

# “Esa paz blanca, esa paz de muerte”: Peacetime, Wartime, and Black Impossible Chronos in Postconflict Colombia

By

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## R E S U M E N

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El 24 de agosto de 2016, el presidente colombiano Juan Manuel Santos anunció el final formal de la larga guerra de cincuenta años con la guerrilla de las FARC, ya que el grupo acordó deponer las armas y participar en las elecciones generales de 2018 como un partido político. El acuerdo de paz fue recibido con una mezcla de emoción y escepticismo. Desde entonces, casi seiscientos activistas han sido asesinados, la violencia homicida contra la juventud urbana sigue alta y el prospecto de paz positiva en los territorios negros e indígenas es en el mejor de los casos esquivo. En este artículo, me pregunto: ¿cómo entender la transición a la paz como supuestamente un momento mágico cuando los *tiempos-de-guerra* y *tiempos-de-paz* son experimentados como evento a-temporal acuerdo a la alteridad racial de los sujetos? ¿Pueden los marcos normativo de conflicto / pos-conflicto y paz / guerra, explicar la trans-historicidad de la experiencia negra en sociedades de la diáspora africana? [afro-pesimismo, violencia racial, construcción de paz, paz liberal, protesta negro]

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## A B S T R A C T

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On August 24, 2016, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos announced the formal end of the fifty-year-long war with the guerrilla FARC, as the armed group agreed to lay down their arms and participate in the 2018 general elections as a political party. The peace deal was met with a mix of excitement and skepticism. Since then, almost six hundred human rights activists have been killed, homicidal violence against youth in major Colombian cities has remained high, and the prospect of positive peace in black territories is at best elusive. In this article, I ask: what are we to make of postconflict interventions that assume transition to peace to be the magic moment of a

new social order, when the elapsed time of (post)war is experienced as a timeless event according to one's racial alterity? Can the normative framework of conflict/postconflict, wartime, and peacetime account for the trans-historical and timeless conditions of racial subjugation blacks endure in societies of the African diaspora? [ Afro-pessimism, racial violence, peace-building, liberal peace, black protest]

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“Se acabó la guerra en Colombia.” It was an evening of August 2016. I was hanging out with friends in the outskirts of Cali, Colombia's third largest city, when President Juan Manuel Santos announced on the television the end of the fifty-year-long armed conflict with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). After years of peace talks backed by the Norwegian and Cuban governments, the peace deal was finally coming to an end. I was planning to visit my friend across the city to follow the presidential announcement and to “celebrate” the historical event with her family. In striking contrast with my enthusiasm, Doña Tereza, a white/mestiza caleña in her fifties, told me there was nothing to celebrate because “nothing will change.” She feared that the guerrilla members, who were granted ten seats in the Colombian Congress as part of the deal, would turn Colombia into a “Castrochavist regime,” as the Cuban and Venezuelan leftist governments are usually referred to in conservative and right-wing circles. Doña Tereza also worried about increasing urban insecurity while the elite celebrated the “damn” peace. Perhaps too optimistic for her liking, I tried to argue that it was an important moment to turn the page and that Colombians should give it a chance anyway. She left me alone standing in front of the TV listening to President Santos' announcement. On my way home, I initiated conversation with a mestizo *pirate* (unlicensed) taxi driver: “So, the peace-deal is signed. People don't seem excited, huh”? He had another explanation: “The war is profitable. Do you really think they [the political elite and armed groups] will let this business die? Now we have all these men coming to the cities and disputing territory with the *Bacrim* [a state term for neo-paramilitary and drug-trafficking criminal groups also known as *bandas criminales*]. It is going to be a hot mess. This will never end.”

Perhaps Doña Tereza and the taxi driver were simply reproducing “rumors” spread by the far right-wing antipeace campaign led by the former President Alvaro Uribe, a key figure in the country's war against the guerrilla insurgency and with alleged ties to paramilitary militias. Or perhaps they were just expressing a widespread mistrust in the government's capacity to effectively meet the terms of accord. Its troubling record of breaking deals includes lack of financing ongoing transitional programs, attempts to modify the legal provision for transitional justice, and failure to protect demobilized guerrilla fighters from the Patriotic Union

or UP in the 1990s when more than five thousand were killed in targeted assassinations. Whatever the reason, it was clear that Doña Tereza and the taxi driver, and certainly many others in Cali's outskirts, viewed the "end of the war" with general skepticism if not with indifference.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, although predictable in light of an intertwining and ongoing conflict involving FARC dissidents, other insurgent groups, paramilitaries, and drug-trafficking organizations (see Idler 2016), my interlocutors' reactions also resonate with a strong anthropological record that has made ethnographically visible how the "post" of the postwar is experienced as a moment of uncertainty and anxiety. Normative categories such as "transition" and "postconflict," anthropologists have argued, may have a place in the international framework of stability and governance but they fail to account for the complex ways in which temporalities of peace and war overlap and are embodied in the space of everyday life (Shneiderman and Snellinger 2014; Offit and Cook 2010; Pérez 2008). In many transitional contexts, although "postconflict" may signify a *shift* within the liberal lexicon of international peace-building politics, for ordinary citizens living in permanent insecurity and uncertainty it may be just *war by other means*. Indeed, in many postwar societies of the global south, astonishing levels of physical and structural violence call into question the supposed exceptionality of wartime. In such spaces, ordinary individuals, like Doña Tereza and the taxi driver in Cali, may experience the *post* of conflict as disenchantment, deception, or something *worse than war* (see Green 1994; Moodie 2011; Choi 2014; Gill 2017).

