




Cognitive mapping in the terror zone: an elegy for Colombia

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“History is a way of learning....Only by grasping what we were is it possible to see how we changed, to understand the process and the nature of the modifications, and to gain some perspective on what we are. The historical experience is not one of staying in the present and looking back. Rather it is one of going into the past and returning to the present with a wider and more intense consciousness of the restrictions of our former outlook. We return with a broader awareness of the alternatives open to us and armed with a sharper perceptiveness with which to make our choices. In this manner it is possible to loosen the dead hand of the past and transform it into a living tool for the present and future....This enrichment and improvement through research and reflection is the essence of being human, and it is the heart of the historical method.”

William Appleman Williams, *History as a Way of Learning*

Introduction

At some point, I became an itinerant academic, so my books are in boxes again. I cannot easily refer to Frederic Jameson’s now-forgotten call to find better ways of describing, explaining, and representing new configurations of commodity production, social reproduction, and new collective experiences of time and space that come with them, under “late capitalism.” The term is borrowed from a massive tome of the same name by the Belgian Trotskyist economist, Ernest Mandel, by which I assume Jameson meant neoliberalism and the rule of the real estate, finance, and insurance oligarchy. (I could Google it, but it’s not necessary.) High theory from the North Atlantic academy in the 1980s—much less the infinitely more commodified 2010s—is not going to guide us, except insofar as it suggests we need better guides. Because

For Robert Eschelmann (1973–2020)

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of the cultural turn, the current political conjuncture, and an unprecedented capitalist crisis precipitated by the century's first global pandemic, this remains as true today as it was when Jameson formulated his once-famous phrase.

I'll try to do that—cognitive mapping—through thick description of everyday life under quarantine in my neighborhood. With the help from a posthumously published collection of EP Thompson's essays, called *Making History*, and Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, in the conclusion, I discuss theory and method in history and anthropology, which need each other now more than ever, but cannot find each other in the current darkness. I also reflect on space in relation to power, along with the hot topic of scale. How to think about my neighborhood, Carlos E Restrepo, in relation to the city, Medellín; the metropolitan region, Valle de Aburrá; the Pacific and Caribbean lowlands in Urabá, Antioquia (of which Medellín is the capital), Córdoba, and the Chocó ("indigeneity," "blackness," and borderlands); the Colombian nation-state anchored in Bogotá; and the US-dominated Western hemisphere?

The experimental form of the piece is an effort to adapt to the chaotic content of the terror zone, and the method is what the poet Charles Olson called an openness to the field.

Lay of the land

Before climate change, Medellín was known as the city of eternal spring: Founded in 1675 in a broad, sub-tropical valley (1500–1600 m), surrounded by solid walls of mountains that rise a thousand meters on all sides, temperatures long averaged between 18 and 22 °C, with minimal seasonal variation, and fresh breezes, usually running north-south. "Seasons" were brief episodes of rain, twice a year, in May and October, with sufficient rainfall the rest of the year. Medellín has long been Colombia's second largest city, with over 3.7 million in the metropolitan region, and Antioquia its most populous department (after the Federal District of Bogotá), with 6.4 million people, and among its largest, akin to Texas or California. Today, the city suffers from the worst air pollution in the country, as trees have been felled to make way for half-empty high rises, heat is trapped in the asphalt, and temperatures have risen, occasionally reaching 31 °C, and often hitting 28°. Usually, from 11:30 AM until 5:00–5:30 PM, the sun is punishing. Many people carry umbrellas.

Antioquia is also home to the country's most ultramontane traditions of Catholicism, and its most aggressive patterns of settler expansion and capital accumulation in its hinterlands: south in the inter-Andean valleys of the so-called coffee belt, north to the Caribbean coastal plains of Urabá and Córdoba, and northwest to the Pacific jungle region of the Chocó. For centuries, through long-distance trade networks, merchants from Medellín and Antioquia controlled the terms of exchange, rather than production or property ownership, both in the sub-tropical coffee regions in the Andean heartland, and in lowland frontiers where people of African descent, indigenous people, and racially mixed people overwhelmingly predominated.

As a result of their strategic power in the coffee trade, by the end of the nineteenth century, Antioquian merchants accumulated enough capital to launch successful banking and industrial ventures, especially in textiles and light manufacturing, and to position themselves as the leading edge of Colombian modernity for the duration of the twentieth century. As leading industries went into crisis and decline in the 1970s, and the city/country transitioned to a model based on real estate, finance, insurance, and services, by the late 1970s, Medellín and Antioquia emerged as the vanguard of production and circulation of the country's newest export commodity: cocaine. Since then, the city and region, along with neighboring

departments of Chocó and Córdoba, have experienced some of the highest levels of homicide, massacre, and forced displacement in the country and the hemisphere, as class, race-ethnicity, and the US-backed counter-insurgent state have been reformed in a cauldron of violence and terror that has yet to abate.

