of the State is to appropriate this war machine that is foreign to it and make it a piece in its apparatus, in the form of a stable military institution; and the State has always encountered major difficulties in this. It is precisely when the war machine has reached the point that it has no other object but war, it is when it substitutes destruction for mutation, that it frees the most catastrophic charge. [...] When this happens, the war machine no longer draws mutant lines of flight, but a pure, cold line of abolition" (ibid. 231-232).

freedoms that she did not have in her community by circumscribing her in an armed liberation project in which she had to submit to new codes; and on the other hand by the state, which by exercising its legitimate use of force mutilated her body before it could become a political force capable of questioning and rebelling against the systems of oppression.

What's most important is that beyond this theorization, a naked ethnographic truth remains: Blandina was a girl born in a small, indigenous agrarian community in the Pacific basin. She had never seen a city or a car, but her unconscious body, or the part that was left of it, flew by helicopter to Buenaventura. This macabre irony characterizes the lives of most of the guerrillas of the war front who came into the world in a house made of stilts, on the margins between rivers and forest, between state and non-state. After a childhood spent helping their parents with subsistence activities such as small-scale farming, fishing, and hunting, they eventually leave the rainforest to arrive in the city for the first time by helicopter, only to end up in a hospital or in prison. The use of intersectionality, however, allows us to go deeper into the analysis.

RACIALIZED WOMEN IN THE MOVEMENT TOWARD CHANGE

Blandina's tragic end makes me think back to New Year's Eve, a month before her death. We spent the holiday in a community, and like everywhere else in Colombia, the partying, drinking, and dancing did not last for just one night, but for multiple weeks. I could extend a description of that New Year's Eve over several pages, but I wish to close this chapter and introduce the next with just two observations. The first is that I spent three days in the village, and despite my best efforts, I could never figure out who was part of the guerrillas and who was part of the community. When on the third day I explained my dilemma to a young officer, between a cigarette and a sip of *aguardiente*⁹⁸ to get rid of the previous night's hangover, he replied as spontaneously as honestly, "It's just that nobody here is a guerrilla, we are all community! The lady you see at the back is my mother, does she look like a guerrilla? No, but she is my mother, so...well...in short, we are all the same here in the Pacific!" In the area under ELN control, it is not helpful to draw a sharp analytical line between the civilian population and the guerrillas. Thinking in binaries is inaccurate because it oversimplifies the relationship between community and guerrillas, and ends up entangled in the game of dichotomies carried out by the state – legitimate vs. illegitimate, law vs. terrorism, capitalism vs. underdevelopment. My suggestion is rather to depict this space as a zone simultaneously of encounter and conflict,

⁹⁸ *Aguardiente* is sugar cane distillate common throughout the country.

where a guerrilla can be a member of a community, where a woman can be the mother of a guerrilla but not necessarily support the ELN, and where a civilian can be a militant or simply have economic relations with the ELN without adhering to its ideology. Above all, it is an area where people unite in bonds of solidarity against the state without these having anything to do with group membership. In other words, if after a bombing the local peasants are the first to try to help the wounded, it is not because they do or do not support the ELN, but because the victims are primarily inhabitants of the region, whose race and class make them the oppressed among the oppressed.

As with Benkos and Monika's funeral described at the beginning of the chapter, it is clear that the ELN in the Pacific is not an entity alienated from the local population, but that the very basis of guerrilla warfare is its rootedness in the communities that inhabit the region.

The informal, and undoubtedly often contentious, relationship between the ELN and the surrounding communities stands to explain how spatially, temporally, and in some ways both ideologically and emotionally, the ELN is closer to the ethnic communities than the state is. This explains, as seen in Chapter 3, why it is imperative for the ELN to involve the ethnic communities (and the civil society more generally) in any peace process. Not in order to impose its own agenda, but because the political goals of this guerrilla movement often overlap with that of the communities as they are based on a material knowledge of the terrain and the immediate needs of its inhabitants. At the same time, as addressed in Chapter 2, it was my prior knowledge of this setting that allowed me to gain access to the ELN where I had to constantly negotiate my positionality as an academic, as a person of urban strata, as a man, and as a "native-outsider." What finally allowed me to stay in the field for so long was my engagement, not as a supporter of armed struggle, but as an anthropologist determined to make use of his privileges to unveil a reality that must be known, analyzed, and taken seriously if we are to work effectively toward peacebuilding.

The second situation that impacted me during that unusual guerrilla New Year celebration took place on the morning of January 2nd, when I sat next to a commander and an officer, listening to their discussion. The officer looked around and said, "Phew, it's going to take a while to get the beer bottles out of this village. If we move tonight we'll also have to wash the clothes from the last three days. I don't have anything clean anymore." "Yes brother, here we have to look for some young girl who will wash my clothes right away so to hang them when the sun is hot!" the commander replied, pointing to two girls, one indigenous and one black who happened to be coming out of a house on the other side of the street. Coming from a commander originally from the department of Antioquia – heartland of white, conservative

Colombia – the link between young girls [*muchachitas*] and racialized girls, referring to those who would have to wash his cloths, seemed all too obvious. Indeed, racist attitudes in Colombia cut across all movements or political currents, despite their relative liberality or conservatism. It is therefore not surprising to find them circulating within a local Marxist guerrilla group. In big cities like Medellín, Cali, or Bogotá, to name only a few, it is Black and indigenous women who take care of the homes and children of the white, Colombian middle/upper class. Mistreatments, abuses, and threats are the order of the day, but are generally silenced by uneven power relations. However, the same racial and patriarchal mechanisms of oppression are also present among lower social classes, where masculinity and whiteness remain explicit drivers of domination. As we will see in the coming chapters, economic position, masculinity, and race are factors contributing to discrimination within the ranks of the ELN as well as between and within the same ethnic communities.

Here, it is useful to provide one of the feminist critiques brought against Deleuze and Guattari. In their *Œuvre*, the two authors do indeed discuss extensively the genesis of capitalism, but as Thornton (2019) explains, they sidestep the same process when confronting the question of sexual difference, which is situated post factum, but without an explanation of “why the binary logic of disciplinary societies has played out historically in the form of a massive asymmetry that gives privilege to masculine power” (ibid. 345). For example, the two philosophers discuss power and despotism by presenting them in masculine terms, but they do not dwell on the historical conditions that still cause the reading of the world to be mostly conveyed through the eyes of a Western heterosexual white adult man (ibid. 356). To overcome this predicament, which is also central to the concerns of contemporary anthropology (see especially Chapter 2), Thornton takes up the Deleuzo-Guattarian discussion present in the *Anti-Œdipus* (2013a) of how a presignifying regime of signs designate and encode bodies in primitive societies. For Thornton,

“When the penis is no longer taken as simply a physical organ, but as a marker of gender difference, it becomes the phallus. The birth of presignifying regimes is also the event in which the phallus becomes a sign. The phallus is a mark on the exterior surface of the body used to separate the flows of men and women in primitive societies” (2019, 360).

This process, which Thornton calls *the abstract machine of phallusization*, is significant because it allows for further development of the other process described by the French thinkers, namely that of *becoming-woman in a molar politics*. Simply put, for the two authors, the fact of *becoming* is a concept that serves to explain a tendency toward change. The fact is, however, that for them there is no concept of *becoming-man* since in their analysis, man is, not becomes.

And man *is* because in social terms, (white) man represents the dominant class which consequently is the majority and therefore *molarity* (Deleuze and Guattari 2013b). For the two French thinkers, women, like children, are constrained to a marginal role in what they define as social assemblage and at the same time, thus interfere with the presignifying regime. What Thornton is getting at is to assert that because

”The presignifying regime interpenetrates with the signifying and the postsignifying regimes in capitalism [which] mutually create our contemporary patriarchal modes of life,” becoming-woman not only “explain[s] the centrality of patriarchal power in contemporary life,” but seeing “as a technique capable of combating phallusization [becoming-woman is] key to all other becomings” (2019, 360-361).

Therefore, if the men who rely on the patriarchal structures present in Colombia tend toward a static position, young Black and indigenous women are the ones who, as long as they do not allow themselves to be transformed by the structural violence hidden in the state apparatuses that tend to capture them, have the potential to transform the social assemblages on which capitalism and consequently patriarchy reside. Possibly, guerrilla women will show that I will call “guerrilla feminism” (see Chapter 9), “[...] might then not be one movement among others but a new way of thinking movements or becoming: no longer a movement ‘owned’ by identities, but a movement of desires, bodies, flows, and *style*” (Buchanan and Colebrook 2000, 14).

Returning to the introductory vignette, I believe the presence of so many people at Benkos and Monika’s funeral was primarily due to the death of Benkos – man, and commander. In contrast, even today I wonder what happened to the mutilated body of Blandina, as she had no rank, and was a young girl, indigenous, and from a community where most people do not speak Spanish and are therefore even further pushed to the margins of a society from which they are systematically excluded.

Revealing the reproduction of overlapping mechanisms of oppression in less privileged social groups or groups whose mission is the struggle against injustice is certainly nothing new, nor, in my view, particularly interesting. In fact, my use of intersectionality is not aimed at uncovering contradictions within the ELN or ethnic communities. Rather, it aims to show how the structural violence of the state affects those on its margins in different ways depending on their race, class, and gender. This enables us to expose the underlying tensions of the Colombian internal conflict in order to explain it beyond a clash of ideologies. The hope is to point out possibilities to overcome such issues.

Lastly, I portray the ELN project as an intersectional struggle for social justice – an assertion from which I have derived the title of Chapter 1, *Intersectional Revolution: Multiple Struggles Against and Beyond the State*. Above all, the ELN's intersectional struggle moves not only against the state, but beyond it. While it attacks the state in its driving force, i.e., the capitalist mode of production, and increasingly through its emphasis on the importance of the struggle against systems of oppression (such as sexism and racism), it also focuses its efforts on fighting the same problems within its own revolutionary organization. The next pages will tell us how.

CONCLUSION

This short chapter begins with an ethnographic vignette that captures the clash between two worlds: that of the state, organized according to the geography of exploitation produced on the physical and social distance that divides the center and margins; and that of the ELN and the communities, where bombs fall and destroy without distinction the racialized bodies of minors and the environment from which communities extract their resources. The bombs fall and seem to fade away, but their rumblings endure over time, influencing the traumas that will drive new youth to join the ELN, and the present writing, which seeks its reason for existence by forcing the reader to *feel-think* the ethnographic journey by "*asking as walking*."

The structural violence of the state, associated with its social, racial, and spatiotemporal dimensions, appropriates and mutilates the body of Blandina, a teenager born in an indigenous Pacific community who, driven by indignation at her oppressed condition caused by multiple layers of violence, sought emancipation within the National Liberation Army. Like the bombs of the Colombian military that continue to fall on the Pacific rainforest, Blandina's death continues to resonate throughout this ethnography for two reasons. The first is a showcase of how structural violence forces those oppressed by it to seek survival solutions outside their comfort zone (the Deleuzo-Guattarian *smooth space*), and who, by clashing with the state apparatus, end up losing their bodies and ultimately their lives. The second reason, neither analytical nor academic, is to invite the reader to feel-think with Blandina and her struggles which became part of my struggle, when laughing and joking, I shared a beer with her on New Year's Eve.

The previous chapters have provided a glimpse of how race, class, gender, and environment are crucial categories for understanding the functioning of the ELN as they determine the identity of its members and the traits upon which social cohesion and the ideology to which the group adheres are built. PART III of this dissertation focuses more explicitly on these

categories, explores their origins, and highlights their importance for interpreting the ELN, the Colombian internal conflict, and more generally, dynamics that are part of a manifest worldwide neoliberal logic that must be reckoned with on a global scale.

CHAPTER 7

THE APOLITICAL ECOLOGY OF THE STATE

*“Tú no pediste la guerra,
Madre Tierra,
Yo lo sé.”⁹⁹*

Alfredo Zitarrosa – *Adagio en mi país*



Black guerrilla member showing a turtle to an indigenous child

– Photo courtesy of Commander Marcos

⁹⁹ "You did not ask for war, Mother Earth, I know that."

Pacific basin, January 13th, 2018

Since I was a child, I've had a special relationship with trees. I feel them, I feel their life, and over the years, I've learned to listen to them. However, having grown up in the other hemisphere, my connection with them is a little less strong in the rainforest, but I'm working on it.

This morning I almost cried seeing Raúl rip all the bark off a tree near my cambuche. At first, I didn't notice because I was reading and he was talking to Assata. All of a sudden, however, I looked up and there in front of me was a tree that had turned white up to two meters high, in fact a cream-colored liquid kept coming out of its trunk, as if it were bleeding. At Raúl's feet there was a mountain of reddish bark, which he quietly continued to tear off in small strips from the tree. I dropped my book and shouted at him, "But no, why are you doing this!" He looked at me as if he was wondering the meaning of my question, so that Assata intervened, "Leave him alone. If anything, Ernesto will scold him. Here one learns to do these things, they don't see things like you and Ernesto, that nature, that animals, that rivers...here it's not like that." I still don't know if I did the right thing in answering, after all, who am I to give life lessons? I couldn't keep quiet though, and irritating Assata, I allowed myself to say, "No brother, it's not a first world thing or for the rich, protecting the Earth is everyone's job. The bark to the tree is like skin to us, and now that tree will die. The state kills the forests with its monocultures and their bombs, if the ELN doesn't protect them who does? Protecting the forest is part of the fight against the state!" While Raúl was looking at the now flayed tree and even Assata seemed to have understood my words, as a surprising coincidence in that moment, Ernesto walked by.

Seeing the mountain of bark on the ground he got furious, and realizing right away that Raúl did it, took him back, "How many times have I said that we don't do these things! The ELN respects nature! We bury our waste, we don't pollute the rivers. It doesn't matter if in your community they don't tell you these things, in the ELN you have to learn them. When you see a snake in your village you kill it. Here it is not so, if a snake passes by you let it go, for it too has a right to life." And turning to Assata, he added, "And well, so that Raúl may reflect on these things today we are putting him an extra hour on watch. And next time it's your turn too, because you're a veteran and you shouldn't let him do these things." And looking at me, "Plus we have a distinguished guest. We don't want him going off there to his faraway lands to say that the ELN are terrorists, killing the woods!" he finished by saying with his usual fatherly humor and manner.

Commander Ernesto has an ability to read situations and get messages across that are touching me on every take. Getting respect in a leadership role can be easy, but being loved is not for everyone. I suppose Ché Guevara was such a person.

And a few hours later, there I was, with “the last Ché Guevara,” playing chess. Today I won two games in a row so that I made up for yesterday’s defeat. The first game I won because of an error of his, but the second was really a fight to the last pawn. Even Ernesto acknowledged the good game, so I stayed a while longer to chat with him and provocatively asked him if he wouldn’t like to profile the ELN as an eco-terrorist group, a fight perhaps easier to legitimize. I could see that he cared a great deal about the environment, and taking his little dog on his lap, he explained the ELN’s vision to me: “For us the rainforest is life. With these trees we make our beds, we wash in these rivers, we drink this water, in short, for us the environment has a symbolic and material importance. And this understanding we share with the cosmovision of the peoples who also inhabit this forest, such as the Afro and the indigenous. Now, it is clear that because of the conditions of poverty and ignorance where these peoples are left, one encounters young people like Raúl, who have never learned to respect a tree. He grew up without a father, with a mother who works all day to support her other children, who do you want to teach him these things? So that the state not only takes away people’s land, but also takes away their cosmovisions. I was reading the other day about that little gringa girl, what’s her name, the environmentalist?” “Greta?” “Yes, that’s her. To be Norwegian or from one of those countries of yours there she can afford to speak in the media, to throw videos to the world. We don’t have all these media apparatuses, we can’t send videos to the world about how this government is filling the rivers with mercury, how it is fumigating the forests with glyphosphate and pesticides. The government calls us terrorists and the media shows when we blow up a pipeline, however dams, gold mines or coal mines like the one in the Guajira, no one shows the damage the government is constantly doing.¹⁰⁰ That’s where state terrorism is! And sure, the one for the environment is an ELN struggle, we have to free people from their oppressors and nature from capitalism!”

Suddenly, I think back to college. I can’t wait to get back to teaching my courses, to open students’ eyes to the damage that Swiss corporations are doing in the world. I think back to how much I love teaching, too bad it matters less and less today, because it is the most

¹⁰⁰ Perhaps the most impactful and saddening example in this regard is the mine mentioned by Ernesto in the Guajira department. Known as the Cerrejón, this mine is but one of the many examples of how multinational corporations, first and foremost the Swiss Glencore-Xtrata, preach neutrality and respect for human rights at home while violating them in other countries. See, for example, the following article in the Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/cerrejon-mine-colombia-human-rights>.

important thing. Teaching, sharing, I imagine myself sitting with Commander Ernesto on one side, and Kropotkin on the other. I wonder if Kropotkin also played chess? Definitely! I laugh to myself. I'd better go find some food. The tree in front of me keeps bleeding, but today is a good day."

In the introduction to his latest book, *Against the Grain* (2017), James Scott explains that the term “barbarian” was used by the ancient Greeks to define anyone who did not speak Greek, and then, as the first states arose, it gradually became a derogatory term known today to refer to populations or people with an uncivilized appearance, or said otherwise, those who are out of the state. Pertinent to the arguments I develop in this chapter, is Scott’s description of the barbarian realm as a “zone of physical mobility,” where people survive by mixing fishing, hunting, and various forms of agriculture. In his words, “If the barbarian realm is one of diversity and complexity, the state realm is, agro-economically speaking, one of relative simplicity” (ibid. 33). Today, in Colombia, the agro-economy of the state is not only “simple,” in the sense of little diversity, but above all, it is destructive – for the environment, as well as for the populations that inhabit the territories commodified by the state. As we saw in the introductory vignette, the ELN takes a position that we might call environmentalist and that it defines antithetically to the apolitical – what we might also call anti-political-ecological nature of the state. The reason I place this chapter under the methodological label of intersectionality is very simple: the environment, or in the case of the Pacific, the tropical humid forest, is not only the space where armed conflict takes place, but it is also the site where conflicts of race, class, and gender overlap. In the Pacific, these conflicts mostly have a collective form, as they are linked to shared ideologies or cosmovisions which shape identities and feelings of belonging. In turn, these shared visions include the environment, not as an external object in which one moves, but as a lived space, a territory, and for this reason, an identity trait.

To echo Deleuze and Guattari, I showed in Chapter 4 how the rainforest fits into their category of *smooth space*. In the Colombian Pacific – an argument possible to extend to the thousands of ethnic groups in post-colonial and non-colonial countries – the forest, and therefore the environment, is also a lived space, and therefore a territory. As Arturo Escobar describes it, “[...] territory is conceived as a space of affective appropriation of the ecosystem, that is, as a space used to satisfy the needs of communities and for social and cultural development. [...] Thus defined [...] the territory incorporates the life project of a community” (2015, 183). I argue that given the central role the environment plays in the cosmovision of ethnic groups, it is not only *smooth space*, but also an identity trait ergo a *circular segment* that

shapes the lives of these groups. My point is that the environment must be included in an intersectional analysis, not necessarily for being a category akin to race, class, and gender, but as it is the site where the oppression of these categories is put into play in a Machiavellian way. Capitalism, and thus the economic policy of states like Colombia and most modern states, draw on natural resource extraction to ensure continued capitalist accumulation. The fact that ethnic populations inhabit these spaces allows the state to wield a dual weapon. On the one hand, it fulfills the forced displacement of people who, because of structural racism and all the discriminatory dynamics described so far, have no way of resisting or demanding and, above all, obtaining adequate reparations. On the other hand, the focus given to the creation of economic surplus in a hegemonic model of development allows these populations' resistance to extractive projects to be portrayed as a reticence toward the creation of wealth for the nation, adding fuel to racist narratives. Given the intrinsic relationship that local people have with the environment, actions such as tree cutting, river pollution, and aerial fumigation become part of the structural violence suffered by ethnic groups.

Finally, armed conflict takes place in the forest – between the state, the guerrilla movement, and indirectly the ethnic communities – and on the forest, that is, over the control of natural resources. Given the different meanings that the various actors give to this space, I argue that the rainforest is not only a place of conflict, but that the rainforest *is* conflict. Conflict of ontologies, of values, of ethics, and finally, of intersectional struggles.

In this chapter I therefore show how the relationship between environment and state is dictated by repressive policies. Unlike community cosmovisions and ELN ecological politics, the relationship between state and environment is a dichotomous one – human vs. nature; economic development vs. social development; civilized vs. barbaric; speed vs. natural cycles. In this relationship, the environment is commodity and the state deploys technologies for its exploitation.

Before delving into this chapter, however, I want to return to the introductory vignette. When I presented the preliminary results of this research, someone asked me, "but are you sure that Ernesto didn't act that way toward Raúl because of your presence?" I think it is important to give an answer to this query, since it allows me once again to discuss my positionality as a researcher working in an armed group. My presence, despite the fact that in the vignette Ernesto jokingly referred to it as that of a distinguished guest, has not significantly changed the dynamics within the group. I have observed on several occasions that when a guest is welcomed by Ernesto or Marcos, the lower-ranking guerrillas behave in a reserved manner. This does not mean that they bow to the needs of the host, but simply that they keep their distance and do not

ask unnecessary questions. My case was different, however, since having integrated from the beginning by participating actively in various daily activities, for consistency's sake, I couldn't then be expected to be treated in a privileged manner whenever I was asked to perform less pleasant tasks, such as spending hours chopping onions or potatoes, digging a hole for garbage, removing water from the bottom of the boat, helping carry heavy materials, and so on. Moreover, since in the forest one lives in commissions of at most a dozen people, in the space of a few days, falsehood no longer finds a place, and human relationships follow codes dictated by the emotions of the moment, transparency, and sincerity. By this, I do not pretend to say that I was perceived as being a guerrilla myself, but as a human being who certainly makes mistakes for which I was scolded and called to order by commanders as well as by lower-ranking guerrillas. In the harsh reality of war, everyone gets tougher, and when things need to be said, they are said directly, and without the need for embellishment or sweetening. What I have learned is not to hide behind my mistakes, but to face criticism, and do my best to improve myself every single day.

Returning to Ernesto, his care for the environment was evident in more than just the episode related in the introductory vignette. Among the troops, everyone knew that Ernesto did not like it when other living things were mistreated, whether plant or animal. Several times in the forest we spotted snakes, and on every single occasion, Ernesto's voice rang out, "Don't kill it, I forbid it!" In perhaps a less radical way, the same was true of Marcos, who at every encampment was concerned about having garbage burned or those that could not be burned buried. Of course, this practice also has to do with the importance of maintaining the terrain as a weapon (see Chapter 4). What always struck me was to see how both Ernesto and Marcos always took the time to explain to everyone the importance of protecting the environment. I was not a journalist, and everyone was aware that my doctoral research would result in an academic paper (see Chapter 2), which even if it were to become a book, would never be a bestseller. To think that I influenced the actions of the commanders, or that my proximity to them had a radical influence on the way the guerrillas behaved toward me, is wrong. In spite of my somewhat strange, though still clearly Colombian sounding accent, my Colombian citizenship, my Afro-descendant features, and perhaps my humble attitude, never created the high expectations that are automatically placed on any white people, men and women, coming from the "global North."

KILLING YELLOW BUTTERFLIES

In his chaos theory, mathematician and meteorologist Edward Lorenz realized that a tiny change in initial conditions can be the cause of huge variations in the long-term behavior of a system. This assertion, commonly known as the *butterfly effect*, is directly or indirectly found in the cosmovisions of many peoples throughout human history who have been interested in their relationship to the world around them. The capitalist system is probably the only culture that denies the universal interrelationship between all the elements of the earth system, denying the harmful effects in the short, medium, and long term that an irresponsible human activity can have on this system. This negation is theorized by O'Connor as the "second capitalist contradiction" (1988). Picking up on Marx's analysis that capitalism is dependent on a constant state of crisis, O'Connor discusses the current effects of

"[...] the increased penetration of capital into the conditions of production (e.g., trees produced on plantations, genetically altered species, private postal services, voucher education, etc.) [where] the state places itself between capital and nature, or mediates capital and nature, with the immediate result that the conditions of capitalist production are politicized" (1988, 23).

The politicization of the conditions of capitalist production – in this case, the environment – creates a constant state of *capitalistically produced* crisis. In other words, for O'Connor, the internal contradictions of capitalism – especially the constant need for overproduction – alter the geographic landscape – through monocultures, extensive plantations, etc. – which is continually forced to adapt and recover from self-imposed, i.e. *capitalistically produced*, crises.

The exponential increase of these environmental crises in Colombia is due to national policies based on the capitalist-extractive model since the second half of the 20th century. Monocultures were already part of the environmental landscape before that, as the country's economy was centered on the agricultural sector and the production of cash crops such as bananas, coffee, cocoa, and tobacco (e.g. Bucheli 2005) associated first with the colonial system, and then the post-colonial. However, the growing demand of Western countries for primary resources – especially in the mining and energy sectors – shifted the center of interests. Given the immense resources of the territory, Colombia quickly became a favorite country for international mining investments (Sanudo et al. 2016). As the country entered the 21st century, the political agenda of three successive governments – of Uribe, Santos, and Duque – only consolidated an economic model based on almost total dependence on the mining sector with an exponential increase in natural resource extraction throughout the entire national territory.

The modification and destruction of the geographical landscape has become the main cause of adverse effects ranging from the weakening of the environment and its ability to reproduce, to the damage caused to its inhabitants in their specificity of race, class and gender.

The title of this subchapter, *Killing Yellow Butterflies*, recalls two things. The first is Lorenz's theory and the *butterfly effect*. Through their neoliberal policies of extractive capitalism (Canterbury 2018), Colombian governments choose to deliberately ignore the damage created by their actions. However, these damages are not limited to the destruction of the environment and the people who inhabit it in Colombia, but massive deforestation and the pollution of waterways have devastating impacts on the entire global ecosystem. The responsibility the Colombian government has in destroying the delicate balance supporting the existence of every living thing on earth is shared with that of governments where large multinational corporations have their headquarters, such as Switzerland and the United States. Second, this title serves to exemplify the damage created by these policies through an anecdote that takes us back to my very first days in the company of the ELN, when I stayed for a few days at Vanessa's house with Commander Marcos.

It was a Thursday morning, and I still remember the sound of the joyful laughter I heard coming from the courtyard next to the house as the sun was getting warmer and warmer. Curious, I leaned out of the kitchen to see what was going on, followed closely by Vanessa, whose curiosity had also been aroused by the laughter. I remember that as we leaned out and realized what was going on I looked at Vanessa and exclaimed, "Clearly García Márquez and magical realism were born in Colombia!" Laughing in the courtyard were two guerrilla girls with rifles on their shoulders completely surrounded by marvelous yellow butterflies. The girls and the butterflies seemed to be united in a dance as poetic as surreal, as those two rifles seemed to recall the reality of war in a deeply magical moment. Then Vanessa told me something that didn't particularly strike me at the time, but that now finds all its importance:

"As a child I also loved playing with butterflies. When I would go to my uncle's house, sometimes in the garden it seemed to me that there were hundreds of them. He lives up in the mountains, four hours by boat, in an area that has become a [gold] mining area, and today when I go to his place you can't see a single butterfly."

