

Devils, Witches, and Narco-Monsters

What does the title of this chapter have to do with environmental justice? “Devils,” “witches,” and “monsters” are generally regarded as entities of supernatural origins and/or entities that have acquired supernatural powers. Their presence and capabilities incite fear among the masses, which is why the stories of many visions are interpreted as metaphors for different kinds of people that have been othered. This chapter deconstructs accounts of these visions within the historical context of Colombia’s third-largest metropolis, Cali. It draws from hundreds of years of stories about devils, witches, and monsters to highlight how the continual displacement of rural peoples, particularly Afro-descendant and Indigenous, has factored into the racial geography of this metropolis. In doing so, this chapter continues an argument from chapter 1, which is that the silent violence of environmental racism is inextricable from the overt violence related to struggles for the control of Colombian territory (i.e., the armed conflict and illicit activities such as drug trafficking). This chapter also presents this history as a means of relating Cali’s settler colonial history to an entirely different form of environmental racism, which is the myth of overpopulation.

For most of its nearly 500-year history, Santiago de Cali, situated between the Pacific Ocean and the Andes mountain range in the Cauca Valley in southwestern Colombia, has been an isolated colonial settlement. Sebastián de Belalcázar, a Spaniard who accompanied Columbus on his third trip to the Americas, is credited with founding the city on July 25, 1536. The first part of the city’s name honors the Apostle Santiago, patron saint of Galicia, Spain, traditionally celebrated on July 25. The origins of “Cali,” the frequently used abbreviation of the city’s name, are uncertain but often attributed to several Indigenous dialects.¹

The forgotten origins of “Cali” reflect the settler colonialism² of the city’s founding, which entailed both the physical erasure and the cultural and historical erasure

of pre-Columbian Indigenous groups such as the Chibcha-speaking peoples.³ Colombian anthropologist Rodríguez Cuenca explains, “Upon their entrance in the 16th century to the Cauca River Valley, the Spanish hosts in their quest to appropriate the native gold left the land devastated, the houses and crops destroyed, heads, hands and noses cut off . . . with dogs fed on Indigenous bodies, in the greatest ethnocide of its time.”⁴ The complete name “Santiago de Cali” therefore represents the historical consciousness of a population assured of its Spanish heritage but violently detached from its Indigenous roots.⁵

It is a city with many nicknames, including *la sucursal del cielo* (the branch of heaven), a term that originated in the 1984 song “Cali Pachanguero,” which translates to “The Partying City of Cali.”⁶ Penned as an anthem for one of the city’s annual celebrations (La Feria de Cali), the song proclaims, “Barranquilla port of gold, Paris the city of light, New York capital of the world and from heaven, Cali its branch. . . . Everything else is just hills.”⁷ To put this homage in perspective, it is just one of at least 500 songs paying tribute to one of the most festive cities in all of the Americas.⁸ It is worth noting that the vast majority of these are salsa songs, as Cali prides itself on being the salsa dance capital of the world. It is also worth noting that this particular tune is from Cali’s most famed salsa group, Grupo Niche, which was originally comprised of Afro-descendant musicians from the Pacific coast.⁹

Jairo Varela, legendary composer and cofounder of the band, chose the name Grupo Niche to assert Black pride in an anti-Black nation.¹⁰ Ethnomusicologist Waxer notes that the term *niche* signifies “someone of African descent, but among Afro-Colombians [is] also used to mean ‘brother’ or ‘pal.’”¹¹ As reported in the *Miami New Times*, Varela later spent three years in prison on drug charges that he believed to be racially motivated: “At the time of his arrest in 1995, the musician owned a modeling agency, a two-million-dollar discotheque in Cali, and a \$250,000, 48-track, state-of-the-art recording console. He also invested generously in the campaigns of aspiring Afro-Colombian politicians, a move Varela thinks did not go unnoticed by the nation’s power elite. He is convinced that his wealth and influence got him into trouble with the law in a country he believes is not ready to accept a successful black man.”¹²

Despite this incident, Varela maintained his iconic status as local legend, international musical star, and champion of Black culture until his passing in 2012.¹³ His legacy is representative of the Afro-descendant experience in Cali and the greater Americas, celebrated as part of the cultural identity of a place but not fully accepted in that place.¹⁴

This process of exclusion began with the transatlantic slave trade but continues in the present. Colombia’s principal port in the colonial era—Cartagena de Indias, situated on the Atlantic coast—received 1,800 African enslaved people per year between the years 1560 and 1650.¹⁵ By the beginning of the nineteenth century roughly 3,000 enslaved people had been brought to the Cauca Valley, primarily to work in haciendas, ranches, and mines.¹⁶ Slavery was abolished in 1852, and some Afro-descendants occupied lands at the margins of the haciendas

in exchange for tribute to hacienda owners. Others sought out *tierras baldías* (unoccupied lands) along the Cauca River or in the mountainous areas of its valley.¹⁷ In the early twentieth century many of those Afro-descendants without land eventually found employment harvesting sugarcane and settled in unoccupied lands in Cali.¹⁸

As in many major Latin American cities, Cali's population exploded during its industrialization in the second half of the twentieth century. Though it was founded in 1536, by 1910 the population was still just 26,358 inhabitants.¹⁹ Roughly a hundred years later its population is nearly a hundred times larger, and it is the city with the third-largest population in Colombia, currently estimated at 2.25 million inhabitants.²⁰ For most of this history, the primary economic activities were plantation agriculture (tobacco and sugar) and ranching. Cali historian Édgar Vásquez Benítez credits its exponential population growth in the latter half of the twentieth century to the following reasons: increased connectivity to the region's transportation networks (railroads and highways), an influx of foreign capital (an opportunity for regional industrialization during World War II), and a steady stream of migrants seeking employment (often fleeing conflicts in rural Colombia).²¹ These transformations connected Cali to the most important port city on the Pacific coast, Buenaventura, and facilitated its rise as the economic, political, and cultural center of the region.²²

Vásquez Benítez also notes that, during this population boom, Cali became two different cities. The first city or "the included," comprised of migrants who arrived before or in the early phases of the population boom, occupies the geographic core of the city and has consolidated access to important public services and utilities. The second city or "the excluded," comprised of more recently arrived migrants, exists at the margins of the city and is more reliant on informal economic activity for survival. This tension between the included and excluded plays a large part in determining what aspects of the city's expansion are deemed "legal" or "illegal."²³

This tension between the included and excluded also outlines the racial geography of a city that both celebrates and rejects its own Blackness. The 2005 census ranked Cali as the city with the most Afro-descendants in Colombia at twenty-six percent of the total population. However, it is currently estimated that at least half of the city's population is Afro-descendant, in large part because half of all migrants displaced to the city in recent years have been Afro-descendant.²⁴

THE GEOGRAPHY OF A NECROPOLIS

The rest of this chapter analyzes how different phases of this displacement, and Cali's settlement in general, are reflected in the supernatural visions of the city (depicted in figure 7). Each vision frames a discussion about societal issues related to the changing demographics of the city. The chapter ultimately argues that the persistence of discrimination—in the forms of anti-Blackness, anti-immigrant



FIGURE 7. Visions of the necropolis (illustrated by Jose E. Arboleda).

sentiment, environmental racism, and misogyny—has transformed the domain of the excluded into a “necropolis.”