In the case of Latin America, anthropologist Isaías Rojas-Pérez argues that this "unending regime of emergency" exists because violence is ingrained in the mechanisms of the state as "a modality of rule" (2008:258). Still, if the Latin American poor usually experience *peacetime* as a stubborn *repetition* of the past, as Rojas rightly contends, the dark/brown body of black and indigenous people is the paradigmatic site where the line between *peacetime* and *wartime* is blurred. For these marginalized groups, the "post" of the conflict can be better defined as "impossible chronos," to borrow from Costa Vargas' (2012:5) formulation on the timeless regimes of racial terror that structures black lives in the African diaspora. In this essay, I draw upon this framework to interrogate *wartime* and *peacetime* in relation to categories of people deemed livable or killable according to their position in the hierarchy of humanity. That such scale is deeply racialized is what some scholars have forcefully argued through their reflection on the "structural antagonism" between the white being and the black nonbeing. Whether one analyzes the black experience through the lens of historic trauma and *social death* or through the black optimist's project of rescuing blackness from the captive script of colonialism—the "fugue states" of resistance in Moten's (2008) words—police killings, mass incarceration, homicides, poverty, malnutrition, and death by treatable diseases all indicate the *afterlife of slavery* (see Hartman 2007; Wilderson 2010; Sharpe 2016). That is to say, the antiblack regime of terror that was foundational in the making

of transatlantic/transpacific modernity continues to inform the (post)colony and its subjects of rights.

This proposition may be viewed as an overstatement for some, and it may even raise objections from a reader attentive to a multicultural frame in which blackness is celebrated as part of the national heritage. While I am cautioned not to import and impose concepts extemporaneous to the Colombian racial formation, the original violence of colonialism has an undeniable afterlife in this supposedly racially harmonious nation. As scholar Rosero-Labbé has forcefully argued, while the politics of multiculturalism has granted some racialized groups access to some rights, the current socioeconomic status of millions of descendants of the enslaved population continues to remind us of Colombia's "genealogic footprints" (2007:220) as a nation dependent on black suffering. Thus, as a political and theoretical construct, the *afterlife of slavery* is evoked here not as an investment in a "certain sense of decay" (Moten 2008:177) or "as an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago" (Hartman 2007:7). Against this backdrop and in dialogue with some critical anthropological interventions on the Colombian peace deal (see, for instance, Silva and Dover 2017; Gruner 2017; Gómez-Correal 2015), this article asks: what are we to make of postconflict interventions that assume *transition to peace* to be the magic moment of a new social order, when the elapsed time of war is experienced as a timeless event? How do black Colombians perceive the peace deal and how do they frame their structural conditions within the long-awaited postconflict momentum? Can the normative framework of conflict/postconflict, peace/war account for the long-standing racial violence blacks endure in *transitional* reconstruction societies of the African diaspora?

In the remainder of this article, I address these questions through the voices of black activists who supported the peace deal (successfully pressing negotiators to include an "ethnic chapter" in the final document) and criticized it as *paño de agua tibia* (piecemeal measure). In centering the article on their voices, I do not intend to homogenize the range of perspectives among peace activists on the deal nor do I overlook the contradictory ways ordinary blacks make sense of their experience within this "transitional" context. In many instances, "workers" in the peace industry (mainly white/mestizo researchers and consultants for international NGOs) cautioned me that "the accord did not promise to transform the structure of the Colombian society" and should therefore be analyzed within its legal and political scope. Frustrated, a colleague at a local university contended that his generation "fought very hard for having the accord" and that my critique echoed the negative campaign of the country's far-right *uribistas* (former President Alvaro Uribe's political coalition). In the same way, I met black individuals who were indifferent to, if not against, the peace deal. Serving time in house arrest, a young,

black, male member of a local gang replied to my question about the postwar moment by playing with the word *paz* by vocally imitating the sound of a firing gun: *paz, paz, paz*. The word that in Spanish produces an onomatopoeic sound of a gunshot also stands for peace. Perhaps based on his own experience (as black, as a child of an *Afro-desplazada* (displaced), and now as the target of an ongoing security strategy of urban peace-making), he argued that in Colombia “peace is made with the bullet.”

While cautious of not homogenizing the diversity of black experience within the intertwining context of war, by centering on the painful labor of black activists this article demonstrates how efforts to secure some social and territorial rights in the peace deal collides with the structural and ongoing denial of black life. To do so, I draw insights from interactions during protests, public forums, and casual meetings during a long-term ethnographic fieldwork (from January 2013 to December 2014, as well as intermittent visits since then) in the neighborhood of ElGuayacán, an imaginary name for a barrio in the predominantly black borough of Aguablanca in Cali’s periphery. This ethnographic reading is ephemeral and fleeting, given the multi entangled and shifting scenarios of the Colombian armed conflict in which even “negative peace” (Galtung 1969) has not been secured. I simply invite further dialogue on a timely question repeatedly posed by black Colombian activists and well articulated by anthropologist Alejandro Castillejo-Cuellar (2013:18) in his ethnographic reading of transitional justice in Colombia: how can sustainable “peace” be achieved in a society founded on (racial) trauma and historical injury?

