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# Territory by Dispossession: Decentralization, Statehood, and The Narco Land-Grab In Colombia

By Teo Ballvé

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Paper presented at the  
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DECENTRALIZATION, STATEHOOD, AND THE  
NARCO LAND-GRAB IN COLOMBIA

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For decades, the coupled dynamics of the drug trade and political violence have fueled the displacement of more than four million campesinos in Colombia. Agribusiness developments on these violently stolen lands have become favored conduits for drug-money laundering and profit by narco-paramilitaries, while also affording them military, political, and economic advantages through territorial control (Castillo 1987; Reyes 1997, 2009; Ballvé 2009). Drawing on investigative ethnographic fieldwork into these dynamics in Colombia's northwest frontier region of Urabá, I examine how the Colombian state and its territory are dialectically produced and how this process was marshaled by the convergence of narco-paramilitary strategies and reforms aimed at state territorial restructuring through decentralization.<sup>1</sup> I argue that Urabá's narco-driven economies of violence are not somehow anathema to projects of modern liberal statehood—usually associated with tropes of “institution-building” and “good governance”—but are deeply tied to initiatives aimed at making spaces governable, expanding global trade, and attracting capital.

My arguments rely on the Lefebvrian framework developed by Brenner and Elden on the “production of territory,” which conceives of state territory as simultaneously the “site, medium, and outcome of statecraft” (2009:365). As a contribution to this framework, I highlight the complementary relevance of Gramscian notions of statehood and hegemony for analyzing the integral relations between state, space, and territory. Following Gramscian-inspired relations of force analyses, I approach the ruthless synergies between the region's drug-fueled economies of violence, territory, and state-formation attentive to the “confluence of multiple temporalities (event-like, conjunctural, structural) and a combination of multiple dimensions of scale and space” (Kipfer 2009:23).

My processual, multiply scaled, and ethnographic account of state formation reveals the inadequacy of Weberian definitions of statehood, which serve as the theoretical support for misconceived notions of state “failure,” “collapse,” and related narratives of statelessness. The approach of this paper offers a more adequate means for untangling the knot of relations that produce territory and state formation in Urabá in a way that accounts for the nexus of local/national government, NGOs, international aid, and private firms forged by narco-paramilitaries in carrying out their industrial-scale land theft. Finally, I suggest that the “primitive accumulation” identified by Marx as “reckless terrorism” is part-and-parcel of the production of state territory on Colombia's agrarian frontier (1967:732-733). Despite its undeniable illegality, primitive accumulation in Urabá is the ongoing processual prism that produces, maintains, and refracts both capitalist social relations and the social relations of state formation.

The first section of the paper lays out my main conceptual bearings on space, territory, state, and hegemony. Second, I trace the rationales and historical developments

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<sup>1</sup> Narco-paramilitaries are illegal, private militias funded by drug-trafficking profits.

driving Colombia’s decentralization reforms in the 1980s. The third section details the historical-geographic conjuncture of agrarian class relations in Colombia that cradled the rise of Urabá’s paramilitary groups. The fourth section forms the bulk of the paper and details the production of territory through the activities of Urabá’s main narco-paramilitary bloc, showing how the group simultaneously materialized and socialized the state—that is, helped produce territory—by extending and routinizing its decentralized functions, while even taking on some state-like practices themselves. The final section concludes the paper and traces its implications for recent debates in political geography on the concept and practice of territory.

## **I. In The Space of Territory**

As a spatial process, state formation is not only constituted by the social production of territory; the production of territory is at the same time a process of state formation and an ongoing preoccupation of modern liberal states (Lefebvre 2009; Vandergeest and Peluso 1995; Jones 2007; Brenner and Elden 2009). As Lefebvre notes, “Space is a social morphology: it is to lived experience what form itself is to the living organism, and just as intimately bound up with function and structure” (1991:94). For him, space is both a product and a medium of social relations with dimensions that are always physical, mental, and social. In other words, his contention is that social space—and, by my extension, territory—is produced in and through material, ideal, and everyday-lived imbrications that achieve social concreteness through embodied practice (Brenner and Elden 2009). Brenner and Elden show how Lefebvre’s tri-partite production of space “offers a way to think state, space, and territory together” (2009:367).

Territory, as a fundamentally social and political project, always maintains its dimensionality through the workings of hegemony. Lefebvre’s theories on the production of space depend, in fundamental ways, on Gramsci’s reworking of hegemony (Lefebvre 1991:10). Gramsci’s relational notion of hegemony describes a fluid process of struggle through which certain social relations are naturalized *and* coercively enforced, while others are made unviable and even unthinkable (Gramsci 1971; Thomas 2009). Indeed, hegemony is an innate part of the spatial fetishism that so irks Lefebvre, a process as relevant for capitalism’s role in the production of space as it is for the state’s role in the same process. As Lefebvre claims, “Is not the secret of the State, hidden because it is so obvious, to be found in space? The State and territory interact in such a way that they can be said to be mutually constitutive” (2009:228).

Lefebvre’s three-dimensioned thinking on social space also helps conceptualize *the state* itself as a politico-institutional “concrete abstraction”—that is, “as a product of historically specific material, conceptual, and quotidian practices” (Stanek 2008:62; Lefebvre 1991:279). This framework helps analytically pry apart the frequent conflation of “the central government”—its formal institutions, agents, and ministries, or what Gramsci calls “political society”—and “the state,” a far more amorphous and subjective ensemble of forces, institutional forms, relations, actors, and practices. In Gramsci’s theorization of the “integral state,” which my arguments employ, the state is understood as the fluid and dialectical conglomerate of political and civil society: “State does not

mean only the apparatus of government [i.e. political society] but also the ‘private’ apparatus of hegemony or civil society” (qtd. in Buttigieg 2005:40).

Taking into account Gramsci’s theorizations of the state and hegemony, territory can be understood as the social morphology through which state power is spatially constituted, organized, and exercised. State territory is produced in its ideal, material, and lived dimensions by both the strategic projects of political society (i.e. government) and their dialectical articulations with various elements operating in civil society, whether NGOs, communities, corporations, etc. Hegemony as a form of social power traverses the (analytic) divide between political and civil society (Thomas 2009). And intellectuals—in Gramsci’s elaborate formulation—play a critical role in the realization of this hegemony; they articulate popularly held common sense notions and worldviews with broader ideologies and suture these to political movements working within political society.

