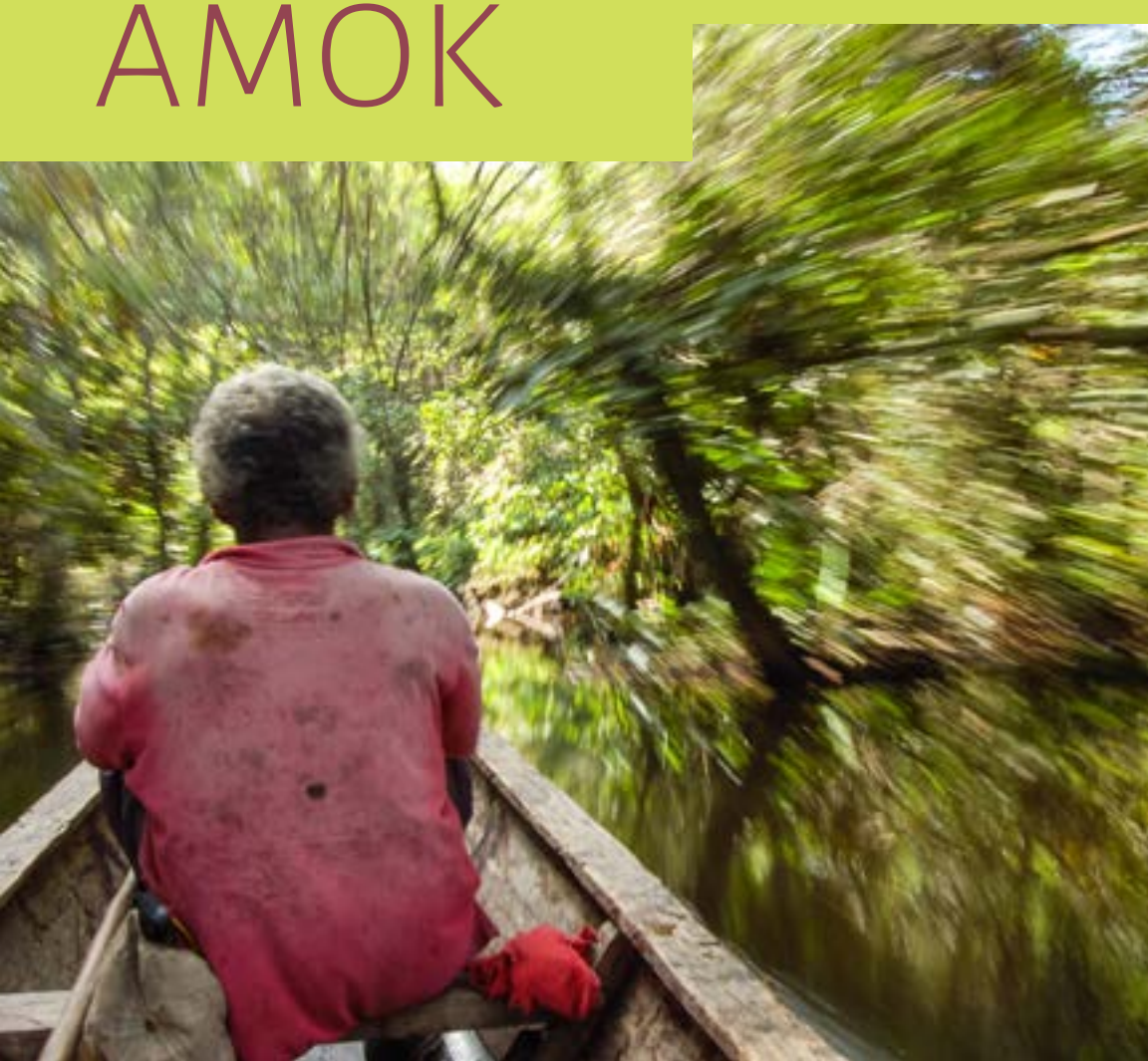
Daniel Ruiz-Serna

WHEN FORESTS RUN AMOK

War and Its Afterlives in Indigenous and Afro-Colombian Territories



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To the women I love the most:
Diana, divine custodian of all beings animating the forest,
and Silvana, the forest herself.

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In the forests and rivers of Bajo Atrato, a multitude of abrasive presences now disrupt the proper rhythms of life and death. The spirits of those who were violently killed and whose bodies were not appropriately buried wander through the forest, as do wicked jaguars, drawn by the taste of human flesh. There are large logjams that resemble floating cemeteries of trees and prevent people from pursuing the very journeys that keep their rivers alive. It is not uncommon to encounter snakes capable of injecting into their victims' wounds a poison that pollutes the former villages and forests that warlords have transformed into oil-palm plantations, and it is known that the forest is peopled by evil beings who, after having been released by powerful shamans in their attempt to protect communities from the raids carried out by guerrilla and paramilitary armies, are now wreaking havoc, drowning people and devouring their noses and their fingers.

These are some of the wounds that irregular warfare has engraved upon the territories of Afro-Colombian, Emberá, and Wounaan peoples living in Bajo Atrato, a region located in Chocó, on the northwestern Colombian Pacific coast. Besides the most flagrant and immediate effects in terms of human rights violations and environmental degradation, war has also compromised the web of relations through which these peoples and myriad other-than-human sentient beings weave their lives together. War, as this book discusses, is seldom an exclusively human experience, and we must begin to take seriously the violence perpetrated against the animals, the spirits, and the other-than-human beings that forests and rivers harbor, as the communities of Bajo Atrato already do.

How to bear witness to, and be accountable for, forest and river ecologies running amok and causing damage that cannot be easily tackled with the language of human rights or environmental degradation? This book approaches the question through an ethnographic investigation into the violent transformations that war has produced in the relations that Afro-Colombian and Indigenous peoples weave with their territories, including the relations they

cultivate with the other-than-human beings that make up forests and rivers. In our understanding of war and its afterlives in other-than-human worlds, what is the place that concepts such as human rights, trauma, reparation, and damage have? There is a form of violence perpetrated against Indigenous and Afro-Colombian territories that exceeds that which often is conceptualized as environmental damage (e.g., depletion of natural resources, pollution of ecosystems, transformation of land use, and loss of biodiversity). I call this violence *ecological* as it encompasses world-making relations between different kinds of sentient beings—including animals, spirits, rivers, and forests—that are all endowed with some degree of personhood and conscious intent. This ecological violence compels us to look attentively at other-than-human forms of suffering and at those worlds in which humans are not the only actors, worlds in which the allocation of events to either natural or cultural domains is no longer simple and neat. Who or what has been harmed, for instance, by the air strikes which infuriated the spirits that protect wild animals and who, following these attacks, decided to keep game inaccessible to people? Is this harm locatable in the world itself, or does it reside within the so-called cultural representations that certain peoples have forged about nature?

We must also consider the deaths of those who were never buried and whose pain, in the parlance of local communities, taints the land and thus accentuates people's struggles to have successful harvests. Do these deaths express a form of collective trauma, or do they go beyond that, transforming the very qualities of places? These types of harm force us to reconsider what constitutes justice and what the material grounds of reparation might be, particularly because these collective and intersubjective experiences of war challenge assumptions regarding selfhood, bodies, the elements of life, the distinctiveness of humans, and, of course, the possibilities of reparation, recovery, and the regaining of agency in contexts of blatant violence.

My aim is to move our understanding of violence, suffering, and justice out of the human rights framework and of modern multicultural dualisms (e.g., humans and the environment, subjects and objects, reality and beliefs) and to bring it into a broader web of human and other-than-human relations that are emerging from, and making possible, what communities in Bajo Atrato experience as a *living territory*. The spectacle that is so often associated with warfare (massacres, humanitarian crises, power dynamics among the actors involved) often receives more attention than its delayed and dispersed forms of devastation and how these affect ecologies emerging from human and other-than-human entanglements. These events through which this violence is made

tangible have world-making power—that is, they induce encounters, reveal attachments, and create horizons of possibility. These events may sometimes echo the acts of annihilation carried out by irregular armies, but they might also at times align with the practices that Afro-Colombian and Indigenous peoples employ to foster life in their territories.

What I propose is a kind of epistemic shift regarding armed violence, one that enables us to see its destructive drives in terms of its world-making effects, for it is not only peoples and their cultures that are at stake when war strikes but also the cosmos itself. Without recasting violence as creative, it is important to see how war enters into the composition of *Bajoatrateño* territories in the guise of a twofold movement—destruction and production—that plays out in a specific manner in this region. To show this, I bring attention to the relational constitution of peoples and their surrounding worlds or, more precisely, between *Bajoatrateño* communities and what they conceptualize as their traditional territories, a notion that encompasses a physical setting as well as the emplaced practices through which humans and other-than-humans hang together in order to create a broader community of life and death. This co-constitution renders porous the divide between natural and cultural realms as two distinct ontological domains, a divide that is embedded in the legal system and that has an effect on the possibility of understanding the experiences of war and therefore on the possibility of redressing its damage.

