

Practicing Peace, Living with War: Going Upriver in Colombia¹

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It is disconcerting to share a hotel room with someone who needs to tell you in detail how he learned to use a machete to chop the human body up into unrecognizable chunks of flesh. Vladimiro's military training showed not only in his butchering prowess, but also in his upright posture, an odd juxtaposition of perfect etiquette and lethal brutality.

A friend had brought Vladimiro by my hotel in Apartadó, knowing my colleague and I were interested in interviewing members of Colombia's paramilitary forces. Although Vladimiro arrived in civilian clothing, the phone call from the hotel receptionist made clear that he needed no uniform in order to inspire fear. "You are needed down here," she tersely informed me. When I walked down the stairs into the lobby, the three hotel employees behind the main desk all made a point of being intensely involved in their paperwork and sweeping, never looking up as I shook hands with Vladimiro and

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invited him and my friend Jefferson upstairs. I glanced back over my shoulder — their tasks continued to be riveting.

Once in my room we opened ice cold coca colas, closed the curtains, and I asked if we might tape our conversation. I assured Vladimiro that I would change his name when referring to our interview; he laughed and told me that would be fine. My initial concern that he might not be a particularly talkative person quickly dissipated as he began a three-hour dialogue that occasionally veered into a confessional. He began slowly, measuring out his words and my response. My interest in listening to his experiences was matched by his need to recount them, and to do so with someone who calmly sipped her coke.

Over the next three hours, Vladimiro inspired both revulsion and pity. He had completed his obligatory year of military service and found himself discharged to join the swelling population of the unemployed. The official unemployment statistics hover at 20%, the hovering stabilized by including ragged merchants at streetlights running out to clean a windshield or sell a package of gum to drivers impatiently waiting for the light to change. He had grown tired of being unemployed and consequently suspect. As he explained, “In my barrio, when anything is missing — when anyone’s been robbed — everyone starts looking at the people who don’t have jobs. I hated that feeling that everyone suspected me.”

After spending a few months unemployed, Vladimiro decided to respond to a recruiting poster displayed on the wall of his local store. The flyer directed people to the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) — the paramilitary forces that operate throughout the country, serving as a private “security system.” I had to ask him to say

this again, stunned that the allegedly illegal paramilitaries actually recruit via flyers at a local store. “Oh yeah, they even have a web site where you can go on and read all about the AUCs.” Impunity manifests in so many ways.

In the midst of staggering unemployment, Vladimiro signed on at 450,000 pesos a month — roughly \$225 in a country where minimum wage is scarcely more than \$100. He kept returning to this theme, telling me over and over again that there was no work in Apartadó. Now that he had joined the paramilitaries, “Everyone treats me with respect. It’s not like it was before. When I walk down the street, people move out of my way. Now I can send my mom 350,000 pesos a month — she’s doing all right now.”

Vladimiro began at 450,000 pesos because he had already had military training. His time at the paramilitary’s “educational camp” was spent reviewing weapons, learning to interrogate, learning how to kill, and learning about human rights. My eyebrows rose, touching my scalp. “Human rights? They taught you about human rights?” “Yeah,” he nodded. “They told us that when we are going to kill everyone in a village, we need to kill them one by one over a period of a few days. If we kill everyone all at once, they call it a massacre and we have problems with human rights.” I could not hold back a grimace. He leaned forward: “We were forced to take very drastic action. An order is an order.”

About two hours into our conversation — after he had explained that it was necessary to “finish off everyone, because if one guerrilla falls, there are five behind him just waiting to kill you” — he paused and began telling me about the cold of the mountains, the lack of food, and the close friend who had died at his side. “A tear

escaped me when I saw him die. I risk my life for 450,000 pesos a month. Friends die and you can't do anything.”

I had been so focused on Vladimiro that I had only looked away when my tape recorder clicked at the end of each cassette. Somehow I now turned toward my friend Jefferson who was slumped on the bed, holding his head between his slender hands. I think he had been sitting that way for some time, and he remained in that position until we finished the interview with Vladimiro.

Finishing is an ill chosen word; he would have kept talking long after I ran out of tapes. I felt badly explaining that I had to meet someone at the dioceses at seven o'clock and needed a few minutes to get ready. There were several awkward seconds as I shut off my tape recorder and rose to my feet. The three of us walked downstairs and I accompanied Vladimiro to the door. We kissed each other good bye on the cheek — shaking hands would have seemed odd after such an intimate encounter.

Jefferson followed me back upstairs, shaking his head. “I've known him since we were kids. We used to play soccer together, we went to the same school. We grew up together.” I just held his hand, that same slender one that had he had wrapped around his temples during Vladimiro's secular confession.

My friend headed home, leaving me to clear my head a bit before meeting with Father Leonides Moreno at the dioceses. I hailed a cab and we jostled our way across town to the church. Father Leonides was sitting at a table, waiting for me and a cup of *tinto* — inkjet Colombian coffee. He began telling me about his twenty years in the region and the role of the Catholic Church in local level peace initiatives. He had served as a mediator on many occasions, negotiating with various armed actors on behalf of his

parishioners. He described one trip he had taken up river to visit several campesino communities in Canyon Claro. Rumors had been running that the paramilitaries were encroaching and the villagers were terrified. Father Leonides tried to reassure people that these were merely rumors and that the *paras* were not headed in their direction. One woman kept trembling and shaking her head. “Why are you so frightened?” he asked. “Por que somos igualitos” — “because we are the same.”

Father Leonides sat back, sipped his *tinto*, and let the story seep in. What that terrified woman was acknowledging was that the *paras* – the feared death squads that human rights organizations hold responsible for 75% of the murders in Colombia — were not monsters, but rather people just like her. There was no comfort to be derived from casting them as inhuman beasts. The *paras* were sons, husbands, lovers — community members who had learned to slaughter their own. Monstrosity can be all too human.

Later that evening I met up with some friends from the UN office. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees established an office in Apartadó in 1997 [need to confirm date]. The director of the office, Maria Paz Bermejo, is a friend of a friend from the peace process days in Guatemala. The UN network leads to familiar faces in the serial contexts of war. Maria Paz is a rail thin Spaniard whose quick movements accentuate her angles, making her seem all collarbone and elbows. Too many years in certain fields can shoot one’s nerves, wearing out the pads that should cushion them from a violently ragged world. When I picture her face, her enormous brown eyes are always opaque — I realize I never saw her except through a thick veil of Marlboro smoke.

We decided to head to Apartadó’s *Zona Rosa* — the main dirt street lined with bars and restaurants. Muscular young men with closely shorn hair fill *La Zona Rosa* at

night. The *paras* cluster at the outdoor tables, occasionally leaning their machine guns against the chair, an arm around their spandexed companions. The young women are drawn to these men for their money and their swagger.

As we searched for an empty table for a barbecued ribs fix, Maria Paz's coworker Claudia yelled over the music and into my ear. "Kimberly, did you listen to the radio today? They talked about a young girl who asked her mother if anyone in Colombia ever dies of natural causes." I had indeed been told about her, several times. Sometimes she was interviewed on the radio, sometimes she appeared on television, and at other times she was someone's neighbor. I heard this twice-told tale often in Colombia. Although people smiled as they told me this, their smiles were accompanied by a dismayed shake of their heads.

That mythical child embodies both the reality of Colombia's thirty-seven year civil war as well as the surreal aspects of a war that began long before many Colombians were even born. What began as a war waged by Marxist revolutionaries against an exclusive, authoritarian political system has devolved into a bloody struggle over resources — a struggle between the military, paramilitaries and the guerrillas for control of this resource-rich country. In the fight over those resources, the civilian population has been rendered fatally superfluous, causing our youthful metonym to wonder if anyone in her country ever lives long enough to grow old.