This is the broader historical-geographical context without which we cannot understand how the crisis of COVID-19 has unfolded in the city, region, and its hinterlands or frontiers. Today, those frontiers are home to capital-intensive mining, energy, and agro-industrial enterprises, as well as coca fields, cocaine exports-arms imports, paramilitary armies, and armed guerrilla insurgencies. They supply most of the dispossessed refugees to the Iguaná, the ghetto located alongside the canal separating my neighborhood from my university.

A general outline of the evolution of COVID-19 in Colombia and the government's response: much like Brazil, Chile, and Perú, cases and deaths are now headed toward asymptotic growth. As of July 23, with a population of 50 million, Colombia was number one in the world in cases per million, and as of July 26, there were 240,793 cases (120,000 recovered) and 8268 deaths. After several months of quarantine and low caseloads in April and May, under intense pressure from business lobbies, in June, President Duque and mayors relaxed the quarantine. Predictably, news cases hit 2000 per day in mid-June; by mid-to-late July, Colombia was logging 8000 new cases per day, concentrated in its major cities: Bogotá, Barranquilla, Medellín, and Cali.

In Latin America, only México and Brazil are ahead in terms of deaths per day, and they have populations 2.5 and four times greater than Colombia, respectively. Most likely, healthcare systems in the major cities will collapse in coming weeks. Outside of these, there are no real healthcare systems to speak of. Thanks in part to former president Álvaro Uribe, who was a senator in the early 1990s, healthcare was privatized on the US model, then mobbed up on the Colombian model of US-backed, narco-fueled counter-insurgency.

Thus, healthcare has become yet another nexus of crime and corruption: in rural frontier regions in the Amazon and the Pacific, and along the Caribbean coast, ties between healthcare provision and narco-paramilitaries are endemic, as *The Lancet* recently noted. Over 60% of the Colombian workforce labors in the informal economy (more than 10 million Colombians are classified as poor—a highly conservative estimate) and therefore has no way to shelter in place, not to mention that large swaths of the rural population lack running water. The situation of Afro-Colombians in the Pacific is dire: with no major hospitals, the Chocó hit capacity in June, as cases spiked 1700%, with nearly 3000 cases, and 83 dead, by July 24. There are only four municipalities where COVID-19 has not yet hit, and the worst is yet to come. Furthermore, the Colombian government declared two shopping days without sales taxes, which, as predicted, proved to be super-spreader events.

Since March, the government security forces have killed more than 30 people in protests against hunger and austerity, and injured over 150, while narco-paramilitary organizations enforced their own quarantines and curfews, not to mention rough justice, executing 9 people. Afro-Colombian, indigenous, and ex-FARC combatants are murdered every week, presumably by narco-paramilitary organizations and/or security forces. Killers are rarely identified, much less captured.

Apparently, people are soon to be charged for 3 or 4 months of unpaid utility bills, meaning they will soon lose water, gas, and electricity. Landlords are now on a rent-collection offensive. Their methods of uprooting and displacing people will be mostly illegal and, if necessary, violent, and there will not likely be any consequences. They can call on narco-paramilitaries as needed. This was true before and is more true now.

Hence, the relative peace and gorgeous scenery of my neighborhood is deceptive: in March, my neighbor Sara Fernández, a leading scholar of gender and sexuality, was nearly murdered in her bed because of her trade union activism. A professor at the University of Antioquia, she had been threatened earlier in the week for helping lead a strike against police repression and violation of university autonomy. (In 2015, a professor from the Universidad Nacional, where I work, was assassinated walking from work to home in Carlos E, but that was due to neighborhood, not university or trade union politics, specifically real estate deals.) Nevertheless, we are constantly patrolled by our friendly neighborhood private security guards, who are in fact friendly, and easily identifiable by their gray uniforms, baseball hats, two-way radios, earpieces, sawed-off shotguns, and black vests. Thanks to her screams and resistance—she fought off her attacker—they caught Sara’s would-be killer and turned him over to police.

Most likely, police or military intelligence hired him, since he was no professional in a city full of young hitmen for hire. Backed by warring Mexican cartel factions—reportedly Sinaloa, Jalisco, and Michoacán—local narco-paramilitary mafias that run the city’s hillside and riverside neighborhoods, as well as the city center, would never have botched the job. On July 7, they (most likely) disappeared Mateo Martínez Ruíz, an alumnus of the history department at the Universidad Nacional, whom I knew personally through political debate and discussion. I bet they had help from local police. We’ll never know, because Mateo was disappeared in the northern, de-industrialized suburb of Bello, which is ground zero for the local organized crime confederation (Oficina de Envigado), and currently a war zone among competing factions. Bodies of the disappeared do not appear in Bello because they are chopped into pieces.