### Ordinary Antiblack Wars

Black activists prefer the term “postdeal” to “postconflict.” The distinction is crucial to understand the paradigmatic position of blacks in the political violence that has killed more than 250,000 individuals and internally displaced another seven million. To the black woman activist Charo Mina-Rojas, the temporal mark of the “half-century” used to refer to the “conflict” cancels lasting racial terror against the black and indigenous populations. “It didn’t start with the guerrilla and it didn’t end with the guerrillas. It started when we were kidnapped and brought to this country . . . since then we are in a constant struggle to keep ourselves alive and also to keep ourselves as pueblo [negro] (black people).”<sup>2</sup> Charo’s remarks echo the voices of other black activists with whom I had the opportunity to discuss this matter. They stressed continuities, rather than ruptures, between their ancestors and their current racial conditions, arguing that the legacy of slavery and colonization inform ongoing land grabbing, displacement, and terror.

Lena’s experience is illustrative of this unfinished colonial project. From neighboring Timbiquí, a riverbank community caught in the crossfire among guerrilla

forces, the military, drug traffickers, and the mining corporations competing for resources and drug routes, Lena left the community when her thirty-year-old nephew was kidnapped, never to return home. She received death threats for her activism defending the territory in which descendants of enslaved blacks like herself make a living as small-scale miners. Now the community has seen the river poisoned by mercury and its slopes destroyed by mechanized excavators introduced by legal and extra-legal mining companies.<sup>3</sup> Black organizations have denounced that these dynamics have produced a humanitarian crisis consisting of environmental hazards, massacres, and massive displacement. Indeed, Lena is one among thousands (and growing) of internally displaced blacks from the Pacific coast. “I couldn’t stay. I felt ill, an anxiety attack each time I saw a canoe with four or five people come to the village . . . My body would shake. Rumors were that they would continue taking people away. So, I said to myself, ‘no, I have to go.’”

Upon arriving in Cali, she found a place to live with her nine children in an informal settlement in the densely populated El Guayacán and began selling *el chontaduro* (a traditional fruit from the Pacific coast) in the streets of Cali, as do many black women excluded from the city’s formal economy. The first year, she recalls, was the hardest: “I didn’t know where to go, where I was. I didn’t have anything to begin again. Then I began to knock on doors, I started to move myself as a fish in the water.” At first, Lena resisted the label *desplazada* and refused to register in the government database, until a friend later convinced her that registering would allow her family to have access to a basic subsidized health care plan and a stipend to complement the family income. She received a government stipend for three months and later became a street vendor, like many other displaced black women.

While the agrarian-based origin of the armed conflict is undeniable, from the point of view of black victims, like Lena, the city is also a warfront that may not be energized by the same military dynamics and yet produces similar racialized outcomes. Here the racial condition of the uprooted and deracinated black population (Vergara-Figueroa 2017), legally known as *Afro-desplazados*, call into question not only reified narratives of time and space, but also the ideological project of the Colombian polity as a racially inclusive national community. In her insightful essay on *Afro-desplazados*, Cárdenas (2018) argues that this is a legal category that dehumanizes blacks, reduces violence to the temporality of war, and “establishes a perverse hierarchy that makes visible and legitimates some forms of black suffering” while silencing others. It is also a political identity revealing the painful strategies of black individuals to access humanitarian and institutional protection otherwise negated to them (Cárdenas 2018:76). In both cases, the question is what does it mean to be legible to the state only to the extent of one’s victimization? How does such a position render visible the intersection between timeless racial injury and specific victimization by the armed conflict?

The spatial and ontological condition of displacement (as uprooted by slavery, as *internally displaced* by the conflict, as socially alienated from full citizenship) reveals the antiblack logics that animate the city and the nation.

It is in black spaces such as El Guayacán—a neighborhood located in the eastside where at least 70 percent of Cali's black population lives—that one can see how particular dynamics of armed conflict and structural conditions of racial precarity blur the lines between the urban and the rural, peacetime and wartime, elapsed time and frozen time. The same areas housing Afro-desplazados like Lena are also depressing urban settings plagued by abject poverty, high rates of unemployment, illiteracy, and homicidal violence (Urrea-Giraldo 2015). In this zone of social abandonment, the urban/rural and pre/postwar divide come together in what Nancy Scheper-Hughes defines as “peace-time-crimes,” or the systematic killing and letting-die-practices that become “the most natural, routine, ordinary and expected of events” against those seen as human waste (1996:891). For example, many residents are unemployed or making a living in what they call “the *rebusque*,” a Spanish word for odd jobs such as street vending, cleaning, and repairing; a friend of mine is battling cancer while waiting for a slot in the public hospital; an acquaintance died of HIV-related illness while waiting for medication; and another close friend was killed while trying to intervene in a dispute between two gang members.