Inspired by the resurgence of ontological, posthuman, and relational thinking in anthropology, and standing on the shoulders of thinkers who have shown the fallacy of abstracting humans from other forms of life, this book centers relationships of human and other-than-human entanglements in a context of war, describing a variety of socially interwoven relations in which the privileged role of humans as the only actors capable of generating, embodying, and making sense of violent actions is decentered. Such an approach takes into consideration that human interactions with other-than-humans are a condition of being and not a choice that one makes (Bingham 2006; Latour 2004), that worlds inhabitable by humans are always constituted in relation with different kinds of other-than-human Others (Haraway 2008; Tsing 2013), and that such a relationality creates particular connections that both demand and enable particular responses (de la Cadena 2015; Ogden, Hall, and Tanita 2013; Stengers 2005b). Although ontological anthropologies have been criticized for tending to reify ethnic and sociocultural identities (Ramos 2012; Turner 2009), exacerbating issues of incommensurability among peoples that embody different cultures (Graeber 2015; Ramos 2022), overinterpreting and decontextualizing concepts such as animacy, personhood, or agency

(Hornborg 2017), and overemphasizing Indigenous onto-epistemic concerns to the detriment of the political and socioeconomic problems that these peoples face (Bessire and Bond 2014; Todd 2016), in this book I rely on posthuman thinking while, at the same time, remaining attuned to the historical and political nature of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian experiences of place and violence. Posthuman and relational perspectives are particularly useful when thinking about justice in Indigenous and Afro-Colombian territories because they help blur the divides between the animate and the inanimate, subject and object, and beings and their environments—splits that have often characterized studies of war and its aftermath, particularly when it comes to Indigenous peoples. Relational, posthuman, and ontological approaches are also convenient for understanding the expressions of violence in these territories as well as the entangled nature of associations that people in Bajo Atrato forge with beings such as snakes, jaguars, rivers, spirits, and forests. The coming chapters describe how these associations between humans and other-than-human actors generate actions, create obligations, and provide logic to the vital practices through which *Bajoatrateño* communities foster life within their territories. Concretely, I ask this: what kind of justice is conceivable when armed violence results in an experience shared by multiple kinds of human and other-than-human beings? Can an understanding of war that extends beyond human losses and environmental damage establish the conditions for a form of politics that includes the diversity of beings that constitute a shared world? If so, what would this look like?

My work draws from Indigenous and Afro-Colombian philosophies, as well as from the practices of their social organizations to defend their lives in their traditional land. Inspired by their struggle to transform traditional ideas of politics, political representation, and governance in Colombia, as well as ideas of land ownership and property rights, I use Indigenous notions that debunk human exceptionality as compared to other living agents and delve into how these ideas might help us rethink the scope of justice. More specifically, I rely on *Bajoatrateño* onto-epistemologies that situate territory as something other than a physical enclosure and that have successfully pushed for the legal recognition of Indigenous territories as victims of the armed conflict. The remainder of this introduction examines local conceptions of territory, as well as a particular legal instrument that has been designed by the state and Indigenous peoples, and that aims to redress the damage that war has wrought upon these territories. But first a brief description of the ethnographic setting for my work.

A Frontier Zone

The scene occurs outside a nightclub situated in an exclusive neighborhood in Bogotá, the capital of Colombia. It took place some weeks before I traveled to Bajo Atrato in 2015, and it later became a viral video. An angry and visibly drunk man argues with two policemen. They had been called because the man in question was threatening to come to blows with a bar employee. The man taunts the police officers and pushes them repeatedly while they remain unusually stoic and unmoving. Then, the defiant man stands in front of one of the police officers, face-to-face, and slaps him. "Don't you know who I am?" he cries. The man slaps the policeman again. "I'm President Gaviria's nephew. If I make a call and talk to the General, you will be working in Chocó." The man's accent and the family ties he claims to have with a former president reveal his socioeconomic status. Perhaps the policemen really fear the loss of their jobs, for they decide not to react to the abuse. In a country where power is still associated with lineage and skin color, the family name of this haughty individual assures him privileged treatment before the law, or at least that is what both the policemen and this young upstart believe. The drunk man continues to utter his insults and threats while the submissive officers just ask him to calm down. But, as I prepared for my departure to Chocó, what really upset me was the fact that, despite being one of the most biodiverse places on Earth and a cradle of peerless cultural wealth, going to this region is considered a severe punishment. "I will send you to Chocó," declares the arriviste several times. The threats uttered by this man (who turned out to be a liar, for former president Gaviria denied any relationship with him) bring to mind the designation of some regions of the world as places of exile and punishment for those who refused to recognize authority. The British imprisoned Napoleon on Saint Helena, a volcanic tropical island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean; the French did the same with their undesirable political adversaries on L'île du Diable during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; Siberia and its infamous gulags were instruments of political repression during the Stalinist era.

The very idea that Chocó might be an adequate location to serve a prison sentence points to the role that this region occupies in the Colombian social and political imagination: a dreadful place to be avoided at all costs. One hundred years before this incident, a local official described Chocó as a "miserable" and "stunted" place "inhabited by wretched people who live far from God or the Law" (quoted in Leal 2018, 172). These ideas are stubbornly persistent, as

evidenced by the kinds of news that circulated during the week this man hurled his curses. Several newspapers documented the Department of Chocó's high infant-mortality rates: between January and March 2015, more than twenty children died from diarrhea and malnutrition (*Espectador* 2015). It was no coincidence that, subsequent to the video, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported that at least 655 Indigenous and Afro-Colombian peasants were expelled from their land as a result of constant skirmishes between paramilitary and guerrilla armies (*Tiempo* 2015). Although it is true that violence and malnutrition are part of daily life in Chocó, the way in which these stories are reported—through the threats of an unscrupulous man, or news naturalizing poverty and violence rather than identifying their root causes—helps us understand what makes this region, according to non-*Chocoano* people, an unviable location. Chocó seems to possess all the attributes that city people consider the opposite of a desirable nation: backwardness, isolation, poverty, disease, violence (Serje 2005). These characteristics are constantly overemphasized by an elite class of wealthy entrepreneurs and corrupt politicians who see the region as a place to be exploited and depleted rather than cherished; as a former deputy of the Provincial Assembly of the Department of Antioquia (Chocó's affluent neighbor) declared, "Investing money in Chocó is like applying perfume to crap" (*Colombiano* 2012). It is in Chocó, more concretely in the region of Bajo Atrato, where my ethnography takes place.

Colombia comprises thirty-two administrative and political divisions called departments, which can be understood as equivalent to US states or Canadian provinces. Chocó is one of these departments and one of sharp contrasts indeed. Alongside accounts depicting the exuberance of its tropical rain forests, there are abundant portrayals of poverty, violence, and corruption. For instance, Chocó is one of the world's most important biodiversity hot spots and home of numerous endemic life-forms (Gentry 1986; Groombridge and Jenkins 2002; Mittermeier et al. 2005; Proyecto Biopacífico 1998; Rangel 2015), as well as the poorest department in the country. According to various socioeconomic indicators elaborated by the Colombian National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), 80 percent of its population lives on much less than a dollar a day; 75 percent of the people, mostly in rural areas, lack access to basic services such as safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, and schools; its infant mortality rate of 43 per 1,000 is three times higher than the national average (DANE 2018).

Chocó has been considered, historically, a frontier zone: a volatile, lawless place of unrestrained nature (Appelbaum 2016; Roldán 1998; Serje 2005). As early as the second half of the sixteenth century, Spaniards knew about the

existence of alluvial gold deposits along the streams of the upper San Juan and Atrato River basins. For the exploitation of said deposits, Spanish mine owners relied, initially, on the forced labor of Indigenous populations and then of enslaved African peoples. However, attempts at colonization encountered several obstacles. The Emberá, Wounaan, and Kuna Indigenous populations furiously resisted the Spanish presence and, even in the cases when they agreed to establish commercial relations with the newcomers, never agreed to relocate to the kind of urban settlements (*reducciones*) that the Crown wanted to impose to enable evangelization, collection of taxes, and tribute (Leal 2018; P. Vargas 1993; Werner 2000). Geographical isolation and lack of transportation routes also proved to be challenges to the Spaniards, for Chocó is covered with dense tropical forests.

Besides the military resistance of the Kuna, Wounaan, and Emberá peoples, other factors, such as their high mortality rates, their patterns of dispersed settlement, and official mandates forbidding certain kinds of coerced labor of Indigenous populations, obliged the Spanish Crown, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, to import African slave labor to pan the streams for gold. The presence of these enslaved peoples increased exponentially in only a few decades: from six hundred slaves in 1704 to two thousand in 1724 and to more than seven thousand in 1782 (Sharp 1976, 21). Thereafter, official censuses show a significant decrease of this population, and although disease was one of the reasons, scholars (Leal 2018; Sharp 1976; Williams 2005) agree that manumission and marronage were the predominant factors. Before 1851, when slavery was legally abolished in Colombia, slaves could purchase their freedom by negotiating with their masters for a price. In Chocó the practice was quite common, for enslaved peoples were allowed to work independently in the mines. In 1782, for example, an official census noted almost four thousand of this kind of *libres* (freedmen) (Sharp 1976, 22). Slave runaways, for their part, established a group of maroon settlements along the headwaters of the different river basins, away from the colonial gaze, where they formed all sorts of economic, ritual, and kinship alliances with Indigenous peoples.