Understanding how the Colombian government is responsible for the slow disappearance of yellow butterflies in the Pacific involves studying its actions through a political ecology analysis. Such an approach differs from an apolitical analysis in that it is interested in "[...] the difference between identifying broader systems rather than blaming proximate and local forces; between viewing ecological systems as power-laden rather than politically inert; and between

taking an explicitly normative approach rather than one that claims the objectivity of disinterest" (Robbins 2012, 5). Political ecology considers not only the primary effects of environmental damage – such as massive deforestation – but also the secondary effects caused by this damage – for example, the disruption of the social fabric of a community forced to abandon the territory, or the disappearance of fauna or flora necessary to maintain environmental balance (e.g. Gellert and Lynch 2003). Over the next few pages, I show how the economic policies of the government related to the wood, gold, and coca industries are the cause of environmental and social damage that are not confined to the sites where these resources are extracted, but extend to the entire system to which these resources belong. In order not to stray too far from the goals of this thesis, I limit myself to explaining the damage and consequences at the local level. As trivial as it may seem, it is important to remember that the system in question is unique and is part of a whole to which we all belong, namely, the earth. Before opening the discussion on the industries just mentioned, however, it is necessary to situate the Colombia Pacific in the country's political geography.

National territory does not have the same value everywhere, as it is striated into unequal and racialized spaces. Economic projects as well as repressive policies that create social and environmental damage are not located in geographic space by chance, but according to a specific logic inherent to the capitalist mode of production, namely that of the exploitation of space and people seen as marginal to the interests of the state. For Wallerstein, the geographic spaces that produce the surplus value on which the wealth of central nations is created are identifiable as peripheries of the world system (2011b). Reducing this pattern to a single country, especially when that country is as centralized as Colombia, it is possible to identify peripheries – and semi-peripheries – within the national territory. If the heart of the country is the capital city of Bogotá, followed by the three main urban centers of Medellín, Cali and Baranquilla,¹⁰¹ the Pacific is one of the peripheries of the Colombia system, and the city of Buenaventura one of its semi-peripheries. A semi-periphery is understood as a site that absorbs and redirects peripheral contradictions toward the core, thus assuming a core role for the surrounding peripheries, and a semi-peripheral role for the central core (Wallerstein 1976). A common point about peripheries is that they often correspond to rural areas conceived of as wild or virgin. However, political ecology as well as anthropology have shown that such spaces are social constructions that demonstrate how the concept of a pristine environment, or more

¹⁰¹ On this subject, see also the World Bank's *Colombia Urbanization Review*: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/527041468025227166/pdf/724620PUB0Publ067926B09780821395226.pdf>.

generally of nature, is embedded within political ideologies of domination (Robbins et al. 2007). The construction of a space perceived as wild in the collective imagination has social and economic consequences. In Colombia, the Pacific basin is seen as a national, and especially international, tourist destination. However, this region is reduced to a wilderness whose only attractions are the whales that come to breed off its coast every year and the Afro-Colombian culture, also reduced exclusively to music, dance, and good food.¹⁰² Through this categorization, the Colombian government is able to continually draw boundaries between wild and cultured, virgin and inhabited, accessible and dangerous, etc. that are used to "[...] legitimate regressive social policies that deny rights and freedoms to less powerful groups, that curb redistributive ambitions, and which regulate social behavior in the name of saving the earth" (Peet et al. 2011, 315).

This is where the link between environment, race, and class becomes apparent. In Colombia, race is spatialized and space is racialized (Lipsitz 2007). Put another way, ethnic groups such as indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants mostly inhabit spaces predefined by historical causes. With the European invasion of the Americas, indigenous groups, slaughtered by disease and by the sword, survived primarily in the Andean and Amazonian regions (Friede 1975). Africans transported to the new continent as merchandise ended up occupying the coastal areas of the Caribbean and Pacific (Helg 2011). These early spatializations join with more contemporary, urban ones, where black and indigenous communities primarily inhabit certain neighborhoods. At each scale – urban, regional, and national – space is then racialized, that is, hierarchized based on the race of the people who inhabit it. In other words, it is no coincidence that peripheral spaces in Colombia, places of extraction and exploitation such as the Pacific region, are those where the majority of the population is Afro-descendant or indigenous. When a geographic space – rural or urban – is used as a site of extraction or expulsion because it is inhabited by marginalized ethnic groups, this phenomenon is called environmental racism (Pulido 1996). The fact that bombings take place in the Pacific, that the fumigation of coca crops is done with glyphosate, that the rivers are polluted with mercury from mining activities, or that the environmental risks related to these activities are only marginally considered by those who perpetrate them has to do with the race (and social class) of a region's inhabitants. This phenomenon is not found only in Colombia, as, "[...] the same domestic pattern of

¹⁰² This is how Chocó is described in various tourist promotions. See <https://www.colombia.co/en/colombia-travel/unique-places/wonder-colombias-magical-choco/>.

disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards and degradation exists worldwide among those who are nonwhite, poor, less educated, and politically less powerful" (Bullard 1993, 179).

Having stated these premises, we can now analyze the environmental policies of the Colombian government, and consequently better understand why they are opposed by ethnic communities and the ELN, which uses this struggle to legitimize its armed presence in the territories.

CUTTING DOWN TREES AND CULTURAL FEATURES

Among the three main industries that are destroying the environment of the Colombian Pacific, probably the one causing the most damage is the wood industry. There are no precise statistics on the percentage of forests that have been lost over time, but available research shows that almost 60% of the wood consumed in the country before the early 1990s came from the Pacific basin, and with it, "the extraction of wood in the Colombian Pacific has brought serious environmental consequences" (Leal and Restrepo 2003, 119). More detailed statistics show that of the forest area that existed in the Pacific in the late 1960s, only 43% remained thirty years later (ibid. 120). However, deforestation is not only limited to the loss of trees, fauna and flora, and the consequent increase in the planet's temperature through the greenhouse effect. In order to transport wood in the labyrinth of waterways characterizing the region, watercourses in the region have undergone important modifications that have destabilized the balance of a once sound ecosystem. The damage is not just environmental. The widening of the rivers, the increase of their depth, but above all, the logging itself have led to a growing demand for labor and the consequent colonization of the territory by populations coming from other departments, especially from the Atlantic coast. Because of this, urban centers were created in places where they did not exist before, modifying the cultural landscape – Afro and indigenous – which previously characterized the Pacific region. Over-exploitation and the consequent capitalist environmental crises rapidly forced the wood industry to move into the aquatic space, opening up new areas of exploitation and abandoning old ones. Thus, hamlets such as Bajo Magalare,¹⁰³

¹⁰³ On January 3rd 2017, before discovering the history of this small town, I wrote, "*Waiting for the boat to leave from this place fills me with mixed feelings. I sit in one of the two open bars and choose a small table in the corner to be inconspicuous. With the arrival of a boat it seems that the whole village runs to the port. Then, whoever shouts the loudest perhaps manages to help a lady unload her luggage and mount it on one of the jeep cabs that suddenly appear along the road. Tips for these helpers range from a few hundred pesos to perhaps 5,000 (a little over USD 1) from the most generous. I imagine that on a good day, a longshoreman can earn 10,000 to 20,000 pesos. Travelers get off the boats, get on the cabs, get off the civa (traditional Colombian bus), and get on the boats. Perhaps a dozen times a day, this coming and going is repeated for a half hour, then the village goes back*

an entry point to the space controlled by the Western War Front, degenerated from a past of wealth and security to a present of misery and violence (Leal and Restrepo 2003, 127). Finally, the timber industry, like the gold and coca industries discussed below, radically altered the relationship between environment and community. Logging and the monetization of the tropical forest have distorted the meanings and values that ethnic communities have ascribed to their surroundings for centuries, and the struggle to reappropriate certain customs and traditions is increasingly jeopardize. As Leal and Restrepo summarize,

"The wood industry as an expression of a model of appropriation of naturalness, of a discourse on how to use it, confronted the systems proper to rural Black communities in the Pacific that did not necessarily compare these assumptions. In this clash, hybrid regimes of nature construction emerged, modern and non-modern regimes articulated in multiple ways and with varying intensities" (2003, 130–31).

EXTRACTING GOLD, INJECTING MERCURY

The gold mining industry in the Colombian Pacific dates from the time of the colony's mercantile economy (Arrighi 2010).¹⁰⁴ Over the centuries, the gold that was initially used to pay the debts of the European invaders, who, like Cortés, were reduced to the brink (Graeber 2014), became the metal with which the descendants of Africans torn from their continent were able to gradually pay for their freedom (Leal 2016). The exploitation of gold resources is exemplified by the image proposed by Eduardo Galeano in his famous *Open Veins of Latin*

to showing its skeleton. The street becomes deserted again. Two young men sit down to count their coins. Another plays with his phone. A few stray dogs pass by. Left alone in the bar I am observed. Clearly, I am not waiting for the boat to return to my home village. Will they know where I am going?"

¹⁰⁴ Between the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, the mercantile economy between the Americas and Europe was known as *triangular trade*. In the sixteenth century, the Spanish crown was the only power controlling the "New World" (with the exception of present day Brazil, which was under the domain of Portugal). In 1640 the Dutch Navy entered the Eastern Antilles, and from that moment, the whole geo-political situation changed. As I explain in my Master's thesis (2014), this trade was characterized by the exchange of arms, slaves, and cash crops (like tobacco and sugar) from the Americas. European powers were importing primarily tobacco, sugar (which in the seventeenth century became the New World's major export) and its derivatives (like molasses and rum). In exchange, the Americas were receiving manufactured goods and luxury objects. On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, Europeans were receiving spices, gold, and ivory from the African continent, while exporting guns, (processed) cotton, cloth, and rum. While Africans were not importing much more than rum from the Americas, they supplied the New World's plantations with a labor force of an estimated number of ten to twelve million slaves – while feeding Atlantic sharks with at least another million human bodies, many of them women. Here it must be noted that African elites played an active role in what is also known as the *slave trade* (Weaver 2000). In fact, the 'real' colonization of the African continent only began in the nineteenth century, when sugar importation from the New World decreased in importance, and African raw materials became fundamental in supplying European industrialization.

America (1973), where the author writes that through the gold extracted in the mines, a bridge extending over the entire Atlantic Ocean could have been built, on the side of which, a second bridge could have been built, with the bones of all the people who died in the mines under conditions of slavery. In other words, for centuries gold has been a factor in environmental alterations, but these were absorbed somewhat by the capability of ecological systems to balance themselves. With the arrival of modernization and the machinery that made the search for gold a new industry, not only the balance between nature, but also the balance between nature and local populations began to radically transform. The first machinery to enter the Pacific at the end of the nineteenth century where the *dragas* (dredges) (Galindo et al. 2019), destroying riverbeds little by little. But it was with the entry of the first bulldozers a century later that gold mining began to create irreversible damage. The larger and more functional the machinery, the more the *surplus-value* produced is separated from those who produce it, as the miner shortens the work time devoted to earning his wages, and lengthens the work time devoted to enriching the owners of the means of production (Marx 1990, 492) – which in the Pacific are national enterprises or multinational companies that extract wealth to invest elsewhere.

At the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the extractive economy took over national economic policies. The so called “mining locomotive” was the main source of funding for the transformations of modernity aspired to by the country's elite (Briceño 2013). Under the pretext of including the country's peripheries in a national development project and simplifying its territorial planning, in 2011 the state introduced a new mining policy (Ortiz-Riomalo and Rettberg 2018). The new *Código de Minas*, stipulated by Law 685, states that whoever is “first in time is first in law” (ibid.). Said otherwise, whoever is first to apply for the right to exploit a given area, filling a minimum of legal requirements, easily obtains a concession contract (ibid.). By facilitating these legal practices, the state's goal was to attract foreign investment, especially from multinationals such as Anglo Gold Ashanti (see Gutiérrez Gómez 2013) or Swiss Glencore-Xstrata (see Dugan and Patterson 2015). Ethnic communities who do not benefit from the legal apparatus of a multinational corporation, are repeatedly circumvented in their right to a prior consultation (*Derecho a Consulta previa, libre y informada*) established by Law 70 of 1993,¹⁰⁵ which developed Transitional Article 55 of 1991. Law 70, also known as the Law of Afro-Colombianity, stands for:

¹⁰⁵ Thirty years after Law 70 was drafted, it has still not been fully implemented.

"the respect for the integrity and dignity of the Black communities' cultural life; the participation of the Black communities and their organizations, without detriment to their autonomy, in decisions that affect them and in those that affect the entire nation in conformity to the law; and the protection of the environment, emphasizing the relationship established by Black communities and nature" (Ch. II, art. III).

Not only is the right to prior consultation rarely respected, but when it is, in the preliminary study of the possible environmental damage of a mining project undertaken to establish compensation, the companies follow an apolitical ecology. That is, only the primary consequences are considered, such as the deforestation of X hectares of forest, and the displacement of X houses. These consequences are the most easily calculable and the most easily monetized. Secondary consequences, which are instead those that last longer and affect the environment and communities the most, are deliberately ignored. Among this second type of damages that can only be analyzed through the lens of political ecology, the primary issue is pollution from mercury and other chemical and toxic products used in the mining industry (Guiza and Aristizabal 2013; Palacios-Torres et al. 2018; Palacios-Torres et al. 2020). When mercury penetrates the aqueous arteries of the Pacific – the sites where most activities from economic to recreational – are concentrated, it causes a severe public health problem¹⁰⁶ that, given the ethnic demography of those affected, is barely considered. The World Health Organization warns that the presence of mercury in the body has devastating effects on health in the medium and long term, as exposure to mercury attacks the nervous system, leading to symptoms ranging from chronic headaches, to dementia, to malformations.¹⁰⁷ In the Pacific, there are communities where people have bodily concentrations of mercury ranging from 9 to 17 parts per million when the maximum sustainable absorption by the human body is 1.2 parts per million (Mosquera et al. 2011). Over the last half-century in the Pacific aquatic space, tides, heavy rains, and the incessant flow of rivers has filled the waterways not only with mercury, but also engine oil, and tons and tons of plastic and other non-biodegradable waste.

When then the consultation mechanism is not circumvented legally, it is done so through secondary avenues, chief among them corruption or violence (e.g. Sanudo et al. 2016). I discussed this issue one night with a community leader, while Angela listened silently in the corner. The community leader admitted, "Several times they tried to buy me, the people from the mining company, they offered me two houses, one in Cali and one in Buenaventura as long

¹⁰⁶ See <https://www.semana.com/contenidos-editoriales/colombia-sin-mercurio/articulo/contaminacion-con-mercurio-problema-de-salud-publica/576601>.

¹⁰⁷ See <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mercury-and-health>.

as I didn't defend my rights at the community consultation. I told them to go to hell!" Looking at Angela he continued, "And well, I can count on their protection, otherwise I would already be in a hole because these companies, if you don't do what they say, they will send the *paracos* to kill you. That's how it is brother!" Unfortunately, this testimony is but one among thousands, since the relationship between increased exploitation of gold mining and increased violence in the affected territories is both unequivocal and exponential. There are many explanations for the intensification of armed conflict in mining territories, but the main consequence always remains the same (Humphreys 2005; Ortiz-Riomalo and Rettberg 2018; Rettberg Beil et al. 2018; Sanudo et al. 2016; e.g. Tobón 2018): the oppression or forced displacement of communities (e.g. Sánchez-Cuervo and Aide 2013). Indeed, the community leader I stayed with that night had decided to agree with the ELN, while the preferred choice of legally asserting one's rights without having to side with one or another armed group, seems impossible in Colombia.

As with wood and coca (discussed below), the gold industry monopolizes the economic activity of the communities. Although the latter are increasingly trying to recover their ancestral activities such as fishing and agriculture, it is easy to observe how "in many villages in the Pacific, activities different to mining are not developed" (Galindo Orrego, Rasmussen, and Valencia 2019, 127). This is problematic as it creates a volatile economic dependency determined by external factors, such as the violence described above, depletion of exploitable resources, or fluctuations in the price of gold.

WHAT IF COCAINE WAS LEGALIZED?

I begin this last sub-chapter devoted to the relationship between state and environment with a provocative question that emerged in a late-night discussion between myself, Thomas, and another Pacific community leader who had come for a day of discussion with Commander Ernesto. We were in the middle of the bilateral ceasefire and were camped in a village. As I went to sleep, I saw Thomas's silhouette sitting and chatting next to our host, so I approached him and asked if I could join the conversation. "As long as you bring your tobacco here," was Thomas' reply. "And while you're at it, a couple of beers too," added the visitor. The tobacco was in my backpack, but to find a couple of beers at that hour I had to walk halfway across the village. In the end, I came back with some cookies and a chair for myself. I never thought we would stay chatting until five in the morning, but as always happens, spontaneous discussions are the ones that contain the most valuable information. That night, I discovered things I never

imagined. Our visitor had an impressive knowledge of the Pacific, including the intricate dynamics of drug trafficking. He and Thomas had known each other before, and given their mutual trust and Thomas' trust in me, our host openly revealed some of the existing links between the drug trade and people in the government, the military, and the police.¹⁰⁸ With fatigue and a few beers in his system, he revealed the names, sources, and amounts of money and cocaine circulating among the various actors – illegal and legal – that revolve around this economy. He told us details about the different embarkation points, the various strategies and methods to hide the coca in the boats, as well as what international relationships were necessary to move in this trade. Given our host's knowledge of the field, Thomas suddenly asked him,

"But why, since you have all this information, don't you get involved in the drug trade? I mean, one or two trips at the most and you easily have a million dollars to invest in community projects. If the projects are well thought out, they are self-financing and lead to other projects over time. I don't see any ethical problem with this! If gringos like to put that shit up their nose let them do it, but money is money, and if there's one thing communities are missing, it's money!"

I admit that between the alcohol and exhaustion, Thomas's proposal seemed appealing. For a good minute, we all kept quiet, imagining what projects could be financed with a million dollars. Our host, however, came to his senses and laughing looked at us saying,

"I almost believe it! No brothers, knowing how it works is one thing, but getting involved in the drug trade is another. That's where you die. One mistake and bye-bye! And then a lot of money, no. You think that people are going to help you with the projects, but once you have the money in your pocket, you start to solve your needs, and once you solve your needs, no, I'm not going to give my wife a gift, no, I'm going to take a trip to Cartagena. The guy leaves and the money is lost. Believe me, I've seen it – money makes even the toughest guy crazy!"

Again we remained silent, and when I thought by now we were going to get up to go to sleep, Thomas thought out loud, "The truth is that if the state really wanted to be done with the ELN and the drug trade in the Pacific, they would only have to do one thing: legalize cocaine, legalize drugs. End armed conflict, the millions from the war go into prevention programs and there we all live in peace!" As the sun was rising, I allowed myself to end the long discussion, saying,

¹⁰⁸ Although it had long been my desire to contact an independent journalist in Colombia or abroad to denounce the links between politicians and the military connected with this activity, for my own safety and that of my interlocutors I destroyed all the notes I had taken in this regard.

"And with these fine words, let's go to sleep, because if they don't legalize drugs and resolve the conflict in five minutes, we in a couple of hours are still forced to be up and looking sharp!"

I've thought back on that long discussion several times, especially when I saw for myself how rapidly so-called illicit crops are transforming the Colombian landscape. In the communities where I have visited dear friends for years, one only has to sit and scan the horizon to discover patches of a slightly lighter green, indicating small plantations scattered across the hills. Coca cultivation also spreads to outlying areas.¹⁰⁹ Between 1990 and 2001, coca went from occupying 19% of the crops in the Andean region to 72% (Diaz and Sanchez 2004). These crops extend to the fringes of the state, areas already stigmatized as underdeveloped, and consequently, even more denigrated (Maldonado Aranda 2012). This results in public support for repressive policies. According to the logic of those who live far from these territories, the reasoning is straightforward: ethnic communities are opposed to the economic development of the country because they resist the mining locomotive that provides economic revenue for large infrastructures,¹¹⁰ so if in addition they engage in illicit activities, repression is necessary.

As explained at length in Chapter 3, the United States plays a central role in dictating Colombian policy in the fight against drugs. Having supported the most atrocious dictatorships throughout Latin and Central America during the second half of the 20th century (Becker 2021), with Plan Colombia, the United States aspires to maintain control of the continent at the dawn of the 21st century. Neoliberal concerns overlap with old imperialist logic in with Plan Colombia (Harvey 2005). Behind the war against drugs, Uncle Sam's goal is to annihilate the guerrilla movements in order to install American industries in the territories at the mercy of internal armed conflict. In spite of the promise of investments in the social field and aid provided to the communities, 93.3% of the billion dollar budget of Plan Colombia is dedicated to financing and training the Colombian military apparatus (Navarro Jiménez 2000). For the United States, the war on drugs in Colombia is the war against leftist guerrilla movements, with coca production an issue to be resolved through forced eradication and aerial fumigation.

The ethnic communities that inhabit affected territories struggle for recognition and the implementation of alternative development programs. For these communities, the state must offer alternatives attractive to young people who have become accustomed to the easy money of coca. It is a question of creating jobs in the long term, and above all, in supporting

¹⁰⁹ On this subject, see Marie Bourdin's Master's thesis (2020), which I had the pleasure of supervising.

¹¹⁰ See for example, <https://razonpublica.com/la-consulta-previa-el-para-que-y-los-riesgos/>; or <https://www.semana.com/amp/puerto-de-tribuga-no-debe-ser-declarado-obra-de-utilidad-publica--noticias-hoy/54842>.

communities in development, especially in the commercialization of agricultural products. The term alternative development goes against the dominant economic model that characterizes the rural economy as based on self-subsistence with low productivity (Zorro Sánchez 2005, 108). For ethnic communities, it is not possible to combat the coca economy without projects that support equitable development in their territories. However, the problem is that innovative economic projects are developed mostly around urban economic centers, while the peripheries are left with classic development projects that only create dependency dynamics. The decentralization of power and the economy in Colombia is a struggle as old as the republic itself, but the voices of peasants and ethnic communities continue not to be heard. Indeed, the exclusion of these regions from economic growth only

"[...] highlights not only the spatiality of racism, but also the fact that space is a resource in the production of white privilege. Indeed, neighborhoods [as well as regions] are not merely groupings of individuals, homes, and commerce, they are *constellations of opportunities* with powerful consequences, for both the recipient and non-recipient populations" (Pulido 2000, 30).

The repressive action of the state severely reduces the already limited opportunities for ethnic groups, who, in a continuous struggle for recognition, fight for access to a dignified life, with functioning health and education systems, and infrastructure that allows for integral economic development. The war on drugs, on the other hand, has the consequence of slowing down the timid advances made by the communities, which since the 1991 Constitution have been strengthening and structuring their political and territorial organization. The eradication of coca plantations is rarely supported by serious development projects that take into account the environment as well as the material and cultural needs of the communities. Instead, most of the fight against drugs results in the forced eradication of coca plantations. It is forced because it is done without any discussion with the owners, who do not receive any kind of compensation, and therefore do not have the time or the capacity to move on to another economic source. Thus, the plantations disappear in one place only to reappear a short distance away. Without development aid policies, there are no other agricultural products that can quickly compensate or replace the coca economy. One of the most common solutions proposed by state and international programs is to replace coca production with other products. "I have received from US-AID a hundred plants of coffee, cocoa, bananas," is what I have often heard from farmers. The problem is that without direct access to marketing, this kind of aid only creates new dependencies, making the producers' situation even worse. The prohibitive costs of transportation via waterways, and the control of the sale of products such as bananas and coffee

by powerful monopolies, do not allow communities and farmers to break out of their cycles of self-subsistence. Communities do not have the possibility to act autonomously in their own development, and therefore remain crystallized in poverty on the margins of the state.

Even worse than forced eradication are fumigation techniques. These are done through glyphosphate or garol 4, both herbicides sprayed by small planes. The first of these, produced by the American company Monsanto, has been categorized by the World Health Organization as probably carcinogenic.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, after the Supreme Court banned its use in 2015, the current Duque government is proceeding so that its reinstatement becomes effective as soon as possible.¹¹² The biggest problem related to fumigation is that it is not just the coca plants that are affected by the herbicides, but the health of local populations. When fumigation is done by air, there is no advance warning, and people often have only a few minutes to take cover. Indirect contamination occurs as the herbicides disperse into the soil, water, and all surrounding crops such as vegetables, tubers, and fruit trees. The operations of fumigation and even more so, forced eradication, are carried out with massive deployments of military force. For local populations, these appearances of the military are often the first and only signs of the state's existence, leading to lack of trust in its legitimacy (Vélez and Lobo 2019).

As Commander Ernesto explained to me one day,

"When they come to eradicate, for us it is difficult to deal with them because they come with several helicopters. First, they unload the special troops on the ground and create a security ring. Then, they unload the troops doing the eradication and protect them from the ground and the sky with at least one more helicopter that keeps flying over the area. The best we can do is throw a few grenades at them with a tube,¹¹³ but depending on the area we can hardly get close enough."

Clearly, if the ELN attacks the army to defend its interests, and indirectly those of the peasant owners of the plantations, they risk provoking an armed clash that can easily escalate and result in the forced displacement of entire communities.

The conflicts around the economy of cocaine, as well as those of wood and gold explained above, show the extent to which development policies disregarding political ecology can hardly propose viable solutions in the medium and long term. A consideration of ecological damages without an integral political vision and analysis results in a focus on compensation policies that

¹¹¹ See <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/widely-used-herbicide-linked-to-cancer/>.

¹¹² See <https://www.france24.com/es/am%C3%A9rica-latina/20210418-colombia-regreso-aspersiones-glifosato-narcotrafico>.

¹¹³ The grenade launcher tube is one of the ELN's "homemade" weapons.

are only useful in the short term, and that do not question the systems of oppression that force communities to seek economic solutions in illegal economies. The repressive policies of the state not only kill the yellow butterflies in the Pacific, but also the possibilities for ethnic groups to change the economic and political structures that condition their existence.

CONCLUSION

The capitalist mode of production, in its relationship with nature, finds one of its greatest contradictions, namely that of the infinite need to exploit the greatest number of natural resources without them having time to reproduce. In this race to find consumable energy, the capitalist machine does not squeeze all spaces equally, but following a center-periphery logic, concentrates its exploitation in those peripheral areas that in post-colonial countries like Colombia, are often inhabited by ethnic communities. The asymmetrical power relations and the impossibility or enormous difficulties these groups face in asserting their rights, mean that these regions are exploited without attention to the damage caused to the environment and the communities that live within it. Given the systematic implementation of these processes, this phenomenon is known as environmental racism.

In this chapter, I take a renewed interest in the wood, gold, and coca industries to exemplify the importance of a political approach to environmental issues. Political ecology is concerned with the human-nature relationship through considering holistically the possible environmental damage associated with exploitative projects. Contrastingly, apolitical ecology, i.e., that applied by the state and large industries, takes into account only the primary damages that such projects may have, willfully ignoring long-term issues such as the loss of a stable community fabric amongst a population forced to move.

I present this discussion around the wood, gold, and coca industries to elucidate how the state's lack of consideration for the ethnic groups that inhabit the Pacific basin only delegitimizes the already short-lived presence of the state in these territories. Following a lack of trust regarding the actions of the state on the part of the communities, ethnic groups are forced to rely on the ELN instead of relying on state institutions, as the ELN which exists in the same territories, demonstrates better knowledge of local complexities, and shows greater empathy for the oppression suffered by the communities.

Finally, my argument is that for ethnic groups, the environment is an important identity feature that structures their political, economic, and social lives. The environment is the site where systems that oppress those at the intersection of subaltern race, class, and gender come

together, therefore it must be analyzed as the framework that contains the three aforementioned categories.

