

Killer Plants and the Two-Headed Monster

The title of this chapter refers to creatures whose origins are distinctly different from those of the supernatural visions discussed up to this point in the book. Respectively, “Killer Plants” and the “Two-Headed Monster” are creatures born of geopolitical and critical social science imaginations of the War on Drugs. The intent of this chapter is to explain the following: (a) why US imperialism in Latin America is fundamental to the genesis of these creatures, (b) how these creatures are implicated in the environmental racism of the War on Drugs, (c) how these creatures thwart the efforts of environmental justice communities resisting the War on Drugs, and (d) why these creatures are emblematic of the “necropolitical ecologies” that displace, dispossess, and erase peasant communities such as *comunidades negras*.

KILLER PLANTS

La mata que mata (the plant that kills) was a counternarcotics public service announcement (PSA) sponsored by the National Narcotics Board (DNE) that aired on Colombian television and radio from 2008 to 2010.¹ Narrated by a child’s voice, it argued that if Colombians stopped cultivating illicit crops (marijuana, opium poppies, coca), the countryside would be cured of many problems in the following ways: “explosive landmines would disappear” (depicted by balloons emerging from the ground and a rainbow rising from the background), “blood would be removed from the rivers” (depicted by a river changing colors from red to blue), and “the lead-filled rain would end” (depicted with a family huddled together under an umbrella that they put down once bullets stop raining down on them). It then continued:

People would cry tears of happiness.
 The dark nights would end.
 Displaced people would return to the countryside.
 People would grow healthier crops.
 Coca, marijuana and opium poppies kill. Don't cultivate plants that kill.

A parallel PSA ran during the same time period (2008–2010) but was set in an urban landscape. The central character of this *La mata que mata* announcement is the very same anthropomorphized marijuana plant of the other PSA (depicted in the lower half of figure 12).² The video begins with the marijuana plant appearing as a burden on a man's back, one so heavy that the man is hunched over as he walks down a dark street. The man shakes off the monstrous plant while the same childlike narrator from the other PSA states:

If you stop trafficking the plant that kills, you will notice a change.
 You will look different, with your forehead much higher, your hands cleaner . . . you will see straight.
 [The man sheds the dark trench coat he has been wearing and appears to glow while walking into a much sunnier neighborhood. He reaches his suburban home, where his wife and daughter are excited to see him.]
 You won't be scared anymore.
 You will come home to bliss.
 Your sleepless nights will be over.
 Coca, marijuana and opium poppies kill. Don't traffic plants that kill.

The fact that these PSAs clearly appeal to children is notable for three principal reasons. In the first place, the PSA criminalizes plants, the substances produced from those plants, and the people implicated in the production process. The underlying message is *the people who engage in these illegal activities should free themselves from the spell of these evil forces!* Second, children do not cultivate coca, marijuana, or opium poppies. This announcement, similar to Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign of the 1980s, seems as though it were meant to plant the seed in children's minds (pun intended) that this is bad, criminal behavior. A declaration from the Colombian Department of Environment, Housing and Territorial Development confirms that the DNE created this announcement to spread awareness about the dangers associated with the cultivation of illicit crops and trafficking of illegal drugs:

The DNE, interested in informing society and the community in general, both nationally and regionally, and especially in informing the communities in the areas being aerielly fumigated, has carried out campaigns for radio, television and print in order to influence, through the mass media, in the construction of the culture of legality and to delegitimize practices associated with illicit crops and drug trafficking; in the same way, the DNE developed the campaign "La Mata que mata," to inform public opinion and delegitimize the illicit business of trafficking and the cultivation of coca, opium poppies and marijuana, as well as to demonstrate the benefits of participating in legal activity.³



FIGURE 12. Killer Plants and the Two-Headed Monster (illustrated by Jose E. Arboleda).

These PSAs posit this “construction of the culture of legality” as the solution to Colombia’s violent conflicts. In other words, if peasants simply stuck to growing legal crops and sustaining their livelihoods through legal economic activities, the country would not be mired in bloodshed.

This underlying message is problematic because it obscures the main reasons why violent civil conflict has persisted in Colombia for decades. These reasons include the following: the myth that nation-states have or should always have exclusive power within their boundaries, which is an element of what geographer Agnew has termed the “territorial trap”;⁴ the fact that many communities in these marginal areas *do not feel protected by* and/or *lack confidence in* the Colombian armed forces;⁵ the fact that most peasants do not possess title to the land they live on, which makes them more susceptible to displacement and makes it exceedingly difficult to provide evidence of displacement when they are forcibly driven from their homes;⁶ and the limited legal economic opportunities for peasants disconnected from national or international markets because of the lack of transportation infrastructure outside of the Andean highlands.⁷ Therefore, in the terminology of necropolitical ecology, the “La mata que mata” PSAs obscure the “coercive reconfigurations of social and ecological relations” of Colombia’s violent civil conflicts, “hidden as though they might be under the symbolic violence meted out by the state.”⁸

The third notable reason why these PSAs appeal to children is that the aesthetics are remarkably similar to the children’s books and videos that depict the supernatural visions of Colombia. The marijuana plant is anthropomorphized with serpentine eyes, a sharp set of bloodied fangs, and a long tongue (illustrated in the bottom half of figure 12). It looks angry, evil, and intimidating. The creation of this menacing plant with human and animal features, however, is not the product of oral traditions of Europe, Africa, and the Americas. It is the offspring of a much larger monster with origins in the United States–driven War on Drugs (the two-headed monster in the top half of figure 12, shown traversing the Americas).

FROM LICIT TO ILLICIT: HOW COCA LEAF TRANSFORMED INTO COCAINE POWDER

The cultivation of coca was only recently criminalized in the grand scope of human history. Coca has been present in the Andean region of South America for thousands of years, though historians disagree about whether coca was exclusively consumed by the Incan nobility or more widely consumed across all social classes.⁹ When the Spanish conquistadors arrived, coca was consumed in a part of the Incan empire, which spanned from present-day Bolivia to southern Colombia, as well as by other Indigenous peoples of Colombia. During the colonial period coca consumption became a point of contention between Indigenous who used coca ceremonially and believed it abated hunger and made them stronger; Catholic missionaries who perceived the ceremonial use of coca as an obstacle to converting

Indigenous to Christianity; and Spaniards who eventually supported Indigenous coca consumption because it enabled their labor force to work long hours without food.¹⁰ Despite the missionaries' efforts, coca consumption persisted and remains an important part of Andean culture, especially in Bolivia and Peru, both countries with large Indigenous populations.