This process is all the more apparent in a region such as Urabá, where decades of leftist insurgencies, drug trafficking, illicit accumulation, and widespread political violence have contributed to the perception of the region as an “ungoverned space.” Urabá can be considered a space characterized by what Gramsci called a “crisis of authority,” which he defined as “precisely the crisis of hegemony, or general crisis of the State” in which even the total use of force is incapable of guaranteeing the stability of its rule (1971:210). The state in such “ungoverned” spaces is recomposed through the production of territory, which gains its dimensionality—that is, its social concreteness—through hegemony. A primary way through which this was achieved in Urabá was indeed through the *work* of intellectuals—in this case, specially designated paramilitary operatives. Their practical and ideological traffic straddling political and civil societies helped socialize and materialize the state’s “presence” through infrastructure construction, bureaucratic procedures, agribusiness projects, NGOs, public services, and more—backed in all instances by ultra-violent force.

The production of territory—in my empirical case, through decentralization and the activities of narco-paramilitaries—is not reducible to an exclusively state domain unless the state is accounted for in Gramsci’s integral formation. Together, Lefebvre and Gramsci help me provide a nuanced account of the relations between the joint-production of state and territory. They help me show how the dynamics unleashed by narco-paramilitaries and decentralization converged in ways conducive to statecraft. The process is far afield from what a former Interior Minister had in mind when he wrote: “Decentralization ... will one day allow us to say that we have as much territory as we have a State, because until now the expanse of the first has been far superior to the authority of the latter” (Castro 1998:15). The particularities of this decentralization are the subject of the next section.

## **II. Decentralization à la colombiana**

Decentralization has emerged as a globally reigning policy regime, a penchant of the free market-oriented reforms advocated by world financial institutions and development agencies. In Colombia, the International Monetary Fund, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the World Bank certainly twisted arms in the 1980s

and 1990s in favor of trade liberalization, financial deregulation, and privatization (Urrutia 1994). For the development banks and neoliberal reformers, decentralization was seen as a necessary companion to the macroeconomic reforms of the so-called “Washington Consensus.” Decentralization, they argued, would help counter the “centralist traditions” of Latin American governments (Véliz 1980), ensuring greater efficiency, accountability, and citizen oversight—all imperatives well-aligned with processes of structural adjustment. But amid these global policy regimes, Colombia’s decentralization was strongly articulated with and by local political dynamics.

By the 1980s in Colombia, decentralization—that is, the devolution of governmental decision-making power, funds, and/or functions to subnational entities (Bardhan 2002:186)—had become a recurrent demand of armed leftist insurgents in sporadic peace talks with the government, particularly political decentralization. The government granted a political decentralization, as a concession to the Communist-inspired Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), in time for the 1988 elections. For the previous 100 years, the president had been solely responsible for appointing all the country’s mayors and governors (though, municipal and departmental assemblies had long been popularly elected). Political decentralization along with fiscal and administrative decentralization reforms were further consolidated in the Constitution of 1991—itsself an outgrowth of peace negotiations with guerrillas.

The framers of the Constitution of 1991 logically decided that the popular election of local executives granted by political decentralization should be complimented by administrative and fiscal decentralization. Their rationale was that without new administrative roles such as the provision of public services and their requisite funds, elected local executives would be incapable of attending to the needs of their newly enfranchised constituents. Fiscal decentralization reforms that granted more financial leverage to subnational entities included a new royalty regime on natural resource extraction that more equitably distributed rents nationwide across subnational governments; a relaxing of rules that granted local governments more leeway in the accumulation of debt; and, most importantly, larger mandatory budgetary transfers from the central government (Eaton 2006). Local governments used the newly available funds to finance the provision of freshly devolved (from the national government) public services—namely, education, water delivery and sewage, and health care—as well as other infrastructure construction and economic development projects.

The motivating rationale for Colombia’s decentralization was summed up by the motto “decentralize to pacify” (Castro 1998). Framers of the new Constitution reasoned that political decentralization would simultaneously give the rebels a legal political outlet and open the electoral system to smaller, long-sidelined political movements. The latter would be achieved because the decentralization implicitly eroded the political duopoly shared for over a century by the Liberal and Conservative parties. The process has received outside assistance by institutions such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which has supported decentralization as part of its donor strategies under the rubric of Plan Colombia, the U.S. government’s multibillion-dollar counterinsurgency and anti-drug initiative.

Considering the political and security rationales behind decentralization, the topic has surprisingly received only passing mention in seminal texts on Colombian paramilitarism; the connection is usually taken as a given, rather than as a formative relation that merits further analysis or theorization (Romero 2003, 2007; Duncan 2006; Reyes 2009). However, Kent Eaton has shown how Colombia’s decentralization helped bankroll “the expansion of armed clientelism by illegal groups on both the left and right” (2006:533). From secondary sources, Eaton details how guerrillas and paramilitaries siphoned public money by intimidating local politicians or by helping elect—through campaign contributions and intimidation—their hand-picked politicians. He assumes a classic Weberian definition of the state as an organization with an administrative staff that “successfully upholds a claim to the *monopoly* of the *legitimate* use of physical force in the enforcement of its order” (Weber 1978:54; emphasis in original). This conception enables Eaton to conclude: “Thanks to the weakness of the police in much of the national territory, guerrillas and paramilitaries have been able to use decentralized resources to destabilize the state, limiting even further its monopoly over the use of force and creating what are in effect parallel states” (2006:533).

My arguments, however, lead to a different conclusion, which points to the weakness of ideal-type Weberian definitions of statehood. Paramilitaries certainly introduce some destabilizing factors into the institutions and practices of Colombian statehood, but they nonetheless facilitate the exercise and territorialization of state power and even take on state-like functions themselves. Although Eaton’s account compellingly highlights decentralization’s adverse effects, the finer-grained investigative ethnographic approach of this paper tries to reveal how these effects *do not* work at cross-purposes with the exercise and territorialization of state power. Indeed, I argue that the narco-paramilitaries became the midwives of state-formation amid the decentralization by showing how paramilitary-state relations were symbiotically and spatially configured in practice.