I knew the city’s terrible, bloody history of class struggle, state formation, and capital accumulation, and had written about it, although with Iván Duque’s election in 2018, and with Federico Gutiérrez as mayor-cum-new sheriff in town, the situation spiraled downward rapidly after the capture of alias “Carlos Chata,” the kingpin of Bello, in December 2017. I arrived in June of that year, was excited at the prospect of working with students who do not view education as a business, or themselves as consumers, and whose commitment to and capacity for democratizing society through mobilization is unmatched in the hemisphere, following two successful student strikes in 2018 and 2019—the second of which triggered a nationwide general strike against austerity and authoritarianism of a scale and intensity not seen since 1977. Whatever their limits, and they are many, Colombian students have become the leading edge of a nascent urban Left. It has been a privilege to work with them, along with my colleagues in our trade union. I have learned a lesson or two about solidarity: no room for Kabuki theater here.

Sara Fernández and I are fortunate to reside in Carlos E Restrepo, named after the Colombian president who settled on the price of Panama away to the USA and who hailed from Medellín. It is full of green space, close to both public universities, the Nacional and Antioquia (and almost geographically contiguous with the Nacional, so I walk to work), in dozens of concrete and brick apartment blocks of no more than four stories, designed by the Instituto Territorial de Crédito (ITC) as public housing for the lower middle-class in the early 1970s. It was privatized and gentrified starting in the 1990s. (Sara and I will both be fortunate to leave the country as soon as possible, though of course no one has tried to kill me, because I have a US passport and do not lead anyone.) There are more public university professors in Carlos E than anywhere else in the city, so the attempted murder of Sara Fernández was a message to all of us, although Sara is head and shoulders above the rest. That’s why they targeted her.

For those of us fortunate enough to live in Carlos E—small business people, professionals and managers, retired pensioners, students, young families—quarantine has sharply restricted our mobility and increased our fear of police, who patrol constantly and fine people US \$350 for whatever reason occurs to them. Class privilege does not protect us anymore, not from abuse and harassment. They are deliberately, indiscriminately terrifying, since there are no effective checks on their interpretation of quarantine. For example, a Venezuelan delivery guy who works at the neighborhood market below my apartment was riding his delivery bike with his mask on his chin so he could breathe better, and the cops stopped him and fined him. The good news is that the system for processing fines has collapsed, so he could not pay it if he wanted to: as so often here, it is cruel farce.

The cops, who wear olive green uniforms and carry guns, of course, are friends with the store owners below me, who aren't from Carlos E originally, but live two floors above me. So cops park their jacked-up, bright green Honda motorcycles and helmets underneath my window several times a day, three or four times on Sundays or holidays. It is hard work extorting innocent citizens when there are so few of them circulating, so apparently police need to rest a lot more than normal during quarantine. They call their superiors and lie to them; they call their girlfriends so they can cheat on their wives before heading home—this sort of thing. In Cali, cops recently shot live rounds at people filming them while they roughed up a “suspect” in the street in the presence of children. This was not a one-off event. It never is.

Except for the shopkeepers, who are probably on the side of law and disorder, or make the good cop-bad cop distinction (always dubious, but especially in Colombia), and are in any case relative newcomers like me, my neighbors and I are furious and worried all the time. My upstairs neighbor, Gloria Sánchez, started the first open-air restaurant, called La Comedia, just below my window 34 years ago. (The open-air area with benches and trees is now full of sidewalk cafés and restaurants, and artisans selling jewelry, books, LPs, smoking paraphernalia, posters, clothing; or was until COVID-19 turned it ghostly.) She and her sisters and brothers come from coffee country in Bolívar, in southwestern Antioquia, a hotbed of light-skinned, rightwing Catholic fanatics, more than 90% of whom voted for Álvaro Uribe, but as freethinking atheists on the Left, they speak their mind, including to police who harass and fine them.

Gloria and her husband Roger have not paid their commercial rent in months and are stressed as they scramble to deliver lunch to neighbors like me. Before COVID, La Comedia was a center of operations for bohemian doctors, mathematicians, musicians, journalists, artists, lawyers, activists, white-collar managers, and lovers of all ages; it was busy from 11:30 AM to 11 PM, every day except Sunday. Gloria laughed in the face of difficulties related mainly to paperwork, municipal regulations, suppliers, and creditors. She was unflappable.

Now she's a nervous wreck, and some days she cannot serve me lunch because I'm her only client. One day she interrupts my writing to bring me lunch, then asks if I can keep a secret. Turns out she's done. No way to stay in business any longer. She's headed back to Bolívar to grow organic vegetables and run a tiny restaurant there. Without Gloria and Roger, who feed the three cats who inhabit the patio and stairs every day, and without Sara, the neighborhood falls. This is unprecedented. She tears up when we talk about all that is happening.

Because of people like Gloria and Sara, Carlos E has always been a center of free thought and dissidence, which could be one reason the policing here has gotten so heavy under quarantine, even though this is one of the most homogeneously middle-class and least

conflictive zones in the city (aside from the occasional attempted murder of our trade unionist comrades, of course).