Coca leaf consumption in the Andes was considered a minor domestic policy issue until the US prohibition movement of the 1920s, which led to several international conventions and agreements that attempted to ban the use of psychoactive drugs.¹¹ In the 1940s, Andean medical professionals launched a paternalistic anti-coca movement on the grounds that coca consumption had negative effects on the Indigenous population. This movement eventually morphed into a 1980s–1990s movement that viewed coca consumption as a public health issue. Coca leaf consumption, however, has never been a high-priority policy issue in Latin America.¹²

Coca leaf became relevant outside of the Andean region because of a growing interest in its energizing qualities. US and Peruvian physicians exchanged scientific notes and samples in the 1860s to learn more about the coca leaf's properties. Historian Gootenberg explains, "Erythroxyton coca, a mild yet complex stimulant comparable to tea or coffee, became embraced therapeutically by a range of American 'eclectic' herbal physicians and drug companies for the treatment of a broad range of ailments, real and imagined."¹³ Corsican chemist Angelo Mariani mixed coca leaf with Bordeaux wine to create *Vin Mariani*, a luxurious tonic endorsed by numerous celebrities of the day, including Pope Leo XIII.¹⁴ The North American affinity for coca leaf began when Atlanta pharmacist John Pemberton began selling Coca-Cola, a syrup medicine that contained coca leaf, in 1886. By the 1890s the United States imported 600–1,000 metric tons of coca leaves annually.¹⁵

Cocaine, the crystallized derivative of coca leaf, was discovered around 1859 when scientists isolated alkaloid from the leaf.¹⁶ It was initially lauded as a revolutionary anesthetic for painful operations and was later employed for a variety of bodily and mental ailments such as cholera, hay fever, opiate addiction, and depression.¹⁷ By the end of the nineteenth century, US pharmaceutical companies were marketing five to six tons of cocaine per year. Austro-Swiss medical practitioners also participated heavily in the cocaine industry (e.g., ophthalmologist Dr. Karl Köller and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud were two famous proponents), and German mercantilists took an active role in Peruvian cocaine production. Peru—with connections to the US pharmaceutical industry, the Coca-Cola Company, and those German mercantilists—was the primary exporter of coca leaf in the late 1800s. By 1900 coca became Peru's fifth-biggest export as the country produced two million pounds of coca and more than ten metric tons of cocaine.¹⁸

Coca plants, however, are not restricted to the Andean region and have been grown elsewhere in the world. Colonial powers wanting to challenge the Peruvian-German monopoly on coca founded alternative growing sites, decimating the market for Peruvian coca from 1920 to 1940.¹⁹ The Dutch East Indies Company

established large-scale coca plantations in Java (now part of Indonesia), the British experimented with planting coca in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and the Japanese established plantations in Formosa (now Taiwan).²⁰ Today the vast majority of coca is cultivated in three countries—Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru—while marginal amounts are cultivated in Ecuador, Venezuela, and Brazil.²¹ Coca could certainly be grown in other tropical areas of the world (the Congo is often rumored) if eradication efforts in the Andean region ever provoked alternative sites for cultivation.²²

THE CRIMINALIZATION OF COCA LEAF AND COCAINE

Political economist and Colombia's representative on the United Nations Narcotics Board Francisco Thoumi describes the eventual criminalization of coca leaf and cocaine production as the product of a "moralistic American model" shaped by religious values and xenophobia as well as the complicated history of US health professions. The moralistic model espoused a punitive approach to the popular drugs of the time (namely alcohol, cocaine, and opiates) based on the perception that these drugs were addictive and caused costly social problems.²³ By the end of the 1890s, US physicians were concerned about the dangerous side effects of cocaine, especially for "cocaine fiends" who were injecting and snorting the drug recreationally.²⁴ In the early 1900s health professionals became more organized and achieved a monopoly over the practice and prescription of medicine. Two months after the Eighteenth Amendment was signed, however, the Supreme Court ruled against physicians' rights to prescribe psychoactive drugs for "drug addiction maintenance," which effectively criminalized the drug supply.²⁵ From the 1910s to the 1930s, US diplomats attempted to push anticocaine legislation in different international conventions established by the League of Nations. Gootenberg explains, "The United States, as the principled, mobilized crusader for drug controls, assumed the universalist stand that all abusable manufactured drugs merited a global control."²⁶ These international drug agreements were largely ignored in Peru, however, which had already dropped out of the League of Nations.²⁷

After World War II the United Nations Council on Narcotic Drugs established a more inclusionary approach to drug control than the League of Nations, integrating countries such as Peru into the American antidrug agenda.²⁸ In 1961, the United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs designated both coca leaf and cocaine as Schedule I substances, which means that the drug has no medical use and that it possesses a severely high potential for psychological and physical dependence.²⁹ Article 26 stated that wild coca plants were to be uprooted, and illegally cultivated coca plants were to be destroyed, while Article 49 stipulated that coca leaf chewing was to be abolished within a 25-year period.³⁰ Drug historian Paul Gootenberg notes that cocaine policy was a "sideshow" of the convention,

as the main drug concerns in the Western Hemisphere were Mexican opium and marijuana.³¹

Following the 1960s—a decade marked by a renewed interest in psychoactive drugs and a weakened respect for authority—President Nixon appointed a National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse in 1971 and declared a “War on Drugs” in 1972.³² US cocaine consumption, however, had faded considerably since the 1940s. Ironically this hiatus in consumption may have contributed to its resurgence because, as Gootenberg explains, “Americans retained no collective cultural memory of cocaine, or its perils, when it reappeared around 1970 as a prestigious and pricey sin.”³³ Middle- and upper-class consumers fueled the “cocaine epidemic” of the 1970s, a trend that reversed toward the end of the decade because of the social disruptions associated with cocaine abuse. In the 1980s the introduction of crack created a lower-class market for cocaine that was largely African American and Latino. The “crack cocaine epidemic” triggered the implementation of repressive drug policies and an unprecedented increase in the number of people incarcerated in the United States.³⁴ President Reagan declared illicit drugs a national security threat in 1986.³⁵

The framing of illicit drugs as a threat to US national security was by no means limited to the criminalization of drug production and trafficking within US borders. This War on Drugs eventually expanded, serving as a justification for US military presence abroad, especially in Latin America, contributing to the growth of the Two-Headed Monster depicted in figure 12.

THE TWO-HEADED NECROPOLITICAL MONSTER

Latin American philosopher Enrique Dussel coined the term *global coloniality* to explain how Eurocentric knowledge obscures the presence of the “non-European Other” throughout the globe.³⁶ Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar explains that in addition to the struggle for resources in lands occupied by ethnic minorities, global coloniality involves “the defense of white privilege worldwide. By *white privilege* I mean not so much phenotypically white, but the defense of a Eurocentric way of life that worldwide has historically privileged white peoples (and, particularly since the 1950s, those elites and middle classes around the world who abide by this outlook) at the expense of non-European and colored peoples. This is global coloniality at its most material.”³⁷

Global coloniality, therefore, applies to a War on Drugs that is largely being fought in the sites of production and transit—Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean—while profits are largely kept in the sites of cocaine consumption—primarily the United States and Western Europe.³⁸ Aerial eradication is a viable option in Colombia, but it would not be if coca were cultivated in the United Kingdom, nor would it be an option in the continental United States.³⁹ The same dichotomy can be found within the United States and other



FIGURE 13. The Two-Headed Monster (illustrated by Jose E. Arboleda).

western countries where cocaine processing and trafficking, activities predominately conducted by people of color living in inner cities, are severely criminalized while middle- and upper-class consumers are merely slapped on the wrist.