The Greek word *necropolis* literally translates to “city of the dead,” though its conventional definition is “a large elaborate cemetery of an ancient city.”²⁵ *Necropolis* in the context of this chapter refers to the geographic imagination of what Mbembé calls a “death-world.” Mbembé’s original definition of *death-worlds* describes war-torn spaces where the death and destruction caused by modern weapons have been normalized, giving rise to “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*.”²⁶

Applied to the context of Cali, Colombia, *necropolis* or urban *death-world* refers to the violent conditions conferred upon those existing at the margins of the urban metropolis. The displaced are the living dead in this scenario, so many of whom have been displaced from one death-world (the violence of the civil conflicts in the countryside), only to find themselves in another (the urban death-world). However, this second death-world, the necropolis, is much less associated with these conflicts because the violence is concentrated in the poorest sections of the “second city.” As Cali historian Diana Vinasco-Martínez notes, “Likewise, these spaces end up representing a utility, since the urban problems of the city are attributed to them, freeing the State from its role as a reproductive agent of socio-spatial violence.”²⁷

Therefore, the necropolis also refers to “the uncanny capacity of the state to draw racial lines and inscribe domination over bodies and geographies through and in death while at the same time celebrating racial difference” or what anthropologist Jaime Alves terms “macabre spatialities.”²⁸ While Alves’s original theorization of these spatialities applied to São Paulo, Brazil, the quote is remarkably appropriate for Cali, Colombia, a city violently delineated by racial difference that at the same time professes a great deal of pride in its connection to Afro-descendant culture.²⁹ Alves notes that in both cases, “these necropolitical practices not only produce the very topographies of violence the state aims to control, but they also illustrate the limits of the rule of Law in dealing with certain zones and bodies seen inherently as outlawed.”³⁰

THREE CROSSES TO EXORCISE THE DEVIL

Whether considered real or merely hoaxes, a number of visions are foundational to the history of Cali. This passage from a book on Cali’s history comments on the presence of the supernatural in the early days of the city’s settlement: “On dark nights and because of a lack of streetlights, nerves or fear made it so that the few people walking the streets at night saw and felt witches and ghosts.”³¹

One of the most popular of these visions is related to the three large wooden crosses that overlook the city from a hilltop (see figure 7). Nowadays hiking to the top of this hill is a popular activity on weekend mornings when the sun is less intense for *caleños* (residents of Cali) and tourists seeking exercise as well as

a spectacular view of the city. However, throughout much of Cali's history, it has been an ominous site associated with unusual sights, sounds, and smells. One version of the vision is that the devil himself, dressed as an elegant horseman, frequented the spot and that the crosses were erected to scare him off and invoke the protection of god.³²

However, another version of this story portrays the devil as *Buziraco*, a demon creature with the torso of a man, the wings of a bat, the tail of a reptile, and the horns of a goat (depicted in the center of figure 7). The origins of this figure are contested in oral histories, as some believe Buziraco was a demon displaced from Spain during the conquest of the Americas, while others believe Buziraco arrived in the Americas on a slave ship from Africa.³³ In both accounts Buziraco was worshipped by Indigenous and maroon Afro-descendants in Cartagena during the 1500s.³⁴

Cartagena, apart from being a key port city in the transatlantic slave trade, was also one of multiple sites of the Spanish Inquisition in the Americas. It is therefore not surprising that this story originates in one of the main battlegrounds for stamping out non-Christian beliefs during colonization. It is also not surprising that the devil's expulsion from Cartagena bears much resemblance to what later happened in Cali; a cross and a church were constructed to exorcise Buziraco from a hill overlooking the city where Indigenous and Afro-descendants supposedly conducted blood rituals, orgies, and dances in its honor.³⁵

According to Colombian writer/historian Silva Holguín, once Buziraco was driven out of Cartagena, it made its way to Cali accompanied by a group of Afro-descendant cumbia dancers, witches, and heretics. These were individuals not successfully baptized by the (now) patron saint of enslaved people, Father Pedro Claver, during Cartagena's Inquisition. Just as Buziraco wrecked havoc on Cartagena, it is said to have subjected Cali to droughts, famines, pests, and smallpox. On dark nights without moonlight, one could reportedly see the silhouette of Buziraco hovering over the hilltop, smell the sulfur, and hear the indecipherable chants of Afro-descendants accompanied by drums.³⁶

Cali's exorcism of Buziraco occurred in phases that spanned a hundred years. Father Alfonso Hurtado Galvis, who was present on the day this exorcism was completed, recounts this history in a video interview with *El País*, a Colombian news outlet. In 1837 three crosses made of *guadua*, a local thorny variety of bamboo, were carried to the hilltop by friars from the municipality of Popayán. The crosses commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (the taller middle cross) as well as the two thieves that were crucified on either side of him (both slightly shorter crosses) (see figure 7). According to legend, the original crosses were destroyed and replaced on multiple occasions, eventually culminating in the tradition of replacement every three years on May 3, also known as the Day of the Cross throughout Latin America. Begun in 1937 and completed in 1938, the permanent concrete crosses one sees today were constructed of materials imported from Europe and blessed by a Colombian priest trained in France.³⁷

The subject of oral histories, novels, and nowadays even video games, this legend has been interpreted as a struggle for dominance of the city: the triumph of Christian over pagan (i.e., non-Christian) beliefs; the triumph of European over Indigenous and Afro-descendant cultures;³⁸ and/or the triumph of modern industrialization (i.e., crosses forged in European concrete and iron) over agricultural economies (i.e., bamboo crosses subject to destruction and replacement).

However, most caleños have never heard of Buziraco and only know that the three crosses were erected to chase the devil away. In recent history, another devil legend has garnered more attention.

THE DEVIL OF JUANCHITO

Curious about how violent displacement from the countryside impacted rural migrants who relocated to Cali, I conducted my initial fieldwork in Colombia in 2009. It was an ideal location because I had read a lot about the history and lore of the Colombian Pacific, and I knew that many migrants from the region had relocated to Cali. I was also interested in finding out whether forcible migration and new forms of violence experienced in a major city affected people's beliefs in supernatural visions.