In regular times, Carlos E is a zone of citizen sovereignty, of neighborhood rule, and the police are held in check. It is a “zone of tolerance” (a most Catholic idea: create a special space for sin) where young people—mostly middle-class university students in the old days, and the working-class precariat today—gather *en masse* in the open air, on park benches, to drink wine, liquor, and lots of beer, and smoke marijuana. In contrast to the past, petty drug sales are constant after dark, and now they snort and smoke cocaine, and to a lesser degree, heroin (both produced locally, and mostly for export, in quantities never seen before: the industry has been booming in the past several years). No one gets into physical fights or even real verbal altercations, although after long benders, occasionally one local cokehead shadow boxes with himself, and insults no one in particular, loudly. People mostly work around him. Sometimes the security guards have to calm him down or walk him home. That’s our neighborhood. Outside of it, there’s little public space left in the city. But it, too, is dying.

Sights and sounds

I had to take up jogging because the university’s pool, like all others in the country, has been closed since March. Our jogging route takes us around the neighborhood’s boundaries with the city’s main arteries—thus pointing toward the sub-regions and Afro-indigenous borderlands—and introduces us to sights and sounds. It also introduces people whose mostly casual work allows us to understand how the division of labor and space overlaps in licit and illicit networks of capitalist consumption and circulation: no commodities of value except cocaine—and derivative industries like construction and real estate for money laundering—are produced here. As noted, the regional economy is based on services, and the official unemployment rate has doubled since a year ago, which means it has roughly tripled to maybe 30%.

In addition to the students, I came for the flora and fauna. This starts before I wake up, with a dream about the local *barranquero*—the long-tailed bird with a sky blue tail feather, yellow green wings and back that become turquoise, greenish-yellow underbody and head, green chin, turquoise racing stripe, black crown, black beak, red eyes, and a black mask—that sometimes comes to perch on my window ledge, and once came into the room where my hammock hangs. In real life, I had to open the window wider so it could get out through the iron bars. In the dream, it was trying to communicate with me about the difficulties of getting in and out, asking me to improve the whole setup. I tried to convey the limits of my abilities, and my willingness to comply within them.

I awaken to feed bananas to birds on a window ledge in another room—they are sky blue and gray, or yellow green—and then water the plants on the balcony, where the neighbor’s ground-level gardens are visible in their splendor, with palm trees, a large bush with a canopy of red flowers, and purple, orange, and white flowers in the gardens around the interior patios. Agave-like cacti, light-green, stick out of corners. My garden grows nicely, with a *lulo* fruit tree sprouting out a palm, and the larger plants entwining with each other and the balcony rails. It’s made up of many shades of green, with the occasional orange flower, which looks like a cock’s crest, from the large plantain, and the red of the hibiscus that flowers occasionally, with yellow-tipped stamens. It’s my main access to nature since March.

For breakfast, fresh pineapple, papaya, mango, strawberries, blueberries, banana, occasionally *pitaya* or passion fruit: more orange, red, yellow, and blue. And the deep dark brown of fresh coffee, locally grown—a reminder that for most of the twentieth century—Colombia's economy hinged on the export of coffee, rather than cocaine or mining-energy. If I run out of fruit, there are vendors, mostly undocumented Venezuelans, hawking their wares through megaphones: seven mangos for 2000 Colombian pesos (\$1 = 3645 pesos), pineapple or mango for 1000, and papaya and aguacate for 2000. I usually buy from a guy who lives in the Iguaná—the ghetto across the canal from Carlos E. He wears a cowboy hat, plays classic salsa, and sells fruit on his motorized tricycle, which he rides around the neighborhood and from which he shouts humorous greetings to neighbors and passers-by.

Well before the peddlers are out and about, around dawn, you'll hear noise from helicopters, light aircraft, planes, dump trucks, busses, semis, and motorcycles. It's more like a hum, throb, or din, than loud noise per se—although plenty of rough riders like to wind it out at, say, 3 AM, and sometimes helicopters fly low. The noise level is related to the levels of air pollution, which kills over a dozen of thousand people per year due to respiratory illnesses: both make writing difficult. When levels of PM 2.5 toxicity are often six to nine times higher than recommended WHO levels, respiration of invisible particles of heavy metal affects your brain. So does the noise, of course, because you cannot hear yourself think except on total lockdown, when birdsong finally dominates the aural environment. Then, the relative silence is eerie, unsettling even. It has the same effect as an overnight in the country for city people—you realize you were exhausted, stressed, and so you rest better, even excessively. You hear yourself think.

Until traffic returns to normal. The reason traffic noise and air pollution here are not comparable with anywhere else in the Americas—unless you have been to Santiago or Mexico DF—is twofold. First, there is no integrated public transport system like the MTA in New York (admittedly a low bar), so bus lines are privately operated by the mafia with no state regulation. Second, the construction and cement industry, also owned and operated by the mafia, at least in part, is a gigantic money-laundering operation, so it needs to move quickly, preferably at all hours of the day and night, without state regulation. Most of the new condos and apartments built will never be filled. They're not designed to be. Just investment properties, like Miami or New York. Medellín City, as boosters like to call it. There's a metro that covers more and more of the city through cable cars, but coverage is uneven, and on my side of the Medellín River, most people still take the bus, which costs 2000 COP, and usually they have to take two. The Metro costs 2750 COP with cable car included, and many have to use both the Metro and the streetcar, which is an extra 2000. So it turns out to be 750 more for most people to take the Metro, and many cannot afford it.