For Escobar, global coloniality in Latin America operates hand in hand with imperial globality, which describes how mechanisms of US imperialism have evolved since the first Gulf War, facilitating “the rise of an empire that increasingly operates through the management of asymmetrical and spatialized violence, territorial control, sub-contracted massacres, and ‘cruel little wars,’ all of which are aimed at imposing the neo-liberal capitalist project.”⁴⁰ In distinction to prior iterations of US imperialism in Latin America (e.g., the Monroe Doctrine or Theodore Roosevelt’s Big Stick policy or Cold War coup d’états involving the Central Intelligence Agency), imperial globality connotes the US imposition of neoliberal capitalist expansion through indirect means. Escobar explains, “The new empire thus operates not so much through conquest, but through the imposition of norms (free-markets, US-style democracy and cultural notions of consumption, and so forth).”⁴¹

These dual forces, global coloniality and imperial globality, have converged with extreme consequences for the *comunidades negras* of the Pacific region of Colombia. As the primary focus of his scholarship, Escobar notes: “The case of Colombia and of its Pacific region, thus, reflects key tendencies of imperial globality and global coloniality. The first tendency is the link between the economy and armed violence, particularly the still prominent role of national and sub-national

wars over territory, peoples, and resources. These wars contribute to the spread of social fascism, defined as a combination of social and political exclusion whereby increasingly large segments of the population live under terrible material conditions and often under the threat of displacement and even death.⁴²

Colombian elites who benefit from such violence have bought into visions of development and modernity that Escobar describes as “inherently displacement-creating processes.”⁴³ Thus imperial globality and global coloniality describe a global variant of necropolitics in which US foreign policy is *implicit to but no longer directly associated with* the violence mandated by such transformations.

The Two-Headed Monster is a metaphor I have invented to explain how imperial globality and global coloniality materialize as a drug-related form of environmental racism (see figure 13). The Two-Headed Monster embodies the demand for illegal drugs and the War on Drugs, both of which wreak havoc across species, ecosystems, and ways of being. The head on the right is drug production and trafficking, largely mobilized to satisfy the demands of US and Western European consumers. This head is composed of nonstate armed actors, corrupted state actors, cultivators, violence, chemicals, and many other components that factor into the drastic transformation of what Escobar terms the “biophysical and cultural landscapes” of drug-producing regions.⁴⁴ In the image, this head is literally inhaling elements of the landscape (people and trees) through a nostril. The head on the left is the War on Drugs, the “Euro-Americanist”⁴⁵ framing of narcotics as an external threat emanating from the “third world” and therefore a mandate for US intervention in Latin America. Out of its mouth spew elements of violence (tanks, soldiers, guns) and criminalization (aerial eradication planes, handcuffs) that are scorching a populated landscape. Though this monster’s origins predate Nixon’s declaration of a War on Drugs in the 1970s, it did not become a global menace until this war was militarized in the 1990s.

THE MILITARIZATION OF THE WAR ON DRUGS IN THE ANDES

Prior to 1990, US drug policy took a back seat to the fight against communism in Latin America. Since the end of the Soviet Union, however, illegal drugs and international organized crime have largely replaced communism as threats to national security.⁴⁶ The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1989 established a new precedent, granting the Pentagon a legislative mandate for counternarcotics operations.⁴⁷ In the same year, President George H. W. Bush’s administration launched the Andean Initiative to reduce the supply of drugs—mostly cocaine and heroin—by limiting drug production and seizing drug shipments from source countries, primarily in Latin America and the Caribbean.⁴⁸ Youngers and Rosin, of the Washington Office on Latin America, noted, “The centerpiece of the Andean Initiative was to empower Latin American military and police forces to carry out

counterdrug initiatives, and significant US training and support was provided to those willing to collaborate.⁴⁹ In the first place, US policymakers believed that militarizing the War on Drugs was necessary to confront heavily armed drug traffickers and to bypass corrupt local police forces.⁵⁰ In the second place, this militarization provided opportunities for the US military to develop relationships with Latin American military forces.⁵¹

Winifred Tate, author of an ethnography of US policymaking in Colombia, describes how the revival of the term *narcoguerrilla*—widely used by US government officials at the end of the Cold War to discursively link communist groups with criminal drug trafficking—was instrumental to the militarization of the War on Drugs. The word *counterinsurgency* fell out of favor in Washington, DC, after the 1993 deployment of Marines to Somalia ended in disaster. From then on, Congress took the difference between *counterinsurgency* and *counternarcotics* very seriously, limiting the amount of military counternarcotics aid available to combat guerilla organizations. The *narcoguerrilla* moniker solved this dilemma by opening a new avenue of funding to combat insurgent movements.⁵² Narcoguerrilla discourse “delegitimized such movements’ political claims by categorizing them as criminal organizations, and it justified the escalation of military aid to their opponents by alleging the narcoguerrillas’ access to the nearly limitless resources of the drug trade.”⁵³

In Bolivia, US Special Forces personnel had trained Bolivian counternarcotics paramilitary police squads since 1983. These squads reported to the Law Enforcement and Narcotics Affairs Section of the US Embassy (NAS) and the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). In 1990 the signing of the US-Bolivian Anti-Narcotics Agreement signaled the official entry of the Bolivian military into the War on Drugs.⁵⁴ At the time, critics, such as political scientist Waltraud Morales, questioned the effectiveness of this new partnership because “historically, the Bolivian military has been no friend to democracy or to drug enforcement; indeed, many consider the military to be the problem rather than the solution.”⁵⁵ In 1997 the election of former dictator General Hugo Banzer to the presidency paved the path for the further expansion of Bolivian military counternarcotics operations.⁵⁶

In Peru, the end of the Cold War signaled a new relationship with the Peruvian military, which formerly had ties to the Soviet Union and had been receiving payoffs from drug traffickers to thwart the Peruvian police.⁵⁷ In fact by the early 1990s, the Peruvian military effectively replaced the Shining Path as intermediaries between local coca growers and drug traffickers.⁵⁸ Despite this situation, in 1992 Congress approved funding for US military officers to train the Peruvian military in counternarcotics tactics.⁵⁹ These efforts seemed to pay off, as by the mid-1990s Peru’s coca exports decreased dramatically under President Fujimori’s strong-arm approach to counternarcotics.⁶⁰

In Colombia, the War on Drugs has been mobilized by the criminalization of drug production and trafficking, which historically has been conflated with the

counterinsurgent objectives of its civil conflicts. US policymakers worried that the rise of the cartels was jeopardizing the security of a democratically elected government closely allied with the United States. The Colombian military was initially resistant to participating in United States-led counternarcotics operations, which were tasked to the Colombian Counternarcotics Police (DIRAN), established in 1981. However, Ramírez explains, “The Colombian police are a national body responsible to the ministry of defense, in effect an additional branch of the armed forces,” and DIRAN is part of the National Police of Colombia.⁶¹ More importantly, Ramírez states: “As the war on drugs took on a counterinsurgent and counterterrorist focus, US policy came to mesh with the internal security discourse of the Colombian armed forces with regard to the struggle against the insurgency, now redefined as narcoterrorist and narco-guerilla. Colombian officers found this version of the war on drugs much more appealing, and the armed conflict intensified during Plan Colombia.”⁶²

In distinction to Peru and Bolivia, both with longer histories of recognizing legal coca cultivation and developing alternative strategies in lieu of forceful eradication, the Colombian version of the War on Drugs has resulted in, according to anthropologist María Clemencia Ramírez, a “blanket stigmatization and criminalization” of drug-producing and trafficking regions associated with the FARC.⁶³ For instance, in the context of her case study on the *cocalero* protests of the 1990s, Ramírez explains, “Seen from the Colombian center, Amazonia is an internally homogenous region, ‘the Other Colombia’ according to the state, or ‘the New Colombia’ in the discourse of the FARC, reflecting its own presence and control.”⁶⁴ The criminalization of newer peripheral drug-producing regions such as the Pacific region, therefore, became the basis for the denial of citizenship, displaced person status, and basic human rights. This relates to what political scientist Nancy Fraser refers to as the “membership principle,” in which “justice is by definition a *political concept*. Its obligations apply only to those who stand to one another in a *political* relationship. So, determination of the ‘who’ of justice depends on what exactly counts as a political relationship.”⁶⁵

THE GEOPOLITICS OF PLAN COLOMBIA

The criminalization of coca cultivation, cocaine production, and drug trafficking eventually intensified under the Plan Colombia agreement. By the end of the 1990s, the US State Department committed to stabilizing a Colombian government that appeared on the brink of becoming a “failed state.” According to the “continuum of states” established by Robert Rotburg, former president of the World Peace Foundation, “weak states” may become “failed states” and, ultimately, “collapsed states.”⁶⁶ In Latin America, as is true elsewhere in the world, these designations have legitimized US intervention and influence in foreign states.