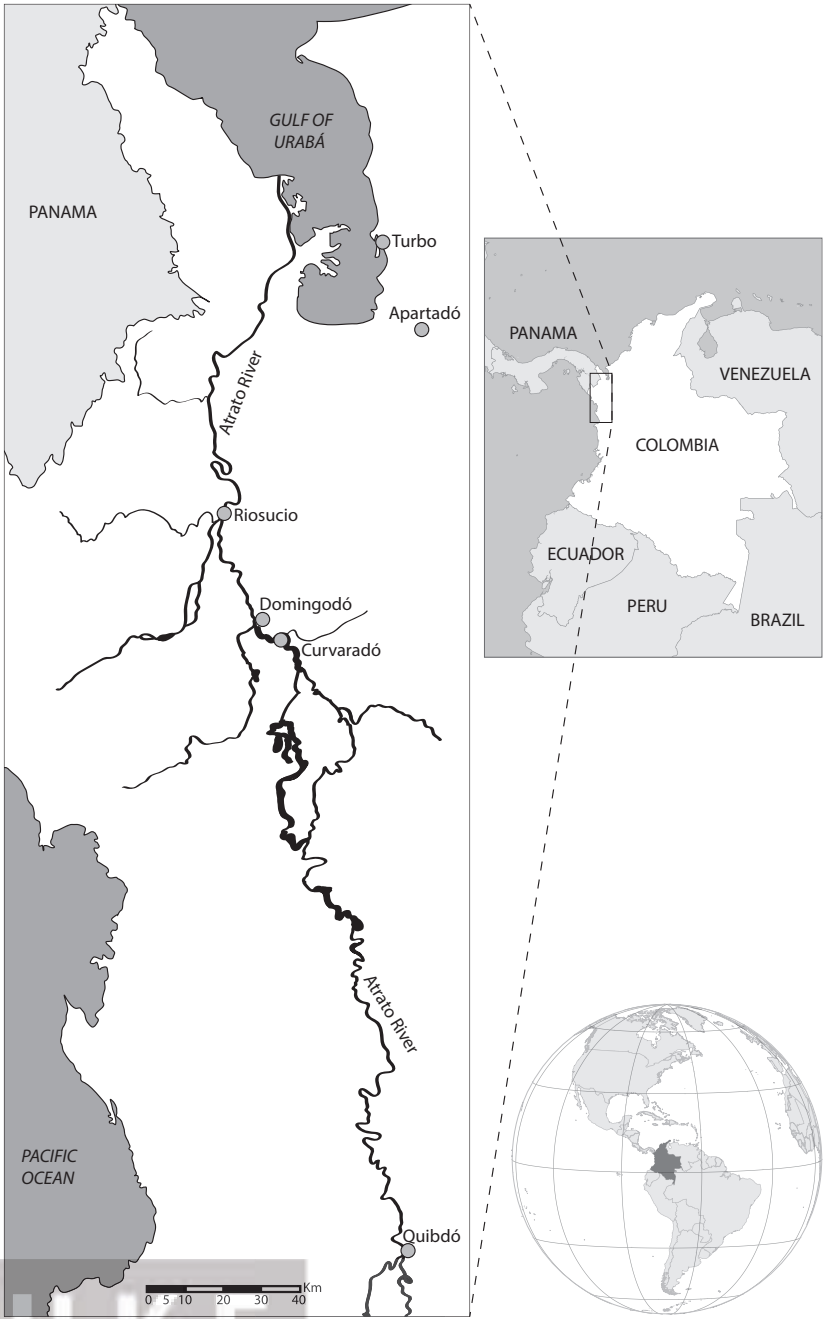
Unlike other colonial mining centers in the Americas, Chocó was not really settled by European descendants. Throughout the colonial period there was not a single Spanish settlement large enough to be considered a city, so the Crown never appointed a mayor or a town council in this region. The few settlements that did exist were scattered far apart, and they looked more like mining camps or commercial warehouses than like centers from whence to launch a permanent colonial dominion (Sharp 1976, 14). As late as 1782, one of the *visitadores*, or Spanish royal inspectors, noted during his visit to Chocó

that there were only eight Catholic priests serving a population of about twenty thousand inhabitants (1976, 130), something that, in his eyes, jeopardized not only the conversion of Indigenous and enslaved populations but also the very attempt to civilize these territories.

In regard to the permanence of peoples of African descent in Chocó, historians have argued that the existence of immense forests, wetlands, and rivers, along with the limited presence of colonial authorities and settlements, and the existence of an extractive economy heavily dependent on the commodification of natural resources such as gold, platinum, rubber, and vegetable ivory, contributed to the emergence of a "rainforest peasantry" (Leal 2018, 12; Offen 2018)—that is, a post-abolition Black society that, unlike others in the colonial Americas, attained high levels of autonomy. The capacity of these Afro descendant communities to decide how to use "their bodies, their time, and the spaces they lived in without having to follow orders" (Leal 2018, 12) hinged to a large extent upon the exchanges they forged with Emberá and Wounaan Indigenous peoples (Losonczy 2006a) and upon the knowledge they accumulated about forests, soils, rivers, and wetlands. This in turn allowed these communities to develop their own subsistence practices in crop cultivation, fishing, hunting, and timber harvesting.

Chocó is known today as the Afro-Colombian department, although *resguardos* (communal territories of Indigenous peoples) constitute almost 29 percent of this department's land area (Instituto Colombiano de Cultura Hispánica 1992). It is inhabited by about 550,000 people, 13 percent of them belonging to Indigenous communities, whereas 81 percent are Afro-Colombians (DANE 2010). Geographically speaking, it is important to note that although Chocó is one of the four departments that make up the Colombian Pacific coast (the others are Nariño, Cauca, and Valle del Cauca), its most important river and artery, the imposing Atrato River, does not belong to the Pacific basin but runs through the department from south to north, disemboguing into the Caribbean Sea at the Gulf of Urabá (see map Intro.1).* The lower or northernmost course of this river is what I refer to as Bajo Atrato, a region close to where the isthmus of Panama and the South American continent connect. Characterized by the presence of several rivers, swamps, tropical forests, and freshwater swamp forests, Bajo Atrato comprises three large *municipios* or counties (Belén de Bajirá, Carmen del Darién, and Riosucio) and

* Valle del Cauca, Cauca, and Nariño comprise areas of the lowland Pacific Coast but also major areas of interior highlands with primarily mestizo populations. Chocó is the only entirely lowland, tropical-forested, majority Afro-Colombian coastal department.



MAP 1.1. The Bajo Atrato region.

eight different river basins (Cacarica, La Larga-Tumaradó, Salaquí, Truandó, Pedeguita-Mancilla, Domingodó, Curvaradó, and Jiguamiandó). It is along these rivers and their tributaries, which constitute the main transportation routes, that Afro-Colombian, Emberá, and Wounaan villages are located.

In Bajo Atrato, like in most of the Pacific region, both Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities legally enjoy collective land tenure as part of their *resguardos* (Indigenous reserves) and *territorios colectivos* (collective territories of Black communities). This land is imprescriptible (it cannot be taken away), inalienable (it cannot be transferred), and nonseizable (it cannot be sold to repay creditors), which are three key features that reinforce collective forms of use, enable its protection and management, and guarantee intergenerational permanency. In Bajo Atrato alone, the collective lands belonging to Afro-Colombian communities comprise more than 6,400 square kilometers (4,000 square miles), an area as large as the territory claimed by the State of Palestine. This region is also characterized by the presence of large communities of mestizo peasants or *chilapos*, a local term used to describe the peasant population that migrated from the Sinú River region, in the Department of Córdoba, to the greater Urabá region during the first half of the twentieth century and that in Bajo Atrato settled principally along the Salaquí and Curvaradó Rivers (Ruiz-Serna 2006; Villa 2013). The settlements of these mestizo peasants have been incorporated into the collective territories granted to the Afro-Colombian rural populations, which means that these mestizo peasants are members of *consejos comunitarios* or community councils, local administrative bodies that watch over the protection of the rights of collective property and regulate social relationships according to customary rules. Because *chilapos* in Bajo Atrato enjoy collective land tenure and its concomitant territorial and cultural rights, I do not disaggregate these communities when I refer to Afro-Colombian territories. In recent years the name Bajo Atrato has been gaining popularity in both specialized literature and media because the historical, economic, and social processes of this particular region differ from those of the rest of Urabá, an area mainly located in the affluent department of Antioquia. By speaking of Bajo Atrato instead of Urabá Chocoano, local grassroots organizations also seek to characterize this region as an ethnic territory: an existential place where Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities have set in motion alternative models of society and different ways of being that have been legally recognized by the Colombian state as Indigenous reserves and collective lands of Black communities. In legal terms these reserves and collective lands are what Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities refer to as their territory.

The Land Is Not the Territory

Territory is a complex concept, the meaning of which depends on the sociopolitical and cultural contexts in which it is used. One way of grasping its intricacies is to consider the way that territory is conceived of by the Colombian Constitution: a group-differentiated right protected by law. Colombian jurisprudence has made the right to territory the cornerstone of the protection of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples. According to the Constitutional Court, the supreme guardian of the national Constitution, territory is "the material possibility for ethnic groups to exercise their rights to cultural identity and autonomy, insofar as this is the physical space in which their culture can survive" (Corte Constitucional de Colombia, Sentencia T-380–1993, §12). Understood as "material possibility" or "physical space," territory evokes the conceptual elements of a substantialist ontology: it comprises the assortment of places that a given community inhabits and renders socially meaningful, as well as the natural resources the community appropriates for its livelihood. But as environmental and economic anthropologists have long made apparent (Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Halperin 1994; Leal and Restrepo 2003; Wilk 1996; Wilk and Cligget 2007), this appropriation is a historical and cultural process, embedded in the wider array of practices and institutions that make up a society. This means that even in its very material or substantial dimension, territory and what is usually conceptualized as natural resources are not given but constructed: they do not precede the set of social relations and cultural values that render them meaningful.