While I conducted research on the visions of Cali, it was common for people to recite stories that they had come across in television news, radio programs, and tabloid newspapers. For those who had witnessed visions as children or otherwise professed a strong belief in the supernatural, media coverage of visions served as legitimate proof that these entities were indeed real. One such vision that has made its way into the popular imagination of Cali is *El Diablo de Juanchito* (the Devil of Juanchito).

In the 1990s, it is said, the devil appeared at the salsa club Agapito in Juanchito, an area of nightclubs just outside the eastern city limits, on Holy Thursday of *semana santa* (Holy Week). Cali prides itself on being the world's capital of salsa and the home of the most beautiful women in Colombia. Legend has it that a tall, handsome, well-dressed man appeared at the popular nightclub and wowed the crowd with his flashy dance moves. In one version of the story, a woman dancing with him was in awe of this handsome man and his incredibly fast moves. She looked at his feet and screamed when she saw that the lower half of his body was invisible. The devil left in a cloud of sulfur, and everyone evacuated the club. The woman had to be hospitalized for three days because of the shock of the incident.³⁹ In the extended version of this story, the club goers ran outside and got into their cars to drive away, except none of their cars would start.⁴⁰

In a slightly different version of this story, recounted by people I interviewed, the devil danced with a beautiful *caleña* (woman from Cali) who matched his dazzling ability step for step. The devil eventually faltered on a dance move toward the end of the night, and the woman noticed he had hooves for feet. He subsequently

turned into a beast and roared with laughter, disappearing in a cloud of sulfur. The caleña, enamored of the devil, followed him out of the club.

The common features in multiple versions of the tale are the devil's good looks, charm, and ability to dance. The description of the devil as a highly skilled and dashing performer is reminiscent of the devil documented by French anthropologist Michel Agier in a Colombian port city near the border with Ecuador. Agier explains how the devil may take many forms but several legends from Tumaco, Nariño, portray the devil as a supremely talented *marimbero* (marimba player) or the best dancer. When someone plays the marimba or dances exceptionally well, locals comment that that person must be the devil.⁴¹ Just across the border in Esmeraldas, Ecuador, there exists a similar legend of the devil as an ordinary man who had seduced many of the women at a party with his dancing. At midnight, a young boy noticed that the man—who was dancing with the boy's mother—had the crest of a rooster and the hooves of a goat. The devil eventually transformed into a tiger and ran off after being confronted by a wise old man.⁴²

Roughly thirty years later, these stories continue to circulate and the Devil of Juanchito has become part of the iconography of the city of Cali (see figure 8). While a good number of caleños find the story utterly ridiculous, there are those who believe that the devil did appear in Juanchito. For instance, José—who claims he saw the devil as a child near Buenaventura (the Pacific port closest to Cali)—recalls that a child lifted the devil's shirt and saw his tail.⁴³ The devil ran off with a woman, whom he later killed, and he remains on the loose in Cali. For José, the fact that the Devil of Juanchito was finely dressed and stepped out of a luxurious car suggests that he is a *narcotraficante* (a drug dealer, member of a cartel).

That affiliation makes sense based on the time and setting of the devil's appearance. During the 1990s the drug cartels of Cali were in full force and the *salsatecas* (nightclubs that exclusively play salsa) of Juanchito were popular hangouts.⁴⁴ Narcotraficantes have a reputation for attracting the most beautiful caleñas (or simply taking them from their significant others) and taking care of their every need.⁴⁵

In his 1994 book *Dancing with the Devil*, José Limón documents the story of a devil that bears an uncanny resemblance to the Devil of Juanchito. Although the setting is quite different (Limón's fieldwork was completed in South Texas in the 1970s), the devil of this dance hall was handsome, well dressed, a good dancer, with goat hooves for feet, and also disappeared in a cloud of smoke. The elderly generation perceived the presence of the devil as an indication of the changing nature of the dance hall and the erosion of morality. Men, particularly married men, viewed the appearance of the devil as testimony to the fact that women always want more. This devil of South Texas was white and affluent, providing material wealth in an area dominated by Mexican American men of more modest means. As for the young women, who were most often the ones to tell stories about encounters with the devil, Limón observes that they described the devil as "a sexually charged site of admiration, delight, and playfulness."⁴⁶



FIGURE 8. The Devil of Juanchito at a salsa theater production in Cali (photo: Author).

One potential interpretation of this vision is that it represents Cali in the 1990s—salsa, beautiful women, and cartels—understood through the lens of an Afro-descendant migrant from the Pacific. As in Limón's observations in Texas, the narcotraficante devil in Cali represents a figure that is both morally disreputable and desirable. The narcotraficante has the power and disposable income to attract attention, yet the stigma of his profession would make him the subject of moral opposition. As in any story repeatedly told, the details have been exaggerated with time. And for some believers, such as José, the story continues because he believes the devil remains on the loose in Cali.⁴⁷

Ultimately, these accounts of different devils of Santiago de Cali are reflective of its history, particularly the necropolitical strains of environmental racism fundamental to its establishment. The first strain, and undoubtedly the most devastating, is settler colonialism. As in virtually every other city throughout the Americas, the savage erasure of Indigenous peoples was fundamental to the founding of

Santiago de Cali. This erasure was so profound that historians can only speculate about the meaning of the second part of the city's name. The Spanish imported enslaved peoples from Africa to Colombia to replace the free labor they had lost in the process. The survivors of both genocides, the Indigenous and the transatlantic slave trade, have been demonized ever since. The visions recounted by their descendants reflect the different forms of physical and ecological violence inherent to Cali's "second city," the necropolis.