It's nearly always sunny and warm by late morning. Let us imagine the avenues as a web of rivers, or sewers of carbon monoxide, with the army of helmeted, mostly male service proletarians on motorcycles as schools of fish made of flesh, plexiglass, and iron. On Sundays, holidays, and quarantine, traffic abates, and the morning is fresh, more like any normal city in Latin America—Cali or Barranquilla, for example. For once, you can hear the breeze, especially on a Sunday when quarantine is mandatory. Otherwise, the noise—from hydraulic brakes and motors—is overwhelming, like the soot. When the stoplights change, it's like the waves of some toxic, demonic sea crashing on the shore.

Just south of us is Avenida Colombia, which has six lanes, and connects with the city center across the Medellín River, which separates east from west. Our route takes us past one of the city's few functional libraries—the park-library complexes that won Medellín so much

positive international press proved to be an elaborate, Potemkin-village-type public relations scam—and the connecting Tower of Memory, where, once upon a time, we held public events of political relevance. These have all been shut down since March, of course, and heaven knows what the state of its salaried employees is; the permanent among them likely have a union. The rest have almost certainly been laid off.

Before reaching the north-south highway, which has three lanes on either side, and is the city's main artery, we veer north back into the confines of Carlos E, where yellow and red hibiscus flowers exist on the same bush, and people have cultivated elaborate mini-gardens outside front doors and underneath windows. There is one plant that has a large red tip like a rattlesnake's tail; another with what looks like a yellowish softball of brain matter; green ferns, palms, and fronds of all kinds; trees with white blossoms, trees with sumptuous vines, as well as lemon, mango, and orange trees; and a place for children to play and older people and teenagers to sit.

Now it's almost always empty, except for the lone senior citizen who body-builds Tony Atlas-style, toning on the bars. We salute one another effusively. The other day, during a hard quarantine in which no one's allowed out, young Venezuelans with a child in a stroller came through, calling on neighbors to feed them or donate food. We're hungry, they cried. Several times a week, hungry Venezuelans pass by my apartment bloc begging. No one harasses or mistreats them, and usually neighbors help. If there is xenophobia in my neighborhood, none of my Venezuelan friends has ever mentioned it—and we criticize Colombians freely and humorously.

Continuing north, we cross 65th Ave., which flows west, up toward the conflictive hillside neighborhoods of the center- and north-west (Comuna 13, Comuna 10, Robledo, and Castilla) that are home to waves of Afro-Colombian as well as mixed-race migrants from Urabá in the Caribbean, and the adjacent departments of the Chocó and Córdoba (about which more below). Linking the Pacific, the Caribbean, and the Andes, these zones are crucial to the export of cocaine and the import of weapons, as well as for linking the city to its agro-industrial energy and mineral-rich lowlands to the west and northwest. They are controlled by shifting coalitions of warring mafia factions, which, in turn, are allied with different, feuding factions of Mexican organized crime, not to mention elements of local security forces, public as well as private (a distinction that breaks down on the ground).

Crossing 65th Ave., we enter the thin, beautiful strip of swampy no man's land that separates Carlos E Restrepo from the Iguaná ghetto, a canal runs downhill alongside the edge of the strip and rages after the rains. During total lockdown, this strip is as frighteningly empty as it is teeming with (mostly masculine) life, much of it illicit, during weekdays, when quarantine is relaxed. I stop to relieve myself in the bushes, and notice a small straw and an empty bag of coke where I am stepping. There are plenty more strewn about. There are also broken brick tiles lying nearby. Roosters and hens patrol the area. Great agave-like plants of greenish-yellow, rising up to 6 or 7 ft, along with smaller spider plants of green and white stripes, line the trail. We pass a sand-and-gravel soccer field, where teens and kids from the Iguaná, many of them black or dark-skinned, practice when they can.

Around the tables, on the trail, in the bushes, and on stools, the dispossessed smoke weed (which is technically legal but frequently persecuted in public), hang out, plan and coordinate illicit activities, and talk without fear of being accosted by police. Itinerant Venezuelan peddlers and delivery men I know also go there, presumably for the same reason (minus the crime: most Venezuelans, like most Colombians, opt for honest work which does not pay), so I

often see people I know. Sometimes we smoke and talk. Without exception, they are behind on all payments and worried about making rent.

Before we reach the end of the trail, at the north-south highway, taped to a light post, we pass a new sign of a 30-year-old man who disappeared recently from the Iguaná, where people get murdered all the time without it being reported because narco-paramilitary mafias run things. They have supervised what limited food distribution has existed during the pandemic, with government aid bogged down in corruption scandals. They undoubtedly finance local political campaigns, which is the real key to their power, along with their relations to local merchants and business owners.