These vulnerabilities are likely to increase within racialized communities of east Cali, caught into an ongoing territorial contest among FARC dissidents, paramilitary-linked groups, local gangs, and corrupt officers. In fact, according to local stories, this is what is happening. While the city government promotes aggressive antigang policies to “pacify” stigmatized black spaces, such as El Guayacán, residents speak of an “invisible war” launched by the *duros* (big men), and supported by corrupt officers who “disarm the youth just to make it easier to control the barrio.” An interlocutor lamented that instead of bringing “real peace” to the abandoned El Guayacán, the state not only fails to curb but also facilitates more repression and violence. “This is a fake peace . . . think how many youth have been killed here since the end of the conflict. The war is pretty much alive here,” she concluded. The urban dimension of war may be invisible in the wealthy part of the city where the predominantly white and mestizo population live, but for local residents these pacification policies are just “war by other means.”

Since my first arrival in 2013, I have lost track of the parents I met who later lost their children in this intertwining urban war. Perhaps hoping that the anthropologist could help her to make sense of the violence, the grandmother of sixteen-year-old Lucero, the latest victim, asked me to explain “why they killed Lucerito,” who was lethally hit by a stray bullet while coming home from school one afternoon. Since then, her grandmother attempts to cope with the grief by engulfing herself in alcohol addiction. Lucero's friend gave me an answer for her

death: “It is because they treat us as trash. El Guayacán is the dump site of Cali.” Then, she complained that while tourists and residents of the wealthier areas of the city were celebrating the *feria de Cali* (annual festival), young people like Lucero were being killed in the periphery: “Imagine if a girl from there [the wealthy areas] was killed. That would be a huge scandal. Police, people marching in the streets, wearing white, with blue balloons, protesting for peace . . . But the reality is that Lucero was a black girl, from the dump site of Cali.” Framing the challenges for urban peace in terms of spatial justice, local grassroots organizer Maria sees an ordinary antiblack war in the economic marginalization, spatial segregation, and state-sponsored violence found in El Guayacán. Particularly vocal about the gendered spatial conditions of black women, she names these forms of racial control as *politicas de muerte* (politics of death). According to her, from the perspective of black women, there is no peace. “Our bodies continue to carry the marks of displacement, we continue to be exploited as domestic workers in the houses of Cali’s elite, and many of us are dying without access to health care.” These *politicas de muerte*, black activists agree, are very much alive in postconflict Cali and, they fear, will be further intensified now that “pacifying” urban peripheries seem to be the new language of war. That is why, Maria says, “it is not a post-conflict . . . it is just a post-*deal*.”

### **Peace that Kills [Paz que Mata]**

While it may be too early to be pessimistic about a newly signed, very unstable deal under constant revision, the black structural condition outlined by my interlocutors makes the prospect of peace at best elusive. To be fair, a peaceful future seems uncertain not only for blacks. Like the mestizo taxi driver and Doña Tereza, who expressed an uncanny indifference and skepticism to the president’s announcement of the “end of the war,” many Colombians do not seem enthusiastic with a peace deal seen as too lenient with the “terrorist” guerrillas who are the scapegoats for Colombian social problems. Unlike the poor in general, however, my black interlocutors were not paranoid about the guerrilla taking control of the political system and turning it into a communist regime or with the “urban criminals” taking control of Cali. Their pessimism came from a different relationship with Colombia’s racialized regime of rights. “The difference is that we are fighting for the right to exist,” a young black activist told me.

This struggle for the right to exist, in opposition to the right to live in peace may well affirm black agency while also underscoring an incisive denunciation of black lives as *always* lived “in the present tense of death” (Sharpe 2016:88). Indeed, the high cost of peace for blacks—expressed in chants such as “peace is sealed with black blood” and “may peace not cost our lives”—renders even more acute a liminal condition of existence that conjures *the ghost of slavery*



(Hartman 2007:170). Indeed, in *peacetime* Colombia rural areas continue to be caught in the paramilitary–drug traffickers–mining corporations contest, urban areas such as El Guayaacán continue to receive Afro-desplazados, and black activists continue to count the dead. According to official data from the Colombian government, at least 150,000 Colombians have been displaced from their homes since the peace deal with the FARC was signed in August 2016. Since then, at least 560 social activists have been killed, with 252 assassinations in 2018 alone (Indepaz 2019).

While positioning these killings within the *longue durée* of racial violence in Colombia—something articulated as black people *always* being “cannon fodder”—activist Francia Marquez also warns of “new” antiblack configurations in the postdeal momentum. As we marched for peace in the streets of Cali, she expressed particular worry about the winning far-right coalition’s (Alvaro Uribe’s protégé Ivan Duque defeated left-winger Gustavo Petro in the 2018 elections) attempts to revise the peace deal and its no-compliance with basic provisions established by the accord. Like Francia, other black activists express concerns with the president’s decision to strengthen further military ties with the United States. Ex-President Alvaro Uribe’s long partnership with the U.S. military and Trump’s “invitation” to the new government to take decisive measures in “security challenges” gives strong reasons to expect further militarization and intensifying crop eradication programs, which will certainly produce more displacement and deaths. Indeed, the long involvement of the U.S. government in Colombian conflicts, some scholars show, have produced enormous environmental and human costs, particularly in the traditional regions inhabited by black and indigenous Colombians, which are the main targets of aerial sprayed pesticides and other counternarcotic strategies (Quiñones 2016; Dion and Russler 2008). Although a discussion of U.S. interests in pushing forward its war on drugs as both counterinsurgency and a business strategy exceeds the scope of this article (see Tate 2015; Murillo and Avirama 2004), the transfer of American taxpayers’ money to the securitization of this country is just another layer in which racial evisceration, land dispossession, and capitalist accumulation are entangled in the geopolitics of peace and war in Colombia.

