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Contesting Displacement in Colombia

Citizenship and State Sovereignty at the Margins

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Control will be strict in the frontiers of the future,

Only the survivors will be admitted.

—Mario Bendetti, *Inventario*

On my first trip to Colombia in October 2000, I visited Barrancabermeja in the department of Santander in the region referred to as Magdalena Medio—a lush, green river valley located in the hills east of Antioquia, west of Venezuela and north of Bogotá. Barranca, with a population of some 300,000, is an urban center. It also forms one of the many internal frontiers where we can see how the mechanisms of state control are reconfigured in relation to displaced communities. I argue in this chapter that such communities are not only objects of state control but are actively involved in shaping their futures in relation to the state. With assistance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), I went to Barranca to interview internally displaced Colombians who struggle with what it means to be Colombian while living a disjointed existence, disarticulated from their communities and pushed to survive at the margins of the Colombian state (Das et al. 2000:1–19). The UNHCR office is located in Barranca’s one high-rise building, the Estrella, which has twelve floors. From the UNHCR balcony, one sees a large oil refinery to the far left. To the right is a densely treed neighborhood where oil company administrators live. Adjacent to the headquarters is a large army base, and directly in front

are the grid streets of Barranca. Beyond the grid, the horizon holds the numerous unpaved barrios of the city's poor and working people. During my stay, music from discos floated up into the night, and the streets were filled with traffic and nightlife, despite the fact that for more than two months, at least two bombs had exploded each week. Just beyond the street cafés and discos, the town abruptly stops at the river to the right. On the other side of the river and down its banks, FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrillas control the territory.¹

On my first day, I traveled across internal frontiers of the state, demarcated in Barranca by army checkpoints, to one of the poor barrios. My guide was Esmeralda, a local leader of displaced communities now precariously resettled in the peripheral barrios. Our taxi driver had been assigned to us by the Popular Feminine Organization (OFP), a local NGO working with displaced women in poor barrios. Our driver was *de confianza* (trustworthy) and was directed by an OFP leader to "stay with them at all times and bring them back safely." We traveled out to the barrios to meet with displaced women and visit OFP barrio projects.² At one project, a local youth leader said, "Our work is difficult. We open a space here so that youths have a place to distract themselves from the violence that surrounds us. We hope that this violence will end. We struggle for life" (author's interview October 2000).

As we left her barrio, we came upon twenty-four professional soldiers at a military checkpoint. The exact status of this checkpoint within a legal-administrative framework was unclear. On the one hand, these spaces are set up presumably to protect citizens against threats of terror, but on the other hand, the military or paramilitary personnel at these checkpoints may unleash violence on people they consider "suspect" (see also Jeganathan in this volume). The barrio checkpoint that stopped us is one of the many frontiers that crisscross Barranca and the rest of the country. Three vehicles were stopped ahead of us. The bicycles and mopeds of five youths were strewn over the street. On our right, four of the youths had their hands on a wall and stood spread-eagled as four soldiers frisked them roughly. Two other soldiers pushed another youth toward the wall as they took his schoolbag. They laughed as they emptied the bag's contents onto the street. The soldiers appeared to be pushing the youths into the wall as they asked them

questions. A large, black personnel tank with no windows on the sides towered over the stopped vehicles in front of the checkpoint. *La Policía en Busqueda de Paz*, “The Police in Search of Peace,” was written on the side of the tank in large white letters. The rest of the soldiers pointed their machine guns at the youths, at the people in the cars in front of us, and at us. To our left, the commander stood in the middle of the road, laughing as he aimed his machine gun at each vehicle. All these soldiers, including their commander, fingered the triggers of their machine guns.

This checkpoint was manned by professional soldiers. They were easy to distinguish from the eighteen-year-old recruits who had nervously reviewed our papers at other army checkpoints. The professionals were in their late twenties to early thirties. They were large and muscular, as opposed to the skinny kids who fill the ranks. These soldiers wore black bandanas around their heads and belts of machine gun ammunition crisscrossing their chests in what Colombians refer to as “Rambo-style.”

As we pulled up to the commander, our taxi driver tensed the muscles in the back of his neck. Esmeralda trembled. When we neared the commander, machine gun barrels entered the open car windows. We stopped in front of him, and the soldiers stepped back. The commander continued laughing. He pointed his machine gun inside our car, first through the driver’s window, nearly touching the driver’s temple, then into my window, waving us along as the barrel touched the hair on the side of my head. We drove off in silence. When we were out of sight of the soldiers, we began to talk about our powerlessness and inability to help the detained youths. “There is nothing to be done,” said the taxi driver. “They would just finish off all of us.”³ At the OFP office, I was asked to make an official complaint about the army’s behavior to the Defensor Publico (Public Defender’s Office). After I gave the public defender specifics about the incident, he told me that he would write a letter to the local army base commander. He also told me that the professional soldiers were elite troops, trained by the United States in counterinsurgency, and that in the two weeks since the elite troops had arrived, there had been many problems in the barrio. “The problem is, they believe they can do whatever they want, because they can,” he explained.

Academic and policy analysts commonly point to Colombia as a weak or “failed” state, citing the inability of state agencies to fulfill administrative mandates (such as the public defender’s inability to do anything more than write a letter to the army base commander) (CPDH 1991; DP 1999). My research, however, suggests that Colombia is neither a failed state nor a state lacking in functioning infrastructure. Rather, it is a state in which the actions of the elected government, bureaucratic agencies, and legal apparatus are, in large part, determined by the reconstitution of the state and its infrastructure at its margins through the army’s use of surveillance and state-sanctioned violence, including the use of proxy paramilitary forces. Moreover, many who argue that Colombia is a failed state also favor strengthening the Colombian army, which indicates a more than implicit recognition of the army as integral to state power. At the same time, this argument contradicts the failed-state thesis. In this chapter, I want to explore how the state exercises power in marginal areas over which it claims to have little control, yet in which it maintains or strengthens its centralized base of power through the use of violence and surveillance—at least temporarily and at great cost to its citizens. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000:39) suggest that “the sovereignty of Empire itself is realized at the margins, where borders are flexible and identities are hybrid and fluid. It would be difficult to say which is more important for Empire, the center or its margins.” Though Hardt and Negri refer to the sovereignty of a globalized, post–nation-state empire, their point about sovereignty being realized at the margins is applicable to the nation-state’s constitution and reconstitution of sovereignty as well.