CHAPTER 8

RACE, CLASS, ETHNICITY, AND THE COMMON STRUGGLE AGAINST CAPITALISM

*“Didn’t my people before me
Slave for this country?
Now you look me with this scorn,
Then you eat up all my corn.”*

Bob Marley – *Crazy Baldhead*



Guerrilla members relaxing under the shadow of a tree – Photo by the author

Pacific basin, January 4th, 2018

We are in the community of Tumaná and tonight I am sleeping in the house of Assata's mother, but she is in the next room watching a soap opera at full volume which prevents me from falling asleep. Before retiring to my room, I chat with her for a while. We discuss about her daughter and how proud she is of her. Then she tells me that the ELN has helped her a lot, it has given her a solar panel that gives her some independence, and it has supported her with her little store at a time when she was in great difficulty. Then she says, "Now I'll show you something!" and disappears into the next room to return shortly after with a bag full of coins. All proud, she tells me that it is her savings and that if she continues like this, she hopes to be able to buy a piglet next year. She smiles shyly at me, as if ashamed of her dream, and then, letting out a sigh of sadness, she tells me something that strikes me deeply: "A piglet, that's all a Black woman in this country can dream of owning." I look at her not knowing what to answer, and more importantly not understanding why she says this. Is she denouncing her situation? Is this a metaphor I don't understand? Is she asking me for help? For a moment, an awkward silence falls between us, then she gets up and picking up her bag with extreme care but without giving me a glance she says, "Fine!" and leaves. I approach the front door and lose myself in unanswered doubts.

A few minutes go by and a man that I had seen in the afternoon comes back, as tonight, he will be hosted under the same roof. He asks me if I want to keep him company with a beer before going to sleep. Actually I've had enough on New Year's Eve, but I have the feeling that it could lead to an interesting discussion, and above all, he convinces me by telling me, "Take advantage of it now that you can, because tomorrow we leave for the forest and you won't see any more alcohol for months!" He introduces himself as Roberto, and as we begin to talk, I realize that he takes me for a guerrilla – I guess surely not for a fighter, but very probably for an ELN member. I don't want to lie to him, but at the same time, I don't want to change the tone of the conversation either, so I decide to play along by remaining as ambiguous as possible about my identity. I want to avoid talking about myself, so I try to ask him questions so that he can tell me about his life. I ask him if he will stay with us for a long time and he tells me that Ernesto decides that. I bite my tongue and call myself stupid. In guerrilla warfare, you don't ask these kinds of questions, and I should have understood that now! I ask him if he has been in the ELN for a long time and he reveals that he has only been in the ELN for a few months, while before, since his adolescence, he was a member of the FARC-EP. I ask him why he didn't demobilize himself by taking advantage of the peace process. He finishes his beer, opens another one, and bluntly replies: "Look comrade, I'll tell you the

truth. I grew up in the FARC-EP, and the FARC-EP was my family. But then, when our commanders decided to abandon the armed struggle to embrace the peace process, many of us felt betrayed. In the beginning, we followed the directives and understood the intentions, but as time went on, it became increasingly clear how the peace process suited the Central Command and senior commanders, while for average commanders like me as well as the base, once we left the arms we would find ourselves surviving on our own in a world that was completely foreign to us. I felt betrayed by my family, and because I'm military and what I do best is war, I found myself a new family!" He smiles at me and I ask him why he chose this front and this area of the country. He looks at me curiously and then continues, "I have always operated in the Pacific, even with the FARC-EP. I was born and raised in Medellin, but I have always had the people of the Pacific in my heart. The Black people here have something special." Again, he pauses for a moment, lights a cigarette and then tells me, "I'll tell you an anecdote. Years ago, I was ordered to go and kill a lady in the Chocoan Urabá. When I arrived at her farm she was picking pineapples in the field. I went to kill her, but when I saw her alone in the baking sun, cutting pineapples for her children, my heart clenched. She saw me, but instead of running she continued cutting pineapples. I walked up to her and said, "You know why we are here don't you?" And she looks at me and says, "To kill me." So I say to her, "Well, and doesn't that scare you?" She gives me an answer I will never forget, "My son, this is my land and it is the only thing I own, if you have to kill me, do it here, on my land!"

With this vignette, I open a chapter in which I discuss feelings of identity and belonging, and how they are tied to factors of class and race. Why does a Black woman in the Pacific believe that all she is allowed to dream about is owning a piglet? Why does another woman in the face of death not beg for her life, but continue to cut pineapples, and how is it that this fact affects a guerrilla to the point of disobeying orders received at the risk of himself suffering severe punishment? Why does a guerrilla leave the FARC-EP to become a member of the ELN? Why are young people in the region who end up in guerrilla groups almost all Black and indigenous people? Why, however, are there no Black or indigenous people in the ELN's leadership positions? Answering these questions not only allows for a better understanding of the profile of the guerrillas that make up the ELN in the Pacific, but more importantly, allows for an understanding of how race and class become determining dynamics in the economy of war.

The underlying objective of this chapter, however, is not so much to examine the identity of guerrillas and ethnic communities but to demonstrate how race and class are factors – *segments* to tie back to Deleuze and Guattari – that bring the guerrilla movement closer to the communities, and simultaneously mark the distance between these groups and the state. Poverty, negritude, and indigeneity intertwine in the *smooth space*. They articulate and clash with each other in a constant struggle for survival and political recognition, but at the same time they often present a united front against the systems of oppression of which they are victims: the state, the nation (white-*criollo* and imaginary¹¹⁴), structural violence, structural racism, class racism, environmental racism, and extractive capitalism. Therefore, this chapter will show how race and class are two categories that limit and hinder the mobility of Colombian Pacific youth, thus making the ELN a viable alternative.

The following pages are divided into three parts. In the first, I discuss the articulation between capitalism, race, and class, and how inequalities are disguised behind policies related to the concepts of nation, citizenship, and multiculturalism. This discussion leads to the second part of the chapter, in which I discuss the relationship between indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples in Colombia. This section includes a brief analysis of the meanings derived from concepts of race and ethnicity. Finally, I close the chapter by discussing the complex links between the ELN and ethnic groups through arguing for the importance of re-centering debates around the *emic* conception of ethnicity, i.e. putting a political claim before a cultural one. With this chapter, I suggest that instead of repressive policies built under the slogan of the "war on terrorism," the only way to offer a definitive end to the internal armed conflict rests on opening to dialogue, and empowerment of regional policies conceived and designed in the peripheries rather than in the centers of the country.

CAPITALISM, RACISM, AND THE WHITE-CRIOLLO NATION

In the Colombian Pacific, the capitalist exploitation of the environment leads ethnic groups to clash with the state, and forces them to develop continuous strategies of resistance for the maintenance of their political and economic autonomy.

¹¹⁴ The *criollo* is a person who was born in Latin America, but has ancestors of pure European descent. In Colombia, "the *criollo* [...] elites constructed a version of white superiority that subordinated the indigenous and Afro-descent group" (Baquero Melo 2015, 1023). Although the white-*criollo* ideal is particularly prevalent among Colombia's upper classes, centuries of movement and mixing of populations makes the "purity" longed for by this category – to recall Benedict Anderson – utterly imaginary.

When confronted with the capitalist timber and mining industries discussed in the previous chapter, members of communities that engage in such economies enter into a type of consumption that Marx refers to as

"[...] of two kinds. While producing he [the worker] consumes the means of production with his labour, and converts them into products with a higher value than that of the capital advanced. This is his productive consumption. It is at the same time consumption of his labour-power by the capitalist who has bought it. On the other hand, the worker uses the money paid to him for his labour-power to buy the means of subsistence; this is his individual consumption. The worker's productive consumption and his individual consumption are therefore totally distinct. In the former, he acts as the motive power of capital, and belongs to the capitalist. In the latter, he belongs to himself, and performs his necessary vital functions outside the production process. The result of the first kind of consumption is that the capitalist continues to live, on the second, that the worker himself continues to live" (Marx 1990, 717).

In this consumption of two kinds, the worker's body becomes that of a body-men, or rather that of "[...] men whose body is a machine-body" (Balibar 1991, 211). Although the quote uses masculine pronouns, it is important to note that while the timber industry is indeed an almost exclusively male space, this is not the case for gold mining, which should however be differentiated between industrial mining, and what Black communities call ancestral mining. The former, dictated by the capitalist economy of extraction and therefore by the overexploitation of resources through machinery of destruction such as dredges and bulldozers, is preponderantly a male space. The second, on the other hand, occupies the community as a whole, without drawing fundamental differences between the sexes, or between ages. At present, small- and medium-scale¹¹⁵ industrial mining in the Pacific is often a hybrid of these two modes of production. On the one hand, machinery does the big land-destroying work, and on the other hand, owners take advantage of the existing workforce and know-how to save money in the production process. In other words, bulldozers dig the hole, and community

¹¹⁵ This argument doesn't apply to large-scale mining, which is totally mechanized, and is almost exclusively a man's space. If small and medium scale industrial mining produces craters the size of a soccer field, large scale mining removes tons of material and digs holes that can extend hundreds of meters in width and depth. On the other hand, ancestral mining, so defined because of the almost total absence of machinery, is mostly environmentally friendly, and follows a logic of long-term exploitation, which is sustainable and responsible. As a miner from Cauca explained to me in an interview I did for my Master's thesis (Bernasconi 2014), "For us the concession is that, it is better for us to have the mine there, for the mine to produce, rather than extracting all the gold from a mountain at once. So the concession made by industrial mining is to excavate the gold from one mountain at once; but that does not apply to us! We want the gold that has been left there from our ancestor to remain there for our children and grand-children."

members enter it to extract the gold. In this relationship of production, "[...] the rule is overexploitation, [*i.e.*] the tendential destruction of the organism (which will be metaphorized as 'degeneracy') and, at the very least, [*the*] excess in the repression of the intellectual functions involved in work" (Balibar 1991, 211). In capitalist production, the *machine-body* is stripped of its intellectual functions and is exposed to an exploitation that pushes capital to a fundamental contradiction – that between the productive force and the conditions of production. The former, necessary for the creation of capital itself, is weakened by inhumane conditions of production that the state legitimizes in terms of general interests such as progress, development, and economic growth (Escobar 2015, 120).

In the post-colonial Colombian state, I argue that the conditions of production in the mining sector (and applicable more generally) are marked by a collective imagination still deeply anchored in colonization and racism. The fact that it is not simply a *machine-body*, but a *racialized machine-body*, further justifies the exploitation of the latter. As the lady from Cali insinuated (see the introductory vignette in Chapter 1), for those who see the world with their own eyes, the Black body is that of an animal, a slave, and for this reason it is machinery for work. This vision is here taken to the extreme, but unfortunately, it is still present in the collective imagination of millions of Colombians. This is due to overlapping historical factors that led to the construction of today's Republic. Returning to the time of the European invasion, as Stuart Hall explains, "racism within plantation slave societies in the mercantilist phase of world capitalist development *had* a place and function [...]" (2018, 211). In addition to producing a labor force that was simultaneously mercantile, the racism of plantation slave societies¹¹⁶ created an attitude of racial superiority that was maintained in the process of nation building.

¹¹⁶ For increased clarity, I provide a brief description of the different plantation – hence slave – societies present in the New World: In the Spanish plantation societies, fifty percent of the inhabitants were whites (mainly Spanish), twenty-five percent were free people of color (FPCs) – mainly mulattos – and only the last quarter was constituted by black slaves (Knight 2012). Meanwhile, the other colonies were not conceived to reproduce any type of 'new European country.' These plantations were controlled by managers and overseers, mostly living in the cities or in the "Mother city," the Metropolis. The population was composed of eighty percent black slaves, ten percent FPCs (also predominantly mulattos), and ten percent white people (ibid.). Contrary to the Spanish colonies, here the whites were not a homogeneous group, but people of different origins (nationalities), languages, and religions. The hierarchical structure based on skin color (pigmentocracy) was therefore much more complex. Moreover, as a consequence of the greater number of (white) Spanish colonies, the latter – except for the ones lost in treaties – remained under Spanish dominion until their independence. It is also interesting to underline the fact that in these colonies, the primary language has remained Spanish. This is due to the fact that, being situated on the biggest islands of the Greater Antilles, these settlements also had the largest populations. The British as well as the French colonies on the other side were characterized by continuous shifts in power, a phenomenon that led to the birth of different Creole languages, which consist of deep structural and grammatical level derived from African languages, undergirding a superficial layer of European vocabularies. The same process can also explain the variety of religions present in the Caribbean area. In the ancient Spanish Main, Christianity has persisted through time, while

As Balibar argues, "Every modern nation is a product of colonization: it has always been to some degree colonized or colonizing, and sometimes both at the same time" (1991, 89). In our case, the immense territory that lies between the waters of the Atlantic, the Caribbean, and the Pacific, was first colonized by the Spanish invaders. During its process toward the founding of the current Colombian Republic, this area was inwardly recolonized through an ideological process of the social creation of an imaginary community (Anderson 2006) – the Colombian nation.¹¹⁷ This process was then finalized with the creation of citizenship, through which all individuals in the territory were subordinated to the nation-state (Balibar 1991, 92), i.e., the judge and organizer of society, and the ultimate ruler of the hegemonic space functional to the ruling class (M. Bakunin 2012 [1882]).

In Colombia, race and class are categories that overlap, clash, and come together as a function of the space in which they are expressed, but as I defend in this chapter, they must be considered primarily in their intersection. Two ubiquitous phenomena in the country's history are racism – which can be traced back to the period of the European invasion – and class struggle or inequalities – which lie at the root of the current internal conflict and the ELN's reason for being. Racism takes various forms, the most common being probably that of environmental racism discussed in the previous chapter, that of structural racism, and that of class racism. The latter is but a continuation of structural violence (see chapter 6) focused on specific ethnic groups. The systematic exclusion of Afro and indigenous peoples from the political and economic centers of power in the country, the non-regulation of laws (such as the case of Law 70) that defend the rights of these peoples, or the continuous non-compliance with them, are but a few examples of the multiple expressions of structural racism in Colombia. Finally, since the latter is not a country of immigration,¹¹⁸ class racism manifests itself in a subtly different way than in countries like France or Australia. In the latter, unable to risk splitting into two or more nations, the ruling class first "divide the mass of the 'poor' [...]; then

different Afro-Christian religions, as well as neo-African ones – like Rastafarianism in Jamaica, or Voodoo in Haiti, exist in other regions (ibid.).

¹¹⁷ The supremacy of the White-Crown race is supported by the myth of the origin (Balibar 1991, 87) of the nation, which celebrates the liberation of the Viceroyalty of New Granada by Simón Bolívar and the Declaration of Independence of 1810, later recognized in 1819. The problem with this myth is that it erases centuries of internal strife, and transforms the colonizers into liberators. In other words, the 'enemy' is shifted outside the nation, and by reinforcing the internal/external dichotomy, a supposed union between hegemonic and subordinate groups within the same imaginary community is constructed.

¹¹⁸ The so called "migratory crisis from Venezuela," resulting from the deep economic crisis that has touched Maduro's country in recent years, is an exception which has led millions of Venezuelans to migrate to the neighboring country. Given the ideological clash between the two countries, in February 2021, President Duque announced a progressive regulation of migrants, which should be analyzed as a mere political calculation rather than a humanitarian gesture. In this regard, see for example, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-55989693>.

progressively displace the markers of dangerousness and heredity from the 'laboring class' as a whole on to foreigners, and in particular immigrants and colonial subjects [...]" (Balibar 1991, 210). In Colombia, this process took place internally as a result of the racialization of the social classes, which had the white-*criollo* elite on top, and at the bottom, the peasant population, and rural and urban ethnic communities created as a result of the forced internal displacement linked to the conflict.

Certainly not all Black or indigenous people in Colombia are poor, but if one looks at the statistics and poverty indices, the data speak for themselves. For at least thirty years, Colombia has had one of the highest levels in the world. At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, the ratio of income between the poor and the rich rose from 40:1 to 80:1 (Hristov 2009, 45), while in the last ten years the richest 20% of society has concentrated between 56.2-59.3%¹¹⁹ of the country's wealth in its hands. If the maps showing where wealth and poverty have accumulated are overlaid with those showing the territories inhabited by ethnic groups, the relationship between class and race becomes evident. Along with Guajira and the Amazonian border region with Ecuador and Brazil, the Pacific basin is the area that has the highest rates of poverty. The Pacific region has a poverty rate on average between 50-70%, reaching a peak of 90.6% in Alto Baudó¹²⁰ – one of the areas under the influence of the Western War Front. The figures drop, but do not change in substance if one considers the entire national territory, including urban centers. For example, among the entire Afro-descendant population in Colombia, including the rich and affluent, the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) for this population in 2018 remains 30.6%. These discriminatory figures are also reflected in access to education (discussed in Chapter 4). Given the role of the educational institution in society (e.g. Ball 1990), it remains telling that, for example, careers in Cultural Studies – present as a Master's program only since 2002 – is in the hands of a white intellectual elite, and even worse, that it is prohibitively expensive for the populations that end up under the researchers' lens. As Eduardo Restrepo explains, "Tuition fees, even at the Nacional University [the only public university in Bogotá] are unpayable for many, which has helped establish social class division in the majority of practitioners of cultural studies in the country" (Restrepo 2021, 12).

To summarize, the main argument of this subchapter is that race and class in Colombia are not independent concepts, but two constants that tend to overlap in complex ways as a result of the historical factors that led to the formation of the nation. For this reason, an intersectional

¹¹⁹ See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1075279/colombia-income-inequality/>.

¹²⁰ See <https://www.dane.gov.co/index.php/estadisticas-por-tema/pobreza-y-condiciones-de-vida/pobreza-y-desigualdad/medida-de-pobreza-multidimensional-de-fuente-censal>.

analysis that considers the issue of race as well as social forces and political economy is essential to understanding the cultural, social, and economic landscape of the Colombian Pacific (Asher 2009). It is my contention that the multicultural nationalism celebrated by the 1991 Constitution tends to hide, under an image of supposed inclusion, the social and racial conflicts that continue to systematically exclude a portion of the population – the poor and ethnic – from the political-economic centers of power in the country. Multicultural policies in this sense, seem to be "the endeavor to produce a unified community in the face of 'external' enemies and the endless rediscovery that the enemy is 'within', identifiable by signs which are merely the phantasmatic elaboration of its division. Such a society is in a real sense a politically alienated society" (Balibar 1991, 215). In the following section, I show how the multicultural model promoted by the "new Constitution" recognizes and unites ethnic groups in their struggle, but at the same time categorizes and separates them through the concepts of race and ethnicity.

UNITY AND DIVISION AMONG ETHNIC/RACIAL GROUPS

If there is one thing that benefits the ruling class, it is tensions among subaltern groups that allow for the weakening or abandonment of the class struggle. As we have just seen, one of the classic strategies of ruling elites is to create an external enemy – such as foreigners – to shift the causes of injustice onto other groups, thus blurring the role of inequalities between social classes. In Colombia, one of the mechanisms that has long fueled tensions between subaltern groups has been the legal recognition of ethnic groups through two types of classification, that of race for Black communities, and that of ethnicity for indigenous peoples.

As Ng'weno (2007) explains, the term ethnicity is more recent than the term race, and over the past sixty years, it has taken on multiple dimensions depending on the context in which it has been used.¹²¹ In Colombia today, especially since the recognition of the ILO Convention 169 and the drafting of the Constitution in 1991, the term ethnicity serves to identify minority groups which enjoy a special category of privileged treatment compared to normal citizenship. If this has long been valid for indigenous communities, it is not the case for Black communities, which began to be recognized as an ethnic group only since the Constitution of 1991.

¹²¹ As Ng'weno clarifies, "In reference to Africa it is used instead of tribe, in Europe and United States it refers to immigrants and minorities. In Latin America it was used to replace ideas of race that are themselves based on culture, all within the context of nation building and as a reflection of historically produced power structures" (2007, 421).

Despite the genocide against indigenous groups that occurred with the arrival of Europeans, the later perception of these communities as culturally distinct from and subordinate to the white-*criollo* hegemony has allowed them to obtain certain recognitions, especially with regard to territorial autonomy. At the end of the twentieth century,

"[...] in Colombia, where indigenous people make up between two and three percent of the population they have managed to gain title for over 24 percent of the national territory under the state's multicultural 1991 Constitution. Afro-Colombians, on the other hand, make up about 26 percent of the population and have gained title to 2 percent of the national territory, principally located within the Pacific basin" (Ng'weno 2007, 416).

Indeed, the big difference lies in the fact that legally, after Blacks stopped being seen as commodities, they became part of the nation as a sub-category of citizens, "underdeveloped" instead of "developed differently," and therefore they are not able to claim privileged treatment. As Peter Wade argues, "it is the slippage between including Blacks as ordinary citizens and excluding them from the heart of nationhood which characterizes the position of Blacks in the Colombian racial order" (in Ng'weno 2007, 422). The 1991 Constitution with Law '70 and Transitional Article 55 have allowed for improvements in the political recognition of Blacks in Colombia, but at the same time, these policies have created new gaps, typically between rural and urban populations. While this may appear understandable in a Western context, it must be remembered that in Colombia the vast majority of the urban Black population is composed of Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs), people originally from rural communities who have been forced to flee their territory as a result of internal armed conflict. For the most part, these are people who now live in the city, but who continue to maintain a deep relationship with their rural origins.¹²² Having been forced to leave their territory means that these people have lost their homes and the benefits that came with living in a rural area recognized as collective territory.

Both Indigenous and Afro communities suffer from structural racism as well as the economic inequalities repeatedly enunciated in this work, but the legislation of their diversity has been and continues to be the cause of tensions that prevent their systematic alliance against the dominant class. As Wade (1995) explains, the "ethnicization" of Black communities through Transitional Article 55 and the subsequent '70 Act follows the model of recognition applied to

¹²² One example is that of the Agua Blanca neighborhood in Cali, which is inhabited by thousands of people who have fled the Norte del Cauca region due to conflict or as a result of mega projects such as the Salvajina Dam (see Bernasconi 2014). Given the proximity to the territory, which is about an hour and a half away by bus, this neighborhood, as well as all the people I have come in contact with over the past twelve years, should be understood as an extension of the community territory of Norte del Cauca rather than as an extension of the city of Cali.

indigenous groups, which is therefore focused on the relationship between culture and territory. In the struggle for the titling of land threatened by latifundium, an argument of confrontation between indigenous and Afro has therefore been that of belonging to the land, to which the indigenous have repeatedly tried to assert their right by arguing that the land of the Black communities is not in Colombia but in Africa, thus accusing the Afro of having lost their cultural identity (Ng'weno 2007, 433).¹²³ Instead of putting up a united front with the indigenous communities – as is often the case anyway¹²⁴ – the Afro communities find themselves having to defend their cultural integrity by justifying their right to collective ownership over land in Colombia. For their part, indigenous groups have enjoyed special treatment since the 1890s in terms of their right to land, but also through anthropology, which has placed indigenous history at the center of Colombia's major educational institutions and museums (Wade 1995, 346). Finally, it is precisely the differentiations brought in from the outside, both by state institutions and anthropologists, that complicate solidarity between ethnic and racial communities, which, by disputing territorial and cultural recognition, and thus being obliged to privilege ethnicity and race over class struggle, often remain facing each other on the margins of society. For its part, the state celebrates multiculturalism within its borders, but it does so by reducing it to sports, dance, cooking and artisanship. In other words, the preservation of cultural authenticity ceases to be accepted since it becomes a political claim that

¹²³ On this topic, it is interesting to mention the contrasting position of two American scholars, Franklin Frazier, an African-American writing during the forties, and Melville Herskovits, a white person. Since Frazier was writing in the social context of the American segregation, his opinion was close to the political agenda of anti-segregation structured upon a Marxist analysis. His idea is known as the *deculturation hypothesis*: i.e. the middle passage created a deep amnesia in the slaves' minds. Accordingly, the Africans living in the Americas created a culture that cannot be linked to their African past. For Frazier, the Africans arrived with the Europeans, and just like the first white immigrants are today's Americans, the early slaves are today's Afro (or African) Americans. On the other hand, Herskovits supported the idea that the slaves retained their cultures across the Atlantic, and this culture can be observed in today's New World in cultural habits like music, food and other various social behaviors. Between these two positions we find that of Mintz and Price (1992), according to whom the Afro-American culture was created in the New World. However, they argue, an African heritage can be observed in various neo-African beliefs. For example, various African societies believed that illness and misfortune were caused by witchcraft, while other groups believed it was provoked by the will of ancestral spirits. In both cases illness and misfortune responded to the intentions of higher invisible forces, i.e. a deep structural level of beliefs on which neo-African societies developed new unique ways of dealing with adversity. In contrast, Thornton finds homogeneity within the African slave population. His hypothesis rests on the fact that slaves mainly came from three African regions: Upper Guinea, Lower Guinea, and the Angolan coast (cf. J. K. Thornton 1998, 189). This is not entirely misconceived, as there were indeed some homogeneous ethnic groups, like for example in the case of Suriname's plantation of La Plata. Between these four points of view, what remains certain is that enslaved people in the New World created groups similar to the various African nations and Kingdoms, with fictive kinships (of prime importance in African societies) and analogous social structures.

¹²⁴ At key moments in Colombian politics, such as during the drafting of the 1991 Constitution or that of the peace agreement with the FARC-EP in 2016, it was the alliance between these groups that allowed the recognition – at least on paper – of important articles of law, such as the Ethnic Chapter of the peace agreement (see Chapter 3).

goes against the interests of the ruling classes (Hristov 2009, 58). I therefore sympathize with the concern of Ochy Curiel, who states,

“Most of the actions that define the [Black] movement revolve around the cultural, exacerbating ‘Black culture’ in order to make it visible and thus value it. I keep asking: Does that end racism? I keep giving myself the same answer: ‘it only recreates the culture but does not end the economic, social and political inequalities that are the product of racism and exploitation’”¹²⁵ (2002, 190).

Yet, it is the National Liberation Army that recognizes ethnic communities as political authorities and allies on the basis of class struggle. The ELN and the ethnic communities are not natural allies and indeed the presence of the guerrilla movement in ancestral territories is often the cause of major forced displacements due to clashes between the ELN and other armed groups. Not infrequently, community members are threatened or become military targets when they disagree with or oppose the guerrillas. Nevertheless, at least at the level of ideology and national leadership, the ELN recognizes the ethnic communities and engages in continuous economic and political alliances. In this regard, I leave explaining the ELN's vision to Commander Pablo Beltrán, who at the time of my interview in Havana, Cuba, in February 2019, was the head of the ELN peace delegation:

“Well, first of all we coincide and inhabit the same territories. That has led the ELN to develop a policy of respect for the norms and authorities of these communities, that is the essential basis of the ELN's relationship with ethnic minorities, whether indigenous or Afro. The majority of these communities do not agree with the war, they agree with peace, so we are companions on the road to peace building and if it were up to them, they would like the war to end today, because they are the ones who suffer it. So we have a relationship of respect: they respect that we are taking up arms, even if they do not share our decision, and we are companions on the road to peace building. In the regions, we are in various parts trying to achieve humanitarian measures and agreements with the government in order to reduce the intensity of the conflict and take away the suffering of the people. Yet, with the war on drugs dictated by Washington, the government is only interested in military solutions, while we and the ethnic communities are interested in the in-depth solutions. The way we see it, everything has a solution, but the solutions are not to be found in a desk in Bogotá, but while talking to the people.

¹²⁵ My translation from the Spanish.

As an example: Most of the Chocó region does not have roads, they are ancestral communities, especially the indigenous communities, so how can we make a development plan with them, how can we respect their territory? It has to be in agreement with their authorities. But the bourgeoisies of the country are used to designing for themselves to carry out projects in other people's territories!