In the geopolitical imagination of US foreign policy analysts and military strategists, Colombia is a key ally in South America. Geographically, it is the gateway between Central and South America, with access to both the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Surrounded by socialist-leaning governments leery of US imperialism (Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia), Colombia is seen by US foreign policy analysts and military strategists as vital to the stability of the region. “Stability,” in the geopolitical sense, represents comfort with the status quo, in knowing who your allies and enemies are, and in knowing how to interact with foreign states. In his 2014 posture statement about drug trafficking in the Latin American and Caribbean region, John Kelly, commander of US Southern Command, warned Congress, “The spread of criminal networks is having a corrosive effect on the integrity of democratic institutions and the *stability* of several of our *partner* nations.”⁶⁷ Likewise human rights scholar Elhawary noted, “The Colombian government, with U.S. support, has in fact adopted the language of *stabilisation* and is implementing an ‘integrated approach’ as a means to defeat the guerrillas and consolidate the state’s legitimate presence throughout its territory.”⁶⁸

The 2000 Plan Colombia agreement established the parameters under which the United States would assist Colombia with this stabilization. The original purpose and history of the plan, however, are very much contested, especially in Colombia, where the final version of the plan was never debated in the congress, never formally introduced to the public, and never published in Spanish.⁶⁹ In a round of peace negotiations with the guerrillas in 1998, President Pastrana described his “Plan for Peace in Colombia,” which he likened to the Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Europe after World War II.⁷⁰ Pastrana linked this new vision to the implementation of Colombia’s Plan for National Development: “Plan Colombia is a collective of alternative development projects that channel the joint efforts of governments and multilateral organizations together with Colombian society. Its benchmarks for success will be the transformation of the areas where 80% of the world’s coca and opium poppies are cultivated. . . . Plan Colombia is orientated towards regional development, the strengthening of departments⁷¹ and the promotion of initiatives and energies of the most vulnerable populations.”⁷²

Realizing that the Colombian state had limited financial means to pursue these objectives, President Pastrana sought international cooperation in the form of an alliance between drug-producing nations and drug-consuming nations.⁷³

In January of 1999, Pastrana’s administration conceded the FARC a demilitarized zone with the intention of advancing the latest round of peace negotiations. This zone in southeastern Colombia was the size of Switzerland and contained some of the main coca-producing areas in the country, and it was pivotal to the FARC in expanding its participation in the drug trade.⁷⁴ At the behest of concerned US State Department officials, Pastrana visited Washington, DC, to share his vision of the bilateral agreement. The State Department insisted that Pastrana revise his plan to take a tougher stance with the FARC, by intensifying counterinsurgent military

campaigns and by ramping up counternarcotics operations meant to erode the FARC's finances. Therefore, the version of Plan Colombia that the US Congress passed in 2000—favoring military and counternarcotics funding over investment in economic development—is dramatically different from what Pastrana had been proposing in Colombia up until that point.⁷⁵ US–Latin American relations scholar Shifter critiqued, “Of the original \$860 million Colombia received, \$632 million was devoted to military and police assistance. The remaining \$227 million went to the general categories of economic development, displaced persons, human rights and administration of justice.”⁷⁶

The original plan called for US financial and technical support to phase out within six years when Colombia became a highly stable democracy, capable of conducting counternarcotics operations on its own.⁷⁷ Wary of entanglement in a “Vietnam-style quagmire,” Congress initially limited the use of donated helicopters, other hardware, and a Colombian battalion of 3,000 soldiers trained by US Special Forces to counternarcotics operations.⁷⁸ In addition, the 2000 Plan Colombia agreement limited US presence in Colombia by capping the number of US soldiers and restricting their primary roles to that of noncombatant advisers and trainers for the Colombian military. However, this cap did not include the network of pilots, private security types, and other contractors that work for the US and Colombian governments without the accountability of government employees.⁷⁹ Furthermore, some of the original limitations on Plan Colombia were lifted after the 9/11 attacks when the United States began assisting Colombia in the struggle against “narco-terrorism.”⁸⁰ Shifter noted, “No longer would U.S. resources have to be directly tied to the drug question. Now they could be used in combating the FARC, Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), and AUC—all of which were considered terrorist groups by the U.S. government.”⁸¹

Plan Colombia quickly became a lightning rod for criticism of US–Colombian relations, which can partially be attributed to confusion about what Plan Colombia actually represents. As Tate explains, “There is this idea that it is some vast orchestrated project but Plan Colombia doesn’t exist as such.”⁸² Since 2000 the original plan has been extended under successive US and Colombian administrations and *Plan Colombia* has become something of an umbrella term for a number of different US aid packages to Colombia totaling nearly \$10 billion.⁸³ What is often understated in discourse about Plan Colombia is the extent to which the Colombian government has sought out US support. Within Colombia some scholars term this “the internationalization of the Colombian conflict,” the process by which the United States was explicitly invited to participate in domestic policy, which began with President Pastrana (1998–2002) and intensified under President Uribe (2002–2010).⁸⁴ Furthermore, what is often misunderstood about Plan Colombia is the fact that the Colombian government has assumed most of the responsibility in restoring its authority. In financial terms Colombia has invested much more than the United States. For instance, Colombia tripled its defense expenditures between 2000 and 2009 to the tune of nearly \$12 billion.⁸⁵

Nevertheless, the concern with US involvement has been that, at certain junctures, the Colombian government may have lost control of its ability to limit the influence of more powerful international actors such as the United States.⁸⁶ The principal criticisms of Plan Colombia have been that, in the words of *The Economist*, it is “too skewed towards trying to win the unwinnable war on drugs by spraying coca fields from the air, and too compromised by giving money to an army stained by human-rights abuses.”⁸⁷

RULES AND PROCEDURES

I had the opportunity to speak to a few different drug policy officials and military officers about their perspectives on Plan Colombia and the reasons why aerial eradication became the most favored method to eradicate illicit crops. For instance, in 2014 I asked William Brownfield, former US ambassador to Colombia and director of policy in the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), the following question at his presentation on drug security in Latin America:

I'm conducting research on aerial fumigation in Colombia, particularly how communities are affected by the spray. I was wondering what your take on fumigation was moving forward, is it going to be phased out? Colombia is the only country where it's conducted still. Where could a researcher like me find the guidelines for how it's conducted and whether the guidelines are followed?