At trail's end, I usually give a small amount of money to two young Venezuelan women with children begging at the stoplight where 65th Ave. meets the north-south highway, although on a normal day, there are a number of other worthy victims who work as squeegee men or selling cigarettes, candy, gum, nuts, fruits, comic books, coloring books, water, soda, and beer. Now that demand has collapsed, their numbers are much reduced. Where they have gone is anyone's guess, but they cannot afford to stay inside waiting for non-existent government assistance, so they must still be working outdoors, in the so-called informal (open-air?) economy.

At this crossroads, along with a view of the dark green mountains and hillside neighborhoods that loom several thousand meters above the sub-tropical valley floor, to the east, I can see my university across the narrow canal that separates this no man's land from the Iguaná. But it's closed and has been since March. The Iguaná used to benefit from the university's student consumers at their restaurants and small shops, until university authorities closed the exit and built another one in 2018 without consulting anyone in the university community, much less the Iguaná, whose people are poorer, darker, and more likely to be displaced by Colombia's armed conflict on its frontiers, or by Venezuela's implosion on its borders. I get my haircut by a young Afro-Colombian there, and have photocopies of my readings made for my classes; I eat empanadas made by Doña Fany and talk with her and her husband. Or did, before all this.

Leaving the intersection, back on the trail heading west under the canopy of trees, including a generous mango with leaves turning orange and falling off to pad the ground, soon we reach the junction of 65th Ave. and 65th St. The latter runs north-south, parallel to the "highway," and marks the western edge of my neighborhood (Av. Colombia marks its southern boundary, and the north-south highway its eastern boundary; the canal its northern boundary). Up above, there's a two-lane bridge usually backed up with lines of dump trucks, motorcycles, cars, and semis, where anywhere between 10 and 14 adolescents and young men and a few women or adolescent girls.

They know me because they have seen me cross the bridge between Carlos E and the Iguaná on my way to work. They say hello and ask that God bless me. One, unusual because he's of my generation, asks me if I could bring him a pound of rice next time out. There used to be pierced and tattooed circus performers and acrobats, many of them from Argentina or other parts of Colombia, working at the crosswalk, and performing incredible feats like climbing ladders and then juggling machetes on top of them, but they are gone.

And the numbers working the stoplight across the street, where people are headed down into the city center rather than up into the favelas, are much reduced. It's a skeleton crew: maybe eight, compared with double that in normal times. On a good day, thirty or forty people used to work the different parts of the intersection. In April and May, the whole districts were breaking lockdown by flying red and white flags of hunger in protest, but those petered out.

Who knows what happened to the organizers. Recently, a tall, thin young guy with a mask told me he had not eaten in a whole day. I'm sure he wasn't the only one. Crossing 65th Ave. once again, heading south, we are back in the apparent, and relative, safety and tranquility of Carlos E.

Most days, I'm confined to my apartment 23 h per day.

The nation that wasn't

Recently, the Attorney General said and wrote that through the participation of current students, alumni, and professors, the Universidad Nacional, where I work, is tied to Colombia's lone remaining guerrilla insurgency, the ELN (who now operate mainly in Venezuela, running guns, drugs, and kidnapping-extortion rackets). This is taken from a Cold War script that never ends. The government has now labeled us terrorists and opened us up to physical attack, or, in the case of Universidad Nacional alumnus Mateo Ruíz' disappearance.

First, of course, we resist, collectively and in writing: in Bogotá, which is the flagship, law school faculty, students, and alumni filed a legal grievance (which the courts rejected); our professors' trade union also denounced the threat, as did the major student organizations. Students and professors took to the airwaves, opinion columns, and social media to make their case to public opinion, which overwhelmingly supports the student movement and rejects government and para-state repression of demands like free tuition, which we are currently winning, except at the Universidad Nacional, where students have initiated an occupation at the university gates. With our general strike, we had the government on the ropes in 2019, just as we did with our more limited student strike in 2018. Now they plan to charge us interest.

In a magisterial synthesis, written soon after the landmark 1991 Constitution, which was to serve as a bridge to the rule of law and away from civil war, historian David Bushnell called Colombia a nation in spite of itself. It was wishful thinking, end-of-history liberal teleology: the US-sponsored counter-insurgent nation-building project was just beginning to contest the rapid expansion of rural guerrillas on Colombia's endless coca frontier, its mining and energy frontiers, its agro-industrial frontiers, and into most of its towns and even cities.

If there was a decade that ripped the country apart like the horrific bi-partisan violence of the 1950s, and made mincemeat of the idea of national sovereignty, it was the 1990s. By the end of the decade, there were more than 400 paramilitary massacres annually. Enter US-backed Plan Colombia, ostensibly designed to cut cocaine production in half: 80% of it went to the Colombian police and armed forces, who worked with the paramilitaries against the FARC and the ELN, or, more often, against the Colombian people who lived in areas where guerrillas were active. Drain the sea and the fish will not swim. From 2006 to 2010, the Colombian armed forces disappeared more than 10,000 civilians and disguised them as guerrilla kills to boost the body count. The US Justice Department is now investigating them for using US-donated communications equipment to commit crimes of blackmail and espionage against political enemies.