Building on Walter Benjamin’s belief that the “state of exception” is the rule in which we live, Giorgio Agamben identifies the sovereign as “having the legal power to suspend the validity of law” and thereby the power to be legally “outside the law.” (1998:55) In this sense, the notion of sovereignty is tied to the ability of the state to resort to a “state of exception,” “state of siege,” and/or suspension of citizen rights, which, in turn, enables it to exercise violence that is both inside and outside the law. If the location of power was limited to the nation-state, so, too, would be the constitution and reconstitution of sovereignty. But Michel Foucault challenged traditional juridico-institutional con-

ceptions of power, and thus sovereignty, by arguing that rather than look for a “central form” of power, one must seek to recognize power in its “multiplicity” of forms and study these forms as “relations of force that intersect, interrelate, converge, or, on the contrary, oppose one another or tend to cancel one another out.” (1997:59) Writing on “state-making” and the recent trials of Pinochet and Milosevic, Jacques Derrida observes the announcement of “a transformation” and “major event” in which the “sovereignty of the State, the immunity of the head of state are no longer in principle, in law, untouchable.” (2001:57) My own understanding of sovereignty is based on both Benjamin’s and Agamben’s theorizing that the “state of exception” is a marker of sovereignty, without losing Foucault’s recognition of the multiple locations of power and Derrida’s observation that the sovereignty of the state is no longer absolute. This framework provides an opportunity to “move beyond the unbounded borders of the nation-state” by acknowledging the nation as a contested space in which citizenship and state sovereignty are reconstituted at the margins (Angel-Ajani, n.d.:5). Further, it allows for examination of the relationship between citizenship and state sovereignty, recognizing that power rests in the citizens, as well as the state, and that the power of each is mutually constituted (even, and perhaps even more so, during a “state of exception”).

I consider the lived experiences of Colombians who have been displaced inside their country in order to understand the role of these marginalized actors in the complex processes that both challenge and reconstitute state sovereignty at its cultural and political margins. I understand the practice of displacement to be a key military strategy of war, rather than a byproduct (Sanford 2001). Thus, I want to problematize and investigate the interrelationship of the replication of this and related practices by the army, insurgent forces, and paramilitaries in their struggle for dominance and hegemonic power.

We can observe how the surveillance mechanisms of the state in Colombia slide into violence at a variety of frontiers: between urban and rural, between Colombia and neighboring states. My experience at the Colombian army’s urban checkpoint in Barranca helped me understand the multiple internal frontiers and margins of Colombia. In particular, when I visited the Peace Communities of the Urabá-Chocó region in 2000 and 2001, the army’s urban checkpoint called my

attention to the exercise of state power through army and paramilitary checkpoints along the Atrato River and its tributaries. The struggle for dominance in this region is both a means and an end for the army, the paramilitaries, and the guerrillas because the river and its tributaries are strategic pathways for the smuggling of guns, money, and cocaine.

In this chapter, I focus on Colombia's fifty-nine self-proclaimed Peace Communities, which I suggest challenge and reconstitute citizenship and state practices (with important implications for sovereignty) by constituting new domains for the production of truth—domains in which Foucault found the very “practice of true and false” to be transformed (1980:131–32). Moreover, these new domains represent new sites on which the state is sought to be made transparent and accountable to its citizens, even as they face the kind of power tactics deployed by the army and paramilitary that I have described. In the Peace Communities, these sites are constituted at the local level within the communities themselves; at the regional level, through the accretion of truth when expressed by the collectivity of communities; at the national level, through involvement of the Catholic Church, national and international NGOs, and unarmed agents of the state itself; and at the international level, through the political brokering of the UNHCR, international NGOs, and international observers.

In the summer of 2001, while international and urban Colombian hopes for resolution of the armed conflict through peace negotiations remained high, the peace process had no visible or experiential impact on state surveillance and violence, or on the state and paramilitary confrontations with FARC guerrillas, which had become a quotidian factor of peasant life in the Peace Communities. Describing the Urabá-Chocó region of Colombia, Father Leonides Moreno said, “Here there is no peace process. Here there is dominion and the territorial advance of armed actors” (author's interview July 5, 2001). Indeed, until 1996, Chocó had been the dominion of the FARC for two decades. In 1996, the FARC's domination of the region was challenged by paramilitaries (who have long-standing and close ties to the Colombian army and trace their roots to serving as hired guns for plantations, factories, and drug lords). Many who today occupy high-ranking positions in the Colombian army were material and intellectual authors of paramilitary violence in the 1980s. As commanders of the armed forces, they have

ties to the paramilitaries, including coordination of army/paramilitary maneuvers.⁴ In the words of one international functionary, “It took the paramilitaries less than four years to conquer the territory it had taken the FARC two decades to occupy” (author’s interview October 2000). The key to paramilitary success in gaining control of the region was to attack river communities, violently displacing more than 45,000 people. The fifty-nine Peace Communities that exist today represent some 12,000 displaced people who have returned to their lands. Urabá-Chocó is one of the many embattled margins of the Colombian state. It is precisely because margins function like states of exception that they become important sites for understanding the way in which notions of sovereignty and exception are tied together. The use of paramilitary forces to control checkpoints highlights the manner in which control is vested into agents who are in one sense outside the law but in another sense are inside the law, for they are able to function precisely because they enjoy the protection of the state. This situation makes the rural and urban margins the terrain from which such agents, functioning both within and outside the state, can establish, consolidate, and advance their exercise of power (HRW 1998b). Thus, as in the cases discussed by Poole and Roitman in this volume, it is also at these margins that the privatization of state violence is revealed.