Brownfield responded:

First, the argument for aerial spraying or aerial eradication is more or less as follows: The economic argument, which is to say, it costs a lot less to fly one aircraft to say spray 500 acres in the course of a day than to deploy 300 to 400 human beings who individually plant by plant will eradicate by hand. There's the economic. Then there's the security argument. You put 300–400 humans out there and start pulling the plants up, there's gonna be some grumpy people. They're the people whose living obviously depends on that coca or opium poppy remaining in the field. And when they get grumpy enough, they will start to shoot at you. And in fact, at a minimum on an individual-by-individual basis kill some people and in a worst case scenario as we have seen, the community will rise up and push back.

These are the two basic arguments for aerial eradication. I myself don't . . . from my perspective eradication is the key. The ideal is voluntary eradication. And voluntary eradication I acknowledge, you don't just say 'please do it because it's the right thing,' you have to find a way to make it in the interest of the individual *campesino* [peasant] or subsistence farmer in Afghanistan to understand why he or she wants to eradicate. They've got to get something, whether it's alternative development, an additional livelihood, schools, clinics, paved

roads, water, sewage, electricity, something! They have to have some reason to understand why it is in my interest to eradicate this stuff even though I know that if I grow corn, I'm only going to make twenty-five percent as much as I'm making by growing opi . . . uh, coca. Or if I grew wheat in Afghanistan, I'm going to make ten percent of what I make by growing opium. The second choice is, I acknowledge, manual eradication; it is actually far more thorough. Believe me, if you pull that sucker out by the roots and you burn it, it ain't coming back. Aerial eradication has a percentage, and it can be in some places a rather high percentage, of what in fact will survive the eradication process.

I'm the son, grandson, and great grandson of West Texas farmers. By the way, we've been spraying for a long time. I mean, the fact that its eradication, that's what we do as well. Crop dusting has been around since there have been airplanes. It's hardly a new science. What is new of course is the involuntary nature of it when you're doing coca or opium poppy aerial eradication. My own theory is that the Colombians have it about right, as they have put it into their own proposed peace agreement. Which is to say, first choice, voluntary eradication. Second choice, manual eradication. If one and two don't work, then we'll come back and do it exactly the way we've been doing it for the last fifteen years.

Where will you find data and information on this? One, you can reach out to us directly at the INL. But let me tell you about a database that is publicly available, would be the database from the government of Ecuador's now terminated suit in the International Court of Justice against the government of Colombia where they argued that, due to drift, much of the chemical spray that was being used for eradication was drifting into Ecuador. Personally, I doubt that, since they never sprayed closer than ten kilometers to the border. But that doesn't matter now because the case has been terminated. But there is in fact a substantial written record on that, and you would find that, including our procedures, and our rules of whatever, of operation in the various findings in the case of Ecuador vs. Colombia, International Court of Justice.⁸⁸

Brownfield's response features four assertions that clarify why aerial eradication is a form of environmental racism and the product of a necropolitical ecology. In the first place, despite the grave socio-environmental concerns and international outrage about aerial eradication (referred to as "aerial fumigation" in my question), it remains a viable option because if other strategies do not work, Brownfield responded, "we'll come back and do it exactly the way we've been doing it for the last 15 years." In other words, *not* eradicating coca and opium poppies is *not* an option. This line of reasoning reflects the coercive relationship between the United States and Colombia, often framed as a partnership by authorities in both

countries. Did he mean the United States or the US-Colombian partnership when he stated “we’ll come back”?

Second, Brownfield sought to normalize aerial fumigation, something practiced in Texas for generations that is “hardly a new science.” The implication of this assertion is that aerial fumigation has been around long enough to be perfected. In the very next sentence, however, he acknowledges “the involuntary nature” of aerial eradication. Understood through the lens of necropolitical ecology, the harms of the coercive US-Colombian relationship are not distributed equally across Colombia, resulting in an uneven geography of what Cavanagh and Himmelfarb term the “reconfigurations of social and ecological relations.”⁸⁹ This uneven geography is accentuated by the fact that aerial eradication takes place under much more stressful conditions, with a greater potential for errors than the aerial fumigation of farm plots in Texas or elsewhere.

In the third place, while aerial eradication threatens the subsistence and livelihoods of peasants and causes health problems for a multitude of organisms, Brownfield describes it as a means to save the lives of 300–400 humans at a time who might otherwise have to pull illicit plants out under very dangerous conditions. The danger of those conditions is indisputable. Many coca fields are protected by explosive land mines and snipers. In fact, I interviewed a manual eradicator who recounted the time he was shot in the leg by a sniper. He knew other eradicators who had been hit by exploded mine shrapnel and described other dangers such as tropical diseases that one is exposed to while working in those fields. *What is disputable* is the way the situation has been framed. Obscured within Brownfield’s assertion is the fact that Colombian lives are being put in danger, whether manual eradicators or peasants impacted by aerial spraying, because of the mandate to stop drugs from reaching the United States. The omission of that mandate in his explanation makes his assertion a necropolitical one. It is a failure or refusal to acknowledge that Colombian lives, especially poor rural people of color, must be sacrificed to prevent cocaine from being consumed in the United States.

Finally, in Brownfield’s fourth assertion that speaks to aerial eradication as a form of environmental racism and the product of a necropolitical ecology, he casts doubt on the findings of the court case between Colombia and Ecuador. Underlying his assertion that aerial eradication was probably never conducted within ten kilometers of the Colombian border with Ecuador is a conviction that rules and procedures were followed. In his call for “critical environmental justice studies,” David Pellow argues, “Environmental justice movements would be better off seeking social change through institutions and practices that rely less on the state in order to achieve their goals.”⁹⁰ In making this argument, Pellow, in the footsteps of other EJ scholars,⁹¹ recognizes that one of the reasons environmental racism happens is *because* state institutions are not only complicit, but, oftentimes, fundamental to different forms of racism. The fact that Ecuador eventually dropped its legal case against Colombia after reaching a settlement is not proof that aerial eradication was conducted according to the specified guidelines on the border

between the two countries.⁹² It is proof that Ecuador had enough evidence and international legal support to prod the Colombian government into a settlement. State institutions and officials can absolve themselves of blame for many situations because *there are rules and procedures in place* to prevent injustices from happening. In such situations, environmental justice communities must prove that rules and procedures were broken. But where are the rules and procedures explained? Brownfield referred me, a PhD candidate researching aerial eradication at that time, to the Ecuador vs. Colombia case to find out more about the rules and to the INL directly for data on this topic. What about communities such as *resguardos indígenas* and *comunidades negras* that are supposed to have a say about what kinds of activities are conducted on their respective lands? *How do these communities, with no access to US drug policy officials and virtually no interaction with Colombian drug policy officials, find out the rules and procedures?*

Around the same time, while preparing for my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to interview an officer in the Colombian army who was temporarily stationed at US Southern Command. The US military has divided its presence over six regions that span the entire globe. US Southern Command, located in Doral, Florida, is comprised of officers from every branch of the armed forces and is responsible for “providing contingency planning, operations, and security cooperation in its assigned Area of Responsibility,” which includes Central America, South America, and the Caribbean.⁹³ I asked the Colombian officer their opinion about US influence on the War on Drugs in their country, specifically the controversy affiliated with aerial eradication. They stated that aerial eradication is a “counternarcotics strategy,” *not* a “counterpeople strategy.” They explained that one of the main reasons that aerial eradication is preferred over other eradication strategies, such as manual eradication, is that the armed groups that protect and control coca fields often plant explosive land mines in the ground to protect their harvests. Furthermore, they said that sprayings must be conducted with the prior consultation of the communities to be affected, especially *resguardos indígenas* and *comunidades negras*. The officer explained that the strategies employed to eradicate illicit crops are decided at periodic meetings with community leaders, local mayors, and the governor.⁹⁴ Similar to Brownfield, the officer expressed confidence in the proper execution of rules and procedures.