I picked up a newspaper one morning as I was foraging for *tinto*. *El Colombiano*, one of the country's leading newspapers, had a matter-of-factoid on page ten: "68 people a day are killed in Colombia." As with many wars, the vast majority of the casualties are unarmed civilians — so-called "collateral damage." And yet, in the political science

literature I had read with highlighter pen in hand, Colombia was also described as the oldest democracy in Latin America, indicating the tremendous gap between procedural and participatory democracy. While the ballot booths may open at regular intervals, fear for one's life prevents many from participating in a system in which the line between politics and violence is terrifyingly blurred. Fear for one's life has also prompted massive internal displacement, as 1.4 million Colombians have left their homes to seek refuge in the growing barrios that corset cities throughout the country.

Amidst the ongoing fighting, the guns have occasionally fallen silent during one of the country's several failed peace processes. Bad faith negotiating in the past has led to tremendous distrust in the present. Many guerrilla members remember the fate of their comrades, who accepted government amnesty and relinquished their arms, only to be hunted down and assassinated by either rival guerrilla groups or right-wing death squads. Similarly, many people can describe in detail the lethal violence inflicted upon them by the guerrilla, and express their desire for revenge. Clearly this is not a Hollywood script with "good guys and bad guys," a shirtless Russell Crowe playing the hero to Meg Ryan's quivering lower lip. Instead it is a story of brutality on all sides, with civilians caught in the crossfire.

Their weariness for war has caused many Colombians to demand peace. Andrés Pastrana was elected president in 1998 on a platform that promised renewed peace talks and a commitment to finding a negotiated settlement to the war. In an effort to demonstrate to the guerrillas that he was a man of his word, he ceded to the FARC a large portion of southern Colombia that would be denied access to the military, thereby ensuring the guerrillas a "safe zone" during the peace process. However, this

controversial move has not succeeded in securing meaningful negotiations, and another armed group remains strikingly absent around the negotiating table: The paramilitaries — those bands of armed mercenaries who maintain close ties to the Colombian military. Only certain armed actors participate in the negotiations, while the war rages on throughout Colombia. And into this already lethal conflict, the US has imported its “War on Drugs.”

Colombians have much to say about cocaine, and the North Americans who snort it. Many friends told me that as long as *gringos* want to pack their noses with cocaine, all this talk about a War on Drugs is just a waste of time. One friend explained his theory to me. Luis has been a human rights activist all of his adult life, and has a sophisticated analysis of the flawed thinking that has shaped US counter-narcotics strategy. When I attended a talk he gave for community organizations about Plan Colombia, he argued that in a post-Cold War world, the US had to come up with some other justification for maintaining a military presence in Latin America — and exorbitant defense expenditures at home. “The US government has spent more than \$25 billion on drug control programs in the last decade, and this has not reduced coca cultivation by a single hectare. US policy just shifts the crop from country to country.”

Luis had recently returned from Bolivia, where he participated in an indigenous human rights gathering. Many peasants from Bolivia’s coca growing Chapare region had attended and they spoke about their continued protests against aerial fumigation. “These campesinos have tried every single one of those crop substitution programs — tomatoes, lettuce, carrots, you name it. And they’ve watched those crops rot in their fields because the roads are bad, the trucks are few, and no one is lining up to buy fields full of

tomatoes. Besides, the fumigations destroy everything, not just coca. The pesticides kill everything and make people sick.”

I assured Luis, and the many other Latin Americans who share his views, that I agree with them. The “War on Drugs” and its serial czars have been a domestic and international failure. I worked for several years in the substance abuse field in California and remember the days we spent trying to find a treatment program that would accept pregnant women or low-income clients. Forget it. For social workers who let their weary fingers do the walking in the yellow pages of the under-funded treatment world, the only light shining was at the end of Carpal’s Tunnel.

I in turn explained my frustration. As a North American working in the Andean region, I saw both the domestic and international dimensions of the drug war. How to explain that being seen as “tough on drugs” is a proverbial litmus test for politicians who hope to wage a winning campaign? How to explain that partisan differences all but disappear when the talk turns to the drug war? How else to understand \$1.3 billion for Plan Colombia?

Plan Colombia was on everyone’s mind and the tips of their tongues as well. Plan Colombia was inaugurated under Clinton, although the first president Bush launched the definition of “drugs as the greatest risk to our national security”. On January 11th, 2000, then President Clinton called for emergency spending in Colombia. Six months later he signed into law a bill to provide \$1.32 billion for counter-drug activities in the Andean region. Of this, \$860 million was earmarked for Colombia, with about three-fourths of it for the Colombian military and police. By August of 2000, US Special Forces had resumed training the second in a series of elite Colombian Army battalions. This

assistance means the US is directly supporting counterinsurgency operations, although this is vehemently denied by government spokespeople. In order to approve this funding, Congress waived key human rights conditions that prohibit funding units of foreign militaries implicated in human rights violations. Instead of learning from past military errors — errors that resulted in the establishment of brutal dictatorships and “dirty wars” in many countries throughout Latin America — US policy towards Colombia continues to focus on expanding military operations.

Corporate interests are also visible in the Colombia debate, particularly defense manufacturers and oil companies. Plan Colombia includes approximately \$350 million in contracts for Blackhawk helicopters. The connections here are important: Connecticut-based Sikorsky manufactures Blackhawk helicopters. During debates regarding the appropriation of funds for Colombia, Connecticut Senator Christopher Dodd lobbied hard for Plan Colombia and for an increase in the number of Blackhawks included in the budget. A large percentage of the funds appropriated for Plan Colombia — now continued as the Bush administration’s Andean Counterdrug Initiative — return almost directly to the US for the purchase of military supplies and training. As for oil, look at President Bush and his cabinet’s investment portfolios.

When a debate arrives prepackaged, it pays to look outside the box. Clearly wars are fought — they are also told. When I give public lectures about the Andes, I ask people to think about the way in which the War on Drugs — and the US focus on Colombia — has been marketed here at home. The mainstream media has focused on southern Colombia, particularly the region ceded to the FARC. This focus suits the official story that government representatives have manufactured. By focusing on the

southern region of the country, the story can be reduced to one of guerrillas and coca, of stalled peace talks and fumigation. The tidy story quickly becomes disrupted if we look elsewhere in Colombia: to the massive displacement of peasant farmers by the paramilitaries in collusion with the military; to the peasant protests against fumigation and its toxic effects on both human beings and the environment; to the role of the military and paramilitaries in the drug trade; or to the absence of the Colombian state in many regions of the country, making it an ineffective means of delivering the scant social and development funds included in Plan Colombia. By looking elsewhere in Colombia, the marketing of US intervention as a “War on Drugs” resembles those grainy commercials in which a local car dealer features his family members against the richly textured backdrop of his garage.

Let’s step up to complexity rather than away from it. The war in Colombia is a resource war, with several simultaneous fronts. We might speak of a drug war, but in reference to land concentration in the hands of drug traffickers that has resulted in a “counter-agrarian reform” that has pushed hundreds of thousands of peasant farmers off of their land. This is also an oil war. Oil, as a fixed asset, contributes to the struggle over land — the only way to access the oil is to control the land on which it is to be pumped. Oil literally fuels the conflict. Finally, we can think in terms of a “corruption war.” Many groups, in Colombia and elsewhere, make money off the traffic in arms, drugs and war. This is an enormous and frequently occult economy. It is this lethal struggle over land and other resources that has led to the death of more than 30,000 Colombians, the disappearance of thousands, and the displacement of 1.4 million civilians.