Since the early 1980s, several Afro-Colombian organizations have successfully espoused a definition of territory that emphasizes the economic and material resources needed to secure social reproduction. Initially, these organizations identified themselves as peasant movements and demanded that the government halt the predatory activities of several timber companies that were depleting forests in Chocó (ACIA 2002; Asher 2009; Escobar 2008; Perea 2012). In Bajo Atrato, such grassroots organizations called into question the extractivist economic models fostered by national authorities, making land claims and conceiving of strategies for securing land tenure under a premise other than that of individual private property, mainly because private ownership was at odds with the customary use of what Afro-Colombian communities have historically considered to be communal forests (E. Restrepo 2013). Although the government considered this land idle and regional environmental authorities were granting it to private timber companies (Leal and Restrepo 2003), *Chocoano* organizations made a twofold demand: legal recognition of

the lands that Afro-Colombian communities had been historically occupying and using, on one hand, and the implementation of sustainable development policies, on the other. Implicit in these demands was an alternative notion of territory as a place where communities had been developing unique local economic practices that challenged the rapacious models which were fostered by the forestry industry and supported by national governments.

Another definition of territory emerged in the early 1990s, a period marked by the rise of biodiversity conservation in Chocó through Proyecto Biopacífico (PBP). This was originally a million-dollar initiative founded by the World Bank as part of the agreements reached in 1992 during the Earth Summit. The PBP was initially conceived of within a conventional scientific framework for environmental conservation and sustainable use of the region's biological resources (Escobar 1997). However, during its implementation and following tense negotiations with Afro-Colombian and Indigenous activists, the PBP had to reformulate its initial goals and take into consideration local forms of knowledge and cultural practices as legitimate sources of biological conservation (Escobar 2008). For local organizations, biodiversity could not be conceived of, and even less managed, as distinct from the defense and promotion of traditional production systems, food security, and cultural practices regarding nature. Within this context, the equation Biodiversity = Territory + Culture was first enunciated (Escobar 1997). Based on the tenet that the knowledges, values, and experiences historically cultivated by Indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples are what have favored the very existence of the diverse forms of life that the international community wanted to protect with their environmental projects, this alternative conceptualization dethroned scientific knowledge as the ultimate guide when tackling pressing ecological problems. From the perspective of local social movements, even the most tangible aspects of biodiversity (ecosystems, species) had to be understood in tandem with the history of the resistance of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities and with their struggles to maintain and develop life projects distinct from those of the larger surrounding society (ACIA 2002; Proyecto Biopacífico 1998). From this perspective, territory and all its variety of life-forms emerge as the outcome of local environmental attitudes that were nested in, and favored by, people's historical and cultural practices.

The production of the new Constitution of 1991 could be considered the pinnacle of the struggle for territory and environmental conservation because the nation recognized itself as a multiethnic and multicultural society for the first time. Accordingly, different measures for the protection of ethnocul-

tural minorities were set into motion, including Law 70 of Colombia (1993), which granted collective land tenure to the Afro-Colombian communities inhabiting the Pacific basin. These lands were hitherto considered *baldías*: vacant, barren, or idle lands without owners. Some scholars (Asher 2009; Pardo and Álvarez 2001; E. Restrepo 2013; Ruiz-Serna 2006) have pointed out that, besides the recognition of rights to lands historically occupied by Black rural communities, the granting of these lands contained a heavily prescriptive component, for the law assigned to this collective property "an inherent ecological function," meaning that land grantees were required to "develop conservation and management practices" compatible with the principles of environmental protection and sustainable development (Law 70 of Colombia (1993), Art. 6). In political terms the constitutional reform led to official recognition of these communities as ethnic groups, which means that they collectively became subjects with special rights, including that of maintaining their culture and securing their economic and social development. With their land and rivers protected by law and with their cultural ancestry dignified by the state, the land traditionally inhabited by Afro-Colombian communities became an ethnic territory—that is to say, the quintessential component of their collective identities and the focus of their political actions for the defense of their particular modes of being. Within this context, in the late 1990s and after, peasant movements from Chocó turned into ethnic organizations, and former struggles over land tenure and control of natural resources gave way to demands for territorial rights. The Constitution of 1991 allowed Afro-Colombian communities to gain political, legal, and cultural visibility, and it has led *Chocoano* social movements to articulate further political demands such as autonomy and self-determination in the attempt to strengthen their authority in matters of decision making regarding land and resource use.

The recognition of these new ethnic identities and cultural rights did not, however, have an immediate impact in Bajo Atrato, for the legal multicultural turn coincided with the escalation of violence against Afro-Colombian communities in a dramatic way. Some scholars (Alves and Costa Vargas 2017; Wade 2016) have argued that there was a sort of sinister agenda to displace, terrorize, and murder Afro-Colombian rural peoples to prevent these communities from enjoying any newly acquired rights. Before the titling process through which communities legally delimited their collective lands could even begin in Bajo Atrato, the region became a major theater of war. The fact that violence erupted at this juncture, effectively preventing the titling process from occurring, was certainly not a coincidence. In 1997 thousands of families were forcibly banished from their lands by means of threats, forced

disappearances, and assassinations carried out by military, paramilitary, and guerrilla armies. During the time that *Bajoatrateño* communities were demanding that the state support the return to their land, the allocation of legal titles became a crucial point in the agenda of local organizations: having these titles meant securing a safe return to their homelands. Armed conflict and forced displacement were threatening not only the newly gained cultural rights but also the very lives of these communities. In such a context the defense of territory overlaps with the defense of basic human rights. This confluence becomes evident in the motto of the regional Afro-Colombian organization I worked with, ASCOBA (Association of Community Councils of Bajo Atrato). It was established in 2003 (see figure I.1), shortly after most communities returned to their lands, assuming as its principal task "the defense of life in our territory." Territory emerges then not just as a socially meaningful place invested with specific cultural values but also as a place central to people's existence. As a leader recently stated in relation to the presence of agro-industry and mining corporations in ancestral territories, "Territory is our life and life is not for sale. [Our interest is] to defend the right to be in these places because that is what makes us to be who we are" (quoted in Alves 2019, 662). In this sense the political project of *Bajoatrateño* communities is articulated around the defense of their territories, which are conceived of as the only setting in which their collective identities can fully flourish. ASCOBA's motto also exemplifies the transition that local organizations made from a struggle based on class identity for the use and allocation of natural resources—before the reforms of 1991, grassroots organizations identified themselves as peasant organizations—to an identity based on ethnicity in which at stake is the protection of their existential places: Afro-Colombian organizations defending their traditional territories.

I first arrived in Bajo Atrato at the juncture of the humanitarian crisis that followed the forced displacement. It was 2003, and I was working with CINEP (Centre for Research and Popular Education), a nonprofit foundation whose mission was to support local grassroots organizations, strengthening their leadership, documenting serious violations of human rights, and accompanying the communities that were progressively returning to their land. For almost four years I lived in Bajo Atrato and had the privilege of working hand in hand with several leaders, traveling with them along all the river basins in order to design what ASCOBA then called an "ethno-development plan": a charter depicting the main aspects of economic and social development based on the preservation and strengthening of the unique lifestyles embodied by these peoples. After realizing that local ideas of development

FIGURE I.1. Former headquarters of ASCOBA (Association of Community Councils of Bajo Atrato), located on the banks of the Atrato River in Riosucio. Photo by author.

emphasized a notion of living well that tied humans into wider living networks, and having witnessed multiple instances of violence that extended to the animals, plants, and other sentient beings that inhabit rivers and forests, I decided to stop my work there, let these beings make their way in my thought, and find the conceptual tools (mainly pursuing graduate studies) to better learn to listen to and account for a form of suffering embedded in a larger context that was not necessarily human. This book brings that effort to fruition and is the result of my years of work as a human rights organizer and the more than twenty-four months of fieldwork I carried out between 2009 and 2019. As a Colombian, I have anchored to this region my dreams of a country where the rough and crooked places shaped by war will be made serene and balanced. The ties I have woven with Bajo Atrato are also organic. During a trip I took in 2020, just before the COVID-19 outbreak, my wife and I, along with some *Bajoatrateño* friends and relatives, buried the umbilical cord of my newborn daughter under the roots of an *árbol de pan* tree at the shores of the Salaquí River. That ritual, aimed to strengthen her body, attune her forming self to the sylvan forces of the region, and root her history to that of her ancestors, epitomized the long process of mutual care between me and the *Bajoatrateño* territory. Although I was not born there, I have

lived experiences and dreams that make me kin with this territory, while it has shown me its own kindness from the first moment I set my feet there, expanding my thought and gifting me with the health, will, and predilection to describe what the reader will find in the following pages.