Finally, because the majority of the communities in Chocó are indigenous and Afro, that also leads to the fact that as the ELN has been there for several decades, its fronts are being built according to that ethnic composition. The majority of our fronts there today are composed primarily of comrades from Afro communities and indigenous communities, which help our relationship with them.”

What Commander Beltrán implicitly suggests is the ELN's recognition of the territorial autonomy of ethnic groups, but also their recognition as political and economic authorities in the struggle against the state and the capitalist model defended by the latter. Moreover, although the ELN is not an ethnic guerrilla movement, as was the case with the MAQL or the EZLN in Chiapas, in regions like the Pacific, the composition of its troops has slowly influenced its political priorities, forcing the ELN to an alliance with ethnic groups in the territories, but also in the national and international political sphere. In this way, a scenario such as a peace process between the state and the guerrilla group becomes a matter of great importance for ethnic communities for two reasons: first, because any decisions taken fall on the territories they inhabit; and second, because given the ethnic composition of the ELN troops in an area like the Pacific basin, at stake in a possible demobilization are guerrillas with a double *segmentarity* – members of the ELN and members of ethnic communities.

ETHNICITIES AS A POLITICAL PROCESS VERSUS CAPITALISM

Since the Constitution of 1991, Blacks, as well as indigenous people, are recognized politically in Colombia as ethnic groups that should be granted a certain territorial, political, and cultural autonomy. Yet, these freedoms continue to be reduced to the cultural aspect by the state and its media apparatus which participate in the creation of a collective imagination portraying ethnic groups only in their folkloric aspect, or worse, as groups that oppose the economic development of the nation. When stigmatization is no longer enough, the state also adopts criminalization, as has been the case several times with the *Indigenous Guard* (for indigenous people) and the *Cimarrona Guard* (for Blacks) – bodies of community watch internal to the communities that patrol and protect the collective territories from external threats

such as armed legal and illegal actors. These watchdog bodies are composed of community members who, without discrimination of gender or age, identify themselves with the functions of protectors of the territory and defenders of human and collective rights of their communities (Chaves, et al. 2018). Both the Indigenous and Cimarrona guards do not possess firearms, only wooden sticks with a primarily symbolic function, yet when these guard mechanisms are utilized during protests or mobilizations, they are frequently accused of affiliation with guerrilla movements such as the ELN.¹²⁶

The political recognition of ethnic groups is all the more problematic because the notion of ethnicity is now the only one that is legally recognized, so that Afro, as well as indigenous groups, are in turn forced to move within this concept without being able to claim particular rights for their class or race status (Ng'weno 2007, 435). Although the notions of "race and ethnicity are in a co-dependent relationship" (iid. 417), the use of the term ethnicity places emphasis on the cultural rather than the political aspect, thus creating a legal framework that does not necessarily reflect the Afro and indigenous groups' view of themselves. Their organization into social movements, therefore, remains the most viable solution in their ongoing struggle for political recognition that is invariably limited and shaped by the legal structures of the state. These social movements, such as the ONIC (the Colombian National Indigenous Organization, see in Appendix: "The MAQL") for the indigenous or the PCN (Black Communities' Process) for the Afro, are nationally articulated and play a linking role between the regions and the various realities of the country. They are movements that have practical functions, such as fundraising or political lobbying, but at the same time, I argue, they are also the spaces where ideologies expressing the cosmovisions around which ethnic groups order their territorial sovereignty are produced.

The problem arises with communities that live isolated in the aquatic space and have more difficulty articulating social movements than those that live near urban centers or in places that can be reached by land. For this reason, the colonization of consciousness brought about by capitalism and the promises of modernity (Comaroff 1991), have led some of these populations to abandon themselves to a state of welfarism *vis-à-vis* the state, but also, arguably, towards the ELN.

Passing by boat near an indigenous community, I remember that Commander Marcos had said to me in irritation,

¹²⁶ See, for example, <https://www.cric-colombia.org/portal/denuncia-publica-sobre-las-falsas-acusaciones-hacia-la-minga-por-parte-de-los-medios-de-comunicacion-locales-regionales-y-nacionales/>.

"We lost thirty million pesos there! First, they gave us stories about how they are abandoned by the state and that having armed actors on their territory is a problem, etc. etc. So we asked them what they needed and they told us wood to build a house and a couple of *cambuyón*. We brought them I don't know how many boards of wood, and you know what happened? The wood just sat there on the ground rotting because according to them we also had to help them with the construction! Did they take us for a construction company or what? No brother, this welfarism is a huge problem here in the Pacific!"

I have never spent a night in that community and therefore cannot contradict Marcos's words, but what I have learned in other communities that have developed similar habits is that a passive resistance often prevails with the logic of: "Because of you (white people) we are in misery, it is up to you to get us out!" However, this anecdote is also telling for two other reasons. First, it shows how ethnic communities living on the margins of the state are forced to find solutions for their own survival that at least seemingly weaken their political process. And secondly, as in this case, they may lead to choices that also confirm the negative and stereotyped collective imagination fed by the media so deeply present in the minds of millions of Colombians, Marcos included.

Here again, it is interesting to see how the ethnic composition of ELN members in the Pacific leads to different understandings. Differing from Marcos, a white *antioqueño* (person from the Antioquia Department) of middle-class background, Cecilia, Ernesto's partner who has marked indigenous traits and was born into a working-class context, offered the following in a discussion of the social conditions of ethnic communities in the Pacific:

"You see, if they [the Colombian elites] keep us in ignorance, they can do with us whatever they want, then they will continue stealing what they have stolen from us all our lives! They will continue plundering us, they will take our gold, our oxygen, well everything that the oligarchy wants to steal from our people! They know that by keeping us in ignorance nobody is going to demand anything, then with any crumbs they will continue deceiving us as they have done all these years, decades of years, right? So that is why they want to continue keeping us in ignorance. And the organization [the ELN] has had to live and help a lot in that, yes, it makes one very sad when one arrives to those communities and the people come to ask for a bite of food, yes? [...] I think that being poor and having people in ignorance is making it easier for the State and the oligarchy to keep us more repressed, with crumbs as they have always done. No, then they will always continue to deceive us! We are going to be more repressed than if the people have knowledge and we are studied, we are going to rise up to claim what belongs to us, our

rights, not to let them take away the riches that we have. That is why I think that the Colombian people, especially the poor and the ethnic communities, are not given the opportunity to study and to have knowledge.”

Cecilia not only talks about ethnic communities by making use of "we," but her analysis centers on social factors and lack of education, instead of just cultural aspects. Put differently, it seems that Cecilia's analysis has as its starting point that of a class consciousness in which she recognizes ethnic groups as a unit that has the potential for its own liberation. As she herself confessed to me in an interview, in her personal case, it was the ELN that helped her in her emancipatory process. But according to her, this also should not preclude the primary work that ethnic communities continue to do internally, even with the help of their own social movements. For Cecilia, as for Commander Beltrán mentioned earlier, the political work of the ELN can be supportive of that of the communities and their social movements, but it should not replace it or try to influence it with visions that are not proper to the cosmovisions of the ethnic groups. In this regard, perhaps one aspect that stands out above all others and that I find essential to clarify is that of the economic model embraced by the communities. Indeed, regardless of whether or not the latter are bound to social movements, their economic aspirations are neither those of survival nor those of external dependence. The glorification of the economy of self-subsistence and the romanticization of poverty celebrated even within anthropology has led to confusion. When communities talk about self-subsistence or food sovereignty, they are not talking about poverty, but about wealth and autonomy outside of capitalism. For ethnic communities, economic development is not synonymous with adherence to the capitalist model, but on the contrary, "[...] while plantations follow the demands of capital, local farmers have been able to configure a rhythm of production that does not bend completely to the rationality of capital; they maintain a certain level of autonomy with respect to the disciplining of labor, landscape, and time that are instead an imperative of capitalist production" (Escobar 2015, 107).

Agreeing with Escobar, I argue that ethnic communities and their social movements have the potential to be economic actors in their territories, but also to propose economic models capable of integrally, equitably, and sustainably uniting these territories with the rest of the country – urban centers included. Ethnic groups not only have a profound knowledge of rural spaces on the margins of the state, but as a result of the violence of Colombia's internal conflict and the forced displacement they have suffered for decades, they also have an acute awareness of the relationship between city and countryside. Saying "no to coca" is not the same as saying "yes to capitalism," but neither the war on drugs proposed by the United States nor the repression enacted by the Colombian state allow for an understanding of the needs of

communities outside of this binary view. For this reason, I suggest it is necessary to move away from the folkloric vision of ethnic groups promoted by the state and traditional anthropology, and give ethnicity its full emic – therefore political and economic – value. In particular, my argument is that the suggestions made by ethnic groups can, and perhaps must, help us to think about possible alternatives to the capitalist model. Above all, both indigenous and Afro cosmovisions value a sustainable relationship with the surrounding territory, but also with the rhythms of human life, in which there is room for work, but also and above all time dedicated to social relations, artistic production, reflection, observation, and the pleasure of small things. These values should not be understood as praise for poverty or idleness, but rather as praise for degrowth. For sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2010), the world is advancing in what he describes as a continuous social acceleration and dynamization of capitalist society. The necessity of incessant production at ever-increasing speeds results in what he calls *desynchronization*, or the material impossibility of acceleration in all areas of human life. As far as production is concerned, in other words, this is O'Connor's second capitalist contradiction seen in the previous chapter. What Rosa explains, however, is that this constant acceleration leads to alienation, that is, the loss of interaction between society and the world around us, or said in her words, the loss of *resonance*.¹²⁷ My argument is that the ethnic groups in Colombia, with their concepts of *buen vivir* ("good living") and *vida digna* ("decent life"), can teach us to recover *resonance* with the space and time of our planet. However, this is not only in the smooth communitarian space but also in urban contexts that first and foremost need to resonate with rural realities. Understanding the intersection between race and class means reading ethnicity in a context that is not only cultural but above all, political and economic. Ethnic groups do not go against development but fight for a different kind of development, namely that of a communitarian and collective model rather than a capitalist and individual one. Their cosmovisions thus echo the words of the anarchic geographer Kropotkin, who warned two centuries ago,

"[...] human societies are forced to return to first principles: the means of producing being the collective work of humanity, the product should be the collective property of the race. [...] All things are for all men, since all men have need of them since all men have worked in the measure of their strength to produce them, and since it is not possible to evaluate everyone's part in the production of the world's wealth" (2014, 242).

In conclusion, an intersectional reading of race and class, added to an analysis of the interaction between ethnic groups and the ELN brings to light what the Colombian multicultural

¹²⁷ See also the TED talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7uG9OFGId3A>

model seeks to conceal, namely the relationship between unequal relations and conditions of production, and ethnic groups as an oppressed, but unrecognized, working class to be named through the cultural lens. The collective imaginary created by the state therefore comes to affect the consciousness of those who, like the two Black women in the introductory vignette, assume their poverty to be naturally connected to their racial affiliation. Without suggesting that the presence of the ELN is necessary or desired in the absence of social movements or state institutions, as a result of my research I argue that the political – not military – interaction between the guerrilla movement and ethnic communities benefits both groups. The presence of guerrillas like Cecilia, Angela, or Assata in the ranks of the ELN influences this organization as much in its ideological production as in its practices. Examples include ethnic-racial self-representation (Echeverry Cano and Urrea Giraldo 2015), and the construction of masculinity and femininity addressed in the next chapter. In the ELN, guerrillas go through a process of liberation and emancipation, but given the impossibility of an ideological political groundwork (see Chapter 5), their reading of the class struggle remains steeped in ethno-racial concepts related to their communal experience. Here, another question posed at the beginning of the chapter remains unanswered: Why are there no Blacks, natives, and almost no women in ELN leadership positions? Why is it that in a front moving across the Pacific and composed mainly of Blacks and natives, the commanders are white? To climb the ladder of this politico-military hierarchy, it is necessary to excel in two fields, the political and the military. The difference lies in the fact that military excellence can be aspired to through experience and personal qualities, while political leadership requires a pool of knowledge to which not everyone has access. Indeed, knowing how to read, write, and having had at least a basic schooling, are prerequisites that almost systematically exclude Pacific youth from access to the highest ranks of the ELN. I would add that the same also applies to all (legal) institutions in Colombia, where with only a few fortunate exceptions, those who advance are generally those who have the opportunities to grow up in the best neighborhoods and access the best schools. It is therefore up to the ELN to ensure that people from the lower ranks are given opportunities to learn, train, and thus be able to aspire to positions of leadership. It should be remembered that the ELN is not an NGO or a state institution, but an armed social movement, which given the war policy of the current Colombian government, is forced to devote itself more to armed struggle than to social struggle. The immediate priorities of this group are therefore more related to the dynamics of war than to those of identity politics. At the same time, people like Commander Esther (to whom I return in the coming chapter), or Cecilia herself, demonstrate how there are transformations taking place that may be valued rather than denigrated. One must hope, then, that if there are no Blacks

or indigenous people in leadership positions, it is only because their time is about to come. It remains to be seen whether the state's criminalization of the ELN and the communities that inhabit the territories under its influence only complicates a relationship that I argue should be analyzed in depth. Indeed, as there is evidence that family and community are the primary sources of support for demobilized guerrillas (Gluecker, Correa-Chica, and López-López 2021), in order to imagine a possible finalized peace process with the ELN, it is necessary to understand the complex relationships between the guerrilla movement and ethnic communities.

Finally, the ethnic diversity within the ranks of the ELN results in inter-ethnic and intra-class solidarity that shapes and influences the historical Marxist-Leninist reading of this organization, not diverting it, but rather creating alternatives, in the common struggle against capitalism. I, therefore, agree with Baquero Melo, that, "accounting for the entanglements of class, race, and ethnicity in our efforts to understand social relations offers an alternative and expanded foundation on which future research on inequalities and agrarian transformations can build" (2015, 1031).

CONCLUSION

The introductory vignette poses the following question: Why do Black women in the Pacific explain themselves and their poverty by making reference to racial rather than class factors?

The intersectional analysis I propose in this dissertation aims to explain how race and class are not disconnected notions, but concepts that, particularly in post-colonial states are often overlapping, but whose relationship is concealed by the state through the construction of imaginary communities such as the multicultural nation. For instance, the notion of ethnicity that for years was attached to indigenous peoples, has since the Constitution of 1991 become the term also used to legally define Black communities. The use of this term, rather than that of race, has several implications, such as the enhancement of difference only in rural contexts, or the highlighting of cultural aspects at the expense of political and economic claims.

For this reason, I argue that scholars must stop studying ethnic groups at the level of folklore, and romanticizing their economies of self-subsistence and survival. On the contrary, these are groups that offer clear alternatives to the capitalist model in rural as well as urban contexts and especially in the field-city relationship. Finally, guerrillas from these communities are agents of change in two contexts – that of the ELN, where they influence the practices and ideologies of the organization, and in their own communities, where they have the opportunity to support

and push dynamics of inter-ethnic solidarity, but also to influence change in unequal relationships such as those of gender discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 9

GENDER CONSTRUCTIONS AMONG RIFLES

“¡En la casa arreglamos!”¹²⁸

Afro-Chocoan expression



Guerrilla man cooking in the forest– Photo by the author

¹²⁸ “*At home we deal with it,*” is an expression normally used by women. It refers to situations in which, in order to avoid public discussion following some problem, the woman wishes to make clear to her husband or partner that the argument will be resumed once home.

Pacific basin, September 27th, 2017

I spent the night turning around in the soggy hammock. My tarpaulin no longer holds water. The good thing is that I think my diarrhea has passed. This morning, while making arepas for breakfast, I saw a small squirrel jump from one tree to another and then disappear into the green of the forest. It is already 2 pm, and because of the heat, my eyes are closing. Around 2.30 pm, Arturo calls me and tells me to put on my boots. He tells me so calmly that it takes me a couple of minutes to understand what is happening. An attack not far away. In three days, on October 1st, the bilateral ceasefire will begin. How is it possible that the army attacks now? I don't have time to finish the sentence as I begin to hear the mechanical noise of the GAU-19A.50 machine guns, a noise I had never heard in my life. Vilma yells at me to get my backpack and follow the others who are already walking up the hill. We remain hidden for about fifteen minutes, and Vilma tells me to crouch down in a big tree's hollow. It seems that everything is over when a helicopter flies at about fifty meters over us, so close that we can see the soldier operating his machine gun. As the helicopter moves away, I make everyone laugh saying, "That was very close!" In reality, I had never been so frightened in my life.

Other helicopters continue to fly over the area and shoot. Paula almost cries with fear. Vilma, one of the doctors of the War Front, is irritated by Paula's tears and tells me, "Todos estamos asustados, pero en esta situación hay que ser hombre" ("We are all scared, but in these situations, you have to be a man!"). Vilma does not seem to panic at all. While Commander Marcos and the other four people begin to make their way into the forest towards a safer shelter, she stays back to order and organize all that remains of the camp (a couple of chairs, stoves, pots, groceries). I decide to stay with her. I feel safe with her. She tells me that as soon as the situation calms down, it will be necessary to transport everything by boat along the river.

Is this the way to be a man, "ser hombre"? Do you have to be a man in order to be a guerrilla fighter?

Pacific basin, September 29th, 2017

When everything seemed to be calming down, helicopters appeared again! Several times we have to leave the cambuyón to go and hide in the forest.

As darkness arose, a boat with a dozen guerrilla members arrives at Marcos's place. They bear tragic news: Camilo is dead. He has been shot while he was trying to erase the traces left in the mud by the guerrilla group he was taking to safety.

The night has already covered the jungle while the same boat leaves toward the place where Commanders Ernesto and Esther are hiding. I said to Marcos I wanted to be useful, so he sent me on the boat carrying food, I guess for the guerrillas who are still hiding somewhere in the forest. The journey is slow; the boat is heavy and slides over the river only a few inches above the surface of the black water. Every five minutes, the engine must be switched off to stop and listen if there are planes or helicopters nearby. We leave the river to enter a small tributary. Suddenly, the sky above us opens up just enough to catch sight of some stars. In front of me, a young indigenous woman scrutinizes those ancient lights in silence. Her companion, an imposing and muscular young Black man, seated at her side, also notices the show. With his elbow, he gently touches his companion. "Look," he tells her, and makes the tiny body of the girl vanish into a tender embrace. Can a fighter be gentle and still be a man?

Once we arrive at a new camp, it is close to midnight already. We are welcomed warmly because we are bringing food to the people who were actually under attack and had not been eating for two days while escaping the army through the bush.

Among the people happy to receive food is a girl who does not stop crying. She is Celia, Camilo's companion. Everybody seems to ignore her cries. When she sees me, she hugs me, maybe because she does not need to be a man with me, or maybe because I do not know how to be a man myself. "They killed Camilo," she sobbed. "Where will I meet a man like him again? Who will take care of my son now?" "There is still hope, and we don't know if he is really dead." It is all I can say, while trying not to let myself go in tears as well, while trying to be "a man."

Pacific basin, September 30, 2017

I share the tent with Commander Esther. She likes to have company and particularly to share some cigarettes before she sleeps.

We talk about everything a bit: she tells me about having a 25-year-old daughter and an 18-year-old son, she tells me about her love affairs, and the reason for the revolution. Esther is irritated by Celia's crying. As she explains to me, "First of all, we must never lose hope until the last word is said, and secondly, we cannot let ourselves be carried away by emotions in this way because our tears end up influencing the morale of all the troops."

Commander Esther knows what it means to lose a loved one, "It happens every three years, that a major attack occurred," she starts recalling. "I was sleeping when they bombed us. At any moment, I found myself in the air, and when I regained consciousness, I immediately

realized that I had lost one foot. I promised myself I wouldn't cry, and so it has been. In war, you can't show yourself weak, especially if you are a woman. So when some civilians came to help me, I told them to leave me there, with a gun and a couple of grenades, and to first rescue those who were worse off than me. The army was blocking the river so I couldn't see a doctor for days. A girl who was with me instead, despite the risk of being arrested later, was sent to the hospital because the bombs had opened her in two; they had to rebuild her whole vagina. In that attack, I lost my foot, my best friend and my companion who was sleeping next to me and whose body has tragically been my human-shelter, but I didn't shed a tear, and here I am. Life is tough for women, but here I am. Let's sleep now!"

The Commander is endowed with a pungent intelligence that leaks out from two emerald green eyes, sharp and peering. In an instant, she can go from the sweetest to the coldest and most severe gaze, somehow a way to remind me that I am talking to a Commander of an ELN War Front. I feel studied, fascinated and intimidated at the same time. I don't know why, but all of a sudden, I remember that passage from Dante: "Elena vidi, per cui tanto reo tempo si volse [...]"¹²⁹

*I close my eyes to tiredness and I imagine Helen of Troy in the midst of a world in turmoil. Then Commander Esther, surrounded by flames, without a foot, with a grenade in her hand...
Is this the way to be a woman?*

What does it mean to be a woman or to be a man? More precisely, what does it mean to be a woman or a man in the ELN guerrilla movement in Colombia? When I first established contact with the insurgency, the study of gender dynamics was not part of my fieldwork agenda. I didn't expect to find a lot of women, if any, and admittedly I wasn't aware of their central role within the ELN. I still remember, as if it was yesterday, my first day with the guerrillas, when Ricardo, and Ramona came to pick me up. As we settled in a house on the edge of the village, I will never forget my amazement when I discovered that three other women and only one other man were waiting for me. Among the three women, there was Rosa, also Black, who shared the typical joyous characteristic of the inhabitants of the Pacific region. She was the soul of the small group that surrounded me during the first night. She entertained us for hours, delighting us with stories of how she has survived several enemy attacks and other critical situations. In

¹²⁹ The passage tells of when Dante finds himself in front of the "infernal storm" in the circle of the lustful, and Virgil, his guide, points out to him some of the spirits that fly in the storm: "Helen I saw, for whom turning time has been ruthless; and I saw the great Achilles, fighting with love in his last moments" (Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy, Hell, Fifth Canto).

Chapter 5 I argued that these narratives strengthen the internal ELN social fabric. Each story has its own place, time, and actors. Every story you hear, moreover, is a story to tell. What I learned my first days among the ELN ranks was that knowing how to tell stories is an art that allows you to be appreciated and desired within the group. Rosa was a master of the craft. As I wrote in my diary that night, "*la recocha*¹³⁰ is the heart of the guerrilla movement, and women are its soul!"

The first night with the guerrillas, there was Rosa, but also Celia and her partner Camilo. I discover that Rosa and Celia, as well as Commander Esther and many other women in the ELN, are fighters as well as mothers. In the September 27th attack, Rosa was with her 4-year-old boy, who was with her for a few days as no one would have imagined an attack three days before the historic bilateral ceasefire. At the time of the attack, however, Rosa was too far away from the house where her son was playing, so Celia took him to safety. That day, Camilo didn't die – he managed to escape in the forest, reappearing unharmed some days after along with a new story. Referencing this attack, Celia told me that when the helicopters began to fly over the camp,

"We were sitting in the *cambuyón*. Esther told us to be quiet and calm, that it was probably a simple overflight, while Simón, Rosa's companion, immediately realized that the target was us and told us to run. I put the baby on my shoulder, grabbed my rifle, and jumped to hide in the forest. The little boy did not shed a tear and remained silent the whole way. Only the next day, he started crying from hunger, but luckily, we had a few spare cookies, and with those, we were able to calm him down."

Listening to the tales of women fighters, of fighters who are mothers, of mothers who are the wives of other fighters, ignited my curiosity about the role of women and their position in the ELN, their relationship with men, and their identity as guerrillas. Thanks to my position as an outsider, I was able to interact and create a space of intimacy where guerrillas shared with me their fears, worries, joys, and dreams for a Colombia in peace. These exchanges sparked my interest in gender relations within the guerrilla, their construction, and the terms used for their definition and positioning. For example, given the current usage, I wondered what *ser hombre* meant to a man, and what the same expression meant when said by a woman. As we will see in the next pages, in an unusual space like that of the guerrilla movement, femininity and masculinity articulate and define each other in a game of oppositions and inclusions that are both bound to the surrounding war space, as well as to external influences that are accepted,

¹³⁰ *Recocha* in Colombia, refers colloquially to a carefree moment between friends filled with fun and jokes.

rejected, or transformed. Most of all, and this is my central argument, femininity, and masculinity in ELN are built, performed, and defined in contrast to the form in which they are experienced in civilian life, as well as in rejection of the gender models perpetrated by the State.

My own masculinity has never been questioned as much as in the months spent with the ELN. I recall one of the first times I had to build my *cambuche* on my own. After trying to plant a trunk in the ground for a couple of minutes, it had only penetrated about ten centimeters. At that point, Assata, a bit impatient as it would soon get dark, took the trunk out of my hand and said "Come on, be a man, push hard!" With three well-aimed blows, she made the trunk penetrate the ground by half a meter. After working in sugar cane plantations in Cuba, milking cows and goats in the Swiss Alps, hoeing the land, and working in various gold mines in Colombia, I did not think it would have been so difficult to "be a man" in the ELN. I was thereby forced to understand the criteria on which masculinity was built.

DO MEN NEED TO BE MACHO?

According to Gutmann, "the first concept of masculinity holds that it is, by definition, anything that men think and do. The second is that masculinity is anything men think and do to be men [or to be 'good men' (cf. Herzfeld 1985)]. The third is that some men are inherently or by ascription considered "more manly" than other men. The final manner of approaching masculinity emphasizes the general and central importance of male-female relations so that masculinity is considered anything that women are not" (Gutmann 1997, 386).¹³¹ In the ELN, *ser hombre* goes hand in hand with being a good fighter and a "good man," i.e., to follow Camilo Torres's example and directives "*Siempre junto al pueblo*" ("always with the people"), and generally trying to get as close as possible to the famous Che Guevara's New Man. Like Patrizio one day explained to me, "To be a good guerrilla, one must have the greatest discipline, follow the orientations given to him by his superior, not be undisciplined. So that one can say, yes, this man serves for war."

Indeed, in the guerrilla movement, it seems that it is the hierarchical position and level of education that determines the masculinity model to which one aspires. If, as Judith Butler (1999) points out, gender — and thus masculinity — is a performance, the spectacle offered by guerrilla men appears to rely on the different tools that every individual possesses. Hegemonic masculinity is embodied and performed by those who can read and write, and those who have

¹³¹ See also the work of Connell (R. Connell 2005; R. W. Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

an in-depth knowledge of the ELN principles. With these prerequisites, he will propose himself to be a replica of the timeless Cuban revolutionary. Those who never had the possibilities to educate themselves will continue to perform the kind of masculinity they have learned since childhood. The latter is masculinity that highlights physical strength, hypersexuality, and defiance in the face of risks associated with war. In Colombia, this other (civil) hegemonic masculinity is defined as *machismo*, where a *macho* is the man who displays in his attitudes what is referred to in English as *toxic masculinity*. As I've done so far, I will maintain the *emic* definition – *macho*, *machista*, *machismo* – in this chapter.

The context of the ELN, where everyday tasks are gender-equal and where women carry guns and are engaged in active combat, leads to every man attempting to develop a strategy to stand out and assert a particular form of masculinity. As Kimberly Theidon suggests based on her extended fieldwork among former Colombian combatants, "women choose someone who can protect them, give them something" (2009, 28). So, "anything men think and do to be men" (*ibid.*) mostly relies upon the ability to perform "useful masculinity," i.e., masculinity that can offer something to women, which usually translates into the economic maintenance of women by men. However, in the ELN, even for those who enter the movement carrying these values, the situation transforms. As Patrizio observed,

"So we know that the guerrillas...not only the guerrillas, but all the women, are free. They know whom they're bonding with. Here in the ELN, you don't have a woman, you have a partner, a comrade. And so, how to say? Is not, "That's my wife, I'm supporting her." Here as the man, you don't support the woman. Because here the organization supports her. It is the organization that gives her everything, that answers for her, for all of us."