Statistics can be numbing, unless the human faces behind the numbers have names, histories, families — unless we can see people rather than graphs. I am a medical anthropologist who has worked for years in Peru, particularly in rural villages that were destroyed during that country's internal war. I have spent many hours talking with survivors of war, offering kleenex, caressing backs heaving in sobs, massaging necks that “open like raw nerves every time I think of how they killed him” — and drying my own eyes as survivors transferred the burden of their memories to me, if only for the space of an interview. I lost my capacity to erase the faces many years ago.

One too many mornings spent reading the New York Times and Juan Forero's columns about Colombia made inaction impossible for me. I knew from my experience in Peru that people must be trying to work against the violence, even in the midst of war. I also knew that simply saying “no” to military funding and interventions was insufficient: There had to be alternatives to which people could say “yes.” I left for Colombia in July, meeting up with two colleagues who share my concerns. We decided to head to Urabá, a northwestern region which straddles the departments of Choco and Antioquia. Maria Paz at the UN office was a good contact, and we had heard that a number of the displaced had organized as Peace Communities and returned to their land.

Urabá is rich in natural resources and man-made woe. National and international companies have amassed great wealth via the extraction of wood and the cultivation of bananas. Preliminary studies indicate that oil will be found throughout the region. Additionally, the border with Panama serves as the thin line through which drugs are smuggled out and arms smuggled in. These resources, combined with the Atrato River and the port at Turbo, make control of this region desirable to international businesses

and local elites, as well as to the paramilitaries and the FARC who are engaged in a struggle for control of the region.

In Urabá the paramilitaries control the towns and cities in alliance with local elites and their military connections, and the guerrillas dominate the countryside. Both charge “a vaccination” — the bribes that civilians are charged to keep an unnatural death at bay.

As the violence escalated dramatically in the mid-1990s, thousands of peasants were displaced, leaving abandoned villages in their wake. Crowding into the small towns along the Atrato as well as the larger cities of Turbo and Apartadó, the peasants endured several years “*andando en tierra ajena*” — “wandering in foreign land”.

The wandering caused these peasant farmers to begin organizing, motivated by their desire to return to land they had worked since the time of their great grandparents — since a time before individual memory, a time passed down in the communal histories that tied generations of villagers to the great expanse of banana trees that grow bright green from the deep chocolate soil.

Villagers wisely sought out the Catholic Church, turning to an institution that had in part filled the absence of the state, and which certainly has a moral authority the Colombian government can only envy. The local diocese is personified by Father Leonides — whenever I asked someone to point me in the direction of the church, I found him. Father Leonides is a big man, in size and presence. There is nothing of the dour priest about him; rather, he eats with great appetite, enjoys a good glass of Chilean wine and while his eyes may be on heaven, his feet are firmly planted on the ground, in this world and its many problems.

In the midst of his busy schedule, Father Leonides made time to explain the context in which the Peace Communities had been formed. His twenty years in Urabá give Father Leonides an understanding of the violence that pre-dates drug trafficking and arms smuggling. “It is the cattle ranchers who have financed the violence in Urabá. They supported and nurtured the paramilitaries to push peasants off their land and to stop unions that might oppose them. In the mid-1990s the *paras* entered with force, and they accused these campesinos of being guerrilla sympathizers. The FARC had controlled this land for twenty years and had a coexistence (*convivencia*) with the campesinos. Yes, there was a relationship; campesinos paid their “vaccination” and lived with the presence of the FARC. But the *paras* accused these people of being guerrillas. The accused were in great danger — there was an exodus of thousands of people. In the Church we had to ask ourselves, ‘What response do we have?’ We began building shelters for the displaced, but they dreamed of returning to their land. So there was a process of organizing to resist the violence. The Peace Communities were forged in that juncture. The campesinos came together to reclaim the possibility of life in these villages. The armed groups refer to the dead as the “quotas of war” — these campesinos were tired of filling those quotas.”

As he spoke about the founding of the 59 Peace Communities four years ago, Father Leonides grew increasingly animated. “What these campesinos have organized is a truly revolutionary alternative — peace.” He kept insisting that national efforts to negotiate peace will not resolve the regional issues that have fueled the war. Father Leonides maintains that peace will come from a series of regional peace processes and

local initiatives. As he asked me, “Why do we think that armed actors are the ones who will bring peace to Colombia?”

A review of the accords the campesinos drew up reveals that the Peace Communities represent both a citizen initiative and a demand. Anyone who has ever worked with campesinos has heard them speak about their villages, and themselves, as “*los olvidados*” — the forgotten ones. They are referring to a geography of difference that informs the distribution of poverty, the administration of (in)justice and the right to be considered citizens of the nation and not merely “wards of the state.” But the “forgotten ones” also refers to the absence of the state in their communities, except in the form of soldiers who may be stationed in nearby military bases. One clause demands the unarmed presence of the Colombian state, in the form of services, public works, and the fulfillment of the state’s obligations to its citizenry. As one of the campesinos who participated in drafting the agreements told me, “We are no government pilot project. The Colombian state has never treated campesinos as brothers, but we are members of this country.”

In declaring their villages “autonomous space” in the midst of the war, villagers “are reclaiming the right to life.” These villagers attempt to create their own demilitarized zones in the slender swath of land that runs between the territory controlled by the paramilitaries and the FARC. A key clause in the agreements prohibits any armed groups from entering their communities, either to kill or to recruit. The agreements also guarantee there will be no collaboration with the army, guerrilla or paramilitaries. This guarantee reflects a central concern of all communities living in zones of conflict. In a familiar pattern of terror and death, first the army enters a community and demands

support, making the residents a guerrilla target. Conversely if the guerrillas enter the community, the civilians become targets of the paramilitaries and the army. Neutrality is afforded little respect in the bloody business of war.

And there is another demand that speaks of the desire for recognition — recognition as human beings and not “*olvidados*.” The agreements include the demand for “moral reparation,” in the form of monuments to the dead and “memory books” which list the names of those who have been killed as well as record the history of a people who remember a time when they lived “*una vida sabrosa*” — a delicious life. The campesinos also ask that a film and radio series be made about their struggle, showing “all of Colombia and the world that we are laborers for peace, and that we have not lost the hope that someday we will live as we did before.”

Villagers have maintained their non-violent struggle despite tremendous odds. One side of the river that flows through their land is occupied by the paramilitaries. Standing on the left bank of the Atrato, one can look across the muddy water to the FARC territory that runs the length of the river’s other bank. As the Atrato flows through the thick jungle of Canyon Claro, enormous green leaves periodically give way to burned out homes that stand as testimony to the violence that has molded life for so many years. Yet, despite the helicopters overheard and the nearby thunder of machine gun strafing, these villagers insist on being more than “targets in a war we did not start.” As one local leader told me, “So far peace in Colombia has only existed in words or written documents. This is not enough. We must put peace into practice.”

The challenges of practicing peace became apparent shortly after I arrived in Urabá with my two colleagues, Asale and Victoria. In our first meeting with Maria Paz,

she mentioned that the villagers in the Peace Community of Andalusia had requested accompaniment from the Catholic Church and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to leave their land and join five other Peace Communities that had clustered together for security purposes in Costa de Oro. The Andalusians were living in the midst of combat and wanted safe passage down river to the relative calm of Costa de Oro.

Phone calls ensued, mosquito nets and knee high rubber boots were purchased, and permission was secured for us to join the humanitarian commission that was charged with accompanying the villagers. Maria Paz called us into her office to explain how delicate the situation was and to review the security measures the UN insisted we follow. “I want you to understand that the paramilitaries and the FARC are all over this area. You may be stopped and it is critically important that you do not speak. You might endanger everyone if you open your mouths. The spokesperson for the group will be Miguel Angel — he is the Defender of the People of Urabá. He and Vicente, from the government Social Solidarity Network, have years of experience with this sort of thing. I’m glad they are going so I feel you will be safe.”