THE PEACE COMMUNITY OF CACARICA

My experience in Colombian Peace Communities began in October 2000 when I participated in the UNHCR-coordinated accompaniment of the displaced residents of Cacarica on their return to their village. Paramilitaries had displaced the residents in February 1999. In addition to the UNHCR, the displaced were also accompanied by representatives of Peace Brigades International, Justicia y Paz (Justice and Peace), Humanidad Vigente (Vigilant Humanity), the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of the Interior, the vice president’s office, the Defensor Público, the Human Rights Ombudsman, and the Red de Solidaridad Social (Social Solidarity Network, also a government organization).

Cacarica is a Peace Community. Peace Communities are small, mostly rural river villages that have organized to assert their neutral, nonviolent stance in the face of the surveillance, control, and extreme violence of the army, paramilitaries, and guerrillas. By declaring their

village a Peace Community, residents are demanding that armed groups stay out of their village.

Cacarica is located in the Urabá zone in northern Chocó and northwestern Antioquia. Urabá is a strategic area located on the Panamanian frontier. To reach Cacarica, we traveled by boat from the port city of Turbo across the Gulf of Urabá for about two hours until we reached the Atrato River. At the Atrato, we entered the jungle. We traveled the river for about four hours, then traveled along a small tributary for another two hours to reach the path to Cacarica. From the start of the path, it is a two-hour hike through the jungle to the actual village. Paramilitaries dominate the rivers and tributaries here. Both guerrillas and paramilitaries use the Atrato to move weapons from Panama. Cacarica is closer to Panama than to any other Colombian town.

The entire Urabá area is rich in natural resources desirable to international businesses and local elites. Both national and international companies have amassed great wealth via the extraction of wood here. In addition, many people believe that the region contains oil. Urban elites in Urabá-Chocó also talk about a new canal being built through this area, as well as the development of lucrative African palm oil tree plantations. Indeed, a December 6, 2001, article in the Colombian newspaper *El Tiempo* noted international interest in both a canal and oil extraction in this region.⁵ Moreover, the Atrato and Sucio Rivers, their tributaries, and the surrounding jungle are principal corridors for moving armed columns, weapons, cocaine, and money.

The location and geography of both guerrillas and paramilitaries in this region highlight the intense competition for control of the rivers and river communities that form the physical, cultural, political, and economic frontiers of the state. This is not to suggest that the river communities are the only frontiers or margins of the state. On the contrary, geographical, political, economic, and cultural frontiers and margins of the state can be found throughout Colombia, including but not limited to urban peripheries, rural communities, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, as well as the shadow economies and cultures of coca growing, drug trafficking, gunrunning, and money laundering. The colonization of these rivers was the focus of the most recent waves (late 1970s to early 1990s) of state-sanctioned migration, development,

and frontier expansion. In the Urabá-Chocó region, guerrilla expansion in the zone paralleled colonization until the early 1990s, when the paramilitaries, in tandem with the Colombian army, began attempts to regain state control of the rivers. This increasing occupation by paramilitaries ultimately displaced overt army control (or made it unnecessary). Nonetheless, to travel the rivers of the jungle, one must pass through numerous Colombian army checkpoints. While this region has been considered historically an economic, territorial, and social frontier of the state, these checkpoints, and the columns of paramilitaries and guerrillas one comes upon between them, point to the overlap and tension between the concepts of frontiers and margins. The rivers represent the margins of state sovereignty, where the violence and regulatory powers of the state become clearly privatized in both guerrilla and paramilitary maneuvers and checkpoints. In this sense, the rivers are more than territorial or social frontiers. They are margins that run through the spectral state. For example, though the Colombia-Ecuador border is patrolled by Colombian and Ecuadorian state agents (immigration, customs, armed forces), the massive “illegal” movement of arms, armed columns, drugs, money, and undocumented immigration constitutes a margin of the state as well.

Like most displacement in Colombia, the February 1999 Cacarica displacement was not the first or the last in the region. In the Cacarica area, paramilitaries displaced 2,000 people (civilians) in 1997 (author’s interview August 2001). The alleged strength (or alleged civilian support) of the guerrillas was used to justify development of paramilitaries as a strategy to retake territory. The paramilitaries consolidated their control using displacement as the principal tactic to empty the zone of any possible guerrilla support.

According to those who have been displaced, displacement operations are joint maneuvers between the paramilitaries and the army. The army frequently uses planes and helicopters to bomb civilian areas, forcing inhabitants to flee while paramilitaries carry out ground maneuvers, destruction of the physical community, threats to and assassinations of those deemed subversive or potentially so, and sometimes full-scale massacres (author’s interviews 2000 and 2001). A paramilitary who had recently returned from combat confirmed survivor testimonies. Specifically about massacres, he told me, “Human rights are a

problem. Now we can't massacre everyone, we have to kill them one by one, one by one" (author's interview August 7, 2001).⁶

In February 1999, paramilitaries entered Cacarica and ordered community members to displace themselves within twenty days. They were told to go to Turbo, where they were to be received by the police. For the residents of Cacarica, who have only heavy wooden boats with small outboard motors, this trip took around eight hours. However, the trip takes only two hours in the high-powered boats available to only UN, Peace Brigade, and Colombian military personnel.

When Cacarica residents reached Turbo, the local police were waiting for them. The newly homeless were taken to the local soccer field, where the police told them to set up camp. At the field, there were no services whatsoever—no running water, no sanitation, no shelter—nothing but a field. At this juncture, the Catholic social justice group *Justicia y Paz* became involved with the community.⁷ *Justicia y Paz*, a Bogotá-based Catholic social justice organization, pushed for the provision of basic health care, water, sanitation, food, and other humanitarian services. It was able to considerably improve the basic quality of life for displaced Cacarica residents with the assistance of Oxfam, Doctors without Borders, and the International Red Cross. However, it is important to keep in mind that the displaced of Cacarica represent only 2,000 of the 280,000 civilians displaced by violence in 1999.