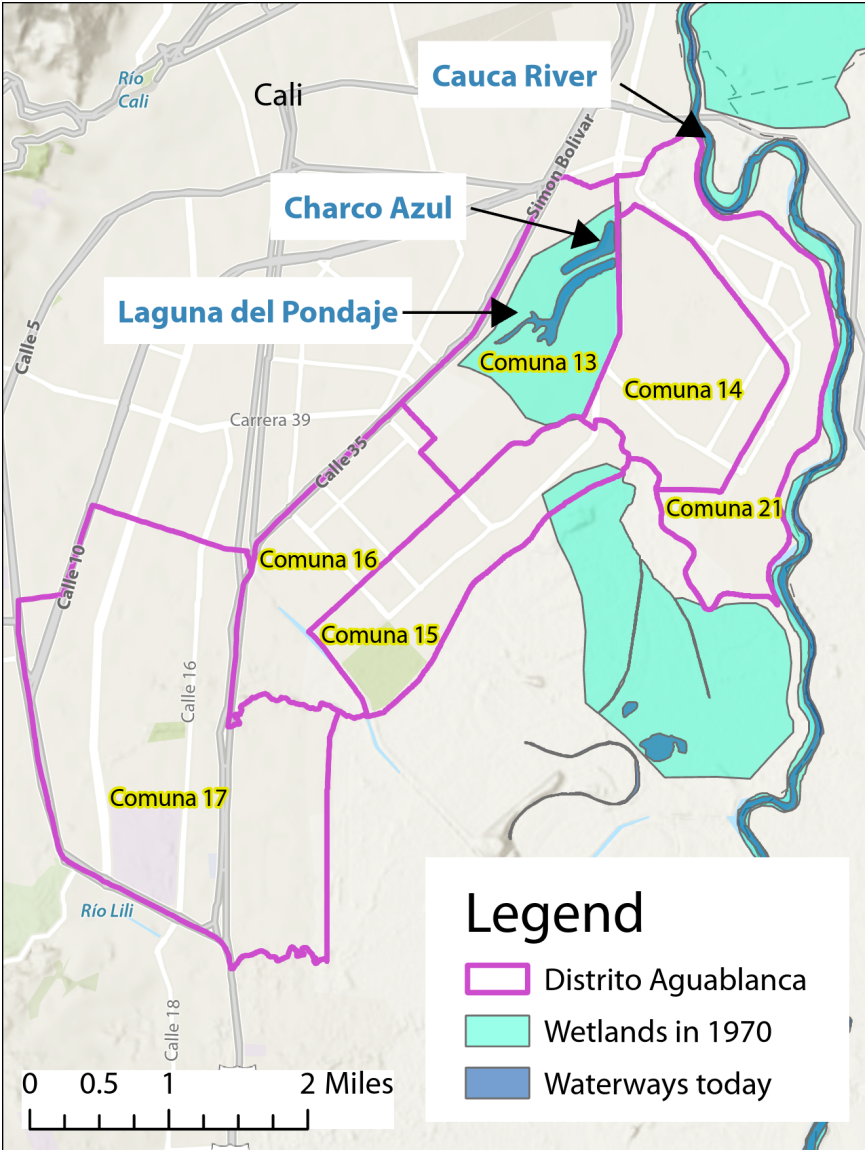
THE MONSTER OF THE BLUE LAGOON

Apart from the Devil of Juanchito, most people I interviewed had not heard of any new visions specific to the city. And because everyone I spoke to had migrated to Cali recently, or at least in the last few decades, no one mentioned *El Monstruo de los Mangones* (the Monster of Vacant Lots). In 1963 and 1964, the corpses of at least fourteen boys were found throughout the city in vacant lots and alleyways. Many of the bodies were drained of blood, and some were found nude, fueling a rumor that the monster was a kind of sadistic vampire. Though some suspects were arrested, the monster was neither seen nor captured.⁴⁸ Caleño cultural scholar Ponce de León-Calero describes the popular imagination of the monster as a response to the city's rapid economic growth, changing morals, and geographic expansion (i.e., the once-respected traditional elite became perceived as vampires feeding off the populace).⁴⁹

The lack of discussion of visions in the city was in stark contrast to what I found in the countryside, where every single person I spoke to (with one exception) had personally witnessed or heard stories about visions. There were mixed opinions about the reasons for the relative lack of visions in Cali and the implications for this difference. The most-cited reason for why there was less talk of visions in the city was that today's youth do not believe in such things.

The violent conflicts in the city are directly related to those in the countryside between state, guerilla, paramilitary, and drug-trafficking forces. In fact, the armed groups that have battled for control of the countryside over the last few decades have played a major role in the organization, training, and leadership of many gangs that have plagued Cali during this time.⁵⁰ This dynamic has been especially treacherous for forcibly displaced migrants who fled violence in their rural communities only to face similar concerns for their safety in their new urban setting.

The displaced population of Cali is concentrated in some of the most dangerous and marginalized neighborhoods of the city. *El Distrito Aguablanca* (the Aguablanca District), which borders Juanchito in the eastern section of the city, is one such area where many displaced migrants have resettled (outlined in pink in map 3). However, as Vinasco-Martínez explains, it is first important to point out that the name *Aguablanca District* delineates a socio-historic imagination of this part of Cali and not an actual political jurisdiction.⁵¹ Cali is officially divided into



MAP 3. Map of Aguablanca District (created by Author).

sectors referred to as *comunas* (commons) rather than *distritos* (districts), and the Aguablanca District is comprised of six such commons (13–17 and 21). The name originally referred to the eastern part of the city that was intended for agricultural development (drawing water from the wetlands shaded in the color teal on the map) and subject to flooding by the Cauca River (labeled on the right side of the map). Despite those plans, it has largely been settled by rural immigrants unable to find affordable housing elsewhere in the city. The Aguablanca District has therefore become synonymous with high rates of poverty, crime, and Blackness, given the fact that seventy percent of people in this part of the city are Afro-descendant.⁵²

In 1969, two lagoons were constructed to regulate flooding in this part of the city, *el charco azul* (the blue lagoon) and *la laguna del pondaje* (the overflow wetland). They channel water from the Cauca River and are separated from each other by a narrow strip of land (found within Comuna 13 on the map). The land surrounding this area was initially attractive to migrants relocating to the city from the countryside, providing a source of clean water to bathe and fish in. *Invasiones* (squatter homes) were constructed without the purchase of land and without regulation by city agencies,⁵³ eventually making this the fastest-growing part of Cali.⁵⁴

As in the rest of Cali, sightings of visions were more common when the Aguablanca District was less populated. Visions such as *La Llorona*, *La Viuda* (a crying widow who often preys on drunk men), and *El Caballero sin Cabeza* (the Headless Horseman) were sometimes seen late at night by local residents.⁵⁵ For instance, Valeria—a long-time resident of the neighborhood named *Charco Azul* (Blue Lagoon)—recalled the story of *El Monstruo* (the Monster).