Although Maria Paz felt she could not spare someone from her office, she decided to send Claudia, a young woman who worked for Legal Option, a non-governmental agency that coordinates with the UNHCR. Claudia’s presence meant we could fly the UN flag as we traveled up river. Via Victoria’s connections with the UN office in Bogota, we were allowed to borrow a satellite phone, which would be useful not so much for calling, but for its symbolic import and the leverage it would afford us when it came time to plan the subsequent mutiny.

Rounding out the commission were three outreach workers from the Catholic Church. Jaime, Maria and Wilson are all from the region and spend the bulk of each month living in the peace communities, providing material and moral support. Finally, we were to stop along the way in Curvaradó and pick up a local government official.

The next morning the UN truck picked us up at our hotel shortly before dawn. The forty-five minute ride to the port at Turbo took us through banana plantations, rows planted for as far as we could see. We heard the rumble of an airplane flying low overhead, and realized we were up early enough to see the crop dusters that fly over the fields each day, clouds trailing in their wake. The director of the local health clinic had told me about these fumigations. Cleft palates and miscarriages were part of their patient profiles.

The bumps in the road meant that we consumed half of our *tinto* and wore the rest. We arrived in Turbo a bit ahead of schedule and left the driver to watch the truck as we walked around. Ports do have that hey sailor bustle about them. Stores were stocked with canned foods, appliances, clothes, compact discs and shiny bicycles. There were easily a dozen large boats docked, and canoe sized vessels were tied to poles all along the mouth of the gulf.

A short time later the rest of the commission arrived and we began loading the UN boat with the boxes of supplies the Social Solidarity Network was delivering, the food we had purchased to donate to the village, and our belongings. We slowly motored out of the harbor, stopping briefly at the military checkpoint. The UN paperwork was reviewed and we were waved on. The captain full-throttled our way across the gulf. The

twin engines propelled us along the surface of the water and the ocean air laid salt crystals along our eyelashes and the corners of our mouths.

The crossing was quick and its completion signaled by the sudden appearance of trees sticking up out of the water. I am not a seasoned sailor, but I sensed we were no longer on the high seas. We had arrived at the mouth of the Rio Sucio — the “Dirty River.” It was wide and easily navigable for those who had learned how to avoid the tree trunks. We tooted up river, passing the towns of Rio Sucío and Domingodó.

Mid afternoon found us at the small town of Curvaradó, a cluster of worn wooden shacks sprinkled along muddy roads. We spent the night because Jaime and Maria had some business to attend to, and the municipality maintains a large house with mattresses stacked up along the wall. The UN boat headed back to Turbo; from this point, the trip would be made in outdoor motorboats. The nuns prepared dinner and we finally fell asleep at three in the morning when the corner store turned off its battery-powered disco beat.

It was three hours later when we began loading the five boats that would travel up river to Andalusia. Suddenly an elegant wooden chair appeared amidst the sacks of food, insect repellent, backpacks and cans of gasoline. It was straight out of *Highlights* magazine: What part of this picture does not fit? An equally elegant man soon walked up, instructing the motorists to load the chair onto one of the boats. Franklin was the secretary for the municipal government and he had arranged to loan one of the boats that would bring the villagers down river. As soon as the chair was installed, jokes ensued about the limited seating in the first class section. Franklin laughed and it was impossible to begrudge that elegant man a modicum of comfort.

Vicente oversaw the loading of the boxes, wrapping them in tarps in case of rain. Over my shoulder he called out to Miguel Angel, who joined us in the boat. He had on the same Indiana Jones hat from the day before, but a new accessory was strapped to his thigh. He was carrying a shiny machete tucked into an elaborate beaded sheath. I had to control my accursed candor. Every single “is that a banana in your pocket or are you just glad to see me joke” ran through my brain. God save the city slickers of this world.

The motorists began coaxing their engines, gasoline fumes burning the hairs in our noses. We headed out, the boats obstinately facing the strong current that pulled against us all the way up to where Río Sucio merges into the Atrato River. An hour and a half later, Jaime pointed to a muddy clearing on the right bank of the river. “That’s where we’ll dock on the way back and walk in to Costa de Oro.” The village was not visible from the river — all we could see were palm trees and endless degrees of green.

Another half hour placed us at the fork in the river. To our left was a large sandy beach. We paused for a moment before turning right into the narrow tributary that leads up Canyon Claro. I think this was the moment when the word “surreal” first entered into our daily conversations. Everything was so beautiful I wanted to reach out and touch it to see if it was real. The water wound its way up through the jungle. Enormous leaves fanned out above our heads. Snowy egrets perched on the riverbanks. When my Colombian friends subsequently told me they could not bear to leave their country because there is not a more beautiful place on earth, this is the image that would cause me to nod my head.

Wilson suddenly called out to the boats behind us. Up ahead the river was blocked, piles of fallen trees and shrubs studiously placed across our path. As we

approached the blockade, a volley of whistles passed from one side of the river to the other. The FARC control movement on the tributaries via blockades such as the one the motorists began hacking at with machetes. The slender branches were quickly cleared, but the large trunks below were easily a foot and a half in diameter. We carefully filed out of the boats, walking across the trunks and out of the way. Revving up their motors, the drivers raced the boats up and over the enormous trunks, belly flopping into the water on the other side. We tightroped our way back out to the boats, and the whistling started up again.

Several bends later we passed Buena Vista, one of several deserted towns along the river. The paramilitaries had attacked Buena Vista several times before the villagers finally packed up everything they could carry on their backs and headed for the towns along the Atrato. We stopped for a few minutes to walk through the empty houses, school, and communal buildings. On the wall of the school the letters AUC had been drawn in white chalk. Burned desks were tossed about in the corners, and several cows walked through on their way to graze. The school taught a gruesome lesson about the paramilitaries' growing power in the region. We could hear machine gun fire as we walked back to the boats.

When we finally pulled up close to the riverbank at Andalusia, the villagers were already waiting for us. We began passing our cargo to the human chain formed on the bank, and joined the Andalusians in carrying everything through the mud up to the village. People offered us thick stalks of sugar cane that trickled sweet syrup down our faces as well as into our mouths.

The villagers also carried up the two flags we had flown as we traveled upriver. A man laid the UN and the dioceses' flags out in the clearing in front of the communal kitchen, adding the Peace Communities sunshine flag to the display. Children pointed to the helicopters that were flying overhead — the flags were meant as proof of our presence and their neutrality.

At the request of Miguel Angel and Vicente, the villagers convened a meeting. Under the thatch roofed kitchen, we sat in a large circle and listened to the villagers explain the decision they had made. The meeting did not drown out the sound of machine gun fire that echoed against the sides of the canyon. Several women shook their heads. “Listen to that. Our children can't sleep. Our heads hurt and our stomachs ache. We have to leave to save our lives.”

An elderly couple began to speak. Emmadarda and her husband Ramón explained that the community had decided to leave Andalusia because the fighting had grown too near and too intense. Ramón shook his head. “I have worked this land all of my life, but we have to leave. Maybe someday we can come back,” his voice trailing off. People nodded silently, encouraging him to go on. It was Emmadarda who completed the thought. “We were getting ready to leave, but the FARC sent militia to tell us we have to stay. They told us we are not allowed to leave.” Miguel Angel interrupted. “Are you saying the FARC told you not to leave? Why weren't we told this before we left Apartadó?” He and Vicente became agitated, and the villagers sensed this.

Ramón explained. “We sent three emissaries to talk to the FARC and see if they could obtain permission for us to leave. We sent Rafael, Narciso and Vladimiro. They left two days ago and still haven't come back. We want to wait until ten o'clock

tomorrow morning, and if they aren't back by then, we need to leave." One of the women explained to me later that Vladimiro was just a teenager but had been chosen as an emissary because he was a bit mentally disabled and thus not likely to be retained and forcibly recruited. Both Rafael and Narciso were too old to be in danger of that.