In a situation of economic equality, men in the ELN are thus forced to rebuild a new social model of masculinity, no longer based on the control and domination of women, but on accepting their equality. Clearly, this is an ongoing process that remains difficult for many men to accept, but the fact that gender equality has become part of the ELN's revolutionary agenda is gradually allowing structural changes to take place within the organization. Interestingly, the people who are most reluctant to adapt to these new standards are the men at the top of the military hierarchy. In fact, for an officer, and even more so for a commander, it is easy to maintain the role of "protector" and to offer material benefits, directly, in the form of money or gifts, or indirectly, by taking care of his partner's family. Even so, the female guerrillas are aware that the organization grants their subsistence, and the courtesies they could get from a high-ranking partner are extra favors that do not seem to jeopardize their integrity as ELN members. This does not mean that there are no cases of abuse and power games, but as many

guerrillas have often told me, the ELN is a political-military organization with a precise Internal Regulation, to which everyone is able to appeal. The Internal Regulation is the Bible of every guerrilla, and everyone is obliged to study it. During my stay, I rarely saw people reading books, and yet, the Internal Regulation is not only part of the group readings, but very often, I have seen young guerrillas lying down in their *cambuches* at break time to read it.

Unlike civilian life, where legal procedures can take indefinite time, in the ELN, as I happened to observe on several occasions, a young guerrilla fighter annoyed by a comrade's behavior can appeal to her supervisor at any time. As Ramona explained to me, "When a new comrade arrives who, let's say, is a *machista*, who mistreats a comrade or gets his clothes washed. In this case, what do you do? With the Internal Regulation, with the rules he must change! And if he doesn't change, he has to pay the sanctions!" Cecilia, Ernesto's partner, confirmed Ramona's words in a filmed interview, "Here in the ELN, we are in the process of eradicating *machismo*. We are fighting *machismo*, trying to build a new society where we all have to be equal. First of all, we have discussions. We are trying to train people, to change their chip. Here the man cannot mistreat the woman." Finally, confronted with the same questions, Ernesto also summarized the circumstance with his words,

"Well, customs become culture even if they are wrong. However, it has not been easy to eradicate or advance in eradicating macho postures, obviously led by men, but sometimes also assumed for the wrong reasons by women. The ELN continues to ride on the ideas, on the practice, on the day-to-day, combating these macho attitudes and macho situations within our organization. And we fight them with ideological struggle, with talks, with clarifications, but sometimes we also have to resort to coercive measures, to administrative measures, so that this political axis, so transcendental for the moment that the world is living in, is taken seriously!"

What was clear from my interlocutors' words was that overly masculine attitudes with which young Colombians are socialized are hard to eradicate. The ELN, therefore, takes on the role of a school for the re-education of gender relations, the respect of whose rules is guaranteed by the application of coercive measures. The struggle for gender equality must not be understood as a singular pursuit, but as part of a constellation of actions necessary to realize the social justice advocated by the ELN. The assumption of a gender policy in the ELN's regulatory codes of social and military life reaffirms the political-military nature of this revolutionary movement. The coercive dimension of the internal regulations obliges the guerrillas, especially young people new to the organization who cannot offer particular favors or benefits to their companions, to re-evaluate the criteria on which to build their masculinity. In this way, being

"a man" gains an integral dimension. Physical strength and courage certainly remain valid criteria, as they suggest the ability to protect in a challenging situation and be a useful arm in the demanding daily tasks. Yet, a "good guerrilla man" must also show sensibility and the capacity of being caring and loving. As a Commander once told me, "it is important to have a good partner in this difficult environment."

From my experience and the various situations that I have had the opportunity to observe, especially within villages or in the presence of more people, the type of manhood that young guerrillas perform most is what I call "heroic masculinity." Such masculinity has more to do with a particular attitude than with any physical features. I would define "heroic masculinity" as a set of behaviors that men perform to demonstrate their gallantry, courage, and willingness to protect not only their beloved women, but all their people, before a single common enemy: the state. Heroic masculinity is legitimized by the fact that every guerrilla is ready to give his life for an ideal – the struggle for social justice embraced by the ELN. As I explored in Chapter 6, marginalized, racialized youths end up in the ELN to escape the State's structural violence. In their search for economic security, however, the guerrilla movement not only guarantees their daily bread, clothing, and a pair of boots, but it also opens up a space where men and women can perform new roles. For men, the role of "generous protector" almost assumes the properties of a romantic ideal. When guerrilla men enter a *caserío* (a small village) with a rifle on their shoulder, their enactment entails what Bourgois labels a *search of respect* (2002), as well as a certain charm and sex-appeal directed towards young women. Particularly for men, becoming guerrillas is not limited to the abandonment of economically and socially precarious situations, but also to the acquisition of a new status. As Kivland put forward, "[...] we cannot reduce the appeal of gangs for poor Black youth to economic necessity; instead, we must see the allure as tied to their role as alternative value systems that offer spaces of belonging and opportunities to attain status and influence" (2014, 680). For ELN members, I argue, the performance of "heroic masculinity" is contrasted to femininity, but even more so, it is contrasted to masculinity in civilian life. Men belong to a place of resistance against the state, and their masculinity is situated within those boundaries, where carrying a rifle inspires respect, fear, but also the willingness to offer protection and favors against the oppressive state's apparatus. Not surprisingly, as Theidon points out, "constructing certain forms of masculinity is not incidental to militarism; rather, it is essential to its maintenance. Militarism requires a sustaining gender ideology as much as it needs guns and bullets" (2009, 3).

Yet, once isolated in the forest's intimacy, "heroic masculinity" unveils aspects that are flaunted less often than when in the presence of extraneous glances, but which are no less

relevant to its realization. With the exception of a few commissions that for logistical reasons or for political work are often found in the vicinity of villages, most commissions spend periods ranging from one to four months away from any inhabited nucleus. Here, in this lapse of time that accounts for most of a guerrilla's life, caring and loving seem to be the most important qualities a man is expected to display. The existing literature on guerrilla movements, based on fieldwork and interviews with demobilized fighters or in the post-conflict situation (Bejarano Sanabria and Delgado Salazar 2017; Cuénoud González and Clémence 2019; María Fernanda Molina Álvarez and Vanessa Juliet Vizcaíno Barrera 2016; Wiegink 2020) generally does not explain how masculinity is performed in everyday life on the front, particularly in the close intimacy of partner relationships. In the *cambuche*, away from prying eyes, personal problems are solved with long discussions that force self-reflection. As Patrizio recalled, talking to me about his relationship, "Because, as I'm telling you, sometimes she [his girlfriend] makes mistakes, so I call her and give her a talk, there for her to reflect. Both she and I have to reflect, as a man too. And if she is seeing me misbehaving, she also has the right to call, "Hey comrade, I did not like this, this and this!" Just as I, as a man, can call her and ask her to change, to reflect."

In other situations, the use of intermediaries is not excluded. I remember a discussion with Thomas, who was Assata's companion for a time. Being unfamiliar with life in the rainforest, at the beginning of the relationship, he often became jealous. He told me that one day, a comrade called him and explained that with his jealousy, he was creating discomfort in the whole troop, and that if he wanted to be a good guerrilla, he had to be "a man." Here, being a man meant being able to swallow his jealousy, and always show affection toward his partner. In one of our long talks, Thomas confessed that his jealousy was due to his insecurity. His little time spent in the ELN still did not make him a guerrilla, and even less a fighter. He was a curious and very sensitive young man, but having grown up in the city, in a small middle-class family, he was aware of not yet having adapted to the hostility of life in the tropical forest. One afternoon, during those long, hot hours of waiting before dinner, we ended up discussing gender equality. Thomas made his points clear,

"I believe in the necessity of armed struggle. Not in revolution, that is a utopia, it doesn't exist, but in armed struggle, yes, as a necessity to force social change. But brother, the road is long. You come from another world, and in a certain way, so do I. I don't know what it's like in your part of the world, but Colombia is a society where man is in charge, and that must change! The ELN is trying, but it is up to us to help women to change all this. They can't do all the work on their own! Here, no one can beat a woman or he'll be

punished, but machismo, uff... the youth has understood, and they are changing, but the commanders. Except for Ernesto, who is certainly an example, the others are each more macho than the other! What a nuisance! But then it's true that we are a military organization, so I don't know, but it's certain that there's still a long way to go..."

Thomas' analysis opens up an important space for reflection on the ELN as an avant-garde movement. In the Pacific, and in Colombia more generally, being a man is still profoundly linked to being *macho*. In the ELN, this posture is fought in the discourse, but still often reproduced in practice, in particular, as Thomas recalls, by those who enjoy more affluent positions within the hierarchy.¹³² Nevertheless, even if slowly, a change is taking place that is driven simultaneously from three angles: from above, through regulations and directives issued at the national level; from women, who internally are seizing important spaces for discussion; and from male fighters, who increasingly recognize that their "heroic masculinity" is not so much linked to their virility as to their ability to value social justice, thus gender equality. As Thomas recognized, one aspect that is key in the ELN's social policy is support and solidarity. As I have observed on several occasions, male fighters increasingly stand up for their female companions' cause. To sum up, the ELN's "heroic masculinity" is undoubtedly linked to a brave, fearless, dominant attitude, and more than anything else, it is dependent on the exhibition of a rifle on one's shoulder. However, like in the muscular embrace under the starry sky described in the introductory vignette, a guerrilla man can easily become a fighter, but to be a "good man," the same fighter will have to show unexpected tenderness, and from time to time, completely surrender to his female companion.¹³³

DO WOMEN NEED TO BE MEN?

Just as Vilma scolded Paula in a moment of panic under the attack of the army described above, it may seem paradoxical that a female fighter explains the necessary attitude in a crisis by saying "*Hay que ser hombre*" ("You have to be a man") without ceasing to be a woman. Nonetheless, in the following pages, we will see how for a guerrilla woman, such a statement not only makes sense but also demonstrates how femininity is a concept that is continuously reconfigured, especially in the context of war and its attendant forms of structural violence, such as racism and sexism.

¹³² Here, see for instance the work of Aaronette While (2007).

¹³³ Bayard de Volo's work here is crucial, as she looks particularly at guerrilla masculinity, both tough and tender, loving and fierce (2012).

In Latin America, there is a long-standing women's revolutionary tradition (cf. Jaquette 1973), but names like Cecilia Tupac Amaru, wife of the last Inca's king, and possibly the first American female martyr, are not as renowned as those of their masculine counterparts. The presence of revolutionary women has been overshadowed by icons such as the "Ché" or EZLN Subcommander Marcos in Chiapas. As Kampwirth suggests, "[...] our understanding of revolutionary movements is inevitably poorer if we try to understand those movements in gender-free terms; revolution in the real world has never been gender-free" (2002, 1). Women's role merits attention, not only because of the number of females who have joined revolutionary movements, but because of the ways they have shaped those movements through time. Jaquette points out, "the act of taking up a gun and entering a guerrilla band implies a new relationship of equality with men and a consequent change in patterns of role differentiation by sex" (1973, 433). Women are not passive elements or "false men," but actors capable of reshaping preconceptions and toxic masculine habits that their comrades inherit from their socialization outside the guerrilla movement. Moreover, the role of women in the ELN has changed over time. The performance of femininity, once passive and subordinate to men, has become today more and more a manifestation of independence, emancipation, and appropriation of a space – the revolutionary one – which had long remained almost exclusively male-dominated.

According to the Commander Pablo Beltrán, who spent most of his life in the guerrilla movement, three historical periods mark the presence of women in guerrilla warfare. The first period matches the first ten years of the ELN's existence. During this time frame, "[...] The presence of women in the guerrillas was seen more as a cause of conflict than of contribution." During this decade, the insurgency was perceived as a natural masculine space, and women had to contribute to the revolution in the form of logistic support away from the frontline, rather than as soldiers interfering with the dominion of men. According to Beltrán, following the severe crisis that shook the organization during the 1970s (see Chapter 3), the guerrilla movement recomposed itself, and women became a crucial element in the process of reconstitution. After a decade of denial, given the urgency of recruits, it suddenly became apparent that "[...] women can also do the same exercises, they can do the same physical efforts, they can study the same, they can have command, in short, they can do the same." The flow of new female fighters, however, did not come without some adjustment in the rules holding the military structure together. For example, "[...] the female companions were having their first child and asked to leave. So they were given 'the leave,' and motherhood became the main reason for the guerrilla 'casualties,' not combat but motherhood," laughed Beltrán – alluding to how many guerrillas left the group in order to take care of their children. In his memory, during

this period, the number of ELN women significantly increased, forcing the organization to adjust its habits. As we will see below, maternity within the ELN follows less strict rules than those to which women in the FARC-EP were subjected. It is nonetheless true that, as Beltrán suggests, many women who left the ELN to give birth often did not return. One of the reasons for this was exemplified by Sandra, a woman who has been an ELN militant for forty years. She explained to me one day that it seems young mothers were worried about their children's fate, often having no one to leave them with as many women are disowned by their families once they take up arms. Sandra continued: "Over time, I think the ELN realized it was not right. Today, the guerrilla movement takes care of its militants' children, gives them money for food, and sometimes even pays for their studies. It is much easier to be a guerrilla woman today than in my youth days! It really wasn't easy back then!"¹³⁴ Listening to anecdotes of my interlocutor about her past in the ELN, it appeared that during this second phase, the guerrilla women embraced what Duzel, in her study of militant femininity¹³⁵ in the Kurdish PKK (2018), calls masculine womanhood. For Duzel, masculine womanhood is the stage of guerrilla lives where "[...] female fighters construct[ed] masculine femininity through the traditional gender binaries. Masculinity, belligerency and toughness became the pillars of empowered womanhood" (ibid. 144). In other words, during this second phase, women were present, but they were expected to inhabit a strictly male-dominated space, hence they had to try to fit in with their male companions rather than seeking to adjust the space for their particular needs.

Finally, the third period described by Commander Beltrán, which began in the 2000s and continues to the present, is one in which the ELN has grown in the urban spheres. In this latter phase, for Beltrán, "It is no longer just the experience with the peasant or indigenous woman, but already with the woman of urban areas, that is a guerrilla member with a medium or higher education. Therefore, there are discussions about feminism, and there are other focuses, other analyses, and other debates." Although the ELN has opened up spaces for discussion on feminism, the dynamics of historical and structural discrimination that mark the entire

¹³⁴ In the ELN today, motherhood is accepted but it has to be planned in accordance with Chapter IV, "On Affective Relationships of Couples and Family Allowances" of the Internal Regulations (my translation from the Spanish). As Article 9 on affective relationships explains "The couple's affective relationship is authorized by the Directorate or command of the structure, and sexual education and planning methods must be guaranteed in the AG. Couple formation must be continuous to guarantee its stability and permanence." Article 10 discusses family planning "Stable couples with more than three years of relationship in the AG, may have children in a number not exceeding two, with prior authorization of the Direction or command. Otherwise, the partners must respond for the paternity, according to the criteria of the Organization." Finally, Article 11, defines the possibility of having family leaves: "Family visit leaves are granted according to merit and domestic calamity situations, depending on the type of structure. Management and commanders will regulate the leaves within a schedule for the year."

¹³⁵ This concept is discussed by Isabel Käser (2021), who has also worked on the PKK.

Colombian society have not completely disappeared. Even Commander Beltrán recognized that "these moments are not differentiated from each other, they overlap, and of course, in some, there are unresolved problems." As a companion who helped me peel carrots told me on a cold, rainy afternoon,

"Why lie to you? Of course there is *machismo* in the ELN! Of course, as women, we are often mistreated. You also saw Commander Marcos touching my ass the other day. But what do you want me to tell him? He is the Commander. But I know that he will never do more than that. Here no one can rape me, no one can beat me, while out there [outside the ELN], it happens every day!"

The eradication of toxic masculinity that Cecilia was talking about turns out to be an ongoing process full of obstacles. Nonetheless, as I have been told by practically all the young guerrilla women I have been able to discuss this with, what attracted them most to the ELN was precisely that freedom that they cannot enjoy as women in their communities of origin. In the ELN, physical violence is less present than in their previous civilian experiences, and above all, in this group they feel free to decide about their love and sexual lives. In this context, they admit to aspiring toward roles of higher responsibility in the organization. Slowly, women are shifting from adapting subjects to guerrillas with specific agency and individual as well as collective goals. Also, as Badaró suggests in discussing women joining the Argentinian army, throughout their increasing presence in the guerrilla movement, "the behavior of military women also alters traditional definitions of military men as individuals, which in turn contributes to undermining the gendered definition of the military identity" (2015, 89).

In Colombia, women enter the ELN for lack of better opportunities, and in an attempt to escape the multiple layers of the state's structural violence to which they are subject. For them, the guerrilla movement becomes a platform where they can claim their equality and possibly their emancipation. To some extent, this third and ongoing phase in the ELN matches with Duzel's "woman's color phase," where "female guerrilla started to have women-only spaces" (2018, 146). However, the ELN seems not to be yet in what Duzel describes as the last, "goddessness phase," during which, in the PKK, "there is a strong movement that asked for complete independence for women" (ibid. 148). Though it is difficult to imagine that women in the ELN might envision the creation of an independent front, several young women fighters I spoke with admitted that they do not just want to show that they are capable of performing the same tasks as men. Instead, they wish to influence the political and military decisions of the guerrilla movement first-hand. This last goal appears far off at this point in time, but proves how women are shaping a space that has historically excluded them. As Badaró points out, "[...]

through their bodies, gestures, uniforms, and emotions, female cadets and officers unintentionally show that the masculinity-military link is indexical--that is, contextual not categorical or 'natural'" (2015, 93).

To better discern the ways women are unsettling the ELN's masculine bond, it is worth discussing a group activity I assisted with. In this activity, under the orders of Cecilia, five female fighters had to describe what it meant to them to be women in guerrilla warfare. Despite the small number of participants, the statements I heard during the exercise correspond to what was recounted to me in several interviews and informal discussions I had with other guerrilla women during my fieldwork.

A FEMINIST PEDAGOGY OF LIBERATION

It was January 2018, a couple of days before the Colombian army bombed an encampment a few kilometers away from where I was (see introductory vignette in chapter 6). I had just finished having breakfast when Cecilia called all the women in the commission (we were five women and six men in total) to report. I approached and was allowed to listen. Some days before, on Wednesday, we had the *prensa* (literally, the press), an event which deserves a brief explanation. The *prensa* is a weekly event that takes place by radio. When the *prensa* is called, all the members of a troop gather around the radio. At this time, all the radios of the war front are tuned to a common frequency and the activity can begin. First, a square is formed around the radio and everyone must stand at attention¹³⁶ while the ELN hymn is sung. Once the formalities are completed, the activity's program is read, and any possible changes are discussed. Usually, in the last minutes of the *prensa*, the themes that will be dealt with the following week are decided so that each troop can prepare a presentation on a chosen topic. The topics range from discussions on current political issues to the reading of historical events related to Colombia's revolutionary struggle, to topics such as gender equality.

On that Wednesday, the exercise had been assigned to the women of the warfront, who recited poems and writings, sang songs, and reiterated their importance in the guerrilla movement. Inspired by that event, instead of the usual hours of study, Cecilia decided to organize a pedagogical activity with our committee's women. The exercise was simple but had many goals. Everyone had to write on a piece of paper her understanding of being a woman in

¹³⁶ Standing at attention means standing upright, the arms along the hips with the elbows slightly bent so that the hands, in the shape of a fist, reach the hips' height. The heels must touch each other while the feet are opened at 45 degrees. Most importantly, the T-shirt should be tucked into the pants, and as far as possible, it is imperative to wear a decent outfit.

the guerrilla movement, and later memorize her thoughts and recite them. With this exercise, Cecilia knew that everyone was practicing writing, memory, and recitation, revealing how the ELN pedagogy is very close to the popular education proposed by Freire (1996). I was allowed to watch and film the exercise.

Assata, who was also taking part in the assignment, gave an account of her life in the ELN compared to what she experienced in her civilian life, where to her eyes, "[Women] are abused, oppressed by the husband, the *machist* state, and capitalism." The time spent with Assata, her stories, her confessions, and the discussions I had about her with Thomas, allowed me to make deeper sense of her words. In my analysis, her description mirrors the hard reality to which women – particularly indigenous and Afro-descendant women – are confronted in the Colombian Pacific. As mentioned in chapter 5, various guerrillas have enrolled after being mistreated, physically, emotionally, and sexually, by their stepfathers, boyfriends, soldiers, or other men. Also, it appeared that Assata's understanding of the *machist* state relies on the way the state manifested itself in the marginalized aquatic space, i.e. through a narrative of domination and oppression which materializes with the army's presence and its oppressive behavior toward racialized women. Yet, I don't believe Assata's understanding of capitalism derives from her reading of Marx's *Capital*, but on guerrilla narratives of everyday experiences. The Western warfront operates in a territory that covers a large part of the Pacific basin. Mainly in the northern region close to the border with Panama, national and multinational corporations are opening the earth to extract minerals or are depleting the soil throughout monoculture plantations (cf. Altieri 2009). Therefore, many guerrillas have seen firsthand the damage created by a mode of production, the capitalist one, whose functioning is linked to the continuous over-exploitation of natural resources and consequent environmental damage.

Angelica, who was also participating in the exercise, stated, "[...] in ELN we can decide on our love relationships." Again, her feelings were displayed in contrast to her experience outside the guerrilla movement where, in her community, she claimed that women were treated merely as a means for procreation that had to submit to their husbands from the age of fifteen. Young indigenous women often feel they can hardly escape from this subservient status without violent repercussions against them or their children. Although within the ELN, various rules bind relationships, and particularly pregnancy, for many guerrillas, the armed movement is the place where, even at young age, women can freely decide with whom to have relationships, and when to end a relationship if they wished to. Hence, women's sexual freedom within the ELN is undoubtedly an attractive factor that pushes many young women toward this group. According to Assata and Angelica, the ELN provides a space where gender is relearned and reconstructed

under new moral rules that are at least formally based on gender equality. For women growing up in a society where it is common sense to believe that "*si el novio te pega es porque te ama de verdad*" ("if your boyfriend beats you it is because he really loves you"), the ELN has become a space of liberation that, despite being a military structure, contrasts strongly with the constraints encountered daily in civilian life.

I argue that for the women participating in the workshop, the main pillar on which femininity is built is that of emancipation and independence. In the guerrilla movement, women can free themselves from pre-established and subordinate roles in which they were imprisoned in their civilian life. In the ELN, they have the freedom to make decisions regarding their bodies and sexuality. Women's emancipation and independence are empowering tools in the agency of female guerrillas, and simultaneously pose a challenge to the ELN's historically masculine legacy which is forced to open up to a more encompassing and less gender-marked understanding of the militarized space. In the guerrilla movement, women's independence is also supported by the appreciation of individual capacities regardless of gender. This feature of the guerrilla movement, as commander Beltrán suggested, has made the ELN a place where opportunities for social upscaling have always been granted. As another girl in the workshop explained, "In the ELN there are women who are Commanders of a Front, there are women that are specialists in explosives, women who are snipers [...]" In the ELN, women might enter the same ranks as men, in contrast to the everyday life that women experience outside the ELN. As we have seen throughout this thesis, in the Pacific region, access to education and a decent salary is mostly prohibited to racialized women. In contrast, in the guerrilla movement, uneducated youth with restrained economic possibilities have the chance to prove their value otherwise, while acquiring new skills that facilitate their ascent through the ELN ranks, and potentially, their opportunities in a post-conflict situation. A person generally proves her value in a war-like context through bravery, combat experience, and the ability to face an army attack or similar situations. For the workshop participants, women pursue an idea of femininity that does not exclude but rather valorizes, features generally considered strictly masculine. Women represent themselves as capable, determined, brave, heroic, and cold-blooded if necessary. At the same time, they underline the importance of maintaining what they understand as a more traditionally feminine side and thus are likely to describe themselves as tender, beautiful, and charming. As Badaró concludes in the study he carried out amongst women in the Argentinian army, in a militarized space,

"[...] women aim to elaborate a kind of femininity that, without invalidating certain hegemonic gender codes 'outside' [the military] such as the importance of personal

appearance, incorporates into their gender identities moral values like honor, courage, and individual responsibility, which female civilians allegedly lack. In this sense, being 'one of the guys' in a group can be an essential mechanism for acquiring professional respect" (2015, 92).

Even in the middle of the rainforest, women like to wear makeup and jewelry. When circumstances are appropriate, femininity also passes through typical cultural traits. Indigenous women spend hours making their elegant and elaborate beaded necklaces, while black women gather in two or three to comb and then braid each other's hair or attach extensions. In the ELN ranks, femininity becomes a cultural exchange, as indigenous women are eager to learn the secrets of creating Afro-descendent hairstyles, just as Black women are enthusiastic about learning about indigenous crafts. Besides these activities, guerrilla women who join the ELN quickly realize that they are in a space where they have the opportunity to project themselves in pursuit of a particular interest, and the presence of women with roles of higher responsibility demonstrates that with dedication, every goal can be achieved.

In the next pages, I point out first how Vilma offers an example of a woman who retains femininity along with authority. Second, I explore how this relates to the outside world where demobilized guerrillas face structural violence anew. At the time of my fieldwork and my participation in the above-mentioned workshop, this was particularly relevant because the peace process appeared to be developing in a promising direction. I have decided to include my reflections on the peace and demobilization process because they are relevant to understanding how ELN women perceive their position in the guerrilla movement and possible 'post'-conflict scenarios. I conclude the chapter with reflections on the importance of an emancipatory discourse within the ELN for women and explain why they were hesitant to follow up with the peace process.

WOMEN'S BODIES AS SITES OF RESISTANCE

Vilma trained as a nurse and has been a fighter in active combat. Since having a child, she asked permission to serve the guerrilla movement away from the front line. For her, caring for others was a central trait of her femininity. It is through caring that she is able to best express her womanhood and be recognized, appreciated, and often admired for her role. I have heard young guerrillas several times saying, "I wish I was like Vilma. She is the one who saves our lives in case something happens." For Vilma, being a nurse and thus having individual as well as collective responsibilities, reinforced the moral values she was appreciated for. More

generally, in the ELN, women are taught to believe in themselves and their capacities, which emancipate them from their role in civilian life where they must constantly fight to find a place in a society that systematically denies them possibilities to raise their status.

It is not surprising that many women who demobilized following the peace agreements with the FARC-EP now confront barriers erected by a patriarchal state. As Paarlberg-Kvam stresses throughout her work with ex-combatants, not only was the agenda on women and gender the last to be implemented but "women's groups also report that violence against women has increased since accords were signed, a common trend after peace agreements elsewhere in the world" (2019a, 2).

If the ELN has historically enabled social upscaling, notably for marginalized people regardless of gender, outside the guerrilla movement, men have easier access to unskilled jobs or can join other illegal — like paramilitary — or legal armed groups. On the other hand, unprivileged and especially racialized women collide against the discriminatory structures on which the state is founded, and which pushed them to join a revolutionary movement in the first place (e.g. K. Theidon 2009a; Viterna 2013).