During the 1970s and 1980s approximately one hundred human corpses were found at the bottom of the blue lagoon. It was rumored that a woman who lived in the surrounding marsh was responsible. The Monster would wander the streets of the neighborhood at night and seduce young men. She would then drag these men into the water by their testicles and drown them. The dead men were never from the neighborhood, although they might have had friends there.⁵⁶

Agier describes the monster as a synthesis of various visions from the rural Pacific of Colombia: *La Tunda* (a vision that attacks wayward travelers in virgin forests and marshes), *La Viuda* (the Widow, a vision known for seducing men and then killing them), and *La Madre de Agua* (the Mother of Water, a vision that drowns its victims). The one hundred men found in the lagoon were victims of the drug cartel wars. Similar to *El Monstruo de los Mangones*, this monster was “a defense formed in the imagination of the people confronted with these serial killings.”⁵⁷ During a very violent period of Cali’s history, the Monster also allowed the inhabitants of *Charco Azul* to disassociate themselves from the bloodshed of the drug wars by attributing the responsibility for the crimes to an external agent. *El Monstruo del Charco Azul* (the Monster of the Blue Lagoon) was the embodiment of violence being brought to the neighborhood by outsiders.⁵⁸

But why was this monster feminized, especially in consideration of the fact that these men were killed by other men? Though he described the origins of the visions that likely inspired this monster, Agier never directly addressed this question. In linguistic terms, similar to other romance languages, Spanish is a very gendered language. The name of the monster itself, *El Monstruo*, is masculine, but many of the terms relevant to its description are feminine words in Spanish, such as *sobrenatural* (supernatural), *muerte* (death), *incertidumbre* (uncertainty), *naturaleza* (nature), and *agua* (water). Perhaps a nature-bound supernatural entity of uncertain origins that resides in water and drowns its victims to death was destined to be feminine in this patriarchal society.

The detail of the victims being pulled into the water by their testicles suggests that male bravado contributed to their demise. Perhaps this vision is emblematic of the “monstrous-feminine,” which horror film scholar Creed describes as the patriarchal fear of woman as a castrated being, invoking “castration anxiety in the male spectator.”⁵⁹ The “monstrousness” of this monster stems from the fact that its existence disrupted the social order, bringing death to a place that many people migrated to hoping to find peace.

In summary of this account of the Monster of the Blue Lagoon, a second strain of environmental racism contributing to the construction of Cali’s necropolitical area is the facilitation of extractivist ecologies, which has resulted in Colombia becoming the country with one of the largest populations of internally displaced persons in the world. As Vanín Romero notes, “people emigrate because the paradise they lived in has collapsed and their space has been invaded.”⁶⁰ These extractivist ecologies (the necropolitical ecologies to be discussed in chapter 3)—which include gold mines, palm oil plantations, oil pipelines, shrimp farms, and coca fields—are disproportionately situated within the boundaries of those rural Indigenous and Afro-descendant lands. Thus, rural Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations, whose spaces have been invaded, are disproportionately represented in the most dangerous parts of rapidly expanding cities where these migrants eventually settle. At the same time, their migration to cities such as Cali is often perceived as a socio-ecological burden, even a source of pollution.

SQUATTERS, POLLUTION, AND DEAD FISH

In 1971 Cali hosted the Pan-American games, and rowing trials were staged in the crystalline waters of the blue lagoon.⁶¹ Nowadays the lagoon is more of a gray-green hue, thanks to runoff contamination by roadways and mounds of trash piling up along the banks. In 2000 a government agency, La Corporación Autónoma Regional del Valle del Cauca, commissioned the restoration of the lagoon and wetland.⁶² They were failing to serve their original purpose and had begun overflowing during heavy rains, flooding major streets and homes in the surrounding neighborhoods.⁶³



FIGURE 9. Inside of a home near the lagoon and wetland (photo: Author).



FIGURE 10. Garbage near the lagoon and wetland (photo: Author).

Projects to restore these areas have been slowed by several issues, including the continued presence of unpermitted residences along the banks of these areas (see figures 9 and 10). An engineer from Emcali—the state-owned company that provides water, telecommunications, and electricity services to the city—explained that trash illegally dumped drifts into the water and then clogs drainage pipes and prevents the lagoons from properly draining (see figure 10).⁶⁴

One reason completion of the cleanup project has been slow is that the city has attempted to force those residents to relocate away from the banks of the lagoon and wetland.⁶⁵

In 2013, over 300 dead fish were found floating in the blue lagoon, prompting one local news outlet to issue “an environmental alert.”⁶⁶ The following year, over 400 dead fish were found floating in the reservoir lagoon, and the same news outlet declared “an environmental emergency.”⁶⁷ These reports emphasized the mysterious circumstances under which the fish died (no signs of discoloration), the hardness of these two breeds of fish (catfish and tilapia), and the fact that local residents had never seen anything like this happen before.

A YouTube video produced by a group of students at La Universidad del Valle, Cali’s largest public university, provides a brief history of the lagoon and wetland and then identifies the root of the problem—those squatter settlements. Set to dramatic music (“O Fortuna” by Carl Orff), the video shows images of what these areas originally looked like before it transitions to images of dead fish, makeshift homes, and mounds of trash. Of the handful of comments posted below the video, the most “liked” states, “And the Blacks came to fuck Cali over and invade it.”⁶⁸

Once again, dead corpses—fish bodies instead of human bodies this time—had been credited to an external threat. In this case, displaced persons “invaded” the city and ruined a habitat originally engineered to prevent flooding. Similar to the portrayal of many environmental issues throughout the world, depictions of this particular news story are narrowly focused on the symptoms of the problem (i.e., human settlement and waste disposal in a rapidly growing city) rather than the histories (i.e., colonialism, genocide, slavery, civil wars, drug wars) and structural inequalities (i.e., unequal access to waste management, a lack of affordable housing, etc.) that contributed to this situation. Without this context, this news story has become another opportunity to demonize displaced persons, the vast majority of whom are dark-skinned.

The portrayal of this issue also relates to a wider discussion about whether people who migrated to a polluted place are to blame for making a bad choice or whether they are the victims of environmental racism. In describing the need for a “Critical Environmental Justice Studies,” sociologist David Pellow argues that scale is under-theorized in environmental studies scholarship. There is far too much emphasis placed on the sites of contamination, which are termed “sacrifice zones” because of the specific impacts experienced in those spaces by devalued populations.⁶⁹ This emphasis is problematic because these populations are viewed as expendable, no matter where they reside: “The implication of a ‘sacrifice zone’ is that one could

presumably move away to safety, but the implication of expendability is that there is no escape. Critical EJ Studies makes this theme explicit by arguing that these populations are marked for erasure and early death, and that such ideological and institutional othering is linked to the more-than-human world as well.⁷⁰

Thus, forcibly displaced Colombians are often “marked for erasure and early death” no matter their location. They are subject to the violence and environmental racism of their new environs as well as haunted by the “evil of the past.”