THE STATE AND ITS PROXY FORCES

In the Urabá area, paramilitaries control the northern part of Urabá, Antioquia, and Córdoba; paramilitary leader Carlos Castaño dominates this area. Paramilitaries in Urabá and elsewhere support local economic powers and move freely from north to south in their areas of control (except for mountainous areas dominated by guerrillas). At the state's multiple margins, these aspects of state practices become evident through army maneuvers and paramilitary checkpoints. Indeed, in Apartadó, army soldiers patrol the streets—guarding the restaurants and bars where off-duty paramilitaries eat, drink, and dance. Traveling from Apartadó to the beach town of Necocli on public transportation, our bus was stopped and/or waved through five times at paramilitary checkpoints, as army vehicles moved up and down the highway and army platoons patrolled the highway at the periphery of

each town less than a kilometer from each paramilitary checkpoint. The infrastructure of Colombian army patrols, troop maneuvers, and security checkpoints lends protection to the paramilitaries and allows them safe freedom of movement and action. Once revealed, this relationship between the army and the paramilitaries, which is mutually beneficial on a strategic level, makes legible a relationship of power intended to remain illegible by proxy paramilitaries of the state operating in the anonymity of the margins of the state. Thus, what at first glance appears to be simply a privatization of state violence is revealed in practice as state violence by proxy.

Displacement in the Urabá area can be traced back to the founding of the paramilitaries between 1994 and 1995 (Comisión Andina de Juristas Seccional 1996; García 1996). Indeed, the largest barrio in Apartadó is Barrio Obrero, founded by civilians displaced by paramilitaries between 1995 and 1997. Today Barrio Obrero is controlled by paramilitaries and *sicarios*, or hired thugs. In this way, marginalized communities on the urban peripheries also become margins of the state and sites of contention where state sovereignty is made visible through violence and surveillance. As is the case in other areas, it is the use of proxy paramilitary forces that shows how sovereignty stands both inside and outside the law.⁸

The paramilitaries have used displacement as their central military tactic in rural areas. On the urban peripheries, paramilitaries most often use threats, disappearances, and assassinations in their exercise of state power. While agents of the state may assert little to no control within these communities, in fact, the ranks of the paramilitaries comprise poor young men recruited shortly after completing military service in the Colombian army (and therefore they are trained by the Colombian army prior to joining the paramilitaries). Moreover, on the streets of Apartadó in broad daylight, I witnessed an older man in plain clothes giving orders to a group of soldiers on the street. I also witnessed an army official in uniform giving orders to a group of young men, who, as they say in Apartadó, *tenían pinta de paramilitares* (had the paint [or mask] of paramilitaries), referring to their carriage, style, and dress.

Operación Limpieza (Operation Social Cleansing) is a parallel system of justice that paramilitaries have established in the urban areas

now claimed in their dominion. In this parallel system of justice, it is safe to leave items in one's car in Apartadó, for example, because a person seen stealing will be shot. Indeed, this system is part of the phenomenon of social cleansing targeting drug users, street children, prostitutes, and petty thieves. Social cleansing also targets NGO leaders and members, as well as other poor individuals, who are killed if they try to organize a union or protest injustice. One example of this parallel system of justice took place in the spring of 2001 near Apartadó. A mayor called a community meeting with local leaders, who were organizing for the rights of banana plantation workers. He offered to facilitate communication between the plantation and the workers. He passed around a sign-up sheet for the meeting, which was scheduled to take place the following week. Within one week, all but one person who had signed the list had been killed. As the individual who recounted this story on condition of anonymity pointed out, "Now the victims sign their names to the death lists" (author's interview August 6, 2001). Actions such as this are carried out in the name of "citizen security," which depoliticizes structures of state terror by placing them outside the framework of international human rights and humanitarian law.

This social cleansing needs to be discussed in terms of human-rights violations, and the victims of social cleansing need to be included in inventories that quantify victims of political assassinations. The killings constitute political means and have political ends—they create and sustain terror among those who most need to organize to defend their rights. At the same time, social cleansing provides a level of assurance to the middle and upper classes, who may feel protected from crime and view the victims of social cleansing as something less than human, living on the margins of society. Indeed, one international human-rights worker commented, "It's nice to be able to leave the doors unlocked and the windows open when I am not home—it's a benefit of the paras" (author's interview July 2001).

Theoretically, we need an idiom to argue that these are political killings because they are not common crime: they are systematic because they target specific populations. If victims of social cleansing are not included in the quantification of human-rights violations, a commentator will speak about the number of political killings (5,000 per year) and then point out that the number of "nonpolitical" assassi-

nations (25,000 to 30,000 per year) was actually higher. This simplification of an incredibly complicated political situation allows for the conclusion that Colombia is simply a “violent” country and Colombians are “by nature” violent people, or that they have a “culture of violence” (comments I have heard both inside and outside Colombia) (see Poole ed. 1994). In addition to the obvious racism and ethnocentrism, this type of conclusion is especially problematic because it negates the political character of the conflict and implies that there can be no political solution because these people and this culture are “by nature” simply violent.

In Urabá today, the paramilitaries control municipalities through alliance with, or representation of, local economic power interests. They act in ways consistent with racketeers or mob bosses, charging for protection and operating like Pinkertons with *carte blanche*. The guerrillas dominate the mountains; the paramilitaries control the rivers and municipalities. The guerrillas are around the rivers, and the paramilitaries are around the mountains. The Colombian army is present at checkpoints on the rivers, in helicopters flying overhead, and in ground maneuvers around (and often through) Peace Communities. The civilians are everywhere in between the guerrillas, the paramilitaries, and the army.