The undermining of women discloses structural violence that is not challenged by the neoliberal peace agenda, wherein "The peace accords' narrow definition of 'violence against women' includes only direct physical and sexual violence as paradigmatic crimes of war, obscuring other kinds of violence, like economic dispossession" (Paarlberg-Kvam 2019a, 4). In other words, if the end of war might open new opportunities for men, without concomitant structural changes, it throws women – especially racialized women – back to the unequal position they experienced before enrolling in the guerrilla movement (cf. Paarlberg-Kvam 2019b). The vanishing of promises of liberation and empowerment following the demobilization of women who were part of revolutionary "emancipatory movements" is what Deniz Kandiyoti calls the patriarchal backlash (1991). Patriarchal backlash suggests a traumatic experience, particularly for female guerrillas whose education has been that of the Front.

In the case of the ELN, women are challenging the historical masculine authority through discussions and workshops that strengthen their capacity to collectively organize. Engagement in activities like the aforementioned appeared to be particularly beneficial for women as these are moments of the exchange of ideas and experiences, but also skills that strengthen a model of femininity that has the potential to become an example even outside the guerrilla reality. However, the failure of the Colombian government to fulfill the agreements signed with the FARC-EP, and the disappointing testimonies of ex-combatants resonated in the ELN

consciousness, explaining an increased reluctance toward following up with the peace process that was so present in the guerrillas mind during the first couple of months I spent in the 'field.'

In order to better grasp the anxiety that some women have in imagining themselves outside the guerrilla movement, more attention should be brought to the war as an experience that, like the state's structural violence, affects people differently according to their gender. Women's encounter with war is not limited to merely an external reality, but takes the shape of an idiosyncratic bodily experience. Black women in the Pacific, both inside and outside the guerrilla, constantly refer to their wombs to explain their sufferings: "We are the ones who put the death bodies in this war, we're the one who gives birth to the young who die in these wars. Our womb is to give life, not death!" Therefore, the woman's womb turns into the site where life and death collide, and as a result, the woman's body elevates itself as the ultimate site of resistance. In this sense, war is not a state of exception, but rather the combination of multiple forms of violence that assume a particular *modus operandi* when encountering the female body. As Paalberg-Kvam points out in her feminist analysis of the Colombian peace process with the FARC, "feminist organizations [...] see the treatment of women during wartime not as exceptional, but rather as part of a continuum" (Paarlberg-Kvam 2019a, 5). The relationship women have with war is more physically intimate than it is for men. In their everyday encounter with the state, women struggle to safeguard their bodily sovereignty. In the Pacific region, as in other places under military occupation like Palestine (Afshar 2003), girls have been taught since childhood to approach the military with caution and avoid being alone in the vicinity of men in uniform. For women, to be penetrated by war — or by the State (Torpey 2000) — reveals profound anguish, as in war, women's bodies become a military target and the site where the most savage violence is perpetrated (Branche and Virgili 2012). Female guerrillas are aware of their vulnerability. The following statement of Assata echoes the opinions of many other guerrilla women, "I'd rather die in battle than be captured. You know, under Uribe's presidency (2002-2010), the army was ordered to rape guerrilla women. That was an order! But they must kill me before touching me!"

There are no official documents that prove Assata's claim, but since I heard this narrative on many occasions from different female and male guerrillas, it appears that the army did its best to spread such threatening news. Whether true or false, these proclamations of violence against the female body demonstrate how in war, the latter becomes a site where the state's physical and psychological brutality converge. Lastly, women in the Pacific argue that safeguarding their bodily integrity means protecting their dignity, virtue, womb, and with it, the possibility of continuing to procreate life, hence freedom. As Harriet Jacobs reminds us, during slavery, the

white master not only exercised his control over the body of the black woman, but in the event a child was born to an enslaved mother, the statute of captivity was inherited (Jacobs 2001). Giving birth to an enslaved child, whether born from the consensual relations with a partner or the white master's inhumane violence, ended with the master's power to separate the child from the mother. Rape committed by soldiers against guerilla women reflects similar power dynamics as seen in the institution of slavery.¹³⁷ Not only do women lose their dignity, but they are also separated from their children. It is the authority figure, here the state, which has the power to indefinitely separate a mother from her child through the prison system, or social services.

In the guerrilla movement, mothers generally live away from their children, although in addition to supporting their maintenance, the ELN allows women to visit them and spend periods of time in their company. Nonetheless, many women have confessed to me the pain involved in being distant from their children. Even in the workshop described above, for female guerrillas, the responsibilities of motherhood dissolve into concepts of solidarity and sisterhood. As Cecilia pointed out, "We [women] are solitary, loving, we give our companions the affection we cannot give to our children." The way feelings are shared between women and men, but also intergenerationally within the guerrilla movement, might further explain why many ex-combatants talk about their former organization as a family. For example, Commander Esther is called "*la vieja*" ("the old, the grandmother"), an affectionate nickname emphasizing the maternal role that she represents for her troops. As she recalled the night we shared a shelter, "For me, many of these young people are like my children, I love them and take care of them like my children." As Afshar suggests in her study of women in conflict, "Some women fighters [see] motherhood as a celebration of their femininity and as the humanizing aspect of their lives" (Afshar 2003, 182).

FEMININITY AS A (ELN) POLITICAL PROJECT

But what does it mean for a woman to "be strong" or "be a man"? *Ser hombre* is possibly only an expression imbued with the structural violence that consolidates the heterosexual binary paradigm enclosed in political discourses and institutions. In Colombia, this normative model is reinforced by telenovelas that attract millions of people, including guerrilla fighters, to the TV, even in the most marginalized areas. Likewise, *ser hombre*, "be a man," does not mean *ser*

¹³⁷ Mara Viveros also makes an interesting parallel to the time of slavery, explaining how "the position of women slaves contrasts sharply with the classical representations of female subordination" (2016).

un hombre, “be one man,” but rather “be masculine.” Hence, masculinity is performed in opposition to and denial of femininity. Simply put, if women construct femininity to include masculinity in saying “be a man,” men construct masculinity to exclude femininity. Guerrilla men say, “you have to be sensible” instead of explicitly saying, “you have to be a woman” or “be feminine.” They just list supposedly feminine traits, thus reinforcing Chandra Mohanty’s statement that “[...] gender inscribed within a purely male/female framework reinforces [...] the heterosexual contract” (2003, 108).

Femininity, on the other hand, seems to be built upon the acceptance, inclusion, and valorization of the “masculine side.” As Commander Esther reminded me while sharing cigarettes under her tent, “life is tough for women in the guerrilla movement.” Being tough seems to be a necessary characteristic for a woman to survive. As Badaró points out, “By aspiring to be recognized simultaneously as women and soldiers, by denying that being a soldier represents a renunciation of their femininity, and by questioning the notions of femininity ruling other social environments, these women have become the model for a military individuality that is not trapped in rigid, all-encompassing social categories” (Badaró 2015, 96). Accordingly, for female fighters in the ELN, toughness is a quality that is not separate from their femininity but rather supportive of their struggle for emancipation and independence within and outside the armed movement. The performance of femininity becomes a political project that Mirabal (2017) defines as “ELN feminism.” This emic definition advocates for the emergence of a (new) revolutionary (female) subject and is inspired by various feminist currents within popular feminism. The former espouses that Latin American societies are based on a system of patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial domination – three inseparable forms of oppression whose historical articulation is at the origins of the neoliberal states that currently rule the subcontinent (*ibid.*). Indeed, as Mohanty suggests, “all forms of ruling operate by constructing and consolidating as well as transforming already existing social inequalities. In addition to the construction of hegemonic masculinities as a form of state rule, the colonial state also transform[s] existing patriarchies and caste/class hierarchies” (2003a, 61). In Latin America, except for the socialist experiences that marked the ’60s and ’70s, and the more recent ones distinguishing the first decade of the twenty-first century, post-colonial states like Colombia remain grounded in colonial structures.

These structures reflect inequalities and injustices that have disproportionate gendered and racialized effects that reverberate in the peace process achieved with the FARC-EP as well as in the 2016-2019 process with the ELN. Both peace processes were tied to the traditional liberal peacebuilding paradigm (Céspedes-Báez and Jaramillo Ruiz 2018) based on the strengthening

of neoliberal policies centered on mineral and monocrop exports. As Céspedes-Báez stresses in her article on women's inclusion in the peace process with the FARC-EP, "both extractivism and megaprojects have gendered effects that the peace accords overlook [...] not only does the economic model of the accords fail to address certain kinds of gender violence, it is in fact likely to exacerbate them" (2018, 4). State exploitation of mineral resources, as well as the implementation of large-scale monoculture cultivation in the territories no longer controlled by the guerrilla movement, are causes for massive displacements. According to the UNHCR, with over 7 million internally displaced people, Colombia leads this unfortunate ranking alongside countries like South Sudan, Syria, and Afghanistan. As Tovar-Restrepo (2014) points out, in Colombia displacement unequally impacts female-headed families, especially those who are Afro-descendant and indigenous.

In addition to condemning the historical disparities and the economic model upon which the post-colonial state continues to undermine the role of women in society, the political project of ELN feminism is also committed to contesting inequalities through the deconstruction of everyday social practices. As Mirabal clarifies, "[...] many men do not want to question their practices and leave their place of privilege, and many women do not recognize or legitimize their place of domination in society" (2017). In Colombia, women are often restricted to unpaid domestic work, freeing men to secure capital accumulation and ensuring their domination over the private space and women's possibilities for engaging in the public sphere. In order to challenge such dynamics in the ELN ranks, men are obliged to learn and perform domestic tasks in the same way as women. For example, each troop has a sub-minister who is responsible for the distribution of food and a *ranchero*, or cook. If a guerrilla is not used to cooking, he or she will be assigned a helper until the person can do the task alone. Everyone is also responsible for their own personal hygiene, including washing their own clothes. According to internal regulations, if a man is found to have had his clothes washed by a female partner in exchange for money or other favors, he will be punished by the commanding officer. Despite improvements toward gender equality, revolutionary movements like the ELN are not impermeable to habits handed down by the patriarchal state. In the everyday life of the tropical forest, it is common to see a woman washing her boyfriend's clothes, particularly if he holds a higher-ranking position. In contrast, the opposite scenario of a man washing a woman's clothing is quite rare. I remember the day when, as a genuine favor but also as a social experiment, I went to wash the clothes of the woman I was sharing a tent with. The reactions were astonishing. For a moment, I was at the center of the men's gossip – but interestingly also that of some

women – questioning my masculinity in terms of what they were interpreting as an act of submission to women.

Although the theory and the internal regulation of the ELN do not wholly correspond to everyday practice, the popular pedagogy enforced by the organization and particularly its female members teaches the guerrillas a new model of society based on gender equality. The value of this practice is well recognized by officer Angela, who I had the chance to follow for some weeks while she was doing political work in several local communities. As she repeated to me several times, "a man cannot talk about feminism until he washes his clothes and cooks in his house!" For her, feminism among the ELN ranks was a political project in solidarity with similar situations throughout the world.

During my stay in the rainforest, I remember receiving many questions about the status of women in Palestine, Kurdistan, or the Basque Country. While I was sharing the little knowledge I had gained through reading or personal experiences, I recall the curiosity with which Angela, Cecilia and Commander Esther listened to my stories. They would then engage me in discussions about the similarities and differences of gender in these various contexts. The arguments espoused by these guerrillas aim for international solidarity between exploited women, aligning with Mohanty's broader understanding of feminism. As Mohanty states, "feminism without borders is not the same as 'border-less' feminism. It acknowledges the fault lines, conflicts, differences, fear, and containment that borders represent" (2003a, 2). The feminism put forward by the ELN guerrillas certainly has its specificities related to the political-military structure that circumscribes it. However, given the close similarities with other insurgent movements like the PKK, the EZLN in Chiapas, or the Colombian FARC-EP, I suggest that a common understanding can be extrapolated and identified as "guerrilla feminism." While in the socialist experiences that have marked Latin America over the last seventy years, the role of women has rarely been celebrated outside the framework of being the companion of a (male) revolutionary (cf. Jaquette 1973), "guerrilla feminism" instead puts women first and recognizes them as political subjects with the potential for transformation. In particular, "guerrilla feminism" urges women to address their often-subordinated position in domestic spaces and gain visibility throughout public mobilization. Furthermore, for the rising of a new female revolutionary subject, society's renovation must be integral. Indeed, "guerrilla feminism" denounces the various layers of violence to which women — especially racialized women — are subjected, and emphasizes that a real change must pass through structural transformations in the social institutions that continue to reproduce injustice and discrimination (Mirabal 2017).

In the ELN, women are slowly redefining their role while simultaneously challenging the masculine hegemony that, as Commander Beltrán remembered, has pieced together the guerrilla movement for decades. Women are appropriating the militarized space in a way that, I argue, strengthens the female guerrilla identity. As a result, I argue that “guerrilla feminism” can be associated in a broader sense with an “insurgent femininity,” i.e. a new category that envisions a more porous masculinity even if it does not entirely upset patriarchal heterosexual normativity. To conclude, I propose that female guerrilla fighters reveal how the reconstruction of gender relations is not a linear process, but rather a spiral where praxes constantly readjust according to shifting temporalities that appear congruent but also disjunctive to the feminist project. Moments of political conjunctures, such as a peace process, can be a stimulus for articulating gender policies within the revolutionary ELN project. At the same time, political agendas based on hatred and armed confrontation, such as that of the current Duque government, can have the opposite effect and slow down or even reverse the progress made by women guerrillas. The performance of femininity within the ELN ultimately responds to the question: What does it mean to be a woman inside an armed revolutionary movement? Here, female fighters display incredible capability in navigating a historically masculine space. With a spiral movement rather than a linear one, women engage in praxes that are constantly readapting to the continuous back and forth between "civilian" and "insurgent" life; between the different layers of the state's structural violence and their remaining traces in the guerrilla movement; and between progressive and regressive gender narratives. Although some praxes might appear contradictory, within the ELN, they appear to be essential tools employed to reshape the masculine perception of the military space and perhaps, of what society ought to be. Therefore, I believe that "guerrilla-feminism" arises as a vernacular "(third-world)' feminism without borders" that could pave the way to broader changes in Colombian social movements and perhaps, society at large. The aftermath of the popular feminist pedagogy embraced by the ELN and other leftist revolutionary groups has already affected other organizations that in Colombia are repositioning gender relations at the center of the national political economy. As Paarlberg-Kvam points out, amid the post-agreements period with the FARC-EP and the "frozen" peace process with the ELN, a "Colombian feminists' vision of a peace that is anti-patriarchal, demilitarized and resistant to free-market hegemony has placed women's organizations at the vanguard of Colombia's social movement panorama" (2019b, 3). Eventually, the implications of “insurgent femininity's praxis” are twofold: on the one hand, it offers a popular pedagogy capable of challenging a longtime strictly masculine space, while on the other hand, it has the capacity to mold broader feminist ideologies and movements. Lastly,

"guerrilla feminism" reminds us that if the state does not radically change its oppressive structures, the reconstruction of gender relations will only arise throughout praxis emerging at the margins and against the state.

CONCLUSION

What it means to be a woman or to be a man in the ELN and how masculinity and femininity are performed in this movement are the questions with which I opened this chapter. The unexpected number of women and the leading role they play in the Western War Front – which after the assassination of Commanders Ernesto, Marcos, and Pepe, is now headed by Commander Esther – are the reasons that led me to write these pages.

Given the horizontal structure and ideology of social equality that characterize the ELN, it is often difficult for men who enter this organization to abandon the habits of toxic masculinity learned outside of the guerrilla movement. The "heroic masculinity" I describe as central to being a man in the ELN is based on courage and bravery, but also on a sense of loyalty to the cause defended by the group, and the ability to be sweet and caring toward one's partner.

On the other hand, guerrilla women conceive of their femininity in contrast to their experience prior to the ELN. While abuse and mistreatment are not absent in the ELN, misbehavior is reported and sanctioned, unlike in the civilian lives they left behind. Nevertheless, the disregard of such standards by those higher up the ELN's hierarchy remains problematic. Furthermore, in the pedagogical exercises carried out by guerrilla women, there is also frequent talk of demobilization. The guerrillas put forward the female body as a key site of resistance, while they aim to defend the maternal instinct against external threats.

To conclude, my experience embedded in the ELN's ranks leads me to identify what I define as a "guerrilla feminism," that is, a struggle for the recognition of women guerrillas as political subjects with the capacity to transform unequal power relations. I thus argue that "guerrilla feminism" is inscribed in the performance of an "insurgent femininity," which in its struggle against systems of oppression can inspire and shape feminist movements and ideologies even outside the guerrilla landscape.

CLOSING – THE FAREWELL

It will soon have been five years since my first encounter with the guerrillas of the ELN's Western War Front. I remember my first boat trip in the company of Ricardo and Ramona as if it were yesterday. Ricardo, an Afro-descendant, was cheerful, festive, and singing as he carelessly slid that little boat down the river. On the other hand, Ramona, an indigenous woman, was reserved and curious, watching me with interest without letting her thoughts show. I recall the laughter that first night in the company of Rosa, who delighted us with her stories and her happiness. I wonder if they are still alive, if they still have the strength to laugh after the losses of recent years. I am also reminded of Commander Marcos, for whom I had mixed feelings but to whom I owe a lot. He is, after all, the one who opened the doors for me to everything that came later. While I regret some of the misunderstandings we had during my fieldwork, I think we both learned important lessons and that is why I remember our last meeting with such fondness. As in the first one, he had welcomed me warmly. I think the anger and disappointments were gone, and we both knew what to expect from each other. When I left, we said farewell to each other with a big, sincere hug.

But sometimes, there are wounds that even time will never be able to heal completely, and which have to be accepted as part of us. All you can do is take care of the emotions that these wounds generate, and gently and carefully find a place for them in your heart. Little by little, this is what I am doing with the memories I have of Commander Ernesto, as I watch them flow through me, slowly, like the thousand waterways of the Colombian Pacific. I'm confident that, as Ernesto once told me, every stream leads to a river, and on every river, somewhere there will be a home. I feel privileged to have met an extraordinary person like him who has been a father figure for me, as for hundreds of young people moving through the rainforest. I will forever cherish and treasure his teachings. I hope that this work will be worthy of the promises I made, and that it will honor the path opened by "that last Ché Guevara." Despite the false information promoted by the Colombian media, Commander Ernesto was determined to follow the path of peace and the struggle for justice on the side of oppressed peoples.

Lastly, what I have learned from this thesis, I hope will be helpful to the other guerrillas, who fight under the orders of Commander Esther, now current head of the FGOc. I hope they will stay alive long enough to see the end of the conflict and thus embrace a new beginning, far from weapons.

However, even in the best of scenarios, it will still be some time before the ELN signs a peace agreement with the Colombian government. Therefore, the questions this research seeks to answer continue to be relevant and indeed, seem to be gaining in importance.

As stated at the beginning of this thesis, the first question addressed by this work was, *How can the action, longevity, and in many cases, the popularity of revolutionary groups be analyzed as revealing conditions of social inequalities worldwide?*

Alpa Shah concludes her book *Nightmarch* (2018b) by arguing, “Perhaps then one of the furthest-reaching consequences of the Naxalites might have been as a democratizing force in India, catalyzing those who want to fight for a more equal world, who are mobilized by the spirit of revolutionary struggle, even if they have been, at the time, disappointed and disillusioned by its practice” (ibid. 269). Much like the Naxalites, the National Liberation Army in Colombia never ceases to attract those from the margins of the state who are no longer willing to accept living in a condition of constant oppression, discrimination, and injustice. Those who have opportunities and access to legal institutions to help break out of these prohibitive circumstances do not need to take up a rifle. On the other hand, for young people growing up in territories where conflict is ever-present and options for escape are limited, a group like the ELN often means hope. Not necessarily hope of a better world, but of a space where one can build one's own independence, autonomy, and emancipation.

The epistemological query of this research is to go beyond the preconceived categories of armed/terrorist groups, and seek to understand what the existence of these groups reveal. As this thesis suggests, revolutionary movements such as the ELN remain active and popular over time because they offer resistance to neoliberal economic policies based on the extraction and exploitation of natural resources at the expense of people's well-being. Although the propositions of these groups may be debatable, as long as the capitalist mode of production remains with its unequal development that continues to widen the gap between rich and poor, Black and white, men and women, movements such as the ELN will persist as showcases of social malaise worldwide.

To help me answer this research question, I formulated two sub-questions. The first being, *How do the guerrillas conceive of and legitimize their struggle?*

The short answer is that guerrillas conceive of their struggle on two levels – the practical one of daily activities and the more abstract one of medium-long term objectives. The first level is understood by all guerrillas, regardless of their ranks, since it is based on daily exchanges

with ethnic communities. It is, therefore, a struggle of mutual aid toward those who are victims of the systems of oppression; it is the struggle of the bag of rice given to the old lady so that she has something to eat with her freshly caught fish; it is the struggle of the soccer field built in a community so that young people can have fun; and it is the struggle of economic exchanges on the margins of the law that allow extra income to those who move between a subsistence economy and a survival economy.

The second level is the struggle against the state, especially against capitalism. Although this is also practical in its expression through war, it remains abstract in its ideological conception. It is a struggle to which the guerrillas adhere, without necessarily being able to put it into words. If, as we saw in Chapter 4, the struggle to support the communities is one of day-to-day activities, as explained in Chapter 5, the impossibility of continuous political work among ELN troops does not allow for a collective study of the macroeconomic-political issues against which this guerrilla movement has been aligned since its origins.

The same argument applies to the legitimacy of these struggles. At the level of daily interactions, made up of clashes with the army and paramilitaries, the use of weapons seems to be a necessity to assert one's voice. Adding to these experiences are ongoing narratives, which as seen in Chapter 5, feed the collective sense of belonging to an organization that defines itself as politico-military. On an ideological level, armed resistance is nourished instead by the experiences accumulated over half a century of struggle which allow the ELN today to profile itself as the last Colombian guerrilla movement that resists the country's total subjugation to neoliberal logics. For the guerrillas, the armed struggle is what holds back paramilitarism and the entry of multinational corporations into territories rich in natural resources. At the same time, the control of territory through arms is what guarantees the guerrillas' support for ethnic and rural communities in their political and economic organization.

The second sub-question was, *What are the strategies the ELN adopts to endure in a context of global capitalism and national 'neoliberal peace'?*

Paradoxically, it would seem that it is the durability of global capitalism and the apparent failure of 'neoliberal peace' that prolongs the ELN's presence in the Colombian political landscape. After the peace agreement signed in 2016 with the FARC-EP, the killing of several hundred ex-guerrillas followed, and the re-arming of dissidents mostly dedicated to controlling the drug trade.

Agreements and support programs to facilitate the re-integration of those who had abandoned their arms have not been respected, or their funding has been cut, making the implementation of such agreements impossible. In addition, the systematic assassination of

social leaders, totaling approximately one thousand five years after the peace agreement, only strengthens the ELN's ties with local communities, which, from being merely tied to economics or necessity, risk over time progressing toward ideological affinity. Moreover, with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the capitalist mode of production has only widened the gap between the rich and the poor, making the situation even more difficult for those already on the margins of the state. Here, support for ethnic communities victimized by the structural violence discussed in Chapter 6 mean that intersectional readings increasingly found their way into ELN strategies. As seen in Chapter 9, these cut across the guerrilla group, shaping its politics, and releasing new streams of resistance.

With this research I also pose a further question: *What are the meanings and implications of the often-observed interactions between the ELN and the ethnic (Afro-descendant and indigenous) communities in the Colombian Pacific basin?*

As repeated throughout this work, the juxtaposition of the ELN and ethnic communities is an exercise that requires the utmost caution, since at every turn there are media simplifications in search of headlines that can quickly delegitimize the political work of self-determination carried out by the communities. Once again, I am obliged to repeat that the ELN and the ethnic communities are not a unity, but a plurality that form a heterogeneous whole – heterogeneous among themselves and within themselves – that touch each other on their borders. Unlike the view defended by the state, for which anyone who has relations with the ELN is identified as a terrorist or partisan of the ELN, my work shows that interactions with this group in no way imply a sharing of its goals, much less an adherence to armed struggle.

As announced in the introduction, my first suggestion was that in order to understand the complexity of Colombia's internal conflict in the Pacific basin, the first step is to stop seeing the border between the ELN and ethnic groups as clearly demarcated, but rather as a porous zone in constant transformation. People, stories, emotions, food, money, information, ideas, and habits pass through this zone. As discussed in Chapter 2, it is in this zone that my ethnographic work is situated, where due to my prior experiences in this complex reality, I was able to pass between these different wholes. And on this journey, the tensions and meeting points often found in borderlands became my own internal struggles as an ethnographer, the struggles between the multiple identities of native-outsider and foreign-insider, and those of the methodological limitations imposed by ethnographic fieldwork in the midst of armed conflict.

The meanings of the interactions between the ELN and ethnic communities are, therefore, summarized in Chapters 7 and 8, where I argue that in the absence of resonance with the state, in order to safeguard their territory, their economy, and their cultural and political identity,

Afro, as well as indigenous groups, are forced to negotiate with those closest to them – in the Pacific basin, the ELN. For ethnic communities, entering agreements with this guerrilla movement to safeguard the economic income from the production of coca paste does not mean embracing terrorism, but negotiating ways out of their misery with the only actor capable of offering alternatives. Furthermore, the fact that, as in the failed peace process with the ELN that ended in 2019, these communities must lean on the guerrilla movement to pressure the government to implement humanitarian agreements or provisions of the law that are not respected, shows how the multicultural model so celebrated in the 1991 Constitution does not find the same response in real life, outside of legal texts.

Finally, the interactions between the ELN and ethnic communities primarily implies two things. First, the continued repression and military policies carried out by the Colombian government with the support of its North American neighbor only exacerbates the fragile living conditions of those in conflict zones, making it increasingly difficult to trust the state and its institutions. Second, the social and economic development of ethnic communities can only come through an understanding of their intersectionality. As discussed in Chapter 3, and further elaborated in Chapters 7, 8, and 9, what brings Afro and indigenous groups closer to the ELN are precisely the ties of class, race, gender, and a political-ecological sharing of the environment. Understanding the systems of oppression that drive young people in the Colombian Pacific to join the ELN is what simultaneously enables the development of policies for the communities that inhabit this region. The condition, however, is that the communities themselves produce their own policies, and take charge of their own destiny as actors in their own territory.

To summarize, through the two research questions discussed above, this thesis offers an intersectional ethnography of the National Liberation Army in the Colombian Pacific basin. The initial goal of this research was to study the peace process that began in 2016 between the Colombian government and this guerrilla movement, but which was abruptly frozen with President Iván Duque's entry into government. Given the exclusive access I had gained to the Western War Front, I decided to pursue my research on understanding the logic and dynamics that characterize this armed faction of the ELN. My fieldwork, during which I was impressed by the high number of female guerrillas and their leading role in this front, quickly made me realize the limitations of my approach initially focused on an ideological reading of the ELN. Witnessing the varied and complex interactions between this group and ethnic communities only confirmed the need for a new analytical and methodological marker. Thus,

intersectionality became the common thread of my research. At the same time, the composition of the ELN troops in this region, mostly Afro and indigenous people who grew up in the area, made me realize that it is not possible to talk about the ELN without discussing the relationships between the guerrilla movement and local communities. The peculiarity of this thesis, therefore, is that it expands the reading of a guerrilla war front to an analysis of the social malaise that characterizes Colombia and other post-colonial states, where ethnic groups are forced to live in situations of misery or mere self-sufficiency on the margins of the state, constantly struggling for the recognition of their political and cultural autonomy.