In summary of this account of the blue lagoon, the third strain of environmental racism contributing to the creation of the necropolis is the myth of overpopulation. Malthusian concerns about finite resources and exponential population growth are relevant to many geographic scales apart from the global. Cities, states, and nation-states are geographically bounded by borders and other forms of political boundaries (e.g., city and state limits). Displaced migrants were blamed for the ruin of the lagoon and wetland in the Aguablanca District because their presence is an unwelcome reminder that Cali’s population is continuing to grow. And not only is it growing, but its demographics are changing, forcing a city that benefits from the commercialization of Blackness (especially evident in the increasing commercialization of the Petronio Álvarez Festival of Afro-Pacific music) to reconcile its own anti-Blackness.⁷¹

Therefore, the disproportionate amount of violence, death, and suffering that happens within Cali’s excluded second city, the necropolis, can be rationalized as a form of population control: *It is their fault that this city floods! Let those animals kill each other!*

SURVIVAL IN A MAJOR NECROPOLITAN AREA

I asked Alfredo, who moved to Cali in 2007, if he had heard about any other ghosts or visions in his neighborhood, and he responded that it is the living ones you need to worry about at night.⁷² Human corpses continue to appear in the lagoon and wetland every so often. Why? The Aguablanca District, much like poor regions of rural Colombia, continues to be the domain of the excluded.

The collapse of the Cali drug cartel, founded in the late 1970s and dismantled by the late 1990s, did not end the drug trade, nor did it end violence in the Aguablanca District. Similarly, the demobilization of paramilitary forces from 2003 to 2006 removed some violent actors from the landscape but eventually spawned new organizations known as *bandas criminales* (criminal bands) (BACRIM).

More recently, the 2016 peace agreement may have ended the decades-long conflict with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), but it has not improved the safety or well-being of those who were the most vulnerable prior to the agreement. If anything, the unprecedented number of activists and community leaders murdered, as well as the increasing number of forcibly displaced, suggests that peace has been accomplished in theory but not in practice.⁷³ Politicians and media outlets might celebrate these events as peaceful change, but the cycle of

violence eventually resumes. The persistence of violence in the aftermath of these events is a reminder that other actors, or often the same actors with new affiliations, are ready to fill in vacated ranks in these organizations when the opportunity presents itself.

These rotating actors are responsible for recruiting teenagers into gangs connected to international drug trafficking. It is said that in the 1990s gangs in the Aguablanca District operated with a code of ethics that included rules such as not attacking one's enemy from behind.⁷⁴ In recent years, drug traffickers have begun selling drugs locally, and the gangs no longer operate by the same code of ethics, resulting in more violence and greater disregard for rival gang members as well as local residents.⁷⁵ This "micro-trafficking"—characterized by fear, threats, extortions, and contract murders—has stationed dark-skinned teenage youth at the bottom of drug hierarchies with faceless bosses.⁷⁶

In 2008 *Las Águilas Negras* (the Black Eagles), a drug-trafficking organization primarily comprised of demobilized paramilitary soldiers, began conducting *limpiezas sociales* (social cleansings) in the Aguablanca District in order to limit micro-trafficking.⁷⁷ These social cleansings are often announced beforehand, posted in public spaces in the form of pamphlets warning residents to stay off the streets at a designated time when threats to the social order (e.g., delinquents, drug users, sex workers, transgender individuals, etc.) will be removed (i.e., murdered).⁷⁸ Though advertised as the restoration of social order, these cleansings have the underlying intent to eliminate activity that might increase police presence and jeopardize the operations of the group conducting these cleansings.⁷⁹ Similar to the dynamics of contested spaces in rural Colombia, the homicide rate usually declines once one of these groups has solidified its control over a neighborhood.⁸⁰ However, that is not to suggest that those neighborhoods are safer than other parts of the city, because even in recent years when the homicide rate decreased for the entire city (2014–2017), the Aguablanca District still accounted for roughly forty-five percent of the total number of homicides in Cali.⁸¹

The residents of the Aguablanca District I initially spoke to in 2009 and 2010 tended to view these initial rounds of social cleansing as a needed form of social control. Ignacio, living in the neighborhood of Los Lagos, had been mugged several times, a couple of times near his own block and in broad daylight. Zarina, living in the neighborhood of Los Robles, was terrified of the drug abuse and gangs in her neighborhood. Her two daughters had already been traumatized by the threats against their lives and the murder of their grandmother in Tambo, Cauca. In addition to the violence and crime of the streets, Zarina found out that her neighbor was a *sicario* (assassin for hire) and was more afraid than ever for her family's safety. Interestingly, multiple people I interviewed recited the same prayer used to repel El Duende (discussed in chapter 1) to protect themselves from these *delincuentes* (criminals).

I made a return visit to Cali a few months after my initial fieldwork trip and was told not to call Elena, a woman with whom I had chatted before but never formally

interviewed. Her son had just been murdered. Elena had been part of a group of displaced women, and her friend Mónica was aware of threats by the Autodefensas (a paramilitary organization whose name means “self-defense”) against the lives of multiple colleagues because of their visible involvement in local politics. Although very active in the movement to support displaced women, Mónica was wary of the attention it draws and attempted to keep a lower profile. She opted not to attend an event celebrating the implementation of a law in favor of displaced women.

Understandably, many other people I interviewed about their displacement were reluctant to talk about their experiences. Ana, living in Marroquín I, and Zarina commented that they had seen members of the FARC in their respective neighborhoods. Zenón, living in Villa del Lago, commented that paramilitary soldiers followed his children from their community in the countryside to Buenaventura.

Many displaced persons are caught in the conundrum of needing assistance but fearing that recognition as “forcibly displaced” in public records can compromise their personal safety. In 1997, the national government acknowledged the crisis of internal forced displacement by creating Law 387, with the subtext, “A law employing the means for the prevention of forcible displacement; the attention, protection, consolidation and socioeconomic stabilization of internally displaced persons affected by the violence in Colombia.”⁸² The consensus opinion of the academics, social workers, and displaced persons I interviewed at the time was that the law was merely lip service and little money had been allotted to ensure its implementation.⁸³

Displaced persons are not only continually concerned by threats of violence against them, but also faced with the challenge of meeting basic requirements for food and shelter under dramatically different circumstances than in the rural context. Government assistance to the “forcibly displaced” is available in the form of a meager allowance for three months’ food and rent. The waiting period for such assistance is normally six months to a year. A high incidence of fraudulent claims of displacement has necessitated a lengthy verification process for government-determined forcibly displaced status. Aside from fears that their safety will be compromised, many displaced victims never declare forcibly displaced status, out of embarrassment or a lack of sufficient paperwork to identify themselves or the loss of their property. Often, the best assistance that the displaced population can find is within the complicated web of nongovernmental organizations dedicated to the cause.⁸⁴

Unfortunately, many displaced persons are unaware of all the options at their disposal, and there exist many individuals and organizations that prey on a population desperate for assistance. Corrupt officials, exploitative agencies, and impostors (fake officials or agencies) will sometimes charge displaced persons fraudulent fees for processing paperwork and securing services never realized. In 2008, a special research group of *Acción Social* (Social Action), a government agency founded