PRIOR CONSULTATION?

The primary rule or procedure that *resguardos indígenas* and *comunidades negras* can employ to protect their respective territories is known as *consulta previa* (the right to prior consultation). Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention 169, authored by the International Labour Organization (ILO), establishes that state-recognized ethnic territories throughout the world need to be consulted before the extraction of resources, the implementation of projects, or any other activities that might jeopardize residents’ rights to occupy their land and practice local

traditions.⁹⁵ Even though Colombia ratified Convention 169 the same year as the new Colombian constitution (1991), *consulta previa* was never made an explicit law within the constitution. However, *consulta previa* has materialized through jurisprudence, meaning that it has been invoked in constitutional courts on behalf of *resguardos indígenas* and *comunidades negras*.⁹⁶ For instance, constitutional court decision 383 of 2003 determined that because many Indigenous communities consume coca leaf as part of their traditional culture, aerial eradication without prior consultation was a violation of their right to cultural identity.⁹⁷ According to Leonardo Correa, technical director of Project SIMCI (of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime that monitors coca cultivation), all Indigenous communities in Colombia had the right to be consulted prior to aerial eradication, as US and Colombian counternarcotics authorities did not keep a list of which communities consumed coca leaf as part of their traditions.⁹⁸

In contrast, *comunidades negras* were not consulted about the aerial or manual eradication of coca in their territories, because of the distinction between cultures that consume coca as part of their traditional practices and cultures that do not (i.e., every other ethnoracial group in Colombia aside from specific Indigenous groups). I met with Pablo Rueda-Saiz, the former director of *consulta previa* in Colombia (2012–2013), and he was vehement that *comunidades negras* also should have been consulted about any counternarcotics operations taking place in their territories: “My argument was that if it is directly affecting them, if it is being carried out within the territory, *comunidades negras* should have the same right as Indigenous communities that are not consumers of traditional [coca] crops as those who are. It may be that the rights involved are different rights, but they should have the right to prior consultation.”⁹⁹

Pablo explained that while there were officials in his branch of the government, the Ministry of the Interior, who felt strongly about guaranteeing the right of previous consultation to *comunidades negras*, there were officials in the Ministry of Justice who believed that *comunidades negras* *should not be granted prior consultation under any circumstance*.¹⁰⁰ Farid Benavides, the former vice minister of criminal policy in the Ministry of Justice, was of the opinion that if Colombia guaranteed *consulta previa* for *comunidades negras*, a group that does not consume coca leaf as part of its traditional practices, then it would have to guarantee *consulta previa* for *every* rural peasant community.¹⁰¹ Pablo considered this logic to be contradictory to the 1991 constitution, which presented Colombia as a multicultural nation intent on preserving its ethnic diversity. He noted that prior to 1993, which is the first year *comunidades negras* were recognized by the state, the government refused to acknowledge that these communities were culturally different from the rest of Colombia. Pablo felt that those in the Ministry of Justice opposed to granting *comunidades negras* *consulta previa* were clinging to a racist mentality in which “the only difference is a phenotypic difference and not cultural . . . it was *not* considered a different culture that is worth preserving or protecting.”¹⁰²

Julián Wilches, Colombia's former director of drug policy, was very forthright about the fact that the rules and procedures set forth for the previous consultation of Indigenous communities had not always been followed during the period between 2011 and 2014, for the following reasons: such consultations were rarely carried out; when consultations were carried out, there was not always an agreement reached, because of distrust between Indigenous communities and government authorities; and in instances when Indigenous communities should have been financially compensated for transgressions of their territorial sovereignty, they rarely were.¹⁰³ Julián was also very honest in his assessment of the efficacy of aerial eradication and counternarcotics efforts in general:

I have always said that the results depend on what you are measuring. If you are measuring whether it has reduced cocaine production in Colombia, it did reduce cocaine production. Has the production of illicit crops been reduced? Yes, it has. Has it changed the reality of where there are or were illicit crops? No, it has not changed it. In other words, there may be illicit crops tomorrow where there are none today because the conditions are what they are. It is like when you take medicine to lower the fever, but the infection is still there. I believe that measuring the hectares of illicit crops is an indicator, but it cannot be *the* indicator that measures whether we are doing it well or not because there are many factors. For example, when coca [cultivation] decreases, illegal mining increases and there is still the presence of armed groups outside the law. The crime structures continue to exist.¹⁰⁴

Meanwhile in the *comunidades negras* of southwestern Colombia, many residents understand aerial eradication as an intentional form of transnational environmental racism that exacerbates the violent displacement caused by those armed groups. For instance, at a meeting of five different communities in Guapi, Cauca, one gentleman publicly complained: "I compare the coca here with other places, and there are just small plots here. They came to dump all that glyphosate and we think to ourselves, It is a banned chemical, but they have to exhaust it to satisfy the United States. The United States finances it, so they dump it on us in the Pacific coast. They dump it on us Blacks, on our houses. So, we are punished two or three times, not just because of the war, but also because of state policies!"

In calling glyphosate a "banned chemical," the gentleman was referring to the March 2015 declaration of the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) that glyphosate is "probably carcinogenic to humans."¹⁰⁵ That declaration prompted numerous countries throughout the world, which had permitted the use of glyphosate for agricultural purposes, to ban the use of the herbicide.

I approached the gentleman after the meeting and asked him how many times his community had been fumigated and when. He replied:

Exact dates I could not say. But I know that in Napi they fumigated five times since the beginning of the process on the Pacific coast. They do it like every four months, three times a year. This year they have not fumigated. It will be a year now as of

Holy Thursday that they don't fumigate. But it is the little things that they have done without following protocol; communities have been fumigated, rivers, water sources such as streams, aqueducts, and farm plots and forests have been fumigated . . . which have nothing to do with illicit crops.

He later added: "If someone has one hectare [of coca], ten are fumigated. And it is not one affected, but nine more. And it generates displacement because people are without anything to eat, and they must leave. They did away with food crops. We used to have so many children in school but not anymore."

This description of aerial eradication as a counternarcotics strategy implemented overzealously in *comunidades negras* was quite common among people I interviewed in the region. Beyond the frustration that *comunidades negras* are not consulted about the eradication of coca, many people feel that *comunidades negras* are sprayed where coca is not being cultivated as an intentional means of dispossessing these communities of their lands.

MYTHMAKING AND THE WAR ON DRUGS

Skeptical of the perception that aerial eradication was an intentional means of dispossession, but more skeptical that other rules and procedures, in addition to *consulta previa*, were *not* being followed, I shared these accusations with the INL staff of the US Embassy in Bogotá, which oversees the US side of illicit crop eradication operations. Somewhat ironically because I am a US citizen, it was more difficult to schedule this interview than the interviews with high-ranking Colombian government officials. I was granted an interview six months after my initial request. In fairness, there was quite a bit of uncertainty during that six-month period because it coincided with IARC's declaring glyphosate to be "probably carcinogenic to humans" and Colombian government agencies' deliberating whether to suspend aerial eradication as the government negotiated a peace agreement with the FARC.