As one analyst put it at the time, there was no political subject willing and able to implement the 1991 Constitution, whose provisions on indigenous autonomy not only became dead letters, but whose passage preceded record numbers of indigenous deaths, as the war machine dispossessed, disappeared, tortured, and massacred indigenous people on an entirely new scale. The same tragedy happened to Afro-Colombians in the Pacific, who secured provision to collective land title in 1993, following the indigenous model of autonomy through

communal land tenure, but these lands were coveted by mining and logging companies as well as drug traffickers-cum-ranchers-cum-paramilitaries. Not to mention capital-intensive African palm plantations, which predominate.

Nowhere witnessed greater tragedy than what the local oligarchy dubbed “the greatest corner of America”: Antioquia, especially the sub-region of Urabá on the Caribbean Coast, near Panamá, and neighboring Córdoba, the former of which Álvaro Uribe governed from 1995 to 1997, and the latter of which was home to his largest cattle ranches (his neighbor was extradited paramilitary chieftain Salvatore Mancuso, who claims to have contributed to both of Uribe’s presidential campaigns), as well as the Chocó in the Pacific, which is full of gold, hardwoods, and African palm plantations. Antioquia’s Caribbean outlet in the Gulf of Urabá, with its capital in Turbo, is the banana plantation zone, and ground zero for counter-insurgent terror as state formation, beginning in the late 1980s.

Homicide levels there surpassed those of Medellín when Uribe was governor in the mid-1990s, and dropped soon after. Even more than the Nasa in southwestern Cauca, Colombia’s third-largest (and most politically cohesive) indigenous group, with 243,176 people according to the 2018 census, the second-largest group, the Zenú, with 307,091 people, were devastated, dispossessed, dispersed, and hemmed in by the paramilitary advance against the ELN and FARC insurgencies in Zenú territory in the northwest: Antioquia, Córdoba, the Chocó, and Sucre. All that remain intact are two *resguardos*, as reserves are called, in Urabá and Córdoba.

Victor Peña, a longtime member of the *guardia indígena* (security force) in Tuchín, Córdoba, organized the first urban Cabildo Indígena Zenú, because a number of Zenus came to Medellín in the 1990s and after. There are 500 in the city today (Emberás number 900, and are Colombia’s 6th largest indigenous group, with 56,504). Afro-Colombians, in comparison, numbered 10% of the city’s total population, or 236,222, in 2010, and made up perhaps 20% of the national population. Led by the Wayúu in the Guajira, who number 380,460, 150 indigenous people make up 4% of Colombia’s total population, according to the 2018 census. (The latest major corruption scandal involves narco-paramilitaries paying big money to get classified as indigenous so they cannot be extradited to the USA.)

Since the Colombian government only recognizes indigenous people in their territories, uprooted, urban indigenous people do not officially exist. So Victor’s first step has been to fight for official recognition in order to qualify for government assistance. In the context of the pandemic, lacking help from authorities, Victor and I have teamed up to get basic foodstuffs and masks, especially to single Zenú mothers, as well as masks, alcohol gel, and a disinfectant made locally at the Universidad de Antioquia, to 200 Zenú families in Tuchín, in the tropical lowlands, where it sells for double the price. It takes 20 days to get the results of a test there. One man received them after his death.

Victor’s often on the edge of tears lately: he’s no longer able to help the people—mostly single mothers—who call him in need of healthcare, food, shelter, and help with paperwork. He is unable to function as a cacique is supposed to, and cannot sell the hats he makes, and for which the Zenú are nationally and internationally recognized. He forgets, or cannot afford, to eat properly. He’s not sleeping. He recently had to return home to bury his mother, who died from COVID-19. He and his brothers borrowed money to pay for the coffin.

For 3 months, the *guardia indígena* kept COVID-19 out, since no one was allowed in or out of Zenú territory, not even Victor. COVID-19 arrived, however, most likely through transport and distribution of foodstuffs and fuel. While Victor was able to make it home, on the return trip back to Medellín, his bus stopped where the army and the ELN had just confronted each other, and he could go no further for several days, nearly running out of money. He took a

night bus, terrified that narco-paramilitaries would stop it and, because of his leadership, which is officially recognized by the mayors of Medellín and Tuchín in letters he carries on his person, disappear him somewhere along the route.

Not long after burying his mother, he had to borrow money from me for food and fuel to return home on a borrowed motorcycle to bury his grandmother, who died from COVID. Again, he could not get back to Medellín because of army roadblocks. I was worried because he had to stay two nights in Caucasia, in Antioquia's lower Cauca lowlands, disputed by multiple narco-paramilitary mafia and guerrilla factions, and militarized by the army and police. It is one of the most dangerous towns in a very dangerous region. The first night he slept outside with others on cardboard boxes behind the police station. He was not with his people, and if narco-paramilitaries had identified him, they would have disappeared him. Same for the guerrilla factions (the ELN does not have a monopoly), they would say he's from paramilitary territory, and probably kidnap or murder him. I lent him money for food and shelter. After fixing a flat tire—more money lent—he makes it home, driving all night through a downpour. He has important meetings in the early morning.