FIGURE 11. Nidia and the destructive spirit (illustrated by Jose E. Arboleda).

to work with victims of violence and poverty in Colombia, recorded 887 cases of fraudulent behavior against displaced persons.⁸⁵

THE CUMULATIVE EFFECTS OF DISPLACEMENT

Sometimes the stress of displacement and the various challenges of the city are overwhelming, even for those who migrated to Cali many years ago. Nidia, displaced from a town in Nariño in 1979, came to Cali because three of her brothers were murdered by the FARC, and her father had been threatened as well. Her father died a poor man after abandoning his farm without compensation. Nidia relocated to Barrio Sucre in Cali and eventually bought her own house in an area known as *la Olla* (the Pot). *La Olla* is adjacent to downtown Cali and is another notoriously crime-plagued area in the city, with high rates of drug abuse, gang activity, and homicide. Nidia has four children and because of her bad knees spent five years unable to work, occasionally begging for help. Due to her lack of income and some bad investments, Nidia lost her home and was forced to move in with her brother.

Once Nidia had her knees repaired, she felt her luck changing for the better, but for a time she was convinced that an *espíritu arruinador* (a destructive spirit) was harming her. Nidia never saw the spirit, nor had she witnessed any other visions during her lifetime (although she had heard stories from her neighbors and grandparents). Her young daughter and her daughter's friend saw the apparition of a tall man standing in her home on several occasions. Adults who visited the house confirmed that a malevolent spirit was present. She made several attempts to remove the spirit from the house, even paying a priest, but the spirit remained (story illustrated in figure 11).

Out of that house and free of the destructive spirit, Nidia says that she no longer believes in supernatural phenomena.⁸⁶ She is content to place all of her faith in god and is confident that she will have a brighter future because of it. The destructive spirit had become a manifestation of the stress of her life. Confined to a wheelchair for five years and living in one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Cali, she felt that there had to be an explanation for why her life continued to be difficult after she had already endured so many hardships. The destructive spirit was the embodiment of her financial woes, her physical ailments, and her inability to remove herself and her family from the violence of *la Olla*.

WITCHES, OUIJA BOARDS, AND SPELLS

There are mixed feelings about the implications of the relative lack of visions in Cali compared with the countryside. Some view the difference as a natural progression because not every cultural tradition can survive the passage of time and the shift to a new environment. Some feel that the contrast signifies the loss of rural community values and a breakdown of communication with the youth. Others

are simply indifferent and uninterested in any talk of the visions and the supernatural. In some cases, the indifference may be a feigned attitude. Mirabel, for instance, originally stated that she did not believe in visions. In actuality, Mirabel has seen many visions in her life, but she is hoping that not believing in visions and the supernatural will make the sightings stop. Others cited their religion or commitment to god as reasons why they do not believe in elements of the supernatural.

Although the popular sentiment is that many young people are disinterested in the stories their parents and grandparents tell, there is a recent obsession with the supernatural among Colombian youth that has caused quite a stir all over the country. Ouija boards, the famous board game that allows its participants to communicate with the dead, are in vogue and the subject of various news reports.⁸⁷ In most of these news stories, large groups of adolescents are possessed and often require hospitalization after Ouija sessions where they summoned spirits. Concerned adults call on priests, psychologists, and police to dispel the hysteria. Cristina, one year removed from secondary school, commented that her former school and others in the Aguablanca District had banned the use of Ouija boards. Students were using them to communicate with their dead peers, especially dead sicarios. She also mentioned that problems arise because these young people do not know how to properly end the Ouija session and close the portal between the living and the dead.

Juan, Cristina's father, eventually connected the conversation to *brujas* (witches), commenting that witches have the ability to separate their spirits from their bodies. Witches typically torment people through *hechicerías* (spells) and intrusion into their dreams. They can also shape-shift and take the forms of animals to disguise their identity.⁸⁸ The first day I interviewed Juan, his family had found giant black and yellow worms with unusual antenna-like protrusions inside Cristina's room. The worms appeared in the middle of a cement floor on three consecutive days, and when Juan held a candle near the worms, they exploded. Cristina was convinced that this was a spell cast by a neighbor, a witch. She believed that her neighbor was envious because Cristina was much better looking than her neighbor's daughter. Cristina also woke up on several occasions with her hair braided and with bruises from bite marks on her arms and neck—all telltale signs of *brujería* (witchcraft).⁸⁹ She acquired an amulet to protect herself from the witch, a stone that she eventually discarded because she did not have much faith in its power. Cristina also visited her church in an effort to rid herself of her problems with this witch.

Juan and his wife Nancy have lived in the neighborhood of Manuela Beltrán in the Aguablanca District since their displacement in 1988. They recently began their own foundation to assist the displaced population and were formerly the proprietors of an *arepa* (ground maize dough) stand that they operated in the front of their home. Juan and Nancy sensed that the idea of their foundation was not well received by all their neighbors, arousing feelings of *envidia* (jealousy).

They specifically mentioned Andrea, an Afro-descendant woman from the Chocó, because she verbally expressed discontent with the foundation at a neighborhood meeting. Juan and Nancy claimed that this woman, a witch, attacked their home on two separate occasions. On one occasion a large amount of salt fell into the kitchen from an opening in the roof, ruining a meal Nancy was preparing. They also believed Andrea transformed herself into a black cat, which they witnessed enter their home in the middle of the night. This cat, tracking in dirt from the cemetery, broke a pane of glass and, after being spotted by Juan, fled the house holding a large piece of broken glass in its mouth.

I was told that Andrea lives near the sports field of the local school—the same sports field where other informants (of no relation to Juan and Nancy), during a separate interview two months prior, had mentioned that a witch appears every so often. Part of the reason Nancy is convinced that Andrea is the witch responsible for the incidents, besides Andrea's local reputation for witchcraft, is that Andrea no longer greets Nancy on the street, a gesture that Nancy interprets as a sign of hostility.⁹⁰

The attacks by witches and accusations of jealousy are reminiscent of anthropologist Peter Wade's discussion of *chocoanos* (people from the Chocó) who relocated to Medellín. Jealous community members use witchcraft to damage the business of more successful persons who are believed not to be reciprocating their fortunes properly.⁹¹ According to Juan and Nancy, both witches have attacked their family as a result of envy. The accusations also highlight the ethnoracial tensions in the neighborhood and distrust between migrant communities of different origins. When originally discussing witches in his neighborhood, Juan mentioned that those from the Chocó and Tumaco (predominately Afro-descendant areas in the Pacific region) have a proclivity for black magic. Cristina made a similar remark about *indios* (Indigenous) from Putumayo (an area with a large Indigenous population in the Amazon basin) being heavily involved in witchcraft.