At the same time that black activists are worried about the return of *Uribism* to power and highlight differences between the militaristic agenda of war promoted by the far-right winning coalition and the market-friendly liberal peace agenda promoted by then-President Juan Manuel Santos, they also see a deadly convergence in these apparently disparate projects: to secure the economic and political interests of the national and international white/mestizo elite. In Francia’s words, “in peace or in war, the elite profit anyway. Making peace and making war are strategies to keep control of the economy.” According to Charo, in this intertwining project, the “pacification” of Colombia also means turning over ancestral territories to the agro-industry and mining corporations. “Santos wanted to reassure international investors that it was worth to invest . . . worth to put all this

money in extractivist activities, in port, in mining concessions.” She asks: “what was our interest? Stay alive! Stay in our territory . . . Territory is our life and life is not for sale. To defend the right to be in these places because that is what make us to be who we are.”

Black lives are not for sale, but the racial logic of development and capitalist accumulation requires black exploitation, displacement, and evisceration (Escobar 2003; Lerma 2016; Vergara-Figueroa 2017). In Colombia, even more so if we consider peace-building interventions promising to expand the country’s agro-frontier and/or “securing” its multicultural cities for foreign investment and international tourism. Here is where one can see how the racial project of multiculturalism converges with the racial project of liberal peace in maintaining a peculiar racial order. While the state-endorsed regime of multicultural governance certainly differs from previous regimes of racial domination embedded in the myth of racial democracy—it has recognized some (cultural) rights and structural racial inequalities, and even enabled access to some material opportunities—persistent assault on indigenous and black means of living reveals an enduring colonial condition (Hale 2002). What may be different, Peter Wade suggests, is that under the reconfiguration of *mestizaje* as multiculturalism, the logic of exclusion (by “imposing assimilation” and thus masking racial violence through the myth of racial harmony), has shifted to extreme forms of violence. Despite formal recognition of rights, now the means of exclusion “are effected most glaringly by murder, terrorization, and displacement” (Wade 2016:337). Resonating with this forceful periodization of the multicultural turn as *the* period of extreme racialized violence in Colombia, the formal inclusion of an “ethnic chapter” in the deal, the escalating assassination of black activists, and the expansion of agro-frontiers under the rural development agenda of postconflict, all suggest a sinister and yet coherent multicultural peace project that can be articulated as “granting rights and denying life (Alves and Vargas, 2017).”

Black activists called my attention to this “deadly multicultural peace” in 2015 when I attended a meeting in the mountains of the countryside with participants from Guatemala, Brazil, and Colombia. Among them was Genaro Garcia, the leader of a traditional black community in the Pacific region of Colombia. As we discussed the transition to peace, I remember Genaro expressing great concern with the presence of armed groups, illegal mining companies, palm oil agrobusiness, and a state-funded international highway project in black territories. These megadevelopment projects and armed groups posed a real threat to the rights to difference and landholding, granted by 1991’s multicultural constitution and the hard-fought Law 70. Genaro had a “macabre certainty” that he would be killed, as he was an outspoken voice against these “development” initiatives and the presence of armed groups in black communities. On August 3, 2015, he was assassinated by the FARC in the town of Tumaco.<sup>4</sup>

This eviscerating politics of multicultural peace-building is also well pronounced in Cali, where blackness is celebrated and consumed in “ethnic tourism” while black lives are devalued and criminalized. During a 2017 interview to a local TV station in which he commented on violence in a soccer game, the mayor, Maurice Armitage, expressed concern with the fact that “Cali is a very explosive city. It has one-million blacks ( . . . ), we like them, but we have to be careful . . . ” This criminalization seems to be the underlying logic of ongoing urban security policies. At the same time that the city government is advertising Cali’s newly created Secretary of Peace (said to be an institutional effort to promote “a culture of peace,” “citizen security,” and “community justice” in postconflict Cali), the mayor has announced the hiring of five hundred new police officers under the *Plan Fortaleza* (or Fortress Plan), to occupy the city’s troubling areas. Likewise, the federal government recently has deployed the national army to patrol the city’s “critical zones” (El País 2018). Although the peace accord did not propose an urban strategy for the transition period, the militarization of urban life in “post”conflict Colombia suggests a familiar script tested in other transitional contexts in which marginalized youth were crafted as the “new” threat to peace and therefore the main military targets of vigilantism and state security (Moodie 2011; De la Torre and Álvarez 2011). Indeed, residents draw connections between these security initiatives and ongoing battles to “clean” the city from youth *pandillas* (street-gangs) that spoil Cali’s international image: “Now that the war is officially over, the government sells the city as a commodity. Come to invest in Cali. No more war, no more pandillas, no more crime,” Jorge, a young activist, tells me. Perhaps the overlapping temporality of (urban) peace making and an ongoing aggressive urban planning program that includes the crackdown of informal businesses, arresting street vendors, and remodeling downtown Cali is not a coincidence. The plan in motion—ironically called “paradise city”—will transfer “undesired” drug addicts and homeless individuals from the downtown area to places such as El Guayacán and its surroundings.