A Tapestry of Human and Other-Than-Human Entanglements

At the heart of collective identity as an "existential space of self-reference" (Escobar 2008, 53), territory, as we can now see, is a crucial element of the political struggles around the defense of ethnic identities and cultural rights. It represents different but interconnected objectives: the securing of the livelihood of local communities, the maintenance of traditional and sustainable economic practices, the political projects of regional social movements, the defense of collective rights, the development of proper forms of governability, the local experience of place, and a deep sense of belonging. Thus, what is at stake when defending territory is an alternative model of society and life, a form of being that is often at odds with the values embodied by certain modern institutions and practices. This is why for local communities, Bajo Atrato constitutes not only a territory of life but also a living territory. Let me explain this in more detail. In 2005, on the verge of a crucial decision from the state regarding ownership rights over the lands that oil-palm companies had violently seized from the titled collective territories, leaders from ASCOBA and one of my mentors—a priest and local intellectual whose social commitment draws from the theology of liberation—delineated some key principles about territory and its meanings:

> Territory is the space appropriated for our physical, social, and cultural production. It is the physical space, the plants and the animals; it is the space we name, use, walk, and travel. It is the way villages and households are placed, the economy, our ways of living and working, the days for cultural and religious celebrations, the social relationships, our traditional authorities, and our worldview. All these actions unfold in the space and they create territoriality, which[,] in turn, helps build the territory. . . . The territory is a space to produce life and culture, it reflects our worldview. In the fields we work, in the social and family relations we keep, in the symbolic aspects of our thinking, the territory is materialized. . . . Territory is not only land because it extends far beyond the physical space granted by the law. (Valencia 2005, 15–20)

I would like to emphasize three aspects of this beautiful and powerful definition. First, social practices and relationships (e.g., "ways of working,"

"cultural and religious celebrations," "traditional authorities," and "social and family relations") are not only developed in the territory but also contribute to the creation of the territory. Second, territory and communities are mutually linked and reciprocally constituted: many practices express the attributes of particular places, and the territory itself reflects the qualities of its inhabitants ("in the fields we work, in the social and family relations we keep, in the symbolic aspects of our thinking, the territory is materialized"). Third, territory cannot be understood as abstracted from the experience of being and belonging to an Afro-Colombian or an Indigenous rural community ("it is the space we name, use, walk, and travel"). This sophisticated conceptualization underscores the way that territory participates essentially and not just contingently in the generation of a collective sense of being, how it provides a particular placement to social experiences, and, most importantly, how territory does not always precede the relations and practices that take place there but, instead, is what results from these relations and practices. In other words, the definition applies a relational approach: territory is enacted and experienced rather than provided, and it emerges as such by virtue of people's practices, while those practices are in turn affected by the territory itself. This definition of territory does not just imply some sort of intimate interconnectedness of people and their places but also comprises the conditions through which both territory and communities come into existence.

Hence, what communities in Bajo Atrato experience as their traditional territories are in fact a heterogeneous cluster of relationships: sentient landscapes, emplaced experiences, local knowledges, the quality of places, and the characteristics of their human and other-than-human inhabitants. In this sense territory might also be conceived of as the possibilities of being and becoming in a shared, living place. This includes the practices of care, reciprocity, or even animosity that people maintain with beings such as *avichuchos* (bugs), trees, spirits, soils, crops, mines, ancestors, the rain; places like villages, gardens, *plataneras*, swidden plots, and the wilderness; the knowledge guiding decisions about what, where, and when to plant; the technique behind the *trasmallos,* fishing nets whose threads and shape fit the geometry and movements of fish; ritual practices such as the burial of newborns' umbilical cords; the places where the afterbirth rests; the understanding of diseases, their treatment, and the summoning of forest spirits that enhance shamanic powers; the culinary and medicinal herbs cultivated by women in their *azoteas*, raised-bed gardens made of decayed dugout canoes; the funerary rites and the *alabaos*, songs that appease the souls of the deceased; when children swim or women do laundry in the river; when leaders meet to discuss their response to the

implementation of neoliberal policies promoted by both private companies and the state; celebrations to La Vírgen del Carmén and the *bundes*, dancing processions performed in the wee hours to the rhythm of drums that used to be made of peccary skin. These practices, these ways of living, are not just embedded in the territory: they also act upon it and contribute to its creation. In other words, territory does not merely serve as a setting for the modes of being that people create in close proximity to forests and rivers. Instead, territory is what emerges from these relations; it is what renders possible the specific manner in which Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities exist in the world.

In order to better understand the co-constitution of people and their territories, I build on the aforementioned tenets delineated by Afro-Colombian intellectuals and draw from streams of philosophical and anthropological thought that stress the ontological preeminence of relations and practices over ontologically derivative entities and substances (see, for instance, Barad 2003; Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 2004; Ingold 2000; Latour 1999; Mol 2002; Rose 1992; Tsing 2013; Vilaça 2005; Viveiros de Castro 1998; Wildman 2010). However, this co-constitution needs to be explored beyond the human aspects of the socio-material world (Kohn 2013) and must include a wider assemblage of beings that also participate in the generation of sociality in *Bajoatrateño* territories. Here the word *assemblage* refers not so much to a collection of beings as to a socio-material ordering of entities connected together to form a new whole (Blaser 2013a; Latour 2004). In an assemblage the properties of the collectivity exceed the properties of its constitutive elements. Another way of putting this is that the constituents of an assemblage partake in relational and dynamic associations, and they do so in such a way that what comes out of these relations actually exceeds the properties of the elements when individually considered (Ogden, Hall, and Tanita 2013). Along these lines, I see that the constantly emergent associations between human and other-than-human entities contribute to bringing the territory into existence, which is another way of saying that in Bajo Atrato to live is always to live with other-than-human others and that territory is always in the making (Escobar 2016): it is the outcome of intimate but asymmetrical relations between heterogeneous entities (Ingold 2011; Kohn 2007; Latour 2005). In this sense territory can be understood as the creation and flourishing of emplaced relations between human and other-than-human beings. The concept of territory also entails that these assemblages of beings do not occur in the abstract but always in a particular place and under specific sociohistorical conditions. Territory, to expand the terms of relational

thinking, might be conceived of as a sort of emergent property: it arises out of the contingent relations that human and other-than-human beings establish in particular places, and these relations do not just depend on the territory to exist but constitute the building blocks of what a territory comes to be.

Roughly speaking, *emergence* refers to the relational effects of a given assemblage: an emergent property is what arises out of the specific relations maintained by the constituents of an assemblage (Georgiou 2003; Mitchell 2012). What results from these relations is not reducible to the elements of the assemblage, which means that when the beings that make up an assemblage are taken independently or separately, they do not have the properties the assemblage has. Now, when they emerge as such, assemblages establish their own territories. "Territories" is how Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari ([1980] 2004) describe the sets of emplaced processes through which the entities that make up a given assemblage meet, organize, and stay together. Therefore, territory is not given but constituted; it is a force holding things together rather than a substance or a setting. Territory, in other words, is what results from a particular ordering. In this ordering, Deleuze and Guattari argue, it is possible to track processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization: the breaking of conditions or habits that favor the organization of assemblages and the formation of new conditions or habits to bring together said assemblages. In this fashion war becomes a force, a powerful one indeed, capable of bringing about processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, which produce different versions of territory, some of which might be at odds with those other versions that Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities consider estimable and rightful.

When territory is conceived of in relational terms, it becomes apparent that the existence of the myriad entities with which people relate cannot be reduced to a stream of transcendent materialities or substances. But the opposite—that those entities exist only in terms of the relations they sustain with humans—is not true either because this would simply deny that entities such as forests, rivers, and even spirits possess some kind of ontological core that cannot be exhausted by their relations. Rather than stressing a type of subjective or anthropocentric idealism, the relational approach I adopt underscores that relations between entities are ontologically more important than, but not necessarily prior to, the entities themselves (Wildman 2010). In the context of war this simply means that the transformation of conditions engendering human and other-than-human relations creates new kinds of territorialities—and even new kinds of entities. Another way of understanding the relational features of

territory is by noticing that certain beings are rendered possible by virtue of the particular relations or ecologies that nurture their emergence. This means that in *Bajoatrateño* territories, beings, their environments, and their relations constitute one another's conditions for existence (Ingold 2011). When thinking about justice, the nature of these entangled associations renders insufficient the dominant legal system's continued compartmentalization of human rights violations, environmental harm, desecrations, damage to cultural property, and the like. This means, as this book shows, that the effects of armed conflict cannot be framed within an *either-or* structure (de la Cadena 2015) but that they are always hybrid and multiple.

The Suffering of Territory

In Bajo Atrato, some elders claim that the continuous presence of armed soldiers has frightened away the *encantos*, the enchanted creatures that used to live in the forests of this region. Indigenous leaders of the Emberá-Katío communities from the Alto Andágueda in Chocó report the risk to their food sovereignty caused by air strikes launched by the Colombian Air Force: the bombs dropped during these attacks allegedly infuriated the *jaïs*, spirits that protect certain game animals, to the point that these spirits decided to keep agoutis (*Cuniculus paca*) inaccessible to people (J. L. Quiroga, personal communication, Bogotá, August 2015). In the San Juan River region, also located in Chocó, Indigenous Wounaan leaders say that battles between guerrillas and paramilitary armies have displeased Êwandam, the creator of people, who is no longer capable of distinguishing between those who wage war and those who do not. As a result, no new heralds of this divinity have been born in the last twenty years, meaning that the community now lacks traditional healers capable of communicating with godly forces (*Espectador* 2017a). An Indigenous Wiwa leader from the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta, in the North of Colombia, says that the presence of armed groups has abused and butchered their sacred territories: "Because of the violence, our spiritual fathers who live in the water, the trees, the plants, and the rocks cannot be felt as much as before" (CNMH 2015). These examples demonstrate that, for some Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, the experiences of war are not restricted to the damage caused to people but that war's consequences are also engraved on their territories and the myriad beings that cocreate them, in a way that the wounded lives of humans and other-than-human beings cannot be understood solely in terms of human rights. Accordingly, an understanding of war in these territories can

hardly be attained without taking into consideration the damage that violence has provoked in the web of emplaced relationships these peoples weave with wider communities of life in which humans are not the only actors.