Miguel Angel, Vicente and Claudia began asking the villagers over and over again if they really wanted to leave. The repetitiveness of the question began to resemble a call and response. While preachers may use call and response to drum out sin and drum up God, these three were using the technique in hopes of wearing down the villagers' resolve and convincing them to stay put. When the call did not achieve its desired response, Miguel Angel suggested everyone sleep on it and reconvene at six o'clock the following morning.

We were shown to a large open-air structure and began to hang up our mosquito nets. Miguel Angel was positioned next to me on the wooden planks that would serve as our mattresses. "I feel impotent. The FARC have issued an order. An order is an order. I'm telling you, if I have to choose, I'm saving my own hide." He then tucked that hide into the net beside me and we all stretched out in a row and tried to sleep.

As the sounds of the bats in the thatched roof faded into our exhaustion, my friends nudged me. "Do you hear that?" Indeed I did: Several people were walking by the village, pausing to whisper "They're over here." We did not move, holding still and letting the bat droppings bounce across the tops of our mosquito nets. It was an enormous relief when the walking began again and the FARC faded into the distance.

The morning meeting only served to reinforce the villagers' desire to leave. However, this time their decision was voiced in an altered context. Miguel Angel,

Vicente and Claudia were terrified. The machine gun fire had not subsided, and our nocturnal visitors — the FARC, not the bats — were strong incentive to leave. Asale and Victoria hooked up the satellite phone and I stood on a large tree trunk and began holding the antennae skyward. We finally found the angle at which the satellite established a clean line and called Maria Paz.

We did not need to gather close to the receiver to hear her concern. She had already been informed that there was combat nearby and was uncertain if we should stay or leave. She asked us to call back, giving her a chance to call the military base at Carepa and ask them to ceasefire. In the meantime, she told us to stay put.

While we were waiting to call her back, there was a rapid reassessment of danger. Miguel Angel, Vicente and Claudia decided that staying was definitely more terrifying than leaving — and there was clearly no way to leave without taking everyone with us. By the time I had pivoted sufficiently on the trunk for Asale to locate a phone line, the decision to leave had been made. The communal meeting confirmed the decision and we called Maria Paz back to tell her we were on our way. She had not been able to get through to Carepa.

It took several hours for the villagers to gather up their possessions. Bed frames, dressers, clothing, chickens, pots — everything we could hoist onto our backs was carried to the riverbank. The reality of only five motorboats sent the beds and dressers back up the muddy path. We packed peoples' belongings into every inch of those boats, piling children and other lightweight valuables on top. The boats sat low in the water, laden with many lifetimes. As we walked down the path from Andalusia to the waiting boats,

Vicente kicked the dirt with his rubber boots: “All of this is about land. This whole damn war is about land.”

One by one the young men on the bows of the boats pushed off from the bank with long wooden poles, turning the boats down river. One poor skinny dog lunged into the water behind the boats. Her head bobbed in the current stirred up by the motors, her front legs furiously peddling in the water. She was so skinny it hurt to look at her, her sharp bones cutting at my heart. In the midst of overwhelming human suffering, somehow allowing myself to focus my grief on a frail dog seemed bearable. Someone finally took pity and dragged her into their boat by her front legs.

We moved slowly under the weight. It is difficult to belly flop over trunks with such heavy loads. Each impasse was met with a flurry of machetes — these were new blockades that had been laid since the day before. The commission boat brought up the rear, flags flying off both sides.

About an hour downstream, we came around a bend to find the other four boats angled at a stop across the current. Our eyes followed the tilt of the heads raised towards a clearing in the palms. Three FARC militia stood on the riverbank, two with machine guns strapped over their shoulders, the third man with a radio in hand. He addressed the villagers angrily: “Shit, we told you not to leave. Shit. Get back up there right now or you’ll pay the consequences!”

Wilson steered our boat up close to the bank and we waited for Miguel Angel to speak. He continued with his impotence. “Good afternoon. Might we speak with your commander?” he asked flaccidly. He did not identify himself nor did he stand up, clearly not wanting to rock the metaphorical boat. His request was denied as the guerrilla

repeated their order: “The people back up river, the institutions may continue.” The villagers all looked toward our boat, waiting for Miguel Angel to exercise his position as the Defender of the People. All went silent until he turned to Wilson and ordered him to head down river.

Miguel Angel had never stood up, so there was no need for him to sit down. As the villagers thrust long poles into the silt on the river’s bottom and slowly turned their boats around, the commission did not delay in heading down river, the outboard motor spewing gasoline fumes and churning the water in its wake. It all happened so quickly that we were stunned. Claudia turned around, her head barely visible above her large blue UN life jacket. “But how are we going to leave all of these people?” she asked. The only response was the motor. Jaime and Maria began exchanging glances with us, and the glances turned into murmurs as we began expressing our disgust. Jaime and Maria had been assigned to the bottom of the nautical hierarchy, and they could not openly challenge Miguel Angel — at least not yet.

Amidst our murmurings in the front of the boat, we passed through the mouth of the river, turning left and motored to Costa de Oro. We pulled up, dusk just a few rose ribbons away. Victoria and Asale pulled out the satellite phone to call Maria Paz and let her know what had happened and that we had arrived safely to Costa de Oro.

As we began setting up the phone, I saw Vicente, Miguel Angel and Franklin head into the jungle. Asale, Victoria and I quickly agreed that I would follow them. Handing the antennae panel to Wilson, I took off after them on the narrow mud path that disappeared into the shades of green. Vicente quickly changed direction and headed back toward the boat. It was clear they wanted someone to monitor that phone call.

Franklin and Miguel Angel began walking as fast as they could through the jungle, while my boots gained weight with each additional layer of mud that clung to the ridged soles. The buzz of mosquitoes was so loud it seemed to make the air move. Franklin and Miguel Angel kept walking faster and faster, trying to leave me behind. “*Pasos largos*, big steps,” Franklin kept exhorting. I also shifted into *pasos largos*. They had no way of knowing I walk my enormous German shepherd everyday. For Jack, “big steps” are a way of life.

I soon caught up with them and found them dropping back, leaving me out front to somehow find my way through the deepening darkness. For another half hour or so vines kept scratching across my face and grabbing at my legs. The path was difficult to follow and luck was clearly my guide. The vines finally gave way to a clearing ahead – to a large stretch of green grass that served as Costa de Oro’s soccer field in good times, helicopter landing pad in bad. I waited until Miguel Angel and Franklin emerged and together we walked across the open expanse to where the villagers were gathered.

After much shaking of hands, the villagers noted we had no one from Andalusia with us and looked concerned. Standing before them, Miguel Angel spoke first and then Franklin, beginning to weave the face-saving story they would stand behind when we returned to Curvaradó. Miguel Angel told the people gathered that the guerrillas had ordered the community to stay and given us fifteen minutes to head down river. In an interesting conflation of time and space, he insisted the guerrillas gave us the order at gunpoint, as helicopters flew overhead and the sounds of machine gun fire were at our backs. Discrete events were condensed into his fiction, making the actions of the commission sound reasonable rather than cowardly.

Franklin then rose to second what Miguel Angel had said. He looked nervous, perhaps knowing that while Miguel Angel and Vicente would head back to the safety of their offices, he would be just a ways down river. He spoke quickly, assuring the villagers that the municipality was a phone call away. “Just call and know we are there for you.” He and Miguel Angel then resumed shaking hands, insisting on the urgency of our departure.

As we headed back across the field, an old man touched my arm. He had tears running down the deep creases of his face. My sense of shame matched the depth of those wrinkles. I rubbed his back telling him how worried I was for all the people we had left on the river, and how sorry I was to have just sat and watched. I kept shaking my head and telling him “This is wrong and we need to fix it.” His voice quavered as he asked me “Do they have food? Will anyone get out alive?” *Pasos largos* rang out again as we were rounded up to walk back while we still had the embers of daylight.