NEW SITES OF STATE LEGIBILITY

Between 1997 and 1998, Justicia y Paz sought support from international human-rights NGOs and foreign embassies to pressure the Colombian government to broker the safe return of the displaced residents of Cacarica to their homes. With support from the UNHCR and international and national NGOs, the displaced were able to formalize their efforts in December 1999 in agreements with the Colombian government that allowed their safe return to their lands as Peace Communities. These agreements contained several key guarantees from the government pertaining to the security, protection, education, health care, and documentation (including land titles and personal identification) of the displaced people from Cacarica.

For security, a Casa de Justicia (local house of justice or small court) was to be established, with a civilian representative from the national government reinforcing the community’s position of neutrality with the armed actors, including the paramilitaries, guerrillas, and

army. The actual Casa de Justicia building has been constructed, and a government representative is now residing in the community.

A particularly significant point in the agreements is that no armed entity (legal, illegal, or extralegal)—including the army, guerrillas, and paramilitaries, respectively—may enter the territory of the community. Indeed, at the entrance to Cacarica, a hand-painted sign in the Peace Communities' rainbow colors states: "We are a Peace Community. We are special because we do not carry any weapons. No armed actors, whether legal or illegal, are permitted in our community." Further, the agreements guarantee that there will be no collaboration with any armed groups. This guarantee is among the central concerns of all communities in zones of conflict, because if the army enters a community, the residents become guerrilla targets, and if guerrillas enter a community, the residents become targets of the paramilitaries and the army. Thus the Peace Communities do not want any armed actors entering their territories. This provision is particularly significant for female peasants, who are often forced to provide food and lodging to armed men passing through their communities. Though pressured to give support, the act of doing so makes the women military targets for the next group that comes through.

The agreements between Cacarica and the Colombian government are significant for Cacarica residents because they allowed residents to return to their homes. The agreements are also viewed as a model for other displaced residents seeking to return home, as well as those seeking to consolidate their independence from armed actors. The agreements also represent the possibilities for mutually reconstituting state sovereignty and citizenship at the margins of the state. While state violence and surveillance at the margins continue to reconstitute state power and sovereignty, the agreements reached with the Peace Communities suggest that subaltern agency, by asserting citizenship rights and creating new sites for political action through local, national, and international alliances, also plays a role in the constitution of state sovereignty and state legibility (see Coronil 1997; Dirlik 2000; Sassen 2000; J. Scott 1998; Das this volume). The agreements reached with the Peace Communities, as well as the actual existence of the Peace Communities, represent a new form of subaltern contestation to the armed ambition of the Colombian army, paramilitaries, and

guerrillas. This contestation challenges the power of the armed actors by offering a new terrain of engagement without recourse to violence. The agreements represent subaltern engagement in the reconstitution of the state at its margins, making the presence of the state more legible on the frontiers of the Peace Communities and, indeed, transforming the state itself (for an interesting comparison, see Roldán 2002).

Of course, the agreements are only the beginning of the process. The implementation will determine its success or failure. The government representative in Cacarica is from the Ministry of the Interior. Ostensibly, it is his job to ensure that no armed groups enter the community's territory. Of course, one wonders how one man from the Ministry of the Interior is going to implement such a monumental task. In addition, issues that at first seemed clear suddenly appear murky. For example, where does the territory of the community begin and end? Who decides? Is it a violation if an armed group is outside the community? surrounding it? walking through it? What if an armed group makes threats to community members farther down the river? Who is responsible to adjudicate? How will the government respond? What if the soldiers sent in response are among the 12,000 professional soldiers trained by the United States in counterinsurgency tactics? A Colombian army official, when asked about the paramilitaries, said, "The enemy of the paramilitary is my enemy. So the paramilitary is my friend" (author's interview December 2001). Will army soldiers protect villagers from paramilitaries when the paramilitaries claim that the villagers are "subversives" or support the guerrillas?

Particularly worrisome is the diffuse structure of justice between the responsibilities, obligations, and powers of the Human Rights Ombudsman, Ministry of Interior, Defensor Público, and prosecutor's office. The Casa de Justicia can receive a complaint and advise the various ministries of the complaint, but it can take no penal action. The Human Rights Ombudsman can investigate and sanction, but it mostly focuses its energies on prevention of human-rights violations. The public defender's office promotes and distributes information about human rights; it also provides technical assistance to people seeking redress. The prosecutor's office investigates rights violations but can take no preventative actions on behalf of human rights. What does this convoluted structure mean when an armed group violates the

agreements by entering the territory of Cacarica? Which office is responsible for which aspect of a claim? How are the residents to know? And doesn't this situation make inaction (due to confusion and/or fear) easy for functionaries?

Further, the Canadian government donated a speedboat and a satellite communication system for the Casa de Justicia so that the government representative can notify the army, police, and Ministry of the Interior if an armed group enters the community. This equipment arrived in July 2000. In mid-October, the Defensor Publico and Human Rights Ombudsman were still fighting about who was responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of the equipment; the boat was not in use because they had not yet determined who would pay for gas. The Social Solidarity Network was helping both offices reach an interinstitutional agreement outlining responsibility for maintenance and upkeep of the equipment. The Social Solidarity Network folks are familiar with this dilemma—they, too, had a boat but no resources to pay for gas. In sum, the Casa de Justicia in Cacarica has a rustic house, one staff person, equipment that is still not up and running, no house for the representative to live in, no computer, and an extremely complicated, dangerous, and ill-defined mandate to carry out.