The critical literature on peace studies has labeled this market-sanctioned form of transition as “liberal peace.” Conceptually, this is a hegemonic mode of governance rooted in colonialism, centered in state militarism, patriarchy, and a color-blinded notion of human security; it seeks to enforce geopolitical and economic interests of western states and corporate capitalism (Daley 2014; Azarmandi 2018; David 1999). Liberal peace is also the prevailing notion for Colombia where international donors, the UN system and the elite propose a “sustainable and lasting peace” that reaffirms the economic and political order of the country. The Colombian government and international peacemakers suggest that the transition from war will bring the country into a new stage of progress. In the words of (then) President Santos, “now the war is against underdevelopment. We will employ our energy to promote development . . . security is the base of development.”<sup>5</sup> What

was not articulated in the former president's reiterated sermon on development is the place occupied by black Colombians in this new chapter of Colombian history promised by market-backed liberal peace projects. What if, for some, transitions are experienced "not as fractures but as relative continuities of historically rooted political and economic hegemonies" (Castillo-Cuellar 2013:17)? Or what if this "machine of death" (*maquinaria de muerte*), as denounced by Francia Marquez and confirmed by aggressive urban policing and Genaro Garcia's assassination, is in fact part of the very process of promoting peace?

### Hope Without Illusion

On the evening of January 31, 2018, we gathered in downtown Cali to protest against "esa paz blanca, esa paz de muerte" [this white peace, this deadly peace], as voiced by a black woman during the demonstration. This time, we were mourning the death of Temistocles Machado, one of the main leaders of the *paro civico* (civic strike), a 2017 general strike in the port city of Buenaventura when residents demanded access to basic services such as potable water, public health, and education. He was also an activist against the expansion of port activities at the expense of black displacement from the city's low-tide zones. At downtown Cali, we recited poems, songs, and shared memories of Don Temis' activist labor. As we mourned, we also demanded that the state protect black lives and reaffirmed our commitment "to fight for a real peace" in opposition to the *paz de muerte* (peace that kills). Wearing a t-shirt that stated, "I am also Temis," a black woman asked, "How many more deaths will occur before the state takes the responsibility to protect our people"? Other participants denounced the systematic targeted assassination of black activists since the peace deal, reminding us of our duty to honor the dead with our struggle for life. "For our dead, not even a moment in silence, a whole life in resistance"! Shouting mottos with fists in the air, activists promised to stand united so that "this peace does not kill our hope." What are the meanings of *hope* within a dystopic aftermath of war? What lenses might anthropologists use to understand an apparently contradictory black perspective of supporting the agreement and at the same time vigorously denouncing "liberal peace" as an antiblack project? Lena, the Afro-desplazada woman of El Guayacán, explained to me why she passionately supported the peace deal that she also criticizes as "not our peace": "Not supporting the deal is too much selfishness. To those of us who lived the war, it is not even a discussion. I had a relative killed. I had to leave my territory . . . I don't want to see more people disappearing." Lena's reasoning may explain why in the 2016-defeated referendum—in which 50.2 percent of voters rejected the agreement compared to 49.8 percent who voted for it—black territories of the pacific coast vastly supported the deal. For example,

in Bojayá, a community still grieving the killing of seventy-nine individuals in a 2002 massacre, 96 percent of the residents voted for peace (Vergara-Figueroa 2017). In fact, well before the referendum, black and indigenous activists were “the strongest civilian peace protagonists” and proposed alternatives to the armed conflict beyond market-oriented liberal peace by demanding gender, ethnic, and environmental justice (see Gruner 2017:178). Through the Ethnic Commission for Peace and Defense of Territorial Rights, they demanded inclusion in the peace talks agenda and because of their pressure, as mentioned earlier, the government and the FARC opened a special chapter on “ethnic communities” that promised black autonomy over their ancestral territories. Although extremely worried about the future (particularly now, with increasing levels of violence against black activists including herself), Francia Marquez (who joined the peace talks in Havana) supports the peace deal and sees it as a means and not an end in itself. She explained that overcoming the institutional obstacles to have a seat at the table in Havana was already a victory. “It will not bring real change but it was already a victory against the forces attempting to silence the victims,” she told me. Even now that the agreement is under threat by *Uribismo*, Francia contends, “we must support the deal because this is what we have in our hands. We have to use it as a strategy to make our international demands and to hold the state accountable for the killings of black activists.” In fact, in her public interventions, Francia has desperately called for international solidarity to defend the peace-agreement and, under its mandate, to press the government to create a “humanitarian strategy” to protect black territories.