We rode back in a silence as complete as the darkness that had fallen. Wilson knew the river so well that he wove between the floating trees without even a sliver of moon to guide him. When we docked at Curvaradó, everyone went to their separate corners of the municipality’s large house.

Asale, Victoria and I were upstairs and we began reliving what had happened. We had been ordered by Maria Paz to remain silent. Unfortunately we found no solace in that fact. I did not want to be grouped with the people who had told me “an order is an order.” Vladimiro in my hotel room, Miguel Angel in Costa de Oro — they had both justified their action and inaction in terms of orders given and orders received.

We heard the floor creak and Maria's head peered around the doorway. She came in and sat on the edge of the mattress. She had already spoken with Jaime and Wilson, and they had decided they were going to head back up river and bring the people down to Costa de Oro even if they had to rent a boat and go alone. Maria blended anger and concern: "We left those people with no food. There are two pregnant women and a young girl with malaria. But the worst thing is that they disobeyed the guerrillas and we left them there to go back all alone. We wondered if the three of you would consider going with us?" The posthumous mutiny was christened by the commitment of these three outreach workers.

The UN boat was waiting for us the next morning and we headed down to Rio Sucio. We disembarked and walked over to the church to let the nuns know we had arrived safely. News of the events had preceded us, and the story had become more sensationalized as it traveled down river. People were both surprised and relieved to see us alive — after all, squadrons of FARC, dozens of helicopters, and grenades flying in all directions must have slowed us down a bit. I remembered a book my mother used to read to me. "To Think that I Saw it on Mulberry Street" is a Dr. Seuss story about a little boy who arrives home late and begins embellishing the reasons for his tardiness. By the time he places the final flourishes on his tale, the normally tranquil Mulberry Street has been lined with lions, elephants, fire engines, flame eaters, and a few other distractions.

We were escorted upstairs to meet Father Lucho, the priest who is in charge of Rio Sucio's parish. He was waiting in the conference room, where several state representatives, the Peace Brigades, and two nuns were already gathered. We sat down and began to sort out the flame eaters from the facts.

Miguel Angel and Vicente were both out-numbered and out-raged. Everything we had wanted to say in the boat but could not came pouring out as we rushed to complete each other's sentences and make very clear that what had happened was morally indefensible. Maria then took over, speaking on behalf of all of us and letting Father Lucho know that we had already decided to go back upriver and accompany the villagers to Costa de Oro. She stared down Miguel Angel who wisely shut up.

The UN motorist came in, pointing to his watch and letting us know he needed to get back to Apartadó. We were all walking down to the boat when it suddenly occurred to Asale, Victoria and I that heading back to Apartadó would only make it easier for Miguel Angel and Vicente to assure that we would be ordered to stay there. Part of the story they had fabricated implied that as North Americans we had been part of the problem —that our presence had endangered “the humanitarian space.” We unloaded our bags, deciding that physical presence would be half the battle in terms of heading back up river.

Jaime and Maria suggested we leave our belongings in the church and go with them to Domingodó where there was a meeting scheduled later that day in the Red Cross office. Wilson piloted us to the dock and we walked into the Red Cross office to find a circle of chairs, half of which were already occupied. We went around the circle introducing ourselves. The dioceses of Apartadó had sent a young man named Carmelo to coordinate the next step, and he had arrived with Oscar, a representative of CINEP, a Jesuit non-governmental organization that provides support to the displaced population. The same two women from the Peace Brigades were also there, as were two Red Cross

workers. One was a tall skinny man who kept writing in a notebook while his coworker Miriam sat silently by his side.

Several children suddenly ran into the office to tell us a boat had just arrived. We looked out the doorway and saw two men walking toward us. They were two of the motorists who had accompanied us to Andalusia and had stayed behind when their boats were detained. They were exhausted and hungry, but alive. We sent money with one of the children and asked her to buy coca cola and cookies while we embraced the two men and cried. Somehow tears come in the moments of relief.

They began telling us what had happened after they headed back up river. The villagers had not gone all the way back up to Andalusia but had decided to dock at Villa Hermosa, about forty-five minutes from where the FARC had detained them. The motorists told us the villagers felt “muy engañados” — very tricked by what had happened. The state had failed them, and even the children talked about the fear they had seen in Miguel Angel’s eyes. They had passed the night listening to the machine gun fire and wondering what the guerrillas would do.

They did not have to wait long to find out. That same evening a group of militia arrived and called for a communal assembly. The comandante claimed his men had turned the villagers back for two reasons. They wanted to see what the state would do when challenged, and expressed their amazement that no one in the commission had said a word. They also insisted they had stopped the villagers because the *paras* had established a base in the mouth of Canyon Claro and the FARC were concerned the *paras* would open fire on the boats and slaughter everyone. Although this seemed a merely convenient version, subsequent events would indicate it was prescient.

After the two motorists had spoken, Oscar took the floor. He began by stating that the commission had completed its task, which was accompaniment. He emphasized that assisting the villagers had jeopardized the humanitarian space, and that any plans to go back up river could shut that space down entirely. By this point the concern voiced about humanitarian space and the need to maintain it took on aspects of the absurd. I asked Oscar to explain the logic. “If no one sets out for these communities to deliver humanitarian assistance, then what sort of space is being maintained? Does space exist if everyone is too frightened to fill it?” He became very angry, moving toward me and repeating, “The commission fulfilled its task.”

It seemed that someone needed to mediate the increasingly heated conversation. The two Red Cross representatives said nothing. When I approached Miriam afterwards insisting there was only one ethical action and that was to go upriver and accompany the villagers to Costa de Oro, she just stared back at me. I pressed on: “The lists you are making are lists of the dead — don’t you see that these people are worse off now than they were before?” Still nothing. I am not certain Miriam spoke Spanish, as she never said a word. It was one of those occasions when I wondered if I was mixing up my “ar” and “er” verb declensions. I repeated myself, mentioning the two pregnant women, the young girl with malaria, the people left with no food, the villagers who had disobeyed the FARC. The skinny man said they would consider heading up river in seven to ten days. Seven to ten days was not a plan, it was a perversion.

Finally Carmelo stepped in, backing up Maria and Jaime. Although cautious, he agreed that something needed to be done. He said he would communicate with Father Leonides and determine what should happen next. We returned to Curvaradó with Maria,

Jaime and Wilson. Several hours and two beers passed and our anxiety did not abate. Shortly before dusk, Carmelo and Oscar arrived: A second humanitarian commission would be leaving the following day. However, Oscar had decided that Asale, Victoria and I should not go because we were “targets” and would endanger the humanitarian space.

Devious palace politics ensued. The Peace Brigades representatives communicated with their head office and were denied permission to join the commission on the grounds that it was too dangerous. That meant their satellite phone would remain in Apartadó.

In the interim, I performed my human antennae role and Asale was able to get through to Maria Paz. She chastised us for a few minutes, and told us she would not accept responsibility for anything that might happen to us. We assured her that we were not asking her to take on that burden. She tried another tack: “What you girls (sic) do not seem to realize is that Colombia is very complex. It is not like Guatemala or Peru. The most important thing we can do is maintain open the space for humanitarian aid. You are North Americans and will be targets for the FARC. They will kidnap you. Of course I don’t want anything to happen to you, but if it does the humanitarian space will be closed. Think about it.” We assured her we would and asked who she was sending from the UNHCR office. She told us she could not spare anyone.

We then patched our way through to the dioceses and spoke with both Padre Leonides and his indispensable assistant *doña* Pilar. They told us we could go under the auspices of the dioceses. They granted us permission to accompany the commission,

thanking us for an international presence that would confer some security to all involved. Their permission and our borrowed satellite phone sealed the deal.