The decentralization helped regional politico-economic powers to reconfigure their various relationships to Bogotá and other metropolitan nodes (Duncan 2006). As should become evident in later sections, the paramilitaries were an integral part of how this process of redefining national-regional-local power-geometries played out.<sup>2</sup> Paramilitary blocs were intimately invested in “local” forms of social, economic, political, and military power. Indeed, the survival and strength of each bloc rested on their ability to tap into these state-mediated networks of power. At the same time, regional elites depended on the paramilitaries for solidifying their local political dominance, their capitalist accumulation, and their position as regional power-brokers vis-à-vis central government institutions and urban centers.

Urabá provides a particularly revealing case study for examining these relations, because the region became a veritable laboratory for forging a model of armed colonization that paramilitary commanders eventually exported to other parts of Colombia, with a strikingly similar sequence of events, institutional forms, and practices. But before examining the profane symbiosis between decentralization and paramilitaries,

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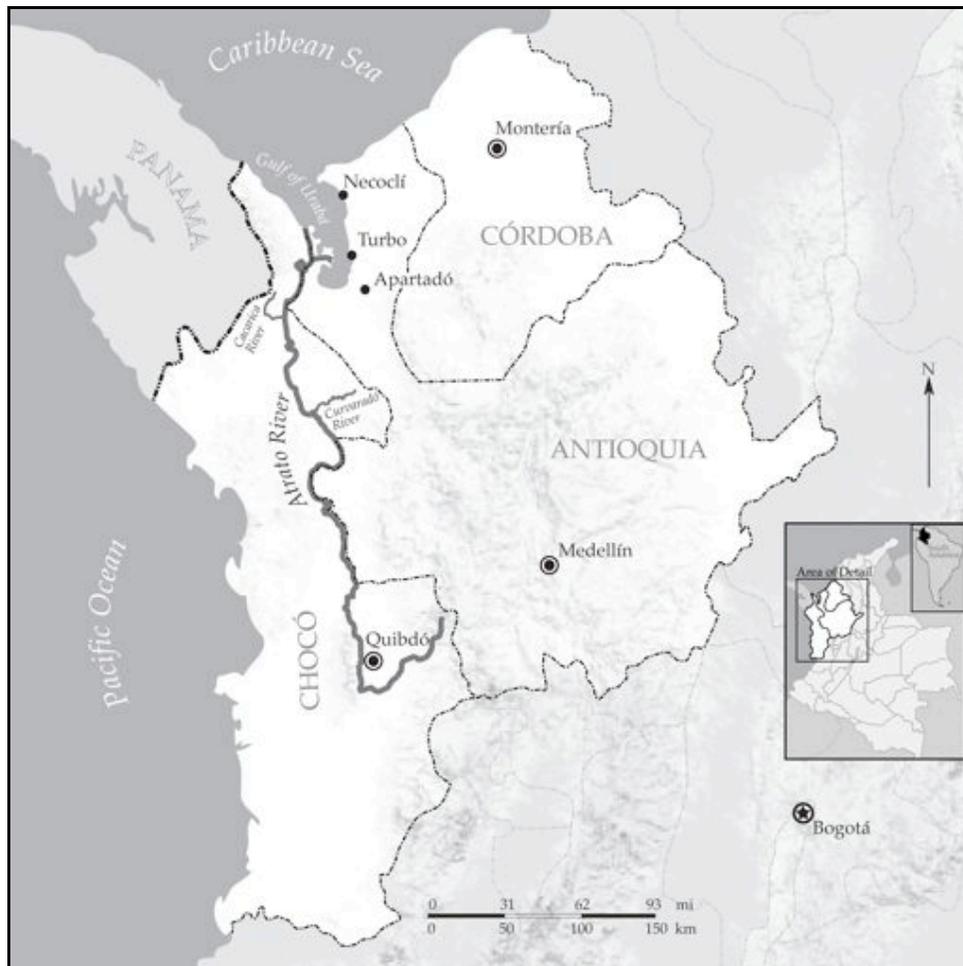
<sup>2</sup> See Massey (e.g. 2009) for more on “power-geometries.”

the following section seeks to explain and situate the narco-paramilitary land-grab historically and spatially.

### III. Rebels, Narcos, and Elites: Urabá's Agrarian Class Relations

The most ubiquitous feature of northwest Colombia is water. Biblical downpours nourish low-lying tropical mountain ranges, which feed vast swamps and countless rivers that stretch vein-like across the rainforest landscape. Most of these waterways flow into the larger Atrato River, which snakes its way north through the steamy lowland jungle until it empties into the Caribbean gulf of Urabá (see Figure 1 below). The region's privileged geographic position—a watery land corridor hinging two continents and flanked by two ocean coastlines—has made it a coveted swath of land throughout Colombia's turbulent history. Most Colombians call this region Urabá, while its western fringe closer to Panama is also known as the Darién. The Urabá gulf-region spans the northern ends of the administrative departments (provinces) of Antioquia and Chocó along with the western fringe of Córdoba.

**Figure 1. Map of Northwest Colombia**



(Source: Author)

In the 1980s, the concentration of land ownership and narco-trafficking became a ravenous metabolic cycle in Colombia. As the cocaine boom exploded, narco-traffickers began investing and laundering their windfall drug profits by buying up huge expanses of rural property. The narco-driven land rush was another of Colombia's recurring "agrarian counter-reforms" (Sánchez 2001). One nationwide survey found that between 1980 and 1995 narco-traffickers had bought up some of the most productive lands in nearly half of all the nation's municipalities (Reyes 1997:339). According to this study, the northern tip of Antioquia and Córdoba department—i.e. Urabá—presented some of the most pervasive instances of narcos buying up lands. Rural land and agribusiness remain attractive ways to write off and launder illegal profits, while incurring little or no tax burden (Ibañez 2010).