Given these far-reaching effects of war, which cause forests and rivers to run amok, we need to refine our understanding of justice and cultivate new forms of responsibility and accountability. By this I mean we need new ways to respond to (Haraway 2008) and to account for (Barad 2011) the relational worlds that human and other-than-human existences generate. In order to begin to imagine what this other form of justice might look like, this ethnography explores some of the overwhelming latent effects that violence produces in the manifold beings and relations that constitute *Bajoatrateño* territories. Attending to beings such as spirits provoking havoc or rivers that are being prevented from flowing properly, I adopt a relational perspective that seeks to understand the intersections among war, ecologies made of human and other-than-human entanglements, and Indigenous ontologies. This book is then my humble response to the challenges that Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities have presented in their insistent call for the construction of a more capacious kind of justice in their traditional territories, which is a concern that Indigenous organizations successfully addressed when they managed to forge a series of laws with the state for assistance, reparation, and restitution of their rights as victims of war. In particular, the Decree-Law 4633 of 2011, also known as the Victims' Law for Indigenous [Peoples], incorporates the notion that their territories should also be considered victims of armed conflict: "The territory, understood as a living entity and foundation of identity and harmony, in accordance with the very cosmovision of the Indigenous peoples and by virtue of the special and collective link that they hold with it, suffers a damage when it is violated or desecrated by the internal armed conflict and its underlying and related factors" (Congreso de Colombia, Decreto-Ley 4633, Art. 45).

The raison d'être of the recognition of the territory as victim is based on several interconnected facts: the existence of a special legal regime for collective land ownership; territory has a fundamental importance for the physical existence, cultural survival, and autonomous development of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples; armed conflict has hit these peoples disproportionately and in ways that require different measures of rectification than those the government provides to other kinds of victims; and the presence, in the parlance of the law, of a "special spiritual relationship . . . that indigenous peoples have with their territory" (Art. 8). However, it is

important to point out that if this law seems to express a certain sensitivity on the part of the legal system, it is because of the unflagging efforts of Indigenous organizations that contested the initial scope that the government meant to give to the Victims' Law—namely, that the measures of attention to Indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples would be the same as those applied to victims from the rest of society.

From a certain perspective, the recognition of territory as a victim might be considered a kind of legal fiction: a proposition or a "technique of make-believe" (Moglen 1990) through which certain facts are assumed or created in order to apply a legal rule. The classical example of a legal fiction is the way in which corporations are treated as persons by many nations' laws in order to affirm that they have the same legal rights and responsibilities a natural person has. In the Colombian case, it appears that the Victims' Law establishes the territory as a victim in order to advance public policy and preserve the territorial rights of Indigenous peoples. This seems to be achieved by enforcing respect for both the previously recognized collective land rights and the cultural values that these communities attach to their territories. Yet, I argue, conferring statutory personhood on Indigenous territories is something that exceeds traditional multicultural arrangements (e.g., the protection of the worldviews associated with those peoples affected by war), particularly as it takes into account the lively relationalities of people, places, and other-than-human beings that have been compromised by war. If one takes, for example, the harm experienced by masters of game animals, *encantos*, and the spiritual guardians of trees and rocks, the recognition of territory as a victim demands that we question modern practices regarding justice and reparations, for what becomes a matter of concern is not mainly cultural rights (including the right to use and manage lands) but the set of practices through which these peoples share life with a set of beings whose natures transcend some modern divides such as animate and inanimate, sacred and secular, or *bios* and *geos*. Put differently, the idea that territory should also be considered a victim of war renders possible not just a series of actions for the protection of particular cultural frameworks but also, more importantly, for the recognition of diverse groups of beings and emplaced practices whose importance transcends what modern ontology usually relegates to the religious sphere.

To honor the complexities that Indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples bring to the fore requires a form of ethnographic attention that recognizes that the harm inflicted upon the territory is not just damage to their worldviews. Rather, such harm is in fact an experience related to the very nature of

war and its impacts upon the world. This kind of ethnographic attention is different from what, for instance, political ecology or cultural politics might offer in their interpretation of the Victims' Law. For example, from a cultural politics perspective, the inclusion of the territory as a victim can be understood as the recognition made by a multicultural state of the variety of worldviews embodied by Indigenous peoples. From that viewpoint, one would feel tempted to acknowledge the important advances of Colombian legislation and to interpret said inclusion as an achievement of Indigenous organizations in the recognition of their territorial rights. Indeed, the framework of cultural politics would lead to praise for the way that Indigenous organizations successfully challenged the dynamics of state power and contested the initial scope that the government wished to give to the Victims' Law, mainly its emphasis on the restitution of some purported universal human rights. From a political ecology perspective (i.e., the analysis of power struggles in environmental governance), the inclusion of the territory as a victim would provide new ways to understand disputes over the control, use, and protection of rights of ownership of collective lands and territorial resources, as well as the conflicts that emerge when nature is conceived of and experienced in radically different ways by different actors. Even from the perspective of political economy, this recognition would problematize the type of hegemonic ideas that have rendered territory and its constituents a collection of natural resources to be exploited. My point, paraphrasing Marisol de la Cadena (2015), is that the recognition of Indigenous territories as victims of armed conflict addresses all that but not only that. The recognition of the territory as victim entails the recognition of a violence that goes beyond its human and environmental impacts—and thus beyond modern notions of human rights and ecological restoration or, more broadly speaking, beyond the boundaries that state and modern politics have mapped out between the realms of nature and culture. And this requires, once again, an ethnographic attunement to the harm that communities in Bajo Atrato register on the living relationalities that make up their territories, as well as to the way their own humanness is constituted through the various emplaced relations they cultivate with other-than-human beings. Part of what this book seeks to do is to gauge what transpires in this legal recognition of the territory as a victim of war, paying attention to the challenges this event poses to the cultural policies promoted under the banner of multiculturalism, as well as to the implementation of appropriate and effective policies of truth, justice, and reparation for these peoples and their living territories.

Ontological Occupation

Approaching war from a perspective that takes into consideration the harm suffered by wider assemblages of human and other-than-human beings is the way I have found to underscore the ontologically and politically disturbing character of the demands made by Indigenous and Afro-Colombian organizations. The fact that in 2011 Colombian law recognized the territory as victim of the armed conflict is an event without precedent in the national and international jurisprudence of war. It paves the way for local organizations, and for anthropologists like me, to go beyond the modernist, anthropocentric conceptualization of victimization toward a relational and ontological approach centered on the idea that what is at stake is the veritable destruction of the worlds forged by wider communities of life. In this sense the war in Bajo Atrato has not just been a war waged in the territories of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities or merely a violence against these peoples and the ways of being they embody. It is all of that, of course, but not only that. This book shows that war is not just a phenomenon unfolding in Bajo Atrato but rather a force producing other versions of this territory. War comprises world-making relations between different sets of sentient beings, relations that do not merely take place in the territory but that contribute to bringing it into existence. What I attempt here is not just to include animals or the environment in our accounts of human destructive acts—to do so would only enact the nature-culture divide—but rather to describe how war reconfigures whole ecologies or relational worlds made of human and other-than-human entanglements. Entanglement, as Karen Barad (2011, 150) reminds us, is not interconnectedness but specific material relations of obligation: "being bound to the other." To put it differently, if war compromises the values, rules of engagement, and obligations through which people and other-than-humans *are* and become the territory, it follows that war becomes a form of ontological occupation of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous territories.

Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar (2016, 2020) uses the concept "ontological occupation" to describe the tenacious and continual dominant world-building endeavor of modern institutions to erase other emplaced realities that do not fit within the hegemonic idea of "One-World World" (Law 2015). Drawing from a Western onto-episteme that arrogates to itself the right to be "the world" and to speak on behalf of a monist reality, this One-World World relegates all other worlds "to its rule, to a state of subordination, or to nonexistence" (Escobar 2020, 14). In this sense the most fundamental

dimension of the struggles of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples in defense of their territories is ontological: the protection of the conditions that sustain the emergence of their own local, relational worlds. Ontological occupation of the territories and lives of these communities is effectuated through capitalist, colonial, secular, or patriarchal means, war being the most perverted manifestation of this kind of occupation: one that, besides constraining people's possibilities of being and canceling other thoughts and relationalities, pursues not just the submission of local worlds but their actual obliteration. If what is destroyed or affected are relational worlds, then war also destroys worlds that flourish from relations and modes of being different than the ones prescribed by modern onto-epistemic frameworks.

There is little novelty in writing about armed conflict in Colombia. As a matter of fact, war is such a pervasive topic that there even exists a school of thinking and research devoted to understanding it—*violentology*—and for which Colombian social and human sciences are, rightly, internationally known. I can hardly get away from that pervasiveness, yet what I show is that besides the political, economic, environmental, or cultural aspects of war, we need to pay attention to its latent repercussions in terms other than those offered by the human rights framework and its anthropocentrism.