That evening we gathered and discussed the details. In addition to Carmelo, Father Honelio had arrived from the dioceses. He, Carmelo and Oscar were placed in charge: They would speak on behalf of all of us. Father Honelio explained that in the event we were detained — by either the paramilitaries or the FARC — we would all stay together. Under no condition would we allow them to pull someone aside because we would not be likely to see them again. We would head to Villa Hermosa where the villagers were waiting, accompany them to Costa de Oro, and those who chose to stay on for a few days were welcome to do so. As the meeting drew to a close, Fernando Alvarez, the president of Andalusia, addressed the group. He had just returned from a trip to Quibdo, where news of what had happened had prompted him to return immediately. He thanked everyone for their efforts and assured us “ If they stop us tomorrow, I am prepared to speak to them, whoever they might be.” Our meeting ended just as Curvarado’s generator wound down for the night.

Two boats set out the following day. There was no first class section, although Franklin did come out to see us off. The other boats were waiting with the villagers at Villa Hermosa. We were also joined by a wiry man named José Luis. He was one of the leaders of Costa de Oro and he had come to Curvaradó to join us on the journey up river. I think he wanted to make certain this commission had a distinctly different outcome.

We followed the same route up river, arriving at the sandy beach across from the mouth of Canyon Claro. Suddenly, the lull created by early morning air and the rocking of the boats was broken. “Get out of the boats now! Now, dammit. Fuck, get out of the

boats now!” One by one, men began appearing from behind the palms. Each one lowered his machine gun to back up the command. Wilson and the other motorist steered us toward shore and we hurriedly got out of the boats. “Run! Run up the beach! Now!” The machine guns waved us in the direction of the jungle and we ran as fast as we could through the porous sand. Father Honelio was in front of me and I reached out to touch his shoulder and let him know we had faith in him. In our rush, we did not tie up the boats, which began floating out with the current.

The jungle was so dense that we had to bend over as we ran, following a single track of worn mud. At regular intervals on each side of the path a man with a machine gun told us to keep moving. I tried to discreetly peek out from under my baseball cap and I noticed crosses around many of their necks, reflecting the beams of sun that found their way through the leaves. I began counting as we ran — first one, then five, then fifteen, then fifty-three paramilitaries, each with a machine gun and rounds of ammunition wrapped around his chest. Some of the *paras* had mortar shells strapped to their thighs and others had radios in their hands. When we finally came to a stop, one young man radioed to his commander: “Eagle, we have the livestock right here. What do you want us to do with them?” In the clearing I could stand up straight, and I realized that each man bore an N3 on the sleeve of his black tee shirt.

Another realization took place simultaneously. Once we stood up, it was clear that Victoria and I were a *gringa* shade of white. Asale is African-American and thus did not stand out. Suddenly, the young “fuck-run-up-the-beach-now” *para* smiled. “Buenos días. How are you? Oh, don’t be worried, we just want to talk to you.” Another displayed his gift for rhetorical questions by asking us why we seemed nervous. Still

another looked at Victoria and I and paused: “Don’t we know each other from somewhere?” At first this seemed an odd place to practice such a hackneyed pick-up line. However, it may well be that he had seen us walking around Apartadó. Impunity is such that these young men move between the jungle and the city with ease. Indeed, when we returned from Costa de Oro after the *paras* had stopped us, we looked at the young man staffing the military checkpoint. He smiled as he stared back at us, recognizing us from this day on the beach.

After a few minutes in which cigarettes were passed around our nervous circle, Eagle appeared, flanked by two heavily armed young men. Carmelo, Oscar and Father Honelio began talking with him in low tones. While they were busy with him, a young man on my end of the circle began harassing José Luis. “Hey, come over here,” he insisted. José Luis was standing next to me and I felt his body tense. I instinctively wrapped my arm around his waist. “I said come over,” he repeated. I threaded my other arm through José Luis’, remembering Father Honelio’s warning to us in Curvaradó: “If they try to take anyone aside, we won’t allow it. They separate people out to kill them.” I grabbed tighter and looked across at Victoria. She tried to silently beckon in Father Honelio’s direction with her eyes. Jaime noticed and tapped Father Honelio to get his attention. I looked at him and saw his eyes trace my arms. He walked over, daring to turn pale and yet defend life. In contrast to Miguel Angel’s shiny, strapped-on bravado, Father Honelio quietly looked the *para* in the eye: “We are here on a humanitarian mission. Either we all stay or we all leave. We came together and will stay together. You cannot take this man.” The *para* backed down, literally taking a step back into the palms behind him. More cigarettes were requested and puffed.

The long minutes slowly passed, as we tried to fix our eyes on anything but their faces. I was convinced that if they caught us looking at them intently, they would assume we would later try to identify them. I still believed they might care about their anonymity; then I remembered my conversation with Vladimiro.

Eagle finally decided we could continue, satisfied with the explanation that we were only headed up Canyon Claro to help the villagers move to Costa de Oro. He told us we would be stopped again on the way down “to see what sort of people you have in those boats.”

We bent over and began the walk back. At the end of the path, we were told to wait. Several *paras* opened fire, aiming at the other side of the river. The machine gun fire was followed by several exploding mortar shells. As one of the men explained, “We want to make certain it is clear for you to walk to the boats.” A more likely reason for firing was the hope that the FARC would fire back, killing us. Our blood would then be on someone else’s hands. However, there was silence. We waded out to the boats and started up the motors. Looking back, all one could see was palm trees.

The trip upriver was long, the blockades many. When we finally reached Villa Hermosa, the villagers came running to the riverbank. The women were crying. Emmadarda and Ramón thanked us, insisting they knew we could come back for them. Maria had packed enormous bowls of food that we shared with the villagers, plates passed and washed, and passed and washed again.

President Fernando asked for everyone’s attention. He explained the plan and the presence of the *paras*, assuring people that no one had to come along unless they wanted to. He added that it would be necessary to remain very calm — if anyone started to run

away, the *paras* would shoot them in the back. Several men who had lost their documents opted to walk down river. To be undocumented was to be suspect and they were placing themselves in tremendous danger should they be detained. Father Honelio led us in prayer, asking that God protect us all on the way to Costa de Oro. We loaded the boats and slowly wound our way down river.

It was a different group of FARC militia that detained us this time, asking Carmelo, Oscar, Father Honelio and Fernando to come with them. The wait wore on and the rain began to fall. The motorists jumped onto shore and used their machetes to cut down a pile of enormous leaves. We passed them around in the boats, using them as umbrellas as the rain pounded down. Two hours later the four of them came back down and told us we had permission to continue on to Costa de Oro. We waved our leaves to celebrate and everyone started to cheer.

The high spirits continued until shortly before the mouth of the river. Everyone had been told the *paras* would be waiting; I could hear people gasp as men began to appear from behind the trees. The motorists pulled up as close to the shore as they could and we began to file out of the boats. Several more men appeared to search the boats, while the rest of us were herded over to one side of the shore. There were fifteen heavily armed men standing before us. I had pulled two of the children near to me. They were trembling and little Javier was embarrassed when a stream of pee ran down his pant leg and puddled into the sand.

One of the *paras* asked people what they thought they were doing. Ramón stepped to the front and told him “We don’t owe you anything. This is our land and we

just want to work.” He was abruptly cut off by one of the *paras* who scoffed, “All of this land belongs to the guerrillas and we are going to finish them all off.”