Landed elites responded uneasily to this newly ascendant class of narco estate-owners, who were grudgingly dubbed the "*clase emergente*" by their blue-blooded counterparts. But agrarian crises and labor unrest in the late 1980s and early 1990s, gave the *clase emergente* a fortuitous entrée into agrarian society. Declining state support for agriculture amid free market-oriented economic reforms exposed previously cushioned producers. In 1985, tariff barriers averaged 83%, giving Colombia the highest tariffs in Latin America, but by 1992 they had been slashed to 6.7%, the second-lowest in the region (Urrutia 1994:286). The economic restructuring caused "the massive redistribution of income between the city and countryside. The biggest winners were high-income sectors in urban areas, while the biggest losers were high-income sectors in rural areas" (Ocampo 1994:115). The high-income agrarian sectors in Urabá, which included cattle ranchers and banana plantation owners, were also especially hard-hit by sharp drops in commodity prices. Bananas, for example, lost a third of their value by 1994, marking a 25-year low, while beef prices also crashed, losing nearly half their value from 1993 to 1995.

One old-guard observer from the ranchlands of Córdoba, which would later become the epicenter of the paramilitary movement, recalled that the narcos arrived with "unlimited ambition" (qtd. in Romero 2000:59). The situation echoes the shifts identified by E.P. Thompson in early eighteenth-century England: "We appear to glimpse a declining gentry and yeoman class confronted by incomers with greater command of money and influence, and with a ruthlessness in the use of both" (1975:108). Elite fragmentation—between narcos and the landed elites—would have likely continued apace were it not, paradoxically, for the threat posed by guerrilla insurgents. As the newly minted agrarian elite, narco-traffickers became subject to the same extortive guerrilla kidnappings once reserved for rural oligarchs.

Another factor consolidating the intra-elite solidarity was that the rebels, particularly in Urabá, were making headway organizing greater peasant and rural worker militancy, while also flexing electoral muscle with their political arm. The agrarian sectors' economic decline coupled with what was perceived—real and imagined—as a joint peasant-guerrilla advance made natural allies out of the *clase emergente* and the reticent rural oligarchy. In Raymond Williams' words, the "overreachers" and the "wellborn" in Colombia made common cause (1973:61). The variation in Colombia is that the narcos served as the connective political-economic tissue between commercial-

industrial and landed elites (Hylton 2006:11). The narco-paramilitaries straddled the urban and the rural, the new and the old; they were the conjunctural product of this unique socio-spatial constellation of forces.

Across the country, the formal organization of paramilitary groups despite some geographic variations brought together a consistent ensemble cast of actors: drug traffickers, wealthy landowners, business owners, regional politicians, and members of the state security forces. The resulting private militias, made up of mostly poor young men, were established and trained to take the fight to the rebels. A decade later, paramilitary groupings had proliferated nationwide. And they collaborated so closely with the Colombian government's dirty war against leftist insurgents that a report by Human Rights Watch referred to them as the Army's "Sixth Division" (HRW 2001). Fueled by zealous anticommunism, the paramilitaries slaughtered thousands of innocent civilians accused of harboring leftist sympathies. Urabá's militant banana unions were one of the early military objectives of these emergent counter-insurgent death squads. One paramilitary leader explained that in the mid-1990s the banana companies of the region were on the brink of crisis because of perennial labor strikes and unrest. "There was no economic security. The company owners were totally finished," said the paramilitary chief. "Strikes would go on for days during which not a single banana was cut. After we arrived there was no a single strike." He coldly added, "I would personally go to the farms and make people work with a gun; for whose benefit? The banana owners."<sup>3</sup>

The largest paramilitary faction emerged in the early 1990s from the cattle rangelands of Córdoba department (see Figure 1). The paramilitary group came to be called the *Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá* (ACCU), founded by three brothers from the Castaño family—Fidel, Vicente, and Carlos—whose father had been kidnapped and killed by the FARC in the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> Having cut their teeth in the infamous Medellín cartel of Pablo Escobar, the Castaño brothers became heavily invested in Córdoba's cattle industry, buying vast estates during the narco land rush of the early 1980s. Although never devoid of counterinsurgent aims, along with a personal vendetta against anything with even a hint of rebel sympathy, the Castaños also trained their guns toward more economic purposes from the early stages of their armed movement. The violent momentum of their growing war machine became driven by its own internal metabolism, gaining vast amounts of lands, businesses, and weapons, while eliminating political opponents and protecting their most lucrative activity, drug trafficking. As early as 1996, a U.S. Embassy cable noted, "Although portraying themselves as motivated by a desire to seek justice [against the FARC], the Castanos have profited greatly from their activities, reportedly acquiring thousands of acres of land in northern Colombia" (U.S. Embassy 1996).

The Castaño paramilitaries not only became the owners of vast estates; they also became Colombia's undisputed cocaine barons—narco-paramilitaries. As they

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<sup>3</sup> "Yo mismo fui a las fincas bananeras para hacer la gente trabajar con un fusil. En beneficio de quien? De los bananeros." Versión Libre, José Ever Veloza, Justicia y Paz, Attorney General's Office, June-July 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Translation: "Campesino Self-Defense Forces of Córdoba and Urabá." Most paramilitary groups had names with equally populist nods.

increasingly amassed soldiers, drugs, money, guns, and allies, they referred to their war machine as the “House of Castaño.” And from their base in Córdoba department, they set their sights on Urabá, a key smuggling corridor for drugs and guns, and thus a key piece of their politco-military project’s nationwide aspirations. Campesinos often describe how in the months preceding the paramilitary onslaught, rumors coursed through their communities that the *mochacabezas* (decapitators) were coming; a reference to the gruesome way paramilitaries used machetes to dismember the bodies of their victims. The initial incursions were often capped by wholesale massacres, a terrifying message that proved to be just the opening salvo. “They said they came here to clean out the guerrillas,” recalls a local peasant, “but it was us, the campesinos, they cleaned out.”<sup>5</sup> In interviews, several survivors explained that when the violence began, the paramilitaries came to their farms with the same bone-chilling offer: “Sell us your land, or we’ll negotiate with your widow.”<sup>6</sup> What followed was a crescendo of terror that locals simply call “*la violencia*,” an odyssey that would eventually leave thousands either dead or landless.

By about 2000, the Castaños’ paramilitaries had succeeded in taking definitive control of Urabá as well as many other regions of the country. A declassified U.S. Embassy cable succinctly refers to growing paramilitary domination of entire regions—and specifically mentions Urabá—as leading to the establishment of “quasi-independent states” in a process it likens to the “feudalization of Colombia.” With the guerrillas subdued in these regions, agribusiness companies revamped their old operations and established new ones; much of the latter, on the still-abandoned farmlands, and paramilitaries often used these agribusinesses for laundering money (Ballvé 2009, 2011).