THE LIMITS OF THIS RESEARCH

Like any research project, this thesis also carries limitations, theoretical as well as methodological. Given the intersectional reading of the conflict, I chose to position Black women at the center of this thesis. Although I attempted to do so at the empirical level, I was less able to do so at the theoretical level. This project would have significantly been improved by more interactions with texts focused on structural violence through the eyes of Black women. Without taking anything away from Coronil and Skurski, I think particularly Chapter 6 would have benefited from the contributions of Carolyn M. West (2002), Andrea Ritchie and Angela Davis (2017), Dana-Ain Davis (2012), Whitney Battle-Baptiste (2011), and Luciane Rocha (2012).

The methodological limitations were the following. First, I was not able to participate in a variety of activities, ranging from handling weapons, to standing watch, to witnessing interactions with drug traffickers entering the area to buy coca paste. These, as well as other activities that would have involved greater ethical issues or risks would likely have allowed me to confirm or disprove some analyses I had to base on a limited number of interviews or minimal experiences. Second, except for a few weeks spent in Angela's commission, I spent most of my months in the FGOc with Commander Marcos and Commander Ernesto. Since they were two of the four main commanders of the front, the former responsible for the media work, and the later for the political work, the experiences I gained in their company are not necessarily comparable with those I could have had in other commissions, more active in the territory, both militarily and in economic exchanges. The third limitation of my research is my inability to visit other war fronts, which far from the Pacific rainforest, are probably driven by other dynamics, and where my intersectional approach would perhaps have lost relevance. Finally, the fourth limitation encountered is my inability to conduct interviews among ethnic

communities, and especially with the Colombian army or other state actors. Although I only had a few interesting discussions with members of Black communities, my prior knowledge of these groups certainly makes up for the limited number of interactions with them during my fieldwork. However, the same cannot be said about the indigenous communities, where the language barrier and my lack of contacts did not allow me to claim expertise. A deeper interaction with these groups, and especially with state actors, would certainly have enriched the results of my research.

The factors listed above limit this thesis to an ethnographic snapshot of the ELN circumscribed in space and time. Yet, while it would certainly be interesting to elucidate this research by delving deeper into the points just listed, the strength of this text remains in its ethnographic detail of an issue rarely discussed in Colombia, where, unfortunately, the repressive system in place prefers to continue camouflaging (Jusionyte 2015b) with fake news the reasons that keep the conflict alive, thus offering legitimacy to the ELN to continue to take up arms.

WHAT I HAVE ADDED TO WHAT IS KNOWN

The greatest contribution to the existing literature on the Colombian internal armed conflict that this thesis brings is that of a text based on an exclusive ethnographic experience within a guerrilla front. However, my research is not limited to the description of a local reality, but thanks to an analysis on three levels, regional, national, and international, offers a profile of this guerrilla movement that describes its relationships with local communities, with the state, and with international political and economic dynamics. Furthermore, my study sits at the intersection of three disciplinary fields of anthropology, namely the anthropology of revolutions, the anthropology of neoliberalism, and the anthropology of the state.

In the anthropology of revolutions, my dissertation aligns with Alpa Shah's text *Nightmarch* (2018b), bringing to the Colombian literature a grounding experience among guerrillas similar to what Shah describes with the Naxalites, another historic Maoist-style guerrilla movement that has been contesting the Indian state since the 1960s. My ethnography contributes, on the one hand, to historical studies of violence in Colombia (e.g. Guzmán Campos 2005) or guerrilla movements (Villamizar 2017), and on the other hand, to research works on armed movements in the country, which usually rely on interviews conducted with people in the process of demobilization (Alape 1999; Fattal 2018; Franco, de Oliveira, and Ali 2018; Freeman 2020; Salazar, Wolff, and Camelo 2019; Idler 2019). My text also adds to the limited literature on the

ELN written by the guerrillas themselves (Arenas 2009; Hernández 2006), or about them (Curra Lugo 2014; 2015; Medina Gallego 1996; 2019). Echoing Shah, my greatest contribution to this field of anthropology is that of a first-hand description about a reality that few people have access to, and at the same time, that of a text where the ethnographer himself lays bare sharing his own emotions, difficulties, and internal struggles.

In the anthropology of neoliberalism, my ethnography provides an example of how the dominant economic scheme limits the possibilities of peace with social justice in Colombia, and at the same time it generates flows of resistance that bring armed groups like the ELN closer to marginalized communities such as ethnic ones. My research only confirms the concerns of several scholars who have investigated the neoliberal peace process (Santos 2017) with the FARC-EP and who denounce its incomplete agreements (Devia Garzón and Ospina Hernández 2017; Carranza-Franco 2019; Maher and Thomson 2018; Simón Uribe et al. 2021), or the fragility of the latter (Camelo 2020; Céspedes-Báez and Jaramillo Ruiz 2018; Cuénoud González and Clémence 2019; Gluecker, Correa-Chica, and López-López 2021; Salazar et al. 2019). Furthermore, this thesis contributes to discussions around how neoliberalism affects identity politics (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003; Baquero Melo 2015; Escobar 2015; Ng'weno 2007) and the territories inhabited by ethnic groups (Asher 2009; Canterbury 2018; Galindo Orrego, Rasmussen, and Valencia 2019; Gutiérrez Gómez 2013; Valencia Peña and Silva Chica 2018). The main contribution of my work is to unite these two themes.

Finally, in the anthropology of the state, my work offers a double contribution. The first is to the literature that deals with the margins of the state and its borders (Asher and Ojeda 2009; García et al. 2016; Das and Poole 2004; Escobar 2003; Ferme 2013; Goldstein 2012; Jusionyte 2015; Oslender 2016; Velásquez Prestán et al. 2018). Here, my research coincides with those cited above by arguing how these spaces are not lines of demarcation, but zones of trade and circulation. My contribution is to empirically reveal how this argument also applies to illegal armed groups by showing what logic dictates their movements and types of exchanges. Furthermore, although it is clear that my research is structured around a Marxist reading of the state, like others before me (Clastres 2011 [1974]; Scott 1985), I support the idea that anarchist thought (Kropotkin 2014) can be supportive where Marxism finds its limitations, particularly in understanding the constraints between race, gender, and environment, as well as in valuing the political processes of autonomy carried out by communities.

My second contribution, probably the most important one in this thesis, is to center intersectionality as a key analytical framework in the field of the anthropology of the state. As explained, this field of anthropology problematizes the idea of the state as a homogeneous unit

and is interested in deciphering its complexity and the transformations that take place between, and especially on, its borders. My argument is that intersectionality allows us to delve into the complexity that binds the state, its institutions, and its systems of oppression to the people who live on its margins and try to resist it. Intersectionality reveals the facets of structural violence (Coronil and Skurski 2006; Farmer 2004), highlighting how it unequally impacts those who suffer it because of their race, class, and gender. Moreover, to these categories I add a discussion on the environment, which for ethnic communities is a cultural trait upon which identity is extended. The exploitation of gold mines, the pollution of rivers, the indiscriminate cutting of forests and monocultures – i.e., the apolitical ecology promoted by state capitalism – are nothing but a threat to the political, social, and cultural integrity of communities struggling to defend their territories. An intersectional approach is what allows us to analyze what path drives hundreds of young Afro and indigenous men and women to leave their communities to join the ranks of the ELN, stay there, and regretfully, often die there.

To help me systematize my reflections, I lean on the theoretical model offered by philosophers Deleuze and Guattari in their *A Thousand Plateaus* (2013b). My use of their concepts should not be understood as a search for a definition of social reality through abstract categories, but rather as a tool that allows for the visualization and shaping of tendencies – of capture and resistance – that can be observed empirically.

Taking up the imagery of Deleuze and Guattari, my thesis shows the tension between a *smooth space* – the tropical rainforest – and a *striated space* – that of the state, and sometimes, the ELN. The *smooth space* is inhabited by *nomadic populations*, here embodied by the ethnic communities who are characterized by their mobility, autonomy, and ability to follow their bodies and emotions. These populations work according to their needs, and the times of work are dictated only by their own fatigue, or by the rhythms of the forest that suddenly catches *the nomad* under torrential rains, or makes the rivers dry under a torrid sun, making it difficult to move by boat, and thus lengthening the time of travel. Also, among *nomads*, the family is extensive, it stretches and contracts according to affections, and not by codes or laws.

Organized instead in fixed, hierarchical structures, the state and the ELN reflect *state apparatuses*, which by their nature, constantly seek to appropriate *smooth space*, to striate it, capture it, and encode it. Resisting them, however, is the *war machine*, in our case epitomized by the spirit of resistance and the fuel that drives those at the intersection of various systems of oppression to fight for justice. In the *smooth space* of the rainforest, the struggle is therefore that of *a machine against the apparatus*. In order to understand the different logics that move

these two actors, Deleuze and Guattari propose an analogy that falls perfectly in line with this thesis, namely that between the game of chess and that of Go. For the philosophers,

“Chess is a game of state [...]. Chess pieces are coded; they have an internal nature and intrinsic properties from which their movements, situations, and confrontations derive. [...] Go pieces, in contrast, are pellets, disks, simple arithmetic units, and have only an anonymous, collective, or third-person function: "It" makes a move. "It" could be a man, a woman, a louse, an elephant. Go pieces are elements of a nonsubjectified machine assemblage with no intrinsic properties, only situational ones. Thus the relations are very different in the two cases” (1987, 352–53).

Like the pawns of chess, therefore, the state apparatuses move, in an institutionalized form, following rules, codes, and lines. The state needs to make a census of its inhabitants, to connect each person with an address, but the officials in charge of codifying *smooth space* will have a different rank than those in charge of cities or centers of power. The same applies to the army, which dumps bombs and machine gunfire from helicopters to pave the way for its soldiers. The first on the ground are the special troops, but given their economic value, these strike and quickly retreat recovered by a helicopter. They do as the knight, which is the only piece that can jump over enemy defenses without directly facing them. Clashing with the guerrillas in the forest are the pawns, i.e., the simple soldiers without much economic value, namely those young people from the poorer classes who enlist to get a salary with the promise of contributing to nation building and the fight against terrorism. A similar discourse applies to the ELN, which marks on its GPS its camps, or the places where money and weapons are hidden. In its notebooks it notes and codes who has paid taxes on wood, gold, cocaine. Even households, villages and individual dwellings are categorized and ordered in space. In their war activities, the commanders of a front will never be in the front line, but will give their orders protected in the rear. The war machine instead follows the logic of Go, occupies an open space creating structures in continuous movement that with a single pawn can annihilate an entire constellation. This is the role of the spirit of rebellion present in those who find themselves at the intersection of multiple layers of oppression. In the *smooth space* this spirit escapes the capture of the apparatuses taking refuge in nomadic bodies, and then reappropriates new spaces, new bodies. As the two authors explain

“The difference is that chess codes and decodes space, whereas Go proceeds altogether differently, territorializing or deterritorializing it (make the outside a territory in space; consolidate that territory by the construction of a second, adjacent territory; deterritorialize the enemy by shattering his territory from within; deterritorialize oneself

by renouncing, by going elsewhere...). Another justice, another movement, another space-time” (1987, 353).

The state and the ELN are not, however, apparatuses of the same type. The first is rigid, solid, and omnipresent; the second is mobile, porous, and without fixed territory. The state appropriates nomadic space in order to modify it, exploit it, extract all possible resources from it, in a word, to *commodify* it (Marx 1990). And in this process of capitalist accumulation, nomadic populations, for us the ethnic communities, must be controlled or forcibly removed. Ethnicity must also be captured, but the goal is no longer the "civilizing" goal of colonial times, but that of control as a function of capital. What the state cannot control, it represses or simply forbids (Deleuze and Guattari 2013b, 448). With the 1991 Constitution, the Afro-descendants' Law '70, the state codifies cultural diversity and draws the lines that define it. Community leaders are allowed to express themselves, but only within the legal framework of the state, which forces them to speak of ethnicity and not race, of multiculturalism and not class. This is because “The State does not give power (*pouvoir*) to the intellectuals or conceptual innovators; on the contrary, it makes them a strictly dependent organ with an autonomy that is only imagined yet is sufficient to divest those whose job it becomes simply to reproduce or implement of all of their power (*puissance*)” (ibid. 1987, 368).

The ELN, on the other hand, has another relationship with nomadic space and the people who inhabit it, for although it too seeks to striate the forest and capture its inhabitants, its goal is to resist capital, and in particular the capitalist appropriation by other, extraneous, alien state apparatuses – those of other states and multinational corporations. Unlike the state, the ELN captures but does not codify, define, or impose its hegemony. On the contrary, it allows itself to be transformed and shaped from within. Ethnic communities become part of the ELN, but they are not imprisoned within it, or at least not completely. On the contrary, they influence its politics and sometimes even its military action. The ELN legitimizes its presence in the territories as a defender of the communities, an argument that is certainly debatable and has many contradictions. Certainly, the ELN defends its policies and interests – taxes, the narcotics economy, enlisting young people to fill its ranks – these cannot, however, take over its actions, for as Ernesto Guevara wrote somewhere, "a guerrilla movement without the support of the population, is a dead movement." For this reason, ethnic communities and social movements have the power to continually give new forms to the ELN, which while keeping its revolutionary goals clear, captures and allows itself to be captured by the changes and different needs of the populations on whose side it claims to stand.

Finally, for these reasons, the relationship between these two apparatuses and the war machine is also different. The state wants to appropriate the fuel that pushes racialized youths to fight against injustice, the ELN lets itself be transformed by it. In its relationship to the state, the insurgent spirit *takes war as its goal*, subordinates itself to the state, and turns against the nomadic populations. The Black woman in the village only dares to dream of perhaps one day owning a piglet; the other is ready to be killed by the FARC-EP while cutting pineapples for her children; Patrizio realizes that the city has no opportunities to offer him and as soon as possible, returns to take refuge among the guerrillas. In the ELN, on the other hand, the revolutionary fuel remains a war machine and is valued as such, becoming an engine toward emancipation. Thomas is inspired by the deeds of the Black African revolutionary Thomas Sankar; Angela reads the deeds of George Papadopoulos and critically affirms the need for new models from which to take inspiration where the protagonists are women belonging to ethnic groups; Cecilia, Assata, and the other women of the FGOc participate in the production of an “insurgent feminism.” To sum up, I argue the spirit of resistance among those suffering multiple inequalities remains a war machine where it can cross spaces and apparatuses that are sensitive and resonate with its nomadic spirit, which is rebellious, of resistance, and which has liberation as its goal.

Thus, we can conclude by noting how the same spirit, passing through the ethnographer, has shaped the production of this text, and has done so by deterritorializing the positionality of the researcher (Chapter 2), by presenting itself as an analytical-methodological framework (Chapter 1), by showing the *smooth space* from which it originates and its interaction with the guerrilla space (Part II, Chapters 4 and 5), and finally by explaining its struggle against the state apparatus (Part III) where it is structurally repressed (Chapter 6), where its environment is destroyed (Chapter 7), where its population is coded (Chapter 8), and where, however, through guerrilla women, it can recreate streams of resistance (Chapter 9).

To conclude, this research's final contribution is to situate emotions at the center of the text, primarily through the ethnographic vignettes that open the chapters. What is of interest is not the experience of the anthropologist, who from his privileged position cannot afford to be at the center of the ethnographic narrative. Instead, the emotions and internal struggles of the researcher are described only to be dissolved into the struggles that directs the ethnographic fieldwork.

With this thesis, the anthropologist opens the doors of the Pacific rainforest to the reader, but the reader is required to *caminar preguntando* (“asking as walking”), so as to generate new

flows, new traits, and new questions. And in this process, the reader is asked to return to the world around them and to resonate with it, its living beings first, and then its ideas. Therefore, it is necessary for both the reader and the ethnographer to unlearn academic rationality and to return to *pensar con el corazón* ("thinking with the heart"). This text, in short, should be *senti-pensado* ("think-felt"), so that as the anarchist Kropotkin shouted, "science stops being a luxury, and becomes part of everyday life" (2002, 265).

ANTHROPOLOGY AS A TOOL TO FOSTER PEACE WITH SOCIAL JUSTICE

This dissertation, as well as the articles or the book that will derive from it, clearly aims to become a tool at the service of those who fight against injustice, and in favor of the autonomy and self-determination of those who struggle in defense of their territories, and that for centuries have been relegated to the margins of the state. Before being assassinated in the Bolivian mountains, Commander Guevara reminded his children that "the revolution is what is important, and that each one of us, alone, is worth nothing." Thus, the same is true for an academic text, which concludes by being an end only to itself if not supported by other texts and included in a discourse committed to the struggle against systems of oppression. For these reasons, the results presented here invite new research that will test their veracity, and open new questions. Future investigations can be directed toward two fronts. The first is that of ethnic communities. Although there is a vast literature on them, it is important to uncover unexplored aspects such as their relationship with the ELN. This is not so much about the confrontation or the violence that the presence of such groups often entails, but rather to explore the complexity of the intimate relationships, friendships, or kinship, that bind these actors. In the same way, research can be undertaken on other armed groups, such as the army or police present in conflict territories and wherein the lower ranks, not infrequently are found to be members of the same extended families in some way already related to the ELN.

Other research could then investigate, confirm, or contradict my findings by going to other war fronts of the ELN, or its Central Command (COCE). Given the difficulty or near-impossibility of such work, it would be appropriate if the guerrillas themselves at least partially conducted such research. I know that such a statement may at first sight appear utopian, but it is with this idea that I want to conclude the practical recommendations that my work raises.

It is certain that the armed struggle will not vanish from the Colombian political landscape in the coming years, and even less so from the global one. On the contrary, the continuous

increase of social inequalities added to climate problems that will increasingly affect people who already are in vulnerable situations will only consolidate the legitimacy of social-political movements that, like the ELN, see the use of arms as the only possibility to enforce their voice and defend their convictions. On the other hand, new attempts to negotiate with this movement will undoubtedly be made, and indeed, as seen in Chapter 3, the participation of civil society and especially of the ethnic communities will again be a *conditio sine qua non* for reaching agreements with this group. This research is then an unequivocal testimony to the need for the state to not only extend peace discussions to those who inhabit territories affected by internal armed conflict but to make these – mostly ethnic – populations the primary actors in writing the terms of a possible post-conflict space/society. In regions such as the Pacific basin, communities and (ex-)guerrillas are the people with the greatest knowledge of the territory and the necessities of the people. Should a peace process reopen, the relationships between ELN and ethnic communities should stop being stigmatized, but on the contrary, should be valued, so that young people can eventually return to their communities by spearheading social, political, economic, cultural, and environmental projects. In this way, Pacific youth could use the skills they learned as guerrillas, putting them to use in a new common cause. In other words, enhancing these youth's ethnic *segmentarity* (see Chapter 1) would allow their revolutionary spirit to remain a war machine, but in a space without weapons.

These are not utopian proposals, but are the claims that have been pursued for years by the ELN as much as by social movements that support ethnic and rural communities. A clear example in this sense is the Ethnic Chapter that these communities managed to include in the peace agreement signed by the government and the FARC-EP in 2016, where Point 6.2.3.e demands:

“A special harmonization program for the reincorporation of demobilized members of ethnic peoples, who choose to return to their communities, will be agreed upon with the organizations representing ethnic peoples in order to guarantee the reestablishment of territorial harmony. A pedagogical and communicative strategy for the dissemination of the principles of racial and ethnic non-discrimination of women, young people and girls disengaged from the conflict will be agreed upon.”¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Translated by the author. See the entire Ethnic Chapter at <http://www.afrodescolombia.org/capitulo-etnico/>. The entire Peace Agreement can be accessed at https://www.jep.gov.co/Marco%20Normativo/Normativa_v2/01%20ACUERDOS/Texto-Nuevo-Acuerdo-Final.pdf?csf=1&e=0fpYA0.

However, the Colombian government's serious delay and non-implementation of this Chapter¹³⁹ does not allow us to hope that policies toward marginalized populations will change shortly. For this reason, the final recommendation I make in this thesis is that the international community – be it academic, intellectual or political – commit to the creation of spaces, as well as the production and dissemination of documents of all kinds and formats, that can support ethnic communities in Colombia, and all those who suffer from systems of oppression stemming from a discriminatory economic system in the rest of the world. In the Colombian case, such an effort should not, in my view, be focused on the state, but rather energies and hopes should be placed on the ethnic communities and in a movement, the ELN, that has not yet abandoned its ideals of justice. The work should not be about helping the ELN and ethnic groups to "integrate" and join the multicultural state, but to show how such a model may be perfect on paper but has little chance of succeeding without structural changes in the economic policies that underpin it. Therefore, I argue that our task is to show how the models of alternative economies and political organizations proposed by ethnic groups – and supported by the ELN – are viable and sustainable examples that consider the environment and people in their intersection of race, class, and gender. Just as guerrilla women are able to influence a historically patriarchal space, it must be the ethnic and rural communities that shape the political and economic policies of the state, not the other way around.

WHAT'S NEXT ?

Before I left for my first fieldwork, a dear friend wrote to me, "Though the shelter of your night is unsafe, and your goal still far away, know that there is no such thing as an unending path. So do not be sad."

In the rainforest of the Colombian Pacific, no shelter is safe from the bombs dropped by the army, so each new day of life takes on a precious value, the ideals of struggle are regenerated, and the goals seem to be getting closer, whether it's just by one step. For me, this thesis marks the end of a journey, but as the spiral of the indigenous Nasa people, it's only a new beginning, the beginning of a greater circle, with new goals and many new steps to take. It is difficult, however, not to be sad, because once at the finish line, after that moment of euphoria, comes the exhaustion, and the realization of the path traveled. At that moment, one wishes to embrace

¹³⁹ See https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/colombia-paz_pueblos-%C3%A9tnicos-de-colombia-denuncian-el-rezago-en-la-implementaci%C3%B3n-de-paz/47154860.

those who are dear to them and share the fruits of their labor. But, not being able to do so, in addition to deep pain, leaves a feeling of emptiness, as if everything would disappear, and making sense of our surroundings is made impossible. So, I remember the smiles of Commander Ernesto and Cecilia in what remained our last goodbye, "Come back soon!" they told me, "We're waiting for you!" After already moving a few steps, I turned and shouted to them, "Hey, thanks for everything. I love you!" To which, with an affectionate look they replied, "Here too, we love you!"¹⁴⁰

This research, therefore, humanizes war and shows how affections and emotions are necessary for the description of a reality where life and death only touch each other, constantly avoiding and seeking each other. This ethnography opens a window on the Colombian internal conflict, and although it does not pretend to explain it, it allows us to understand some of the dynamics that keep it alive, as well as to show the complexity that structures the relationships between an armed actor and the inhabitants of the territory where it moves. Ultimately, this ethnography aspires to indicate which elements should be brought to light, considered, explored, and highlighted, for anyone wishing to contribute to the construction of peace with social justice – in Colombia, or elsewhere.

A critical reading of war requires a critical reading of violence, which can rarely be justified, and even less so when used disproportionately even if officially defended by the discourse of legitimacy carried out by the state. In this regard, the reflection of the philosopher Enrique Dussel is enlightening. As he puts it,

“The ethical conflict starts when the victims of a prevailing formal system cannot live, or have been violently and discursively excluded from such a system; [*in this case, as it happens in the Colombian Pacific,*] the “legal” coercion of the system [...] has stopped being “legitimate.” It has stopped being so, first, because the subjects have become aware that they had not participated in the original agreement setting up the system (and thus it stops being “valid” for them); and, second, because in such a system new victims cannot live (thus the system stops being a feasible mediation for the life of those dominated)” (2013, 401).

Therefore, the search for peace cannot be based on the military annihilation of the enemy, for as this research shows, the enemy – the guerrillas – are people whose racialized bodies are victims of the systems of oppression sustained by the state apparatus, and are thus bodies in perpetual flux between legality and illegality, between trauma and hope, and between victims

¹⁴⁰ In Spanish, “*Oiga, gracias por todo! Se le quiere!*” “*Aquí también se le quiere!*”

of violence and perpetrators of violence. Resolving the conflict with weapons is not only not possible since the ELN has the capacity to remain militarily and above all politically active for a long time, but most importantly, it would be an objective that should not be confused with peace building, which must include rather than exclude, speak rather than silence. With its armed raids, the state only loses legitimacy toward those who already feel discriminated against, but also toward those who opt for more compliant positions. Finally, if as argued above the participation of society and ethnic groups must be the central pillar of any future peace with the ELN, the guerrilla movement itself must be able to confront the state at a table of equal arms negotiations. Killing its intellectual vanguard, as was done with Commanders Marcos and Ernesto, only creates fragility in a political context as complex as it is unstable.

Finally, one of the questions posed by this research is to understand through what rhetoric the ELN continues to legitimize its Marxist-Leninist thought in an era of globalization, exclusion, and destructive capitalism. On one of those afternoons in the forest when it felt as if the storms would never end, and the rain seemed to be born in the leaves of the trees, in the bark, in the flowers, and even in the protective canvases stretched over the *cambuches*, I lost an exhausting game of chess to Commander Ernesto who, all excited, burst into a hearty laugh. Teasing me, he said, "Don't cry, I win the battles, but the war for justice we win it together!" He then added, "I feel happy. Go get your camera, that I will grant you the famous interview." He devoted almost an hour and a half to discussing the various topics covered in this thesis. My last question led right into the revolutionary ideology of the ELN, and Ernesto's answer emphasized the importance of going beyond ideological dogma, and caring about the content rather than the container, or in his words:

"It is not a straitjacket, we do not have to be a rhetoric. That is to say, that this is revolution, that this is socialism, yes? Because in the end, what is revolution and what is socialism? Well, that there be a decent life, that there be equality of conditions, that there be gender equality, that there be redistribution of the wealth of this country equitably, that education be a right, housing, health, sports, culture, art, study. That is what the people want. If you ask anyone, 'Do you want these living conditions for your children?' They will tell you, 'Yes, brother!' It could be socialism. Some call it 21st-century socialism, others *Buen Vivir* ("Good Living"), or others *Otro Mundo es Posible* ("Another world is possible"). The name you give it does not matter, what matters is the meaning and the ideal for which one struggles for."

APPENDIX

THE BROADER INSURGENT LANDSCAPE

THE FARC-EP

At the time of “Operation Sovereignty” (mentioned at the end of the first sub-chapter), the FARC were still a guerrilla group of peasant self-defense, or simply 'bandits,' as the government called them. However, they could count on the Communist Party's support, which in the meantime, had recognized that there were no contradictions between the mass struggle and the guerrilla war. On 20 July 1964, the group led by Marulanda that would soon take the name of Southern Guerrilla Block, approved the Guerrilla Agrarian Program. The first point states:

"To the Agrarian policy of lies of the Oligarchy, we oppose an effective Revolutionary Agrarian Policy that fundamentally changes the social structure of the Colombian countryside, giving the land completely free of charge to the peasants who work it or want to work it, based on the confiscation of the landowner property for the benefit of all the working people."¹⁴¹

Thus, the program proposed a system of credits and technical assistance, health and education services, basic prices for agricultural products, protection and respect for indigenous communities, and a united front that assembled all Colombians. On March 17, 1965, the Colombian government had not yet recovered from the capture of Simacota (the ELN's founding act which took place on January 7) when the Southern Guerrilla Block launched its first military offensive on the town of Inzá. It is said that, in Gabriel García Márquez's La Havana house, Fidel Castro said that “the Ché” also participated in that attack (Villamizar 2017, 275). This story is denied by the FARC-EP themselves, though some former commanders affirm that a meeting between “the Ché,” Manuel Marulanda, Jacobo Arenas, and a few others took place in 1965 in Viotá, a region close to Bogotá.