In Bajo Atrato, war takes different forms and is performed by different actors embodying different ideologies and therefore fostering different sets of relations. In this region war has pitted a range of distinct armed groups against one another, but it has been, as a matter of fact, a war waged against the Indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples and the modes of being that they and their territories embody. By this, I mean that the so-called civilian casualties and collateral damages associated with the actions of armed groups (e.g., forced displacement, land expropriation, resource depletion) have not been incidental to armed conflict but fundamental to the aims pursued by these groups. The numerous loyalties of these groups and the array of their political agendas are implicit in the acronyms they adopt: FARC, ELN, ACCU, AUC, BACRIM, AGC, FFMM. A common interpretation of war in this region is that it initially pitted a communist guerrilla army (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—FARC) against right-wing paramilitary armies (initially the Peasant Self-Defense Forces of Córdoba and Urabá—ACCU—which later became part of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia—AUC). From that perspective the state, through its military forces (army and police—FFMM), fought these illegal armies in order to fulfill its constitutional duty of protecting citizens' life, dignity, property, rights, and freedoms. Unfortunately, the presence of the Colombian armed forces has rarely had this

protective effect: recent local history contains many examples of the involvement of both army and police officials in serious human rights violations for which several top commanders have been found guilty or are under investigation (Salinas and Zarama 2012; J. Vargas 2016). Those cases are not just a matter of a few bad apples but are symptomatic of the role that the state plays in armed violence. The connivance of the state in this violence in Bajo Atrato results in a form of power relying not so much on the discourse and practice of the control and regulation of life—what Michel Foucault (1990) called biopolitics, the distinctive trait of modern states—as on the permissiveness of the state toward death—thanatopolitics, or what Achille Mbembe characterizes as necropolitics: "the subjugation of life to the power of death" (2003, 39). In this way, war—and the chronically entrenched poverty, marginalization, and discrimination that make war possible in the first place—becomes a way of defining "who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not" (Mbembe 2003, 27): a practice of carrying death and letting it happen to peoples and places deemed as killable or less worthy of grief (Butler 2009). And this constitutes one of the traits of the ontological occupation fostered by war.

The unfolding of events in Bajo Atrato leaves little doubt about the way that the army and the paramilitary, along with regional political elites, wealthy financiers, entrepreneurs, and companies that for years systematically funded the counterinsurgency war launched by paramilitaries, formed strategic alliances in order to extirpate all guerrilla influence in the region and gain economic power through dispossession of people's lands. The so-called counterinsurgency war was at the service of the social and economic status quo, and it adopted the classic "drain the water" strategy: catching guerrillas (the fish) by polluting or drying out their milieu, in this case by eliminating their alleged supporters—the civil population. The apex of this violence took place between 1996 and 2005, when the campaigns launched by both paramilitary and army forces resulted not in the diminishing of guerrilla power but in the banishment of hundreds of Afro-Colombian communities from their traditional lands. Even more than twenty years after Operación Génesis (1996), the army campaign that allowed several paramilitary squads to take control of the region by means of economic blockades, abductions, torture, and systematic killings, many communities have not succeeded in returning to their land under appropriate conditions of safety and dignity because skirmishes between new paramilitary armies and other communist guerrillas are ongoing.

But the armed conflict has not been a counterinsurgency war only. A more complex image emerges when drug trafficking, gunrunning, land-grabbing,

agribusiness, and mining enter the picture. When armed groups promote such activities and earn substantial money from them, war becomes the continuation of political and economic neoliberal agendas by other means. Armed conflict in Bajo Atrato is not a binary conflict, and it eludes any Manichaean interpretation. It demonstrates that politics and economic and military considerations are not always discrete motivations, that some actions undertaken by armed groups are not necessarily aligned to ideological discourses or related to their strategic goals (Kalyvas 2003). This is particularly true when one finds the counterrevolutionary motivations of paramilitary groups conflated with the goals of certain political and economic elites, as well as with the desire of state security forces to "clean up" purported insurgent areas; or when depletion of natural resources and forced displacement of entire communities become instrumental to guerrillas' political agendas.

To further complicate this picture, it is worth bearing in mind that guerrillas and paramilitaries are, in essence, peasant armies. This means that their soldiers often come from the regions that these groups aim to control. Bajo Atrato is no exception, and there, as in many other regions of the country, many young teenagers are recruited as soldiers. Even those who join these armies as legal adults do so constrained by a lack of other viable economic and social opportunities because these armies come to represent a way to earn a living, gain power, and even acquire social prestige. In the same vein, because of the long-term character of this armed conflict, the regular presence of these armies, and the way they permeate different spheres of local life, it would be naive to see these armies as alien, perverted forces overturning a peaceful order of things. This means that there have been instances in which local leaders and some communities have aligned their own economic and political interests with these armed actors, a fact that in some cases has undermined the legitimacy of some local organizations.

Despite the official demobilization of paramilitary forces in 2006 and the peace accord reached between the Colombian government and the FARC in 2016, war has not ceased in Bajo Atrato, to the extent that the region can be characterized as one of the areas entrenched in what Diego Restrepo (2018) oxymoronically describes as armed post-conflict (see also Castaño and Ruiz 2019). After demobilization of top paramilitary commanders, new armed groups occupied the structures of power left behind by the AUC in Bajo Atrato. Although the government insists on calling these groups gangs or BACRIM (criminal bands), they continue exerting the violent power of their predecessors under the guise of a euphemistic name: Gaitanista Self-Defense Group

of Colombia (AGC).* Something similar has happened with the FARC. From the very moment the peace talks with the government were announced in 2012, the ELN guerrilla group (National Liberation Army) began occupying the areas that had previously been under FARC influence. The war waged between these armies for the control of crucial points for accessing oceangoing drug and weapon routes has provoked, according to a mission in May 2019 of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the forced displacement of at least 1,644 people belonging to Wounaan and Emberá Indigenous communities. What is common to all these armed actors, regardless of their purported ideological affiliations, is that they engage in the economic activities of contraband, logging, drug trafficking, illegal mining, or whatever allows them to fuel their war machines. They also share common strategies for terrorizing and disciplining populations: forced displacement, selective assassinations, extortion, threats, economic blockades.

Even though the armies involved in the conflict have received a wide variety of labels from the state—sometimes they have been called and treated as terrorists, gangs, or drug cartels, and at other times they have received legal belligerent status, which means political recognition of their right to resist what the armed groups consider an illegitimate power—and even though the armed conflict itself has been denied by some governments and understood as a legitimate struggle by others, I maintain that armed conflict in Bajo Atrato is above all an expression of politically motivated aims. This is because each armed group represents a particular ideology and organizes its actions to either modify or perpetuate certain power structures. As politics is partly concerned with power and organizing control over a given population, there is little doubt that armed conflict in this region is a form of political violence: all armed actors aim, by one means or another, to exert power over local communities. But, more important to the argument being made, the armed conflict is an expression of an ontological occupa-

* The Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, a right-wing paramilitary group, took its name from Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a charismatic politician and populist leader who was running for president when he was assassinated in 1948. His death led to the historical period known simply as La Violencia, a large-scale political violence instigated by the Conservative party government against opposition parties. That violence claimed between 200,000 and 300,000 lives (Carroll 2011; Hristov 2009; LeGrand 2003). Gaitán was a strong proponent of workers' rights and fought to help the disenfranchised population against the status quo. When a paramilitary group that defends the elitist interests of a powerful economic minority adopts Gaitán's name, we are brought face-to-face with one of the most ironic and oxymoronic political positions in contemporary history.

tion of *Bajoatrateño* territories because the values and practices systematically driven, fostered, embodied, or reproduced by armed actors are usually at odds with the relations and ways of being that are essential to the very existence of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples and their territories.

War maintains and reproduces power-laden relations; it disciplines people; it naturalizes poverty; it constrains agency. This is why the ontological occupation of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian territories affects the horizon of relations that are possible when the values and obligations associated with places and beings are severely altered by instances of power that are at odds with the histories, thoughts, subjectivities, forms of knowledge, and possibilities of being that a territory would otherwise render meaningful. What I underscore is that in the case of Bajo Atrato, the ontological occupation is related not only to the political, economic, environmental, and even cultural aspects of armed violence, but also, and primarily, to the destructive production of human and other-than-human relations and to the struggles these large communities of life undertake for their right to exist. By "destructive production" I refer to the way war enters into—and comes to saturate, to occupy—the composition of *Bajoatrateño* worlds, to the power it has to push cosmological orders beyond their historical, knowable formulas, to the emergence of new kinds of agencies and new kinds of others, and to the arising of new relations and ontological transactions. Without idealizing violence as creative, I analyze war not only in terms of what it prevents, hinders, or destroys; instead, I look at war in order to show, paraphrasing Patrick Wolfe's (1999) conceptualization of settler colonialism, that it is more a structure than an event and that in Bajo Atrato war has produced new presences and forms of agency but also, in some cases, has altered the existences already embedded within the territory. These transformations have compelled communities to establish new kinds of relationships with the places and beings that make up their collective territories.