The administrative and political infrastructure undergirding this process was laid by the paramilitaries by tapping into the state reforms aimed at political, fiscal, and administrative territorial restructuring. Alongside their ultra-violent practices and open involvement in the drug trade, the narco-paramilitaries were, in fact, the on-the-ground handmaidens of the restructuring process. The next section details how they served decentralization process and how the process served them; the product of this profane synergy is state territory. They helped extend and routinize the decentralized state functions, while even taking on some state-like practices themselves; in the process, they earned millions of dollars through a variety of legal/illegal practices while snatching up huge tracts of land.

#### **IV. The Production of Territory: “Promoters of Social Development”**

The branch of the Castaños’ ACCU paramilitary organization controlling much of Urabá was named the Bloque Elmer Cárdenas (BEC). The BEC’s commander was Freddy Rendón Herrera, a Castaño family-friend and former beer truck driver, whose *nom de guerre* was “El Alemán,” or The German—reportedly in reference to the strict

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<sup>5</sup> Author interview, Curvaradó, Chocó, Caño Claro Humanitarian Zone: November 29, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> The “negotiate with your widow” phrase was said to me repeatedly. Though coined during this specific paramilitary incursion, as far as I know, it has become a shared recollection and trope within the collective memory of displaced peasants nationwide and widely repeated in media accounts of mass displacement.

discipline he demanded of his troops. In his rise through the ranks to paramilitary brass, he became the personal protégé of Carlos Castaño, the most ideologically inclined of Colombia's paramilitary capos. When El Alemán turned himself into authorities in late 2006, demobilizing his bloc under a controversial (and largely failed) government amnesty program, which provides light sentences in exchange for confessional testimonies, he donned a chrome-plated nine-millimeter that Castaño had awarded him in recognition for his services. Under Castaño's wing, El Alemán distinguished himself as one of the most politically savvy of all the bloc commanders. While seizing entire swaths of land from campesinos, El Alemán and his narco-paramilitaries not only engaged in statecraft through the making of territory, they simultaneously "privatized the state" as it was being terraformed (Hibou 2004). In other words, they helped constitute and extend the social relations of the state spatially, while capturing elected offices, bureaucratic positions, and siphoning off public funds and international aid toward their anointed front-companies, agricultural projects, and NGOs.

With these processes in mind, this section takes a critical stance toward popular and scholarly explanations of paramilitarism through recourse to notions of state "absence," "failure," or "partial collapse" (Mason 2005; Bejarano and Pizarro 2005). The problem with these otherwise insightful accounts is that they reproduce problematic narratives of statelessness that obscure the mutually reciprocal relations between the state and paramilitaries and, in fact, mirror the paramilitaries' own justifications and discourses. For instance, in a manifesto of sorts, Carlos Castaño wrote: "It's absolutely wrong to argue that the politico-military project of the [paramilitaries] developed under a logic of defending the current model of the State, when it was precisely [the State's] failures, faults, and absences based on this very model that hatched the movement itself" (1999:26). In fact, my argument is that the paramilitary and state formation worked in complex and dialectical tandem.

Instead of narratives of statelessness, the process is more adequately understood by the far richer conceptualization offered by Africanist scholarship on the "privatization of the state"—broadly conceived—as a modality of governing and accumulation (Hibou 2004; Roitman 2005). In such a modality, normative dualisms between state/non-state, public/private, political/economic, and particularly the legal/illegal are not just blurred; in fact, their fluid combination becomes the cumulative expression of multiple and even contradictory actors and strategies that nonetheless facilitate the exercise and territorialization of state power.

For the remainder of this section, I try to reconstruct how the paramilitaries accomplished this making and privatization of the decentralized state through the production of territory. Using methods of investigative ethnography, my evidence is mainly drawn from documentary evidence—primarily, government investigations, paramilitary confessions, court cases, chambers of commerce, land registry offices, etc.—and interviews with displaced campesinos.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I take my methodological cues from Lutz and Nonini's assertion: "We believe that an ethnography of violences and economies will have to look much more like fine investigative journalism ... than it does now" (1999:104). "Investigative ethnography" is particularly suited to "studying up"—in Laura Nader's sense

*Parapolitics and Community Action Boards*

In 2000, when the paramilitary had definitively gained control of Urabá from the FARC, driving the rebels into the upper-reaches of mountainous jungle, El Alemán's BEC sent some delegates to the Castaños' main ranch in Córdoba. More than a meeting, it was a training session—a workshop. Carlos Castaño had founded a peasant “movement” in Córdoba called “Caribbean Campesino Clamor,” and the goal of the workshop was to learn from this organization and establish a similar group in Urabá. Afterwards, El Alemán used an abandoned schoolhouse in Necoclí, where the BEC began training an entire cadre of community organizers eerily dubbed “*Promotores de Desarrollo Social*” (PDS or Social Development Promoters). The PDSs were consummate intellectuals in the Gramsci's elaborate sense; they enabled paramilitary dominion over rural areas through the state structures they helped socialize and materialize. They called the movement, “*Poder Popular Campesino*” (Popular Campesino Power). “It was a movement,” explained one paramilitary operative, “that sought to bring the campesino masses closer to the self-defense groups” in the territories taken over from guerrillas.

The PDSs were first drawn from the BEC rank-and-file; some volunteered, while others were assigned to the post because they had been injured in combat or were otherwise unfit for battle. As the project developed, the BEC increasingly recruited young men from the communities themselves. One PDS described that he would make his first visit to a community with the presence of a local paramilitary commander and call the local residents to a meeting. The PDS said he traveled unarmed and in civilian clothing, but prominently donned a radio at his hip and always identified himself as a member of the *Bloque Elmer Cárdenas*, as El Alemán explicitly ordered.

The young men tapped to be PDSs by commanders acted as intermediaries—or as one PDS euphemistically described it, “ice breakers”—between campesino communities, the paramilitary commanders, and municipal government entities (mayor's offices, town councils, etc.). The primary intervention of the PDS operatives occurred in the sphere of the *Juntas de Acción Comunal* (JAC, Community Action Boards). JACs are a unique administrative form of local governance in Colombia. A law passed in 1958 instituted the JACs as a way for local communities, especially those in isolated rural areas, to promote local improvement projects and gain a stronger collective voice before government entities. By law, the JACs are locally elected and non-profit bodies that are legally defined as a “non-governmental” and “civil society organizations.” Among other roles, they are mainly expected to initiate and direct the local construction of infrastructures (e.g. bridges, roads, sewage) and certain services (employment or education workshops, public health campaigns, etc.). Most common in rural and poor urban areas, the JACs are created by citizen initiative and are legally recognized by the government through a bureaucratic application process.