The following year, between April 25 and May 5, 1966, the second Conference of the Southern Guerrilla Block took place. The resulting Declaration reiterated the struggle against US imperialism, in alignment with the goals set by the First Conference of the Tricontinental, which took place in La Havana in January of the same year. The conference was presided over by representatives of the Southern Block, together with those of 82 other countries from Asia, Africa and Latin America (ibid. 279). The Declaration also condemned the preventive counter-

¹⁴¹ Guerrilla Agrarian Program corrected and expanded during the VIII National Conference of the FARC-EP in 1993: <https://www.farc-ep.co/octava-conferencia/programa-agrario-de-los-guerrilleros-de-las-farc-ep.html>

revolutionary war pursued by the Colombian government, in response to which it declared that: "The guerrilla detachments of the Southern Block have united in this conference and constituted the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC, which will begin a new stage of struggle and unity with all the revolutionaries of our country [...]" (ibid. 779). The FARC was born.

In addition to the support of the Communist Party, it should be highlighted that the student movements, directly or indirectly, have never stopped supporting the guerrilla groups. One reason for this support is due to the symbolic prestige that FARC has enjoyed over time. As Daniel Pécaut explains, "Manuel Marulanda is very quickly classified as a "legendary" leader. These aspects constitute an essential component to building the only political subculture capable of rivaling those that exist around traditional parties" (2003, 66). An amusing anecdote is that of October 24, 1966, when the incoming president Carlos Lleras Restrepo decided to invite the banker John D. Rockefeller to visit the National University of Bogotá, until today a revolutionary hotbed. The National University Federation (FUN) greeted the two visitors with insults, tomatoes, and stones, and the army was needed to evacuate the guests. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice faced a similar reception during her visit to Medellín in 2008. While Rice was in a meeting close to the University of Antioquia, a parade of outraged students left the University. As the situation deteriorated, Rice had to be evacuated by helicopter.

In the 70s, the ELN was almost annihilated, while the FARC grew relatively slowly, but steadily, with help from other foreign armed groups that were established through the congenital support of the communist party, PCC. The 1980s, however, marked a new beginning. The M-19 occupied the Embassy of the Dominican Republic in Bogotá. In response, playing on a relatively favorable power relationship, the national government proposed a "conditional amnesty" open to all armed groups. The FARC's response expressed in an open letter to the parliament was clear: "The armed movement is not on the knees. He is determined to dialogue. But [not] in an ultimatum tone [...] The guerrillas are here in the Colombian jungles. It would be necessary to speak, to discuss, and to reach agreements with us and not with Mr. Carter and his wards of the CIA" (in Villamizar 2017, 417). To demonstrate their capacity, the FARC launched Operation Plan Cisne 3, in which they kept the army under constant siege and attack for almost the entire month of August. It was a change of *modus operandi* in the guerrilla war, no longer based on passive waiting and rapacious attacks, but offensive action. The government's reaction was brutal. In an offensive called Operation Anón, in the space of a dozen

days, approximately 600 bombs were launched, and one million bmg 50 bullets were fired¹⁴² (ibid.). The FARC, which until then, had tried to maintain control of key areas, survived adopting a war tactic based on constant movement. In their seventh Conference, in May 1982, it was decided to duplicate the troops and expand militarily over the following years. In accordance with this goal, EP, *Ejército del Pueblo*, which translates to People's Army, was added to the abbreviation of FARC. Between 1978 and 1982, the FARC-EP multiplied their war front from 6 to 27. They grew in structure, the number of fighters, territorial control, and above all, military and political experience. Their expansion was mainly outside urban areas. In fact, it is essential to underline that the FARC-EP were representing a first generation of guerrillas, which are strictly of rural origin and descent. This can be seen as an "extension of the peasant self-defense model" (Pécaut 2003, 68).

Often accused of excessive orthodoxy, this guerrilla group's political ideology will remain unchanged over the years. As Simón Trinidad, a former commander and official spokesman for the FARC-EP during the Caguan's peace talks and now locked in a maximum-security federal prison in Colorado (USA), explains, "We are Marxist-Leninists in our philosophical conception. In our conception of the origin of the universe, of the development of the world, of society, of man. We fight for socialism, communism, as a strategic fight to end the exploitation of man by man, and private property over the means of production" (Garrido 2001, 37).

Over time, the FARC-EP grew in number and strengthened the political preparedness of their members. Outside the cities, the support of the peasant communities was fundamental and had to be cultivated. In the Eighth Conference's conclusions, we can read: "In our fundamental objective of the seizure of power, we must win the conscience and the heart of the population. Therefore, all our military, political, organizational and propaganda actions must be directed so that the masses of the countryside and the city feel that we fight, defend and represent their interests, needs, and ideals."¹⁴³ In addition to a clear policy of raising awareness among the population, the Eighth Conference stressed the importance of educating its members, "Each guerrilla will carry a book in his/her backpack." Gender relationships became part of the training, "In the FARC-EP, there can be no discrimination against women, who, as they meet the regulatory requirements, have the same rights as men. Whoever discriminates against women will be sanctioned according to the Regulations, be it Commanders or base guerrillas.

¹⁴² A bmg 50 bullet produces such energy, that being hit in the chest up to a mile away, it is highly possible of being literally open in two.

¹⁴³ See General Conclusions of the VIII Guerrilla's National Conference: <https://www.farc-ep.co/octava-conferencia/octava-conferencia-nacional-de-guerrilleros.html>

The woman in the guerrilla is free." Although, as in all spaces, written intentions do not always reflect reality. At least until the 90s, the FARC-EP enjoyed a vast support. Failed peace processes, an increasing number of kidnappings, and above all, the link with drug trafficking, eventually led to questions about the legitimacy of the group. The rural exodus primarily due to the conflict has filled Colombian cities with more than 7 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDP), a number that has placed Colombia at the top of the UNHCR IDP ranking for decades. Over the last thirty years, particularly the youngest generations in urban settings, have lost awareness and possibly interest in rural life, and the knowledge of the conflict is nowadays limited to the news offered by the two mainstream TV channels Caracol and RCN – between a reality show and a soccer game. Due to the influence of vast media propaganda under the two presidential mandates (2002-2010) of Alvaro Uribe – a conservative known for his ties to paramilitarism – the population distanced itself from the guerrilla movements. A march against FARC-EP was organized in 2008. The event, which has been memorialized as "a million voices against the FARC," was attended by about ten million people worldwide.

In the same year, two historical FARC-EP leaders died, Manuel Marulanda and Raúl Reyes. The first of natural death, the second in a bombing launched by Colombian air forces within Ecuadorian borders, which eventually led to a diplomatic crisis between the two countries. In 2011, Marulanda's successor to the command of the FARC-EP, Alfonso Cano, was killed. Cano was an anthropologist trained at the National University. Recognized intellectual and ideologue of the FARC-EP, Cano was also the most inclined to a peace agreement with the government. The man who ordered his killing, was President Juan Manuel Santos, who in 2016 was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Among many other similar acts of peace ordered by Santos, this was condemned as a war crime even by Cali's bishop, who commented:

"All the conditions of absolute disproportion, submission, and reduction to zero of Cano were met. So why did they not bring him alive? A man over sixty years old, wounded, blind, alone? [...] With all due respect, I invite the government and society to review this scheme of 'cutting off the snake's head,' so aggressive and lethal. To compare it to the accumulation of deaths between one chief and another, from Reyes to Cano, by soldiers, police, civilians, and guerrillas" (in Villamizar 2017, 747–48).

Military operations continued until the bilateral ceasefire in 2016 preceding the signing of the peace agreement on November 24 in the same year. From that historic date to 2020, at least 200 former FARC-EP members have been killed by hired assassins belonging to paramilitary groups.

THE EPL

In revolutionary struggles, events rarely have strictly local roots. In the early 60s, the Chinese and Soviet Communist parties diverged on their attitudes towards the US. Fringes of the Colombian Communist Party support the 'Chinese way,' which follows the Maoist thesis of a protracted popular war. Criticizing the PCC leaders of revisionism, in 1964, various members united in what they would call the PCC (M-L), a communist organization of Marxist-Leninist orientation from which the EPL would subsequently arise. The PCC (M-L) conformed as a "cadre-based party, clandestine, selective and secret, of the Bolshevik type, with collective leadership, in short, a party radically different from the PCC but that retained its name" (Villamizar 2017, 296). The new militants decided to prepare 'war zones' with the clear objective of developing the three pillars of Maoist revolutionary theory: party, broad front, and army. Despite the strategy contradicting the tactics, the ML decided to prepare its future armed wing for a guerrilla war based on *focos*, seeking the nascent FARC and ELN's support. The meeting with the FARC, then still the Southern Guerrilla Block, went wrong, the two ML delegates did not return, and to date, there is suspicion that they had been executed by their SGB (cf. *ibid.* 301). The meeting with the ELN is no less shrouded in mystery. Some speak of a constructive visit, while others report that the ELN had detained the ML delegate for eight days (*ibid.*). These two anecdotes are significant because they hide a dark side of this nascent movement, i.e., the continuous contradictions, divisions, and internal ruptures. Even the very founding date of the EPL is disputed, and the only sure thing is that the EPL, People's Liberation Army, was created in 1967.

Initially, the group positioned itself in the Córdoba department on the Colombian Atlantic coast. The EPL policy was defined by the PCC (M-L), the party affiliated with the armed front. Being the armed wing of the party, which embodied Marxism-Leninism and Maoist thinking, gave the EPL's member a feeling of invincibility (*ibid.* 307). This orthodox ideology has been problematic since the beginning. As Pécaut explains,

"The echo of the Cultural Revolution makes its members take over the obsession to erase any 'petit bourgeois' mentality, both in the students forced to agricultural tasks and in the peasants, who are forced to return to self-subsistence and to abandon the marketing of their production. This dogmatism, accompanied by moral rigorism, was not the most appropriate way to seduce a population, mostly black, that had always resisted the inculcation of the Catholic Church's precepts, even the influence of traditional parties" (2003, 57).

The first military action of the EPL took place in 1968. From there, the group consolidated itself in the regions of Lower Cauca, Urabá, and in the Antioquia department, which in the 70s enjoyed broad support in the city of Medellín. Much like M-19 a decade later, the EPL saw the city as a critical site for the preparation of the popular war. To resolve its economic problems in 1969, the EPL decided to adopt kidnapping their tactic. Meanwhile, internal disputes did not cease, and in 1974 the PCC (M-L) split into three factions.

The military life of the EPL was far from glorious. In a series of operations, the Colombian army quickly killed EPL's founding leaders: Francisco Garnica in 1965, Pedro Vásquez in 1968, Librado Mora in 1971, and Pedro León Arboleda in 1975.

In 1991 almost all of EPL's members demobilized. The dissidents, mainly active in the Catatumbo department, are now dedicated primarily to drug trafficking on the border with Venezuela. Following the FARC-EP's demobilization in 2017, they declared a war on the ELN to gain control of illicit activities. As always, the primary victim was the civilian population, which was, and still is, subjected to continued displacements. Given the relationship with drug trafficking, the Colombian government refuses to consider the EPL's dissidence as an insurgent – thus political – group and has classified them as an Organized Armed Group.

THE M-19

If the FARC embodies the first type of guerrilla, and the ELN with its *focos* model the second, the M-19 represents the third generation, or the "tupamaro's model" (Pécaut 2003, 68). The first two are of rural origin, while the latter has been urban from its genesis.

The rising of a new movement is related with the electoral fraud of 1970. The ANAPO consolidated itself as an alternative force to the traditional Liberal and Conservative parties. Active in the ANAPO were Jaime Bateman Cayón (*el flaco*, "the skinny"), Iván Marino Ospina, Alvaro Fayad, and Carlos Pizarro. The four were already linked to the FARC or the JUCO – an organization of the Colombian Communist Youth, which was founded in 1951 as a branch of the PCC. For Bateman, "at that time, the ANAPO represented the best expression of the popular anti-oligarchic struggle" (Villamizar 2017, 356), and only the downfall of the presidential candidacy of María Eugenia Rojas (the general's daughter) in 1974 would convince the socialist wing of ANAPO, also known as *Comuneros*, to advocate for armed struggle. *Flaco* Bateman, who still obeyed the directives of the Farian commander Jacobo Arenas, consolidated a small group within the PCC and the JUCO. When this was discovered, the party was not pleased, and as a consequence, Bateman, and his associates were expelled from the PCC and JUCO.

Bateman's organization followed the conclusions of the fourth FARC Conference, which in April 1971 had stipulated that the time had come to bring the war where it could hurt the oligarchy, i.e. in the cities. This thesis, theorized in 1969 by the Brazilian Carlos Marighella in his *Urban Guerrilla Handbook*, mainly had two objectives: "the physical liquidation of chiefs and subordinates of the armed forces and the police; and the expropriation of arms or property belonging to the government, the big capitalists, the plantation and estate owners, and the imperialists" (Marighella 2009 [1969], 69).¹⁴⁴

In October 1973, the *Comuneros* held their second Conference. It was decided that a new organization would be created, independent of the parties. The group named itself Movement April 19. The reason for taking up the name is found in the first of the two documents from the Conference: "Determined to fulfill this mission of reaching the power with the people and arms, we adopt the name of the Movement April 19 as a permanent symbol that our people will not allow another April 19" (in Villamizar 2017, 358). In the beginning, the new organization remained a secret; in fact, as if it were a new brand, the M-19 had its own "marketing policy." As explained in the second document,

"A tactical step is to link up with the ANAPO masses, strengthen the formation of the legal front, carry out political-military actions linked to the needs of the masses and the armed struggle in general. [...] The actions will be spectacular, but cannot be related, as far as possible, to the negative concept that exists about the armed struggle. The actions should not be of a bloody type since we seek to attract attention to our organization" (ibid.).

Around January 14, 1974, an "advertising campaign" preceded the first official action. The following announcements appeared on the first page of national newspapers: "Parasites ... worms? Wait for M-19; Decay ... lack of memory? Wait for M-19; Lack of energy? Wait for M-19". Finally, on January 17 the newspaper advertisements read, "It's coming, M-19" (ibid. 360). The same evening the neo-militants burst into the Quinta Boívar Museum in the center of Bogotá, recovering nothing less than the sword of the famous Liberator Simón Bolívar. They left behind sheets signed M-19, which on that day made its public entrance as a new Colombian armed movement.

¹⁴⁴ A group to follow Marighella's ideas was Tupamaros National Liberation Movement, which was militarily active in Uruguay from the 1960s to 1985. The Tupamaros, which could count among its ranks José (Pepe) Mujica, President of Uruguay from 2010 to 2015, stood out for its self-explanatory actions, such as the capture of a truck full of food later left in the hands of the inhabitants of a marginalized area in Montevideo.

As a curiosity, it is interesting to note that, like Alfonso Cano for the FARC-EP, the M-19 also has an anthropologist in its founding nucleus. In this case, a woman, Vera Grabe, later senator and then responsible for human rights in the Colombian embassy in Madrid.

The recovery of Bolívar's sword was the first in a series of spectacular actions. In 1977 they seized the manager of a palm oil factory and forced him to publicly recognize the exploitation of his workers. On Saint Sylvester's night of 1978, thousands of weapons were recovered at the main military garrison in the capital. The mission succeeded, but this time the consequences were brutal. In the weeks that followed, hundreds of people were arrested, tortured, and most of the weapons recovered. As Villamizar points out, "the "hunt" against the M-19 was used to hit everything that smelled of opposition, left, unionism, etcetera. The arrests continued with the same intensity during the first six months of 1979: artists, indigenous people, politicians, students, religious, housewives, the elderly, children, teachers, intellectuals, nobody escaped" (2017, 397). In a letter setting out his vision of human rights,¹⁴⁵ the US ambassador wrote, "None of the detainees have been tortured, although some, supposedly, have been mistreated" (ibid.). The Colombian president also denied the use of torture. To expose the government's abuses to the world and to try to force the release of its militants, the M-19 responded with an equally spectacular new action, the occupation of the Dominican embassy in which fourteen ambassadors were taken hostage. This operation was a political success. After two months, the release of the hostages will be negotiated in La Havana, while the M-19 gains widespread consensus. Bateman proposed a meeting with President Turbay (later known as "National Sanchocho"¹⁴⁶) to discuss the amnesty of political prisoners, and the termination of the state of siege: "it would be the first proposal for a political solution to the armed conflict made for a guerrilla leader as a negotiating method to obtain peace" (ibid. 415). In response, in 1981, the Turbay government offered four months for conditional amnesty to all guerrilla movements. The ELN's answer was lapidary, "We reject the amnesty law for revolutionary fighters as a new trick against the people, reaffirming our commitment to LIBERATION OR DEATH¹⁴⁷ [...]" (ibid. 420-421). The M-19 was more open to dialogue, but the diplomatic crisis with Cuba, which obliged the writer García Márquez to take refuge on the island before being arrested and interrogated for alleged relations with said movement, marked the end of the dialogues. In 1983, the M-19 reopened dialogues under the presidency of Belisario Betancur. However, the tragic

¹⁴⁵ The title of the document truly is "Human Rights: Estimate of the Present Situation in Colombia," see Villamizar, 2017, 398.

¹⁴⁶ From the verb "sancochar", to parboil, the "sanchocho" is a typical Colombian dish.

¹⁴⁷ Capitalized in the original text.

death of *flaco* Bateman in a plane crash postponed the demobilization of M-19 and its return to political party to negotiate peace agreements under president Virgilio Barco, in 1990.

In its sixteen years of existence, M-19 marks the history of Colombian guerrilla movements "breaking with the world of violence of the 1950s" (Pécaut 2003, 73). At the end of a difficult decade and despite Ronald Regan's conservative and anti-communist foreign policy, M-19 symbolizes the rebirth of Colombian and Latin American guerrilla groups during the 1980s. Among the new movements, some were purely indigenous. Perhaps the best known is the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), which under the legendary figure of Subcommander Marcos declared Chiapas "liberated land." In Colombia, in 1977, *flaco* Bateman had spent a period in the Huila department giving military training to some indigenous people. The latter, few years later, would found the Quintín Lame, the first and only indigenous Colombian guerrilla group.

THE QUINTIN LAME ARMED MOVEMENT

In 1871, the Peruvian indigenous leader Túpac Katari prophesied, "I will die, but I will return as millions." At the beginning of the twentieth century, echoing Katari, a Colombian indigenous leader, Manuel Quintín Lame, said "A column formed of indigenous people will rise tomorrow to claim their rights, as God claimed humanity" (Villamizar 2017, 478).

Laying the basis to Manuel's prediction, under the directives of unity, resistance, and autonomy, 1971 is the foundation of the CRIC, the Indigenous Regional Council of Cauca. The CRIC allowed a significant advancement of the indigenous cause, especially in the '80s. As observed in a report of the National Center of Historical Memory, "in those years almost 60% of the 74,000 hectares that, according to Incora, passed into indigenous hands between 1970 and 1996 were recovered. This period coincides with that of the activity of the Quintín."¹⁴⁸ The relationship between the CRIC and the future armed movement, however, should not be confused. As a member of the latter explained in 1988,

"No, let's say there is no direct relationship, but the CRIC started the indigenous struggles in Cauca when they reached very strong levels of confrontation and repression. The communities themselves saw the need to also confront the armed side, above all because of the number of murders of indigenous leaders. So far there have been more than 200 indigenous leaders murdered in the CRIC, so this meant that more or less ten years ago

¹⁴⁸ See "Quintín Lame: la primera guerrilla indígena de Latino América", in the National Center of Historical Memory: <https://centrodehistoriahistorica.gov.co/quintin-lame-la-primera-guerrilla-indigena-de-latinoamerica-2/>

small self-defense groups began to organize and the Quintín-Lame was born, as a fundamental need to defend the indigenous peoples."¹⁴⁹

To support the CRIC's efforts and to respond to the continuous attempts by various groups – armed and unarmed – to counter the decisions of indigenous movements and control their communities, in February 1982, the indigenous created and converged into a broader organization, the Colombian National Indigenous Organization, ONIC. As it became obvious in the succeeding years, these organizations were never supplanted by the armed movement. Back in the 70s, the need for indigenous people to arm themselves was due to the continuous assaults by so-called "pájaros" (birds), that is, small armed groups commissioned by and affiliated to the conservative party to defend their interests – somehow the forerunners of paramilitaries.

It should also be noted that the CRIC did not emerge in the Cauca department by accident. According to the data of the National Center of Historical Memory, Cauca is the second department with the largest indigenous population. This is made up of 65% of the Nasa or Paez ethnic group, followed by the Yanaconas (15%), the Guambianos (13%), the Coconucos (5%), and the Emberas and Ingas (2%)¹⁵⁰. In addition, Cauca is an exhibition of historical dynamics of structural racism that has characterized Colombia for years, at the level of departments, and within them. In Cauca, wealth is concentrated in its capital Popayán and suburbs. At the same time, in the Andean area of indigenous majority (as well as in the coastal area of predominantly Afro-descendant population), the communities are left with minimal infrastructure and precarious health and education services. Between the 60s and 70s, infant mortality was three times that of the national level, while life expectancy at birth was 20 years lower than the rest of the population (Ibeas Delgado 2009, 38). This structurally challenging context encouraged various indigenous leaders to take up arms. Interestingly, as Peñaranda Supelano explains, "The founding group was multicultural, for example, Gustavo Mjía, Pedro León Rodríguez, and Édga Londoño were mestizos [...]; There were also intellectuals and activists of foreign origin like Pablo Tattay, with Hungarian roots" (in Villamizar 2017, 478). Even, "the founder of Quintín, Luis Angel Monroy, was of black race" (Ibeas Delgado 2009, 39). According to the anthropologist Myriam Espinosa (2009), the formation of the Quintín Lame happened in four phases and modalities: support group (without uniforms or arms), self-defense circumscribed to the territory, mobile command (with uniforms and weapons, occasional use), and armed

¹⁴⁹ See the full interview, "Interview with the two delegates of the MAQL, held during the 2nd Summit of the CGSB, on <http://www.cedema.org/ver.php?id=1563>

¹⁵⁰ See "Quintín Lame: la primera guerrilla indígena de Latino América"

movement (permanent structure of a broader and inter-ethnic nature, with extraterritorial presence). The ideology of the group drew from the Marxist-Leninist tradition. Although the Quintín Lame repeatedly claimed the contradictions of the classical (orthodox) left that often contrasted with the traditions and reality of indigenous culture (Ibeas Delgado 2009, 39).

The first act of aggression by Quintín Lame Command took place on November 29, 1984, with the attack on Central Castilla S.A estate, in response to the brutal eviction of 150 families, mostly indigenous Nasa, as well as afro-descendants and peasants. The group gained national attention the following year – this time under the name of the Quintín Lame Armed Movement (MAQL) – when on January 4 they occupied the municipality of Santander de Quilichao.

This occupation required considerably more logistics and capacity for action and was, therefore, carried out jointly with the FRF, Frente Ricardo Franco. The FRF is a small dissident of the FARC. The CIA was more concerned with the FRF than the MAQL, which in their reports is only mentioned secondarily. In fact, in the *Intelligence Latin America Review* of 1986, the FRF is described as "[...] one of the most violently anti-US guerrilla groups in Colombia, claiming responsibility for three separate coordinating bombings against US diplomat and business facilities."¹⁵¹ In addition to FRF, since its establishment, the MAQL enjoyed the support of the M-19. Following the sensational recovery of weapons on January 1, 1979, the M-19 managed to get some arms to different future MAQL members, but the government repression reached the Cauca, and various indigenous leaders were arrested. The relationship between the ELN and the MAQL was less constructive, but there was a coexistence agreement based on mutual respect and tolerance (Ibeas Delgado 2009, 43). On the other hand, MAQL's relationship with FARC-EP was quite different. The FARC-EP's orthodox Marxist ideology and their military superiority often led this group to impose their vision by force. In February 1981, the FARC Front VI killed seven members of CRIC in the Tiger Massacre, accusing them of treachery (Villamizar 2017, 476). Despite on-going negotiations between the groups, history repeated itself in August 1985. Under this new FARC-EP attack in the Jabaló municipality, the victims included five men, a Nasa woman who worked as a teacher, and a five-year-old boy. FARC-EP continued its assaults on indigenous and Afro-descendant communities over the years, drawing several criticisms .

In 1985 the MAQL became part of the National Guerrilla Coordinator (CNG), an umbrella organization that brought together the ELN, the EPL, and the M-19 and other minor

¹⁵¹ Center Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence Review, January 31, 1986, Approved for release 2011/12/30

movements. The MAQL also joined the America Battalion, which, under the leadership of Carlos Pizarro, also brought together Ecuadorian and Peruvian guerrilla movements. One of the objectives of the CNG was to occupy the city of Cali in protest against the implementation of neoliberal policies as for instance the agreements made between President Belisario Betancur and the International Monetary Fund (cf. Segrelles Serrano 2018). The CNG, however, did not survive for long partly due to internal conflicts, and partly due to the absence of the FARC-EP, recognized by all the other groups as "the guerrilla organization with greater prestige and ability at the rural level" (Villamizar 2017, 488).

These new alliances were not without repercussions,

"The entry of the Quintín to the America Battalion of the M-19 and then to the Guerrilla Coordinator Simón Bolívar marked a breaking point: from the 'own war' it began to move to the 'foreign war,' in areas such as the Valle Department, away from indigenous territory and ideals. This departure from the original objectives produced a crisis, and already in 1987, the group showed signs of wear."¹⁵²

Precisely in 1987, the MAQL joined the Guerrilla Coordinator Simón Bolívar (CGSB), a new umbrella organization, which also included FARC-EP. Due to this strategic move and sympathy of the anthropologist and commander Alfonso Cano, in 1988 the FARC-EP signed an agreement to respect the autonomy of the indigenous communities. The CGSB began a peace dialogue with the government of César Gaviria in 1991. The FARC-EP and the ELN would eventually abandon these dialogues, while MAQL finally demobilized on May 31 of the same year.

Owing to the demobilization and participation in the National Constituent Assembly, the MAQL managed to influence the new Constitution of 1991, ensuring that the indigenous claims were taken into consideration. The new Constitution was celebrated internationally for its inclusion of diversity, i.e. multiculturalism. In reality, however, there were deeply unsettling problems with multicultural policies, namely that "the peremptory need for favorable value judgments is paradoxical – perhaps we should say tragically – homogenizing" (Tylor 2009, 96). It is no coincidence that the Constitution was drafted without consulting the ethnic communities, and while the MAQL's activities allowed partial recognition of indigenous rights, the Afro-descendants were entirely excluded up to three days before the Constitution was approved. An Afro-descendant leader present in Bogotá at the time told me years ago, "The government did not want to know about it, and it was only thanks to the support of the

¹⁵² See "Quintín Lame: la primera guerrilla indígena de Latino América"

indigenous movement that, at the last moment, we managed to integrate the Transitory Article '55, which in 1993 would become the famous 70's law, known as the Afro-Colombian law."

Although the rights acquired by the indigenous (as those of the Afro-descendants) have remained mostly nominal to this day, the experience of the MAQL deserves attention as it diverges from most armed groups. In fact, "While the norm in almost all wars is that they end with the social fabric of the communities destroyed, as happened in Peru, Guatemala and Nicaragua, in the case of Quintín and Norte del Cauca the opposite occurred. In other words, with the social movement reconstituting and absorbing the armed group in its organizational process."¹⁵³

Perhaps the most significant lesson in the history of the first and only Colombian indigenous armed movement is precisely that of the interconnection between the MAQL and its social base; a relationship that demonstrates how the cultural policies of ethnic groups creates interculturality and are, as the anthropologist Myriam Jimeno puts it, "the composition of subjects in close relationship with collectivities that reinvent themselves over time, like their flags" (2011, 345).

¹⁵³ Ibid.

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