It is also important to note that the agreements are being carried out with accompaniment and implementation of programs by representatives from the national government (not the local government, because it is dominated by paramilitaries). Still, despite a convoluted mandate, the agreements have established limits to the way the state can operate on the margins. The new administrative sites are amplified from local to international domains through the presence of national and international NGOs. Representatives of Justicia y Paz, Peace Brigades, and other national and international groups are living in Cacarica with retornados (the returned) to increase their safety and security. Justicia y Paz continues to seek safety and peace for other displaced communities, and Peace Brigades now has four offices throughout the country. Each group provides regular updates to the international community through Web sites, e-mail lists, speaking tours in the United States and Europe, and international observation tours in Colombia. It is through this process, and through their collectivity as Peace Communities and their administrative relationships to unarmed state actors, that each Peace Community transcends its locality as a

mere village on a river in Colombia and becomes a site for the reconstitution of state sovereignty. Moreover, the constitution of Peace Communities becomes a new site from which the international community can judge the Colombian state and put pressure on it regarding the way the state exercises power.⁹ In this way, river communities, though still geographically isolated margins of the Colombian state, are no longer simply sites of state surveillance and violence for the reconstitution of state power and sovereignty but are also new sites of state legibility presenting possibilities for subaltern transformation of state sovereignty and citizenship.

Finally, though the displaced of Cacarica were able to return to their homes, this return did not mark an end to displacement in the area, nor did it finalize state sovereignty or citizenship. In September 2000, just two weeks prior to the Cacarica return, paramilitaries displaced 1,300 indigenous people in nearby Carepa. The precarious situation of the displaced and the Peace Communities is further deteriorating with the increased militarization that Plan Colombia has brought to the countryside. Thus, even though Peace Communities are now players in the exercise of power at the state's margins, this contested space is a cartography of Hardt and Negri's margins "where the borders are flexible and identities are hybrid and fluid" (2000:39).

DISPLACEMENT AND CITIZENSHIP

For Peace Community members, current paramilitary attacks and displacement of nearby communities become part of a continuum in the *present* of memories of their own displacement in the *past*. Alfonso, who fled his community of Camelias in 1997, recalled, "Helicopters were bombing, and paramilitaries were firing machine guns. To go to the river to cut bananas was to risk one's life. They burned our village, and we lost all our rice. When the army would come, they would say, 'Don't be afraid of us, have fear of those who come after,' meaning the paramilitaries. They had no respect for our lives. We had to leave" (author's interview August 2001). Those internally displaced found themselves jobless and homeless, living in displacement camps scattered on the peripheries of Apartadó, Turbo, and San Jose Apartadó.

The politico-military shift of responsibility from the army to the paramilitaries has had dire consequences for the political and social well-being of Colombian society. Displacement is not a new phenomenon in

Colombia, but in the 1980s it was individuals who were displaced by targeted threats. Along with the entry of paramilitaries into the field of gross human-rights violations via political killings, forced displacement also increased drastically when the paramilitaries entered the politico-military theater in 1990. By 1995, there were 130,000 displaced; in 1996, another 180,000 people were displaced; in 1997, another 250,000 people were displaced; in 1998, 300,000; in 1999, 280,000; in 2000, more than 300,000 people were displaced. In total, that is more than 360 people fleeing their homes each day (CCJ 2000). According to UNHCR functionaries in Colombia, estimates for displacement in 2001 exceed the 300,000 displaced the preceding year (personal communication July 5, 2001). In 2003, human-rights groups report more than 1,000 people fleeing their homes each day (Hagen 2003:66). Though the government recognizes only 400,000 displaced people, humanitarian aid organizations counted 1.5 million displaced people as early as 2000 (CCJ 2000).

Hannah Arendt suggested that the term *displaced persons* was expressly invented for the liquidation of the category of statelessness ([1951] 1973:279), which paved the way for the loss of rights of citizenship, creating a category of the persecuted as rightless people. Significantly, she stated, “The more the number of rightless people increased, the greater became the temptation to pay less attention to the deeds of the persecuting governments than to the status of the persecuted” (294). Moreover, she pointed out that this shift from the deeds of the government to the needs of the displaced constituted an innocence, “in the sense of complete lack of responsibility,” which “was the mark of their rightlessness as [much as] it was the seal of their political status” (295), because as rightless people, she wrote, “their freedom of opinion is a fool’s freedom, for nothing they think matters” (296).

Mateo, a Peace Community leader, explained to me last summer, “When one is displaced, one loses the feeling of being Colombian, a citizen with rights and responsibilities. After many community meetings of the displaced, we decided to return together in 1999. We decided to live in the middle of the conflict because if we waited for it to end, we would never return to our lands. We opted for pure nonviolence. They should respect the decision of the people. If they want to fight with each other, they can—but not on our land and we won’t fight

with them. As the peace communities, we have a life of peace, not violence. Our goal is to support peace, not war” (Sanford 2001).

While staying in the Peace Community of Costa de Oro during July and August 2001 with Asale Angel-Ajani and Kimberly Theidon, we witnessed the tremendous pressures on the communities. On a humanitarian mission with a social service team from the diocese of Apartadó, accompanying the displacement of the communities of Andalucia and Camelias from a combat zone to Costa de Oro, we were stopped by guerrillas several times. Usually, there were two or three irregular forces. That is, they were not the regular uniformed combatants of the FARC but rather local recruits. Though armed, they did not brandish their weapons in a menacing way. We were also forcibly removed from our boats at gunpoint by several dozen paramilitaries, who twice detained our group—once for about an hour and once for about thirty minutes. The first time, when the paramilitaries commanded us to beach our small boats on the riverbank, they ordered us into a corridor they had cut into the jungle and shouted at us to “run like cattle.” As we ran into the jungle, some fifty-three paramilitaries with machine guns and mortar launchers said, “Here are the cattle. What shall we do with them?” However, when they saw our three international faces, they began to say, “Good morning, don’t worry. We won’t do anything to you.” This did not stop them from attempting to separate several young men from our group, however. Father Honelio intervened, telling the commander that if they wanted to talk with one of us, they would have to talk to all of us—effectively informing him that if they wanted to kill one of us, they would have to kill all of us. As Honelio explained, “We will not be separated as a group.” At this, the commander ordered a dozen or so paramilitaries to engage the guerrillas on the other side of the river in an exchange of mortar and machine gun fire. Had the guerrillas responded, the paramilitaries would have had more choices of how to handle us—because civilians often die in crossfire. Fortunately, the guerrillas did not respond.