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(1972)—on the workings of violent and illicit economies by combining the strengths of investigative journalism (its emphasis on documentary evidence) with theoretically rigorous research and the sensibilities of ethnographic methods and writing toward place and everyday practices (Sugden and Tomlinson 2002:12-19). The fieldwork for this paper was conducted in Bogotá, Medellín, and various parts of Urabá, during 2008, 2009, and June-August 2010.

A central task of the paramilitary *Promotores de Desarrollo Social* was to “accompany” communities through the legal process of creating and legalizing a local JAC. Asked about the scope of their work, a former PDS explained:

We also counseled and accompanied the *Juntas de Acción Comunal* in their creation and daily activities: construction of bridges; co-financing works between the communities, the municipality, and the organization [i.e. the BEC]. We did projects jointly between the organization [the BEC] and the community for 90 percent of the roads that were built during the time I was there.

El Alemán described the same process using keywords befitting a World Bank technocrat: “The BEC’s PDS ... would go out and do social work; they had a degree of knowledge of cooperativism, so they knew something about how to create a *Junta de Acción Comunal* and how citizen oversight worked, empowering the presidents of the *Acción Comunal*, giving juridical life to the *Juntas de Acción Comunal* in all our [the BEC’s] municipalities.”<sup>8</sup>

The processes described by the paramilitaries regarding the daily workings and creation of the JACs involve many of the state techniques, strategies, and practices—from infrastructure and delivery of public services to routine bureaucratic procedures—that scholars have highlighted in showing how statehood and conceptions thereof become concretely spatialized (Scott 1998; Rose 1999; Ferguson and Gupta 2002). As Rose notes, “They are the modalities in which a real and material governable world is composed, terraformed and populated” (1999:32). Following Brenner and Elden’s cues regarding Lefebvre’s schematics on the production of space, the material aspects of this process—roads and bridges, for example—constitute “territorial practices,” while the more ideological and conceptual features of the process, such as the bureaucratic paperwork or discursive formations, conform to “representations of territory.” And the third field of Lefebvre’s spatial dialectic is manifest through the embodied and quotidian social relations in which the PDSs and paramilitary violence played pivotal parts—paramilitary roadblocks and checkpoints, for instance. But as Lefebvre made clear, these various dimensions of social space cannot be isolated from each other: such an over-individuation was precisely what he believed helped perpetuate the fetishism of space; similarly, it is only through the combination of material, ideal, and lived dimensions that territory becomes socially concrete and meaningful.

The paramilitaries’ idyllic descriptions mentioned above of “accompanying” communities entirely elide the utterly violent force underwriting the whole process. In some cases, displacements were only slightly more selective: Intransigent campesinos, community leaders, owners of prized properties, and/or those thought to be in league with guerrillas were brutally killed or forced to flee. A more frequent paramilitary tactic during these years involved indiscriminately displacing entire communities and then transplanting client-campesinos from other regions—sometimes displaced persons themselves—to repopulate the stolen lands; a process the Castaños perversely called an

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<sup>8</sup> Throughout, the quotes by El Alemán are from his “Versión Libre,” obtained by the author. Versión Libre, Freddy Rendón Herrera, Justicia y Paz, Attorney General’s Office, June 16-17, 2009.

“agrarian reform.” In practice, the newly arrived campesinos were only front-owners of the properties. Usually, a narco-paramilitary takeover included a combination of all these tactics.

The PDSs were not only in charge of the local public relations, “hearts-and-minds” endeavors of the BEC; they also played the role of interlocutors within local power-geometries by working through the country’s most subsidiary units of local governance—the JACs. Commanders like El Alemán rightly understood the JACs as a fertile and pivotal institutional terrain for articulating the “interests” of local campesino communities, formal government institutions, and armed narco-paramilitary dominion. The JACs were the epicenters for the co-production of hegemony and territory—and, thereby, the state itself. Indeed, at subsequent court hearings, El Alemán couched the process in terms of making a state in its absence: “We trained leaders who carried out their work in the *Juntas de Acción Comunal*, so that these leaders would then go out and become municipal council members, and so that they’d work for the communities in which combat operations had ended and a state presence was needed.”

As El Alemán’s comment alludes, the BEC also used the *Juntas* as incubators for paramilitary-linked candidates seeking the elected offices made available by the political decentralization. The BEC also used the JACs as political action committees that would throw their weight behind—and drum up votes for—the paramilitary-endorsed candidate. Candidates for mayor were hand-picked by El Alemán. “The idea was to have two candidates per municipality,” he explained. “A preferred candidate that shared the [paramilitary] ideology, and one candidate with little political weight that could be put in the contest.” Unsurprisingly, El Alemán’s description is another sanitized version of a process that was in practice horrifically violent. As one researcher found, between 1998 and 2002 in parts of the country where politicians garnered the “atypical result” of 70% or more of all votes, massacres by paramilitaries—defined by Colombian human rights groups as a single event in which five or more individuals are killed—had increased by an astounding 664%, while homicides spiked by 33% (López 2006).

The process in varying forms was scaled-up across the country, leading to the ongoing “para-politics” (*parapolítica*) scandal, which has exposed the narco-paramilitary links of countless public officials. One estimate made by the news website *Verdad Abierta* in December 2008 at the height of the scandal, for instance, noted that 34 out of 102 Senators nationwide were being investigated for paramilitary links as well as 25 out of 168 lower-house representatives. Investigators of the *parapolítica* scandal have turned up more than 300 other public servants, including congress members, mayors, council persons, governors, army and police brass, and high-ranking members of national government agencies with paramilitary ties. Urabá is one of the many epicenters of the *parapolítica* scandal.