A word about one of my methodological premises: the understanding of the harm inflicted upon *Bajoatrateño* territories is the means I found to dislodge human-centered approaches from current policies of justice and reparation. This implies not only a focus on the kinds of harm in which the human is merely another agent but also a reconsideration of agency within practices rather than discourses, as well as attention to the politics of knowledge and practices rather than to the politics of identity (C. Hughes and Lury 2013). In other words, rather than examining the role that social categories such as ethnicity, ancestry, or, more broadly speaking, indigeneity play at the moment of experiencing the territory as a victim, I focus on relationality, on

events and forms of engagement within the territory. This means that what people experience as damage does not necessarily map onto assigned ethnic or cultural identity categories because what renders intelligible the experiences with, for instance, wandering ghosts, wicked spirits, or evil animals is not so much group ascription as the kinds of practices that take place within a shared place. By underscoring practices, I point to their performative power because, as a great deal of anthropological literature has shown (Blaser 2009; de la Cadena 2015; Escobar 2016; Latour 1999; Law 2007; Mol 1999), practices enact worlds, worlds made up not only of human meanings but co-constituted by assemblages of other-than-human existences. This is why this book should not be considered as an ethnography of Afro-Colombian or Emberá and Wounaan communities but rather as an ethnography of place or, even better, of crucial events that have reconfigured a territory treasured by some Indigenous, *chilapo*, and Afro-Colombian peoples. If what defines damage to the territory is its world-making effects, then group ascription (i.e., ethnic or cultural collective identity) is not a condition for tracing the kind of harm that extends beyond people and their human rights. Moreover, my preference for focusing on practices and engagements within particular places becomes a means of seeing the harm inflicted upon *Bajoatrateño* territories not so much as the outcome of particular cultural representations of reality but rather as a set of possibilities that are experienced when people engage in a particular way with their territories.

Chapter Overviews

I have arranged this book into seven chapters. Each of the first six conveys attributes of a territory that is interpreted in relational terms. They also include the conceptual and methodological premises that should guide an understanding of war and its afterlives in worlds made of human and more-than-human entanglements. Chapter 1, for example, illustrates the instances of coproduction between rivers and people and how war affects, in accretive and incremental ways, the practices through which people's and rivers' lives are mutually nurtured. Given that Bajo Atrato is above all an aquatic universe, here I describe the prevalence of water, paying attention to rivers and to the ways that their flow and movement support particular modes of existence. Called "The Flow of Selves," this chapter describes an array of local practices that show how human actions, paraphrasing Karine Gagné and Mattias Borg Rasmussen (2016), are done with rivers and not just to them. I pay attention to how forced displacement and the rapacious eco-

nomic interests of paramilitary armies and timber companies proliferated a form of damage that, besides provoking serious environmental impacts, undermined people's possibilities of traveling and taking care of their rivers, which ended up hindering the very practices that help communities bring their territory into existence.

The violent transformation of rivers cannot be addressed only through the ethics of environmental conservation. Conservation, at least in dominant legal systems, supposes the enactment of rivers as natural resources: entities external to and detached from people, whereas the practices of care undertaken by local communities imply the flourishing of different forms of lives, including other-than-human lives, that not only inhabit the rivers but that *are* and become with them. This is the main argument developed in Chapter 2, "Still Waters Run Deep." I examine how war has changed the relations that different aquatic beings engage in. Concretely, I describe *fieras*, a set of often colossal and extraordinary beings whose existence cannot be understood as disconnected from the specific material forms and ecological constraints that rivers propitiate or from the affective embodied dispositions through which people meet these *fieras*. This means that more than discrete beings endowed with a kind of reality independent from people or places, *fieras* are forged within relational fields. I explore how war has compromised the existence of these beings in order to raise questions about how to understand damage and the possibility of its reparation once the harm is situated within a world made of entangled relations between beings and places whose contours are not always neat. In this chapter the emergent properties of territory—territory being an aggregate of assemblages whose associations generate bigger unities—become more evident, showing that the violence of war propagates in ways that involve relations between multiple assemblages. Therefore, its effects are better traced when paying attention to said relations.

In Chapter 3, "Imperishable Evils," waterscapes and the worlds of spirits meet, showing how violence ramifies in many directions and how in a territory of multiple entanglements war becomes a "threat multiplier," something that does not "simply impact existing forms of life in obvious ways" (Khan 2016, 190). Here I describe the powers of an evil being, known in Spanish as *madre de agua*, that assaults people in the rivers. This being, whose name I have roughly translated as Water Mother, embodies a form of shamanic aggression set in motion by *jaibanas*, the traditional Emberá healers. Although they are more ancient than warfare in the region, Water Mothers have participated in the armed conflict and its afterlives. When the violence exerted by the official armed forces, guerrillas, and paramilitaries attained one of its

highest peaks in the period 1996–2005, some powerful *jaibanas* mobilized these evil spirits in an attempt to protect their communities from the attacks of these armed groups. However, the very nature of armed violence caused many of these spirits to run amok, to the extent that some of these beings are still wandering the rivers and causing indiscriminate damage because they are no longer capable of distinguishing between those who make war and those who do not. In this chapter I tell the story of one of these attacks in an attempt to depict what I consider to be the rhizomatic nature of war and its afterlives in Bajo Atrato, meaning that events apparently disconnected in time and place might share heterogeneous bonds whose repercussions spread in ways that resist single directions and causalities.

In the second part of this book I shift my gaze from rivers to forests. In chapter 4, "Awakening Forests," I depict the afterlife of forced displacement in order to show the processes of ruination associated with war. I focus on the abandonment of villages, gardens, and trails to stress some forms of power inherent to forests, particularly their perseverance in continuing to grow and propagate. However, forests' generative power represents to people in Bajo Atrato a process of rot and decay. I then describe how multiple kinds of other-than-human agencies are involved in processes of ruination and how the entanglement of rubble and animal and vegetal species might help us reconsider the material and analytical grounds of concepts such as forced displacement or dispossession. Ultimately, this chapter conveys the idea that territory is always in the making because ruins and other-than-human presences show how places are in motion or, better, that they can be conceptualized as moments in the arrangements of things (Ingold 1993).

The intricate role of sylvan agents in the decay of people's livelihood, on the one hand, and the proliferation of forces that produce more than material effects during processes of ruination, on the other, complexify certain legal definitions regarding territorial damage, which usually only speak to material losses. This means that we need to look closely at the transformation of the intangible qualities of places, which is the topic I address in chapter 5, "The Shared World of the Living and the Dead." Here I depict the kind of harm associated with the hauntings provoked by the presence of the restless spirits of some soldiers who experienced a violent death. Whereas the first chapter discusses the importance of flow and how rivers propitiate particular values and modes of being, in this chapter I deal with the flow of life and death or, more precisely, the problems associated with those spirits that remain stagnant within the spatial and temporal contours where their human lives ended. Given that, for local communities, coming to terms with these ghostly presences is a

condition for healing their land, I am interested in showing the important role that spirits play in attaining peace and justice. This chapter explores how war is not always bounded within bodies and how being in a territory presupposes being vulnerable to others that can make us and unmake us, that can transform us "into something other than what we are" (Clark 2010, xxi).

Chapter 6, "A Jaguar and a Half," delves into how territory is made of heterogeneous encounters whose outcomes can rarely be taken for granted. Here I describe the events unleashed by a man-eating jaguar and the assorted misunderstandings and responses this provoked among different people involved. I track the deaths caused by this jaguar to show the pervasiveness of war in Bajo Atrato and the perversity of certain warlords who managed to involve sylvan beings in their deadly business. I show how the man-eating jaguar epitomizes a form of excess that renders it a hybrid figure capable of dislocating multiple borders: between human and other-than-human forces, between environmental and social processes, between predation and warfare. Ethnographic attention to this excess sheds light on the instances of hybridization and multiplicity that render war a phenomenon that extends beyond the human.

After having built an ethnographic argument about the form of harm that decades of war have wrought on the large communities of life that constitute *Bajoatrateño* territories, in the final chapter I explore to what extent the legal recognition of Indigenous territories as victims makes a difference in how the conflict itself, its multiple impacts, and the measures to redress it (including reparations) are understood, and how it could be otherwise. I show that despite the progressive deepening of the state's multicultural discourses evident in the law, it remains trapped within realist languages of science, rights, culture, and rationality that, emphasizing an ethics of environmental conservation, deflate the ontological dimensions of the events and beings discussed throughout this book.

A word about the book's title: the war waged in Indigenous and Afro-Colombian traditional territories has produced vast harm. As I will demonstrate, this harm extends beyond people and threatens the very worlds that are both constitutive of and constituted through the social relations which Indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples cultivate with other-than-human selves. The harm of armed conflict has not ceased, and what is left in the wake of destruction, killing, and forced displacement still reverberates in the lives of the myriad beings that constitute these territories. In this sense the afterlives of war are the kinds of lives that humans and other-than-humans must undertake in the wake of the cumulative deaths caused by an ongoing violence.

Inspired by Christina Sharpe (2016), I understand this wake as a track, one left in this case by a war machine, as well as the state of being awake, being vigilant in the context of unending violence. By being in this wake, Afro-Colombian and Indigenous peoples are reaffirming their insistence on living the kind of life that renders their territories a place for worlds otherwise (Escobar 2007; Povinelli 2012). The afterlives of war are not simply trauma or environmental degradation, and they are more than ongoing violence. Instead, afterlives are the effects upon the vital relationalities that make up territories, which at times give rise to certain versions of said territories that can be wrong in the sense of constituting worlds "in which