While this man continued to harass Ramón, another *para* asked the villagers how his aunt was. I thought I had not heard him correctly, but indeed he was asking about his aunt. Everyone from Andalusia knew him — he used to be one of the FARC commanders in the area and he had family in Villa Hermosa. He then radioed in to Eagle: “Do you want me to separate out the ones I know?” We could hear both outgoing and incoming calls. “Who are they with?” He replied that they were with a humanitarian commission. The channel crackled, “Then tell them to have a good trip in the name of the Autodefensas Campesinas de Colombia.” We were allowed back into the boats and continued on to Costa de Oro.

We could see the outline of human forms on the riverbank and loud whoops let out when the boats approached the shore. The villagers at Costa de Oro had heard the shots that had been fired several hours before and had no idea if we had all been killed or not. As we unloaded the boats and headed up the path, Yulie, one of the girls from Andalusia, began to explain to Jaime that the men who had stopped us were really soldiers and not paramilitaries. We knew they were indeed *paras*, but were interested in why she was convinced they were not. As she explained, “I know they were soldiers because if they’d been *paras* they would have killed every single one of us. That’s what *paras* always do”

In response to the villagers’ request, we remained with them for a month in Costa de Oro. We were told that an international presence in their communities keeps the armed

groups out. Accompanying the villagers keeps open the slender space of humanitarian assistance that still exists.

I had many opportunities for conversations that lasted late into the hot, sticky nights. I was told of how life used to be, when they could tend their crops, celebrate their fiestas and watch their children grow, trusting they would have a future to grow into. They spoke repeatedly of the “delicious life” they used to enjoy before the fighting engulfed them, contrasting that past with a present “that tastes like food without salt.”

A “life without salt” indicates the role of war in the production of poverty. Before the fighting escalated dramatically in the mid-1990s, these villagers cultivated bananas and sold them to merchants who ran the twelve to fifteen boats that regularly traveled up and down the Atrato River. A family could earn \$100 a week selling their bananas, a source of income that was cut off with the economic blockade imposed by the *paras*. The blockade has several facets. The river is under the control of the paramilitaries, making travel dangerous in addition to costly. The paramilitaries have set a limit on how much merchandise villagers are allowed to transport up river. The round trip from Costa de Oro to Rio Sucio costs approximately \$25, and the *paras* prohibit the transport of more than \$15 in goods, on the grounds that anything in excess of that \$15 must be going to provision the FARC.

The inability to travel freely on the river has other consequences as well. Many state agencies and nongovernmental organizations are unable to find people who are willing to travel up river. This means the teachers no longer arrive, the health post has no medicine, and the sick have limited options. Those limited options can be fatal.

Not long after we arrived, I noticed the health promoter, Carmen, fanning something on the floor of her front porch. A closer look revealed it was someone and not something. A tiny baby lay on a bed of cool green leaves designed to lower a fever that had been raging for forty-eight hours. Her tiny lungs raised and lowered in jerking spurts, large swollen lumps beneath her skin pressing the life out of her tiny body. I searched my backpack but only had Ibuprofen and this little person clearly needed something stronger than that. Carmen showed me a bottle of pink baby antibiotics, the contents dry and cracking against the sides of the vial. The parents were too afraid to risk a trip down river. When word spread throughout Costa de Oro that the baby had died, people quickly told me that her death was not Carmen's fault — “that baby was a casualty of war.”

At night as we fell to sleep, we heard the passing of heavy boots and the sounds of metal in movement. Both the paramilitaries and the FARC had ample opportunity to kidnap or kill us: They did neither, understanding that to take action against a North American would reverberate beyond their rural bases into the international press. We were politically costly targets and that expense extended some security to the community.

Virtually everyday the guerrilla passed through. They were unarmed, perhaps in deference to our presence. They were instantly recognizable even without weapons: In contrast to the muscular bodies of the campesinos, the guerrillas were surprisingly soft, their bodies undefined. They did not work twelve hours a day in the field, or pound the shaft off rice with an enormous mortar and pestle.

Villagers live in a state of coercive coexistence with the FARC: Forced to choose between an absent state, the brutal paramilitaries and the guerrilla, one selects the lesser

evil. When people speak about the armed actors, the names of the protagonists are frequently omitted. Eyes shift, heads tilt and voices drop. Sentences are punctuated by pauses that the listener fills in, guided by the pattern of the violence and the speaker's eyes. In conversations about the FARC, one man noted, "When the father is in the house, the child does not speak ill of him." The guerrilla kept standing in doorways listening; sitting on porches watching; following the brightest adolescent boys around.

The night before we left, don Manuel sought me out. He is a proud man who has worked the land his entire life. Sitting across the table from me, tears filled his eyes: "Are you really going to leave tomorrow? Are you going to leave us all alone?" Irony is not just a literary device —sometimes one lives it. Three *gringa* anthropologists who do not know how to wield a machete or a machine gun. Yet our presence made people feel safer.

Manuel offered criticism and requested a promise. First his criticism: "Plan Colombia sends more weapons when what we need are schools, health care, roads. If the US wants to wage war, why don't they wage it against the armed groups that started all this and not against us — not against peasants." His words repeated in my ears the next day as we wound our way down river past the paramilitaries and the guerrilla who watched from behind the palms bordering the Atrato.

Epilogue

We arrived back in Bogota. Somehow the word "surreal" continued to punctuate our sentences. The lovely restaurants and stores of the capital city seemed so calm, adding to the perception that the war was far away. However, violence did seep into the urban landscape: When friends drove us around the city, the tour of geographic and

architectural beauty was conducted against the backdrop of famous bombings and assassination sites. Violence hovered on the conversational horizon, clinging to the backdrop as the clouds did to the mountains rimming the city.

One afternoon I headed to Unicentro, a large mall in Bogota. I located the Internet Café on the store directory and rode the elevators that criss-crossed each end of the mall. Setting my bags down on the counter, I made myself comfortable on the bar stool in front of a computer. The familiar AOL welcome screen appeared after a few moments of telephone static and Hal's voice let me know I had mail.

The first message was not recognizable by its sender's address and I paused. The Internet Cafes were papered with warnings about computer viruses and I was hesitant. However, I clicked the icon, found my name at the beginning of the letter and scrolled down to see who the message was from. Jaime's name appeared, wishing me well from Apartadó. Scrolling immediately to the top, I read the first line and began to hold my breath. Salutations did not hide the tone of a message that was sent to inform me of Franklin's murder. The paramilitaries had taken Curvaradó the preceding Saturday, disappearing and subsequently killing Franklin.

I must have made an audible sound that paralleled the swift kick I felt in my stomach. The stool was far too high and the room began to twirl around my head as I tried not to fall. People were looking at me, the bright lights distorting their faces. The bar stools were set against driving rock music and overwhelming brightness. I rested my head on the counter and kept taking deep breaths. It should not have mattered that Franklin was beautiful, but somehow it did. I could not stop imagining how the paramilitaries mutilated him before dumping his broken body. Perhaps it was a mental

defense that refused to allow me to modify the image of Franklin that appeared in my mind — he kept floating down river, seated on his chair and looking so regal. Slashed tongue, severed ears, castrated genitals — my mind would not allow his image to be desecrated in my memory. He remained Franklin, sole passenger in his portable first class.

That was the first of many emails, and I quickly learned to temper the bad news by scrolling to the bottom to confirm that a friend was still alive. In the weeks since my return to the United States, the paramilitaries have escalated their activities. In Urabá alone, they have killed almost 200 campesinos. Some suggest the killings are in retaliation to the US State Department, which recently moved the paramilitaries off the list of allies and onto the list of terrorists. Their brutality has not changed; these are movements of categories, not methods.

I write against the erasure of these villagers and their “revolutionary alternative.” Peace is a long time coming in Colombia, yet some people practice peace every day. These lines are haunted by the promise I made to Manuel on that humid night in Costa de Oro: “Tell people when you get home that we ask for international support so we may live *una vida digna* — a dignified life.”

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