This is not to paint the guerrillas as innocent actors. We were frequently told, “Both sides kill. The paras kill everyone; the guerrillas are more selective.” Indeed, when we were there, the paramilitaries were seeking to gain territorial dominion by displacing the Peace Communities, and the guerrillas were seeking to regain territorial

dominion by prohibiting villagers in the war zone from displacing. The state is not absent from this area, and paramilitary actions are not without an army presence. After twice being detained by the same paramilitary regiment (all in shiny new uniforms), we had spent nearly two hours with the same paramilitaries. On one occasion, when we returned to Apartadó, we ran into two paramilitaries at an ice cream store. As the wave of recognition passed over us, they began to smirk, and we made the ambiguous salutation “*Buenas tardes*” and kept walking. On another occasion, at an army checkpoint on the river, the commanding soldier was giving our papers the usual review. Though we had not previously seen him at an army checkpoint, Dr. Angel-Ajani and I recognized him—as one of the paramilitaries who had detained us. Once back on the river after clearing the checkpoint, we commented on how the paramilitary uniforms and weapons were so much newer than those of the army. Part of what made the commanding officer stand out was our memory of him in a new paramilitary uniform with new weaponry. At the checkpoint, his army uniform was shabby, faded, and frayed, and his belt and holster were worn and cracked.

Shortly after our departure in August, the paramilitaries seized control of several key communities, entered Costa de Oro, and occupied Curvarado—the last town you pass as you head upriver to the Peace Communities in the heart of the war zone. Paramilitaries killed several Curvarado functionaries, including a municipal secretary who had participated in one of the accompaniment missions. In early September, the paras seized Peace Community lands and killed four residents of Puerto Lleras, claiming the land while threatening to kill anyone who challenged them. Also in September, the guerrillas tightened control on tributaries under their command—including prohibiting the diocese teams from entering some communities. In late October, the paras forcibly recruited two boys from Costa de Oro, and the guerrillas ambushed a platoon of paramilitaries, killing at least thirty of them and reclaiming the territory and populations that the paras had conquered in September. In Curvarado, the guerrillas killed a peasant branded as a paramilitary collaborator. In late October, residents of Costa de Oro were very worried because one of their leaders was on the FARC’s list of people to be assassinated. On November 10, Father Honelio and another priest were prohibited from entering

Costa de Oro, then under definitive guerrilla control. At the time, one observer expressed fear that the paramilitaries would respond to the guerrillas with an even more severe attack on the communities. Indeed, on December 5, 2001, the guerrillas and the paramilitaries had a major battle in the town of Rio Sucio. Several hundred civilians were killed in the battle, which caused another wave of displacement of those fearing even greater retaliatory battles. On Christmas Day 2001, the guerrillas killed two youth leaders in Costa de Oro. At the time of this writing, in April 2003, the army has more checkpoints than ever along the Atrato River, and Peace Community movement along the river and its tributaries is restricted by the army, paramilitaries, and the FARC.¹⁰ The FARC controls all river tributaries and access to Peace Communities and towns except Curvarado (which remains a contested space) and Rio Sucio (which continues as a dominion of the paramilitaries). The diocese continues to accompany Peace Community residents, although the FARC sometimes impedes their movement on tributaries or prohibits entry into some Peace Communities.

I want to close by suggesting that despite the surveillance, control, and extreme violence experienced by the communities at the hands of the army, paramilitaries, and guerrillas, the fifty-nine Peace Communities continue because those who were rendered rightless by displacement made a decision to reassert their citizenship and their human rights by reclaiming their lands and reconstituting themselves as Colombian citizens in Peace Communities, thereby reconstituting state sovereignty from below. While the army, paramilitaries, and guerrillas continue to fight for hegemony through territorial dominion, and control of the population through displacement or infringement of freedom of movement, the Peace Communities create new domains for peace that can only be revealed in practice as a negation of war. By drawing administrative agencies and juridical representatives into their practices, the Peace Communities expose the contradictions of the state and especially the violence of its army and proxy forces. Borrowing from Giorgio Agamben, truth is revealed as “a taking-place of the false, as an exposure of its innermost impropriety” (1993:13). And this is possible because truth is an entity of the world that Foucault noted “is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint” and that “has regular effects of power” (1980:131).

I am not suggesting that life in the Peace Communities is some kind of romantic postmodern experience in which peace is achieved by virtue of being sought or that the Colombian state is magically transformed. However, my research and continued contact with the Peace Communities suggest that these effects of power are experienced in the everyday life of the community despite its current cycle of occupation by armed actors (who filter in and out of Peace Communities with fluidity) and that the reconstitution of citizenship has explicit effects on state sovereignty. Moreover, by establishing a new domain for the community practice of peace and human rights, the effects of this community power challenge not only the paramilitaries and guerrillas but also the spectral presence of the state, the state's production of a truth that defines the war as a drug war, and a state that makes and remakes sovereignty with legible and often illegible surveillance and violence. Remember Mateo's words: "We decided to live in the conflict." He also told me that "neither side is going to win, because they have lost the people" (author's interview August 2001). Father Leonides said, "It shouldn't be that those who make war define peace" (team interview July 5, 2001). The Peace Communities challenge military definitions of peace by constituting the rights of citizenship during the everyday experiences of those whom the state would reduce to "bare life" in the midst of conflict (Agamben 1998). Moreover, while surveillance and violence remain central state practices, by forcing the state to assert its power at the margins through administrative acts of law and service provision, these rights of citizenship reconstitute the state and the role of the citizen-subject on the very terrain upon which state sovereignty is realized.