With their anointed politicians in place in mayor’s offices and municipal councils across Urabá, the BEC began accumulating vast resources by steering local construction and concession contracts to their front-companies. Law 60 of 1993, which legislated parts of the administrative decentralization outlined in the Constitution, assigned the administration of public health and education—among other functions—to municipal

governments. As mentioned earlier, under the new fiscal decentralization, the provision of these services enjoyed financing from constitutionally mandated budgetary transfers from the central government. In one relatively typical case, documents from a government investigation indicate that the municipal government of Arboletes under Mayor William Saleme (2004-2008), who now faces charges for having the BEC bankroll his victorious campaign, provided 40% of both the municipal education and health budgets to the BEC. In the case of the latter, the BEC was taking its payments through its own private healthcare firms contracted by municipalities as health services providers.

The same investigation claims that the BEC in Arboletes was skimming off contracts for things, such as street lighting, sewer and water piping, trash collection, and even for the building of the “Park of Non-Violence.” Corporate registries obtained from the Urabá Chamber of Commerce show that known paramilitaries controlled several companies receiving contracts from Saleme’s administration. Nowadays, the mayors immediately preceding and succeeding Saleme in Arboletes all face criminal charges for gaining office with the help of the BEC and its PDSs. A court ruling from the recent conviction of an Urabá Senator under the *parapolítica* scandal shows the BEC began consolidating many of these activities, including its electoral influence, under the management of a single NGO called the Community Association of Northern Urabá and Western Córdoba (or Asocomun).<sup>9</sup> The founder and director of Asocomun was El Alemán’s brother, John Jairo Rendón, who is currently in a U.S. jail facing “narco-terrorism” charges.

#### *Agribusinesses and ‘Strategic Alliances’*

The final node in this network worth examining is agribusiness, bringing the production of territory within the rubric of the region’s capitalist development. Through Asocomun and similar NGOs, the BEC was able to leverage its territorial control into expansive agribusinesses that even managed to tap into grant and financing schemes supported by both the Colombian government and international aid organizations—mainly, under the negligent watch of USAID and its private development contractors (Ballvé 2009). Under Plan Colombia, USAID has destined at least \$400 million into its “alternative development” program, which is mainly aimed at reducing Colombia’s production of coca leaves, which can be used to make cocaine—hence, “alternative.” These funds also support initiatives of local institution building and good governance.

The work of the agribusiness firms and their funding streams shows the joint-workings of two broader forces involved in the production of territory in Urabá: the region’s capitalist development (including the drug trade) and militarized U.S. geopolitical concerns. The process also demonstrates how territory is produced within multiply scaled, intercalated political-economic networks. Urabá’s economies of violence extend well beyond its putative borders. Indeed, states not only shape places, geographical scale, networks, and their interconnections; these are also shaping the state through the production of territory (Gramsci 1971:182; Brenner and Elden 2009:365).

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<sup>9</sup> Corte Suprema de Justicia, Sala de Casación Penal, Aprobado Acta No. 419. Única Instancia 30126, Ramón Antonio Valencia Duque. December 14, 2010.

Under William Saleme’s administration in Arboletes, for instance, the municipality became the recipient of funds and technical assistance from USAID’s “Municipal-Level Alternative Development Program” (ADAM in its Spanish acronym), which “implements agricultural, infrastructure, and local governance activities” (USAID 2007). One initiative in Arboletes involved the construction of school facilities (recall El Alemán’s earlier comments on the construction of schools with the help of the local JACs). A quarterly performance report by USAID’s contractor (2007:33) proudly notes:

The building of two schoolrooms, a preschool area, bathrooms and a storeroom is the result of the combined effort of the community [USD\$ 2,855], the municipality of Arboletes in Antioquia [USD\$ 26,828] and ADAM [USD\$ 90,000]. The improvement to the *El Guadual Arriba* School was completed in October 2007 and is linked to an ADAM sister initiative that is working with 150 small farm families in Arboletes and San Juan de Urabá to plant 450 hectares of cacao. This is another example of the ADAM integrated model in practice.

Usually accompanying such projects are large, sturdy signs, with the USAID logo and that of the respective Colombian government agency, reminding locals of the state’s material presence. But USAID was apparently unaware that the farmers’ cooperative receiving the aid money for the 450-hectare cacao project, which later expanded to include rubber, had contracted Asocomun, the NGO founded by El Alemán’s brother, as the “accompanying management organization” (*organización gestora acompañante*).<sup>10</sup>

Across Urabá, I have found evidence of Asocomun participating in a series of other agribusiness initiatives (banana, rubber, teak, and oil palm), a handful of which also received funds from USAID and the Colombian government. One of these projects “accompanied” by Asocomun and funded by USAID is the “Family Forestry Program” (*Familias Guardabosques*) in Necoclí and Turbo. The Family Forestry program, which began as a pilot project funded by the Colombian government aimed at providing rural employment and illicit crop-substitution, was later folded into USAID’s alternative development portfolio. The director of the Colombian government agency handling the forestry program praised the project for creating “an entrepreneurial culture for forestry in the north of Urabá.”

All these agribusiness projects aimed at instilling an “entrepreneurial culture” and promoting “alternative development” operate through what the government, the private sector, and aid agencies call “strategic alliances.” The “alliances” are a form of corporate-peasant contract farming that is heavily subsidized by the government through grants, tax breaks, and low-interest loans. The goal is for peasants to provide labor and land, usually organized as cooperatives or other associations, while the government, agencies like USAID, and agribusiness firms provide the seed capital and technical assistance.

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<sup>10</sup> Asocomun appears as the “*organización gestora acompañante*” of the Arboletes project in a series of performance monitoring reports to the Fundación Cordesarrollo, a non-profit foundation created by private firms to promote development.

In the Curvaradó River basin (Figure 1), the BEC's operatives created a farmers' collective called the Association of Small Palm Oil Producers of Urabá, which was evidently organized to legitimize and ratify a massive land-grab by paramilitary-backed oil palm companies through one of these "strategic alliances." One eyewitness claims the association existed only on paper, using the names and national identification numbers of paramilitary rank-and-file. One of these palm companies submitted an application to USAID for grant money. The application—obtained from court filings—couches the proposed oil palm monoculture within alternative- and ethno-development discourses by claiming the "strategic alliance" provides "environmentally and economically sustainable" agriculture for "local communities" of socially excluded "Afro-Colombian families."<sup>11</sup> Although the palm company left its application pending with USAID and apparently never received the money, it moved ahead with the project and carpeted 22,000 hectares of Afro-Colombians' land with oil palm plantations. The palm monocultures now stand in stark contrasts to the mostly subsistence agro-ecological practices and jungle foliage that once stood in their place.