The interview took place in August of 2015, which is significant because it occurred in the interim period between the announcement from the Colombian government that aerial eradication would be suspended (May 2015) and its actual suspension (October 2015). During that time, aerial eradication operations were ramped up significantly. For instance, in 2013, aerial eradication totaled 47,000 hectares for the entire country.¹⁰⁶ In the month of August 2015, aerial eradication totaled 27,000 hectares.¹⁰⁷

I was not allowed to record the session, though I am unsure whether that was standard protocol or due to concerns about the negative perception of aerial eradication, particularly at that moment in time. Per the rules outlined at the beginning of the interview, I emailed my notes to the communication liaison, who edited some of what I had transcribed but ultimately approved the majority of what I had noted. The 2.5-hour interview began with thirty minutes of explanation from the

INL director in which I was simply supposed to listen. He presented his lecture as the debunking of “myths about aerial eradication.” What follows is my (subsequently approved) notes on those “debunked myths,” numbered 1–9. Underneath each I have included the findings from my own research on these assertions.

#1) Aerial eradication planes have a map of plots to be sprayed, which are continually updating in flight, so it is not easy for a pilot to miss the target.

My findings: According to the staff at Project SIMCI, the technicians in the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime who track illicit crops in Colombia, the maps that the pilots use are not always accurate. These maps are from snapshots taken on a specific day (usually December 31) or from a composite of images take over a series of days (in areas obscured by cloud cover). It is therefore possible for illicit crops to appear or disappear, depending on when the aerial eradication mission is conducted.¹⁰⁸

#2) The vast majority of coca is grown away from where people actually live, so accusations of communities or people being sprayed are unfounded.

My findings: I spoke to numerous people who claimed that their homes or the rivers where they bathe and wash clothes/dishes had been sprayed. I also noticed that many farmers in comunidades negras do indeed cultivate their crops away from their homes because the soil right next to people’s homes tends to be less fertile than soil elsewhere that has not been cultivated as often.

#3) Coca is clearly visible from the air [bright green color], and the only plants that can be mistaken from the air are pepper plants and young cacao plants. Therefore, it is difficult for pilots, all of whom are experienced spray pilots, to spray the wrong crops.

My findings: I have no reason to doubt this statement, but what the INL director did not mention is the fact that pilot accuracy is impacted by the dangerous nature of the job. The fumigation planes are accompanied by armed helicopters so that the planes are not shot down by groundfire.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, the pilots are under stress. Furthermore, visibility can be a factor, particularly in the tropical lowlands of the Pacific region, where heavy cloud cover is the norm.¹¹⁰

#4) The vast majority of coca is not cultivated on land owned by farmers. It is increasingly grown in national parks and Indigenous reserves.

My findings: Yes, a lot of coca is cultivated in national parks, which are off-limits to aerial eradication operations. The fact that comunidades negras could be sprayed and national parks could not be is astonishing. This decision underscores the perception that human beings, especially Afro-descendant human beings, are not part of the biodiversity worth preserving in Colombia.¹¹¹ Furthermore, the region most impacted by aerial eradication at the

time of this interview surrounded Tumaco, Nariño, the southernmost Pacific corner of Colombia predominately consisting of *comunidades negras*.

#5) Only a small percentage of aerial eradication cases are successful, less than three percent in the last few years. Most claims involve people mixing coca with licit crops or claims of having been sprayed when they were not, as verified by spray line data.

My findings: This is misleading. The Colombian Counternarcotics Police (DIRAN), the same Colombian agency that conducted the spraying, was also in charge of the complaint process. To file a complaint, a farmer had to download a form from the internet (there are not many people connected to the internet, and many people do not even have access to electricity). Filling out the form required information such as GPS coordinates, the exact time the spraying occurred, and the exact quantities of crops affected. It also required some farmers to travel very long distances just to file the paperwork with local government offices they did not necessarily trust. For these reasons, many people stopped filing complaints.¹¹²

#6) Pilots that spray outside the lines are subject to remediation in addition to the annual certification that all pilots undertake. Therefore, it is very difficult for pilots to repeatedly miss the mark.

My findings: This is also misleading, especially when discussing *comunidades negras* or *resguardos indígenas* or any peasant communities for that matter. Pilots can spray more than just illicit crops because the protocols state that licit crops mixed with illicit crops can also be sprayed. So, a farm plot may have only a few coca plants and a much larger swath can be sprayed. “Spraying outside the lines” refers to the shapes of illicit crop fields outlined on the map aboard the plane. Farm plots in the Pacific region do not look like the rectangular plots you might see when flying across the United States or in other places where agriculture is industrialized. These plots are not rectangular with neat lines of separation between people’s farms. From an airplane, a private farm in the Pacific region (and many regions of Colombia) just looks like a mix of vegetation.¹¹³ In other words, how could a pilot tell whether they sprayed “outside the lines” if there were no lines to begin with?

#7) Smaller coca plots mixed in with licit crops and the cultivation of illicit crops in off-limit areas (natural parks, indigenous reserves) is the current trend. Plots mixed with licit and illicit crops can legally be sprayed while indigenous reserves (without permission) and national parks cannot be sprayed.

My findings: This statement is misleading because it makes it seem like farmers are starting a trend of mixing crops to avoid detection of illicit crops. Mixing crops is the traditional way of cultivating crops in many parts of

Colombia, especially in *comunidades negras*.¹¹⁴ So while it is true that some farmers may have planted coca in their fields and may want to hide that coca, this should also be an indication that people of modest means were desperate enough to risk the fumigation of their community.

#8) There has never been a single case of serious health problems proven to be caused by glyphosate. A lot of studies have been conducted, but none offer conclusive evidence substantiated by the peer-review process.

My findings: There are numerous ways that aerial eradication advocates have invalidated claims of health and environmental problems associated with aerial eradication. The number one way is to blame any potential effects on the chemicals used to cultivate and process coca.¹¹⁵ The second way is to be hyperselective about whose research counts (i.e., why the peer-review process was mentioned). Finally, the exact chemical mixture used during spraying has been kept secret, preventing outsiders from conducting tests on the specific effects.¹¹⁶

In other cases, some of the health claims made about aerial eradication by residents of *comunidades negras* seem far-fetched. For instance, some people I interviewed went so far as to blame aerial eradication for the chinkungunya virus outbreak throughout the country. Chinkungunya is a viral disease transmitted by the same mosquitoes (*Aedes aegypti* or *Aedes albopictus*) that carry dengue. The symptoms are quite similar to dengue (fever and arthritis in joints), although there are no fatal strains of chinkungunya. The virus is believed to have originated in Africa; however, the current outbreak in Latin America has inspired a wide variety of rumors about its origins. The Colombian Ministry of Health has an entire webpage dedicated to refuting these “urban myths,” including the statement that chinkungunya is not transmitted by particles suspended in air, perhaps a reference to rumors about chinkungunya being a product of aerial eradication.¹¹⁷

*#9) The FARC and other guerilla groups have been pushing communities to lodge more complaints, which has been driving up the number of complaints being filed.*¹¹⁸

My findings: This was likely true at the time, though I could not confirm that it was happening.