As is the case with many of the visions of Cali, accusations of witchcraft are not unique to the displaced population. Witchcraft is common among people of the same ethnic backgrounds in both rural and urban settings. The witch accounts mentioned here are examples of intrapersonal violence that exists at the community level. This type of violence is symbolic of the greater distrust that exists when elements of the urban and rural worlds collide in rapidly growing neighborhoods such as those of the Aguablanca District.

Accusations of witchcraft also call attention to the intersection of race, gender, and power in the Americas. Is it clearly not a coincidence that Afro-descendant and Indigenous women—two groups heavily marginalized within racist patriarchal Latin American societies—are consistently associated with witchcraft. This association, however, is not necessarily the problem. After all, for many practitioners being a witch is a source of pride. Witchcraft is a form of esoteric knowledge passed on from one generation to the next that may enable one to protect, heal,

or help one's community. The association with Afro-descendant and Indigenous women becomes problematic when rooted in the assumption that witchcraft is inherently malevolent.

The Netflix series *Siempre Bruja* addresses this assumption by featuring an Afro-Colombian witch protagonist, named Carmen, who is powerful but does not practice witchcraft for malicious reasons.⁹² The title of the show (*Always a Witch*) refers to the fact that Carmen escaped slavery by time traveling to the present, making this identity timeless. However, *Always a Witch* can also be read as the typecasting of Afro-descendant women as witches. While the Colombian showrunners have been lauded for casting a charismatic Afro-descendant woman as the lead, they have also been criticized for only superficially attending to race and gender in a society with a long history of discriminating along those lines.⁹³

WHAT DO THESE "DEVILS," "WITCHES," AND "MONSTERS" HAVE TO DO WITH ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE?

Cali is a magical place for me and not just because I have interviewed people about supernatural phenomena. It is my (humid) home away from home. It is a place that has welcomed me with open arms since the first time I visited and every time thereafter. Displaced people I have interviewed, people of the most modest means, have invited me into their homes and insisted on feeding me. On multiple occasions people I have barely just met have walked blocks with me to make sure I caught the right bus or found the way home. I've often heard that I get treated this way because I am a foreigner and not a Colombian. Perhaps it is because I am not viewed as a threat to overpopulate this branch of heaven.

The supernatural entities discussed in this chapter reflect different aspects of the environmental racism implicit to the geography of the city. As in most big cities throughout the Americas, poor Black and Brown people are concentrated in the most violent and polluted parts of Cali.

The devil visions discussed in this chapter (Buziraco, the Devil of Juanchito) are narratives about social control of those populations. Both devils, amalgamations of human and animal parts, horrify because they blur the boundaries of what is socially acceptable. Buziraco defies Christianity and racial purity, making a grand entrance into Cali accompanied by cumbia dancers and rhythms from Cartagena (cumbia is the amalgamation of European, Indigenous, and African musical traditions). The Devil of Juanchito, charming but dangerous, bewilders those beholding its spectacle. How could someone be *that* good a dancer? *They must be the devil*. How could someone leave a nightclub with *any* woman they want, even if that woman was already with someone else? *They must be in a drug cartel*. As much as these devils have horrified, they have never been fully vanquished by the settler

colonial imagination of Cali because the continual influx of rural Colombians is part and parcel of the city's history.

The Monster of the Blue Lagoon and spirit testimony (the destructive spirit) discussed in this chapter are narratives that allowed migrants to rationalize the death and suffering of their displacement to a violent city. The destructive spirit was literally debilitating, breaking down Nidia's body and compromising her ability to carry on with her life. Was she confined to her home by the spirit or by the cumulative effects of everything happening outside of her home? The Monster lured drug cartel members to their deaths at the bottom of the blue lagoon. During the initial phase of displaced migrants settling in the Aguablanca District (1970s–1990s), the bodies were those of men not from the neighborhood. This is likely because the murderers did not want to attract police presence to the places where the murders were taking place. The blue lagoon literally became a cemetery for unlucky cartel members. Both the Monster of the Blue Lagoon and the destructive spirit remind migrants that the forces competing for control of the Colombian countryside have been replicated in their new neighborhoods in Cali.

More recently (1990s–present), the Aguablanca District has transformed into a different kind of cemetery, a necropolis. The hundreds of dead fish floating in the blue lagoon were initially blamed on people from the Pacific region constructing shanty homes too close to the lagoon and contaminating it. This framing is part of a longer historical trend of blaming poor people for overpopulation and the consumption of the finite resources of finite geographic space (e.g., the neighborhood, the city, the nation, the world). This framing of the dead fish is also problematic because it obscures the reasons why so many people have been forcibly displaced to Charco Azul. And whereas the Monster of the Blue Lagoon allowed the residents of the Aguablanca District to dissociate from the death brought to their neighborhoods, *the necropolis* describes the external imagination of a violent place with violent people: *Death and destruction happens in the Aguablanca District because poor, dark-skinned people are violent*. While the bodies initially found in the lagoon were cartel victims not from the area, many of the dead bodies found nowadays are victims of neighborhood social cleansings. These deaths are rationalized as the transgression of a social order established by criminal bands, the latest iteration of a drug-trafficking organization. For those who subscribe to the myth of overpopulation, the social cleansings are thought of as a means of eliminating the least desirable members of society: *It is better to kill off some of these criminals because there are already too many people here*.

The testimonies about the witches discussed in this chapter are testament, not only to the powers attributed to supernatural forces and beings, but also to the epistemic power of categorization itself. While the few testimonies documented in this chapter interpret witchcraft as a form of interpersonal violence between neighbors, the second layer of violence is the stigmatization of Indigenous and Afro-descendant women as beings prone to shape-shift into malevolent creatures.

Testimonies about Indigenous and Afro-descendant witchcraft, therefore, express part of a historical continuity: *Those witches, heretics, and cumbia dancers that accompanied Buziraco from Cartagena to Cali still roam the city to this day!*

From a critical environmental justice perspective,⁹⁴ the “devils,” “witches,” and “monsters” of this chapter represent *anxieties about* as well as *the anxieties of* those rendered “expendable” by the colonial present⁹⁵ and accumulation by dispossession.⁹⁶ However, these categories also represent the potential for critical environmental justice to think, with Pellow, “beyond the category of the human to include the more-than-human world . . . as subjects of oppression and as agents of social change.”⁹⁷ Thus, chapters 3–5 answer this call by conceptualizing more-than-human and other nonhuman entities, as Pellow describes, as both “subjects of oppression and agents of social change.”⁹⁸

The next chapter lays the foundation for this argument by conceptualizing the War on Drugs as a form of transnational environmental racism as well as an example of a necropolitical ecology fueling Colombia’s armed conflict.