Massive land-grabs of this kind were facilitated and ratified by paramilitaries ability to control local governmental institutions, but the "development" discourses accompanying the projects were no less important. Besides local officials and bureaucrats, displaced campesinos have said that notary publics—para-statal agents themselves—were pivotal in ratifying shady land "deals" and other economic activities, whether through complicity or coercion. The most notorious case of fraud involves Lino Antonio Díaz Almario, who in 2000 allegedly acquired 14,645 acres—an impossible fortune for a poor campesino—and immediately sold these lands to the sham "Association of Small Palm Oil Producers of Urabá" (the association started by the paramilitaries and palm companies). But Díaz had been dead since 1995, when he drowned in the waters of the Jiguamiandó River.

An elderly campesino recalls that when he first returned to his farm after years of displacement, he was devastated by the destruction. The palm company had razed his crops and pastures in laying the groundwork for the plantation. Tidy and seemingly endless rows of oil palm saplings had replaced the messy patchwork of fields, pastures, and forest that previously shaped his land. "All the work of my youth was gone," he says, reciting an inventory that he's apparently repeated often. "I had corn, bananas, beans, rice, dozens of cows, nine mules, my wife had tons of chickens, pigs ... they even chopped down the woods I used to fix my house. Everything was gone."<sup>12</sup> The list outlines the varied ways the paramilitary-backed company had deprived him and his family of livelihood. He mentions subsistence crops and those directed toward petty commerce as well as the trees used to shore up his home. In short, he describes a standard peasant household economy and how this means of subsistence was brutally pulverized.

The process described by the campesino can be conceived of as the production of state territory through actually existing "primitive accumulation" (Marx 1967), or what

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<sup>11</sup> From 2003 application titled, "Proyecto Afrocolombiano de siembra y desarrollo de palma africana de aceite: Extractora Bajirá S.A. & Consejo Comunitario La Larga – Tumaradó."

<sup>12</sup> Author interview, Curvaradó, Chocó, Caño Claro Humanitarian Zone: May 2008.

could be called “territory by dispossession.” Mass displacement and the production of territory in Urabá demonstrate how primitive accumulation can become the ongoing processual prism that produces and refracts the violent spatial birth pangs and reproduction of not only capitalist accumulation, but also the social relations of state formation. Although this remains an admittedly preliminary claim that needs to be further researched and substantiated, theorists as far afield as Lefebvre, Carl Schmitt, and Max Weber all make similar arguments about the foundational nature of violent dispossession in the making of modern statehood. In Marx’s own historical account of primitive accumulation in England, he carefully traces how the process persisted with changing relationships to state power, imperatives of statecraft, and the law—first illegal, over a century later codified as legal (1967:717-742). The relevance for his analysis is that it resonates—however distantly in time and space—with the production of territory in Urabá, where violent and illegal accumulation and no less violent and illegal modalities of statecraft work in mutually reciprocal ways.

## V. Conclusion

A processual and spatial understanding of state formation, and its analysis in an ethnographic register, reveals a much richer picture than what can be accounted for through ideal-type, Weberian definitions of statehood and associated narratives of state absence, destabilization, or collapse. Lefebvre’s theories on the “production of space” along with Gramsci’s integral conception of statehood, hegemony, and intellectuals have helped me show how narco-paramilitary predation and primitive accumulation are not signs of a faltering state, but rather symptoms of its spatial production and propagation as territory. The paramilitary-backed production of territory becomes all the more evident when understood in concert with its constitutive relations to decentralization, a much more explicit restructuring of how state power is spatially constituted, organized, and exercised.

Again, my over-arching claim is that Urabá’s narco-driven economies of violence are not anathema to projects of modern liberal statehood—usually associated with tropes of “institution-building” and “good governance”—but are deeply tied to initiatives aimed at making spaces governable, expanding global trade, and attracting capital. I’ve also tried to highlight how the production of territory in Urabá needs to be understood in conjunction with its relations to forces operating across a spectrum of spatial scales, whether narco-capital, international commodity markets, local institutional forms, changing national class relations, global policy regimes, U.S. security doctrines, and political struggles.

The case study outlined also contributes insights for recent debates around the concept and practice of “territory” (Brenner and Elden 2009; Elden 2010a, 2010b; Antonsich 2010).<sup>13</sup> The “production of territory,” as employed here, not only avoids the “territorial trap” critically outlined by Agnew (1994; cf. Brenner and Elden 2009); it also provides a way of examining everyday forms of state formation as a spatial process by “bringing the state back in without leaving the people out” (Joseph and Nugent 1994:12;

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<sup>13</sup> Also, the recent section in *Geopolitics* (Vol. 15, No. 4, 2010) revisiting Agnew’s “Territorial Trap” (1994).

cf. Antonsich 2010). The case of narco-paramilitaries in Urabá provides an antidote to simplistic conceptions of territory by exposing how territory and sovereignty are made through “the exercise of putative powers that need not be restricted to the entities that we call states,” thereby extending “the scope of these concepts to include so-called private actors and political organisations other than states” (Agnew 2010).

However, Colombia provides a healthy dose of caution against the exclusive equivalence of “territory” and “state space” (Brenner and Elden 2009:365). In the Colombian context, where forms of “parcelized sovereignties” (Anderson 1979) are more often the rule than the exception, exclusively conflating territory and state-space as always practically and conceptually isomorphic would preclude serious analysis of the complicated ways in which various actors—such as insurgents, afro-descendent and indigenous groups, peasant communities, or narco-paramilitaries—all make explicit claims of “territory” that stand at varying and sometimes rather awkward angles to modern liberal statehood and its putative territory (Ng’weno 2007; Escobar 2008; Asher and Ojeda 2009). Relegating such claims and practices to “territoriality” seems politically anemic, when it is precisely their forceful claims to “territory,” a word many of these subaltern groups use habitually and powerfully, that provide them a platform for peacefully combating the profane synergies between narco-paramilitary political-economies of violence and state formation—a process that forms part of my broader research project.

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