Though I initially felt that this lecture was a waste of time because I had already done so much research on these topics, it highlighted what the INL was most defensive about. For the rest of the allotted time, the staff, which consisted of five Americans and two Colombians, took turns responding to my questions. By the end of the interview, I realized that the INL had some of its own misgivings about how aerial eradication and other United States–supported strategies were implemented in Colombia. This is noteworthy because the interview transpired at a moment when decisions about the viability of aerial eradication and drug

policy in general were tilting toward Colombian control. As explained to me by the DIRAN officer in charge of the detection of illicit crops, per the stipulations of Plan Colombia, the Colombian government was incrementally taking control of all government projects that were initiated by the United States. He estimated that the Colombian government controlled seventy percent of eradication operations as of 2015.¹¹⁹ It is also very noteworthy, therefore, that aerial eradication was suspended when the Colombian government had more control than ever over counternarcotics operations conducted within in its own borders.

Similar to Brownfield and the Colombian military officer I spoke to, INL officials established that there were rules and procedures in place that made it unlikely for aerial eradication to result in environmental injustices. The INL's misgivings surrounding the Colombian government taking greater control of aerial eradication suggested that *if environmental injustices were occurring*, it was because *the Colombians were not following the proper protocols*.

CONFRONTING THE TWO-HEADED MONSTER

The Two-Headed Monster is the product of an increasingly unpopular War on Drugs that thrives despite unreasonable expectations about the proper completion of rules and procedures. Both the monster and its minions, which include the Killer Plants described at the beginning of this chapter, embody both the *demand for* and *prohibition of* drugs such as cocaine. The monster exists as a plague to Black and Brown communities subject to those contradictory forces. However, it persists, despite an increasingly popular perception that the War on Drugs is a failure, because the very institutions that carry out this war determine its effectiveness, who/what is criminalized in the process, and whether the critiques of this war are justified.

While the visions discussed up to this point in the book have been the products of people engaged in an oral tradition of storytelling, the Two-Headed Monster is something I created on my own to make sense of the far-reaching impacts of US drug imperialism. And whereas many of the visions in this book have been described as the rationalizations of people confronting violent forces beyond their control, this monster is *my* rationalization of the violence and pollution caused by the actions and policies of *my* country. This rationalization also speaks to the tension inherent in my self-description as a gringo latino (explained in the Introduction); I was raised in the United States but am not always proud to say so, especially when interviewing people harmed by US imperialism. However, at the same time, my status as a US citizen and as a scholar connected to powerful academic institutions granted me access to interview US and Colombian authorities that shape, monitor, and/or implement drug policy. While many of these same people are critical of US and Colombian drug policies, it is highly doubtful that they would view the work they do as contributing to such a monster.

Environmental justice communities are often required to look beyond state-based solutions to environmental problems because state institutions can be

complicit in or even primarily responsible for the pollution they live with. The continued violence of “post-conflict” Colombia combined with the external and internal pressure to continue aerially eradicating coca suggest that *comunidades negras* continue to have a limited political relationship with the Colombian state, which has prioritized various iterations of “national security” over the well-being of poor rural populations. They may be understood as a collective of environmental justice communities not relying on state-based solutions to defeat the Two-Headed Monster. *Comunidades negras* challenge the monster in three important ways.

In the first place, they reject the stigmatization of drug-affiliated criminality by calling attention to the fact that *cocaine production is not part of their culture* and that *the War on Drugs is a product of US imperialism*. For instance, I spoke with a young man who bore a rash on his chest and arms caused by cocaine-processing laboratories near the *comunidad negra* of Río San Juan de Micay del Tambo, Cauca. He told me that he and others in his community experienced an allergic reaction to the chemicals that make their way into the river he bathes in. I asked him how his community was dealing with the spread of coca cultivation and cocaine production to the region, and he explained, “We have been working with a group of young people, and we are trying to recover a part of our culture. I believe that this is one of the strategies to begin to eradicate that . . . because it is not our culture.”¹²⁰ He operationalizes an “oppositional imagination”¹²¹ to challenge the conceptualization of his community as a lawless space of illegal activity.

Regarding the destruction caused by aerial eradication, the Process of Black Communities (PCN) leaders I spoke to understood that the Colombian government has been complicit in the US War on Drugs demands. For some, such as Mario Angulo, a PCN leader at the main office in Buenaventura, the Colombian government has been careless in implementing those demands. He explained, “It is a very complex issue because there is no study of the consequences, and that seems to us to be irresponsible on the part of the national government, that due to an imposition by the gringos they begin to fumigate the territories without foreseeing the consequences.”¹²² On the other hand, a PCN leader and member of the Río Anchicayá community council, Benjamín Mosquera, viewed aerial eradication as an intentional means of destroying *comunidades negras* imposed by the United States. Benjamín stated, “The way in which the United States supports a program that is destroying production, agriculture, and the life of ethnic communities . . . we see it as . . . in fact we reject it first because it hasn’t been coordinated properly. Secondly, because that policy is not good for [our] health or for the ecosystem.”¹²³

In the second place, *comunidades negras* challenge “technologies of displacement”¹²⁴—discourses of development, conservation, biodiversity, and national security that US and Colombian authorities have employed to justify the War on Drugs—by articulating alternative versions of these discourses. The perception of state-directed development as a catalyst of displacement and dispossession is also

fundamental to the appraisal of the myriad of security discourses proposed by successive presidential administrations in Colombia. When I mentioned that national security is often cited as the primary reason why rural communities are seldom, if ever, consulted about the means to eradicate coca, one gentleman declared: “For comunidades negras, national security has no meaning! When they fumigate, what they do is displace us. Why? What does a community living on a river do when they have nothing to eat? The fish are dying, so the fisherman comes home with nothing. Plantains, potatoes . . . sustenance crops are ruined, and people survive off of that, so they are forced to move. Therefore, this is a case of the State running roughshod over comunidades negras!”

These alternative discourses both validate local epistemologies and mark such technologies of displacement as “foreign” concepts, not applicable to the context of comunidades negras in the Pacific region.

Last, comunidades negras not only problematize the geopolitical imagination of the state,¹²⁵ but also take steps toward radically redefining the state¹²⁶ by leveraging domestic and international laws designed to protect ethnic territorial rights in court cases. For example, Samuel, a member of the Río Anchicayá community council, complained:

In our territory they have carried out about three fumigations, which for us is something disastrous because it is a government policy with the United States and the Colombian Counternarcotics Police, accompanied by the national army. But we see that it happens without prior consultation, because they say that every project, every program that is going to be carried out in a comunidad negra, must be a reason for consultation. Article 164 of the ILO Convention 169, and it is also reaffirmed by Article 4 and 5 of Law 70 of the constitution of this country, as well as Decree 45, state that if [the government] have not coordinated with the community council, it is not possible for the government to enter our territory. Conducting aerial spraying with glyphosate killed the *papa china* [taro root], *chontaduro* [peach palm], and *borojó* and everything, without anything in return.

Unfortunately, knowledge of these legal instruments and the will to participate in the redefinition of the state are not sufficient grounds to achieve environmental justice in the US-Colombian War on Drugs. The perspectives of Samuel and other leaders of comunidades negras cited here are continually marginalized within what Tate calls “hierarchies of credibility.”¹²⁷ Their experiences and understandings of the War on Drugs have been largely relegated to myths not based on credible scientific facts published in peer-reviewed journals.

With that challenge in mind, the next chapter will explore how comunidades negras champion their own knowledge in the face of the Two-Headed Monster and other monstrosities of environmental racism.