EPILOGUE

In August 2002, Alvaro Uribe Velez was inaugurated as president of Colombia. Uribe ran his election campaign as a referendum against terrorism. Yet, his first actions after taking office only served to further institutionalize the militarization of the Colombian state. Among his key strategies for "democratic security," Uribe has (1) invoked emergency powers and declared a "state of internal unrest" that allows him to rule by decree in areas of extreme conflict that he has designated "Rehabilitation and Consolidation Zones," severely limiting outside contact to civilian populations in these areas; (2) begun training part-

time soldiers to form a “peasant army”; and (3) formed a national network of civilian informants, with the intention of involving one million Colombian citizens in spying on their neighbors. Each of these projects further blurs the distinction between paramilitaries, militias, and the state army.

Although the election of Uribe has increased the impunity of paramilitaries, the Peace Communities continue to create new modes of everyday life grounded in the enactment of a collective moral imagination of communities committed to peace. In October 2002, more than 2,000 representatives of fifty-six peace communities and several hundred national and international observers participated in the fifth anniversary celebration of the founding of Peace Communities. This gathering, held in the river town of Curvarado, reaffirmed the success and commitment of the 12,000 displaced Colombians who have returned to their lands in the combat zone to construct new lives as Peace Communities. A mass was held to celebrate life and remember those who gave their lives for peace. Ambassadors from Spain, Holland, and Sweden participated in the event, as did several delegations of international observers and representatives from national and international NGOs. At the close of the four-day celebration, internationals attending the gathering accompanied participants back to their communities, passing army, paramilitary, and guerrilla checkpoints along the way. In Costa de Oro, community member Don Rafael said, “We are still here. Peace is not an alternative. Peace is our only option.”

When I returned to Costa de Oro in February 2003, residents reported the continued presence of the FARC and paramilitaries in the jungle and rivers outlying their community. They also reported that there had been no violence against Costa de Oro residents since July of the preceding year. Resident Don Alvino explained, “They know that people are watching out for us and that what happens here doesn’t end here. And we don’t travel alone on the river anymore. We don’t send our young men out to the crops alone. We always travel in groups. They will never again have the opportunity to grab two or three of our youths or kill a leader traveling alone. Maybe they now know, finally understand, that we are not going to leave our lands. We live for peace. We live for our lands. These are the lands of our children. The peace communities are what our children will inherit, the example of living in peace. My God, I hope my children see peace.”

Notes

This chapter draws on research in the Urabá-Chocó region of Colombia in October 2000 and fieldwork conducted on the Ecuadorian-Colombian border with Asale Angel-Ajani and Notre Dame students Mariela Rodriguez, Jessica Scanlan, Kristi Green, and Karen Callan in May and June 2001. During July and August 2001, Dr. Angel-Ajani, Kimberly Theidon, and I conducted field research and accompanied the Peace Communities of Urabá-Chocó. I am grateful to the Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts, Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program, Graduate Student Proposal Writing Fellowship, and Strake Fellowship at the University of Notre Dame, as well as the Institute for Human Rights Policy and Practice, for supporting collaborative work with my students and colleagues on this project. I especially thank Veena Das and Deborah Poole for including me in the SAR advanced seminar “The State at Its Margins,” which helped me better problematize the margins of the state. Michael Bosia carefully analyzed several drafts of this chapter with a political scientist’s eye to understanding the state. Asale Angel-Ajani, Leon Arredondo, Shannon Speed, and Scott Appleby offered extremely thoughtful commentary on this work-in-progress. I especially thank Leon Arredondo for his very close read of this chapter and insightful comments about the historical conceptualization of these frontiers within the Colombian imaginary. Scott Appleby and Hal Culbertson gave me a welcome opportunity to present a draft of this chapter to my colleagues at the Kroc Institute. Roberta Culbertson gave me a quiet, supportive space in which to write and invited me to present this work at an international symposium on violence at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities. This research project would not have been possible without the kind collaboration of Leyla Lima and Maria Paz Bermejo of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, who made possible my participation in the accompaniment. Finally, I benefited from support of the diocese of Apartadó, the accompaniment teams, and the Peace Community members themselves. Unless otherwise specified, all interviews were conducted under the condition that I respect the informant’s anonymity. Any errors are, of course, my own.

1. The FARC is the largest and oldest guerrilla organization in Colombia, with some 18,000 armed combatants. For more on the history of guerrillas in Urabá-Chocó, see Comisión Andina de Juristas Colombianas (1994) and Beltran (1996).

2. OFP barrio projects include daily, low-cost midday meals for poor and working people, free meals for children, tutorials for children, microenterprise projects for women, recreational activities for children, and community support groups.

3. This same taxi driver shared fears of being assassinated, naming nine drivers who had recently lost their lives to violence. Like others I interviewed in Barrancabermeja, the taxi driver requested anonymity.

4. In author interviews, current and former paramilitaries in Ecuador and Colombia repeatedly confirmed communication and planning between paramilitaries and Colombian army officials. For more on Colombian paramilitaries, see Human Rights Watch (1996a, 1996b, 2000).

5. The Permanent Consultation on Internal Displacement in the Americas considers plans for the construction of a new canal to be central to the conflict in the Chocó region in general and the Atrato River area in particular. See Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (1999).

6. The soldier agreed to a taped interview on condition of anonymity. At a spring 2001 Kellogg Institute forum, Curt Kammen, former US ambassador to Colombia, also spoke of human-rights efforts as a hindrance to US policy in Colombia.

7. For more on camp conditions in Turbo, see Human Rights Watch (1998a).

8. Field research in Colombia indicated that this is the case in marginalized barrios of Apartadó, Bogotá, and Barrancabermeja. Testimonies from Colombian refugees in Ecuador confirm these practices in Medellín, Cali, Barranquilla, Nariño, and Putumayo, among other places.

9. I use the term *international community* to mean the international NGOs, UN agencies, and churches working for peace within Colombia, as well as those in other countries.

10. These restrictions remain constant but with variation—sometimes reflecting military maneuvers and confrontations between the armed actors and sometimes reflecting the whim of the commander at the checkpoint. On any given day, an accompaniment boat from the diocese may be allowed to enter a Peace Community, be denied entry, or have entry delayed.