I read my interlocutors’ investment in peace as hope without illusion. Perhaps the statement “may peace not take away the little the war has left,” evoked during the demonstrations against the targeted assassination of predominantly indigenous and black activists is the best indication of a hope that tragically reaffirms a permanent condition of expendability. In Lena’s words, “we do not just resist, we fight to *re-exist*.” Thus, hope and (Afro)pessimism should not be regarded as mutually exclusive here. My interlocutors do envision and fight for an alternative future and in doing so they reassert their political life while denouncing their social death.<sup>6</sup> It has a clear political calculus too. Faced with the cruelty of war, hope may be the last resource the victims have as a desperate attempt “to stop the maquina de muerte,” their critical understanding of the limits of liberal *peace* notwithstanding. Black activists supported and *racialized* the peace talks hoping this would open an opportunity to mobilize the institutional resources of the peace industry (e.g., local NGOs and international donors) as well as legal frameworks of international peace-building (crafted by the UN system and so-called international community) to protect endangered black lives.

At the same time, the inclusion of some black demands under the ethnic chapter of the deal did not lead to an optimistic view of what comes next in a

permanent antiblack war. “Their peace is not our peace,” Lena told me. She also highlighted that the peace she envisioned was beyond what was agreed in Havana: “The peace we want will not come from the Nobel prize president. We have to continue fighting as we have always been, with our own hands. We want things to change but we know change will not come this institutional way . . . this is a large process.” While black activists were pessimistic about the outcomes, they took advantage of this opportunity for proposing another peace, one that would grant real autonomy over their traditional land and hopefully destabilize the Colombian colonial order.

This alternative perspective is in consonance to what Christopher Courtheyn (2017:11) has named as “radical trans-relational peace,” in which peace is thought of as an intersectional (racial, gendered, ecological) project of community making. At stake in Courtheyn’s call is how victims contest the temporality and spatialities of war in the name of inclusive peace imaginaries outside the prescription of the state and the so-called international community. For Lena (and for other black activists I interviewed), the state-centric and market-friendly peace is not an option. “We cannot wait for the state and the elite to build peace. We can’t depend on them because peace does not interest them, war generates money. There are two kinds of peace: the peace of the elite that is saying peace on one side of the mouth and on the other side is ordering killings of people, and our peace, built from our own efforts, peace from below. This peace we will not achieve overnight but there is no other way out . . . this process must come from our own community.”

While one must be cautious not to romanticize black communities as inherently “peaceful” (and thus free from intracommunity forms of oppression such as patriarchy and homophobia), we must be attentive to these alternative imaginaries as they reveal the need to *decolonize peace* (Azarmandi 2017) in a war-torn country in which blacks have been the traditional preys of violence. One step forward in the decolonization process is to consider *peacetime* as a racialized temporality enjoyed by those whose skin color positions them in a different space–time coordinates from those who inhabit a permanent state of war. Paraphrasing Costa Vargas, one could say that “the elapsed time, imagined time, experienced time” of transition is an *impossible chronos*. Within this impossible time, “the black subject is an impossible subject, one whose impossible gender, impossible blackness, impossible being, inhabits the very impossible co-ordinates that makes the nation possible” (2012:5).<sup>7</sup> That is not to ignore the unspeakable cruelty and range of civilian victimization across racial and ethnic lines in one of the longest armed conflicts in the world. It is hard to deny, for instance, that a large portion of the poor racially ambiguous mestizo population is also victim of the armed conflict. It begs the question: how do we account for the racial project of peacemaking in the face of astonishing scales of widespread victimization of mestizo ‘peasants’ in Colombia?

In her analysis of the indigenous/peasant relationship, scholar Diana Bocarejo (2009) argues that state and international institutions invest in an “environmental fetishism” that exacerbates tensions between these two groups. In Colombia, neoliberal multiculturalism links indigenous groups to land, all while it also facilitates violence against poor peasants and keeps the unjust agrarian structure untouched. This author asks for a consideration of the ways race, space, and class are reified and articulated in the production of what she refers to as “deceptive utopias” that “portrays indigenous people and peasants as incommensurable communities” (2009:32). This is an important call that my Afrocentric analysis does not wish to overlook. Instead, I want to argue that at least in African-diasporic societies such as Colombia, a better anthropological understanding of victimization at large must consider the colonial trajectory of terror—or “the genealogical footprint of slavery” (Rosero-Labbé 2007)—which continues to inform contingent and ontological categories of killable populations.

While we must be attentive to the ways the racial state subverts and regulates differences in the name of multicultural governance—and while attention must be driven to the ways peasants are *racialized* in dominant narratives (see Courtheyn 2018)—it is also imperative to remind ourselves of the *original violence* that continues to authorize and to inform bodily and land dispossession across racial groups in Colombia and Latin America’s state-endorsed multiculturalism. Can the experience of the campesino be equated to the structural antagonism that informs black (and in a different degree indigenous) subjugation in Colombia? If being blackened or indigenized is meant to live a disgraced life, what does it tell us about normalized violence against these groups? Is there room for cross-race solidarity? If the intersectional dimension of victimization in scenarios of war continues to remind us that anthropology can still do better in explaining the troubling relationship between armed conflicts and identity politics in Colombia (see Lugo 2010), the paradigmatic place of blacks in peacetimes/wartimes, in relation to poor, indigenous, and other racialized subjects (Arocha 1998; Londoño 2010; Quiñones 2016), further complicates the *postwar* narratives.<sup>8</sup> Rather than denying other particular stories of an ugly war that has killed thousands and dispossessed millions—the body count includes trade unionists, environmentalists and especially peasants murdered to open the way for the land-grabbing, cocaine production, and agro-industry expansion—here I want to emphasize the explosive combination of historical and contemporary conditions of racial precarity that seems to bind black people to an “irredeemable past” (Hartman 2007:233). Of special concern is the situation of black Colombian women whose “triple discrimination based on their sex, extreme poverty and race” (CIDH 2011:25) produces multiple layers of victimization before, during and after the armed conflict.

Because black (and indigenous) bodies have historically been the raw material—“cannon fodder”—for projects of nation building in Latin America,

a collective agreement on the trans-historic black condition may be the common ground to call into question the very idea of transition. Indeed, one cannot help but ask: transition toward what? The answer to such a question may be quite disturbing: nothing will change because this is a “peace” that reaffirms, rather than challenges, the Colombian racial order opened with colonialism. At least within the context of my ethnographic work, for the black population living under the *políticas de muerte*, as voiced by Maria and by Francia Marquez, not only must the word “post” be interrogated but also the very word “conflict” must be brought into sharp focus. It’s a crucial point because, as suggested elsewhere, while some groups are killed for their class status and political orientation, blacks are killed for their ontological mark of Other, enslaved, non-beings. Within the structure of Humanity and its ontological grammar of suffering, Frank Wilderson incisively contends, “Blackness refers to an individual who is by definition always already void of relationality” (2010:18).

Still, how then do we account for such structural condition without trivializing critical distinctions between peace and war? How do anthropologists interrogate such temporalities without falling into a nihilist trap that denies legitimate aspirations and tireless efforts of black Colombians to reorganize everyday life in the aftermaths of the conflict? I tried to initiate the discussion with my comadre in El Guayacán: “So, how about the peace? Changes in the horizon”? She promptly answered back: “*Me estas tomando de recocha, mijito* [are you pulling my leg, dear]? What peace”?

### **Post-Scriptum**

On May 4, 2019, Francia Marquez (and other black activists including Carlos Rosero and Victor Hugo Moreno) survived yet another assassination attempt as she participated in a mobilization effort to protect black territories against land-grabbing in southwest Colombia. Once again we all were at downtown Cali protesting against the systematic assault on black bodies and black territories. This time, Francia made a dramatic appeal that should be taken serious also by the reader of this piece: “when you leave us alone, you all are also responsible for our death. Don’t come and tell me you admire my struggle, that I am a strong woman. When are you finally going to act?”

### **Acknowledgments**

This research has been supported by the IDRC (International Development Research Centre) and Universidad Icesi. I would like to thank JLACA’s anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback, as well as Tathagatan Ravindran, Vicenta



Moreno, Debaye Mornan, Aurora Vergara, Inge Valencia, Enrique Caporali, and colleagues at the Interseccionalidades Research Group for their valuable insights on Colombia's postpeace deal. Finally, I thank Francia Marquez and many other (anonymous) black activists for educating me on the challenges for real peace as we marched in the streets of Cali. This article is dedicated to Lucerito and Genaro, two victims of "white peace."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For a critical discussion of the overlooked "emotional factor" that may explain disparate reactions to the peace deal in Colombia, see Jimeno (2017:162). Like Jimeno, scholar Gómez-Correal (2015:112) also examines the role of emotion as a political resource mobilized by the elite (a "hegemonic emotional habitus") to secure popular support for their agenda and as an embodied form of resistance mobilized by the direct victims to create alternative affective community.

<sup>2</sup>Quotes from Mirna Rojas are from a lecture delivered at the CUNY Graduate Center in November 2016. Quotes from Lena are from formal interviews. As for Francia Marquez, Maria, and the other individuals appearing here, quotes may not be exact since they are the result of informal interactions, meetings, and public demonstrations. The names of public figures (Francia, and Charo) are disclosed. I opted for changing the names of ordinary residents of El Guayacán.

<sup>3</sup>As has been noted, this widespread phenomenon has produced devastating human and environmental outcomes in predominantly indigenous and black territories of countries such as Colombia, Peru, and Brazil (see Rossi 2016).

<sup>4</sup>FARC later admitted that one of its unities killed Genaro Garcia.

<sup>5</sup>For President Santos' sermon on development in the postconflict, see <http://wp.presidencia.gov.co/Noticias/2014/Octubre/Paginas/2014101702-Entre-todos-vamos-a-construir-un-nuevo-pais-subrayo-el-Presidente-Santos-en-Cali.aspx> (accessed December 20, 2016).

<sup>6</sup>In defense of "Afro-pessimism," Sexton asks: "Does (the theorization of) social death negate (the theorization of) social life, and is social life the negation (in theory) of that negation (in theory)?" And he answers: "the most radical negation of the antiblack world is the most radical affirmation of a blackened world" (Sexton 2011:35–36).

<sup>7</sup>See also Sharpe's forceful discussion on "the wake" as both a *repetition* of black trauma and a possibility for disrupting these "interminable events" (2016:19).

<sup>8</sup>In this regard, Colombian scholars have used the concept of *ethnic asymmetries* to refer to the different ways the Colombian state (and civil society) incorporated indigeneity and blacks in narratives of nation making (for a discussion, see Londoño 2010).

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