There are clusters of cases in Tuchín and San Andrés de Barlavento, one of the Zenú resguardos. Victor's worried about genocide. Along with his mother and grandmother, people he knows and grew up with are dying, and he cannot stop it. According to the National Organization of Indigenous People (ONIC), in April 2020, 191,000 indigenous families were at risk of contagion, and 513,000 families of humanitarian crisis and/or famine. Victor's fear of genocide is well-founded and extends to the other 114 groups that identify as indigenous. Should that happen, it will be a case of genocide foretold, as in Perú, Chile, and Brazil. Nothing like this has happened since the arrival of the *conquistadores* in sixteenth century.

Conclusion: searching amid the wreckage

Perhaps not all the threads of this essay connect. But hopefully there is sufficient coherence among the fragments and ruins. And hopefully the effort to stretch or bend theory and method—to test both against the fire of local empirical material: organic and inorganic matter, flora and fauna, past and present, life and death—is worthwhile. (Rather than the other way around, which is to say, subordinating the local empirical material to a theoretical straight-jacket that leaves out, or renders invisible, what is right in front of us.)

Pedestrian though it sounds, to map this feral new reality, we need to open our eyes and ears after the fashion of Charles Olson. Twenty-five years ago, I recall Sidney Mintz telling a group of faculty and graduate students at the University of Pittsburgh that we ought to forget about Foucault, and eavesdrop on conversations on the bus instead—the methodological approach I had already taken. In his ineradicable Brooklyn accent, he urged us to use public transport, which I had been doing in part for that reason. Thus, in my own private Sidney Mintz school—which crossed paths briefly with William Roseberry, under whose guidance I was scheduled to work before his untimely death—I decided anthropology should be in the (mean) streets of Latin American cities, in order to democratize knowledge and make it truly public.

What about history? What difference does it make? How can it help us intellectually and politically today? As EP Thompson insisted, history is a discipline of process and context, and

we cannot situate ourselves spatially or temporally without it. As the epigraph from Williams explains, history helps us step outside ourselves, if only momentarily, and return to the present with a refreshed perspective on possible alternative futures and choices to be made in the present. Historical amnesia is one of the predictable outcomes of the commodification of culture, and our time—an age of uncertainty, neo-fascism, and social media—is uniquely amnesiac, hence uniquely adrift.

This is as true of anthropology as any other discipline or intellectual-artistic-creative endeavor. We need history merely in order to avoid the dizziness and vertigo that accelerated, dramatic changes in capital accumulation and state formation have brought about in commodity production and social reproduction during the past several decades. And as I hope to have demonstrated, we also need it to make sense of who came to live where, do what, and why, here in Medellín, the Valley of Aburrá, Antioquia, as well as the neighboring departments of Chocó and Córdoba.

The proposed marriage of history and anthropology is hardly new, of course: Lesley Gill's *A Century of Violence in a Red City*, about the remaking of the working class through terror in the Colombian oil port of Barrancabermeja, offers a template. But what I'm after here is more about the survival of historical consciousness, and anthropological awareness, in this time of unspeakable disaster, death, and destruction. To make sense of the trajectory of Victor Peña, or of race ethnicity more broadly in relation to scale, we have to explain how layers of previous historical tragedies—US-backed counter-insurgent state formation and its legitimate offspring, narco-paramilitarism, in the city, region, country, and hemisphere from 1990 to 2010—are overlaid onto the current crisis.

Thus, the importance of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*: to read what we see at the spotlight on 65th and 65th, or along the trail in no man's land, we need first to decipher the hieroglyphs and ruins, to sift through the accretion of historical layers left by decades of counter-insurgent war, class struggle, state formation, and capital accumulation in Medellín and Antioquia, Córdoba, and the Chocó—"the best corner of the Americas." We have archeological digging to do in order to reveal the horrors before us.

This essay has illustrated and confirmed Benjamin's eighth thesis on the philosophy of history, namely, "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' is not the exception but the rule." Bearing witness without moralism (much less theatrics); being present to accompany racial- and ethn-humanist movements, which are also class movements, for justice, equality, and democracy; understanding and explaining where they come from, and how they sustain themselves against all odds—participant observation for the twenty-first century, if you will—may be the best we can do in terms of cognitive mapping.

The proof should be in the pudding, and, like the application of Charles Olson's idea in Robert Duncan's *The Opening of the Field*, textual practice more compelling than theory:

"The past and future are
 full of disasters, splendors
 shaken to earth, seas rising to overshadow
 shores and roaring in.
 It's the universe suspended by the human word,
 as if it obeyed our fear,

prediction of world-end,
Lad of the Flood or Fire-Tiger,
what they say afterwards happened, what
happened or will happen ...”
Robert Duncan, “Atlantis”

Though it is too early to say, given the depth and scope of the current crisis, the survival of the sister disciplines, along with critical thinking itself, may be at stake. I offer up these historical-ethnographic flashes in Benjamin’s proverbial “moment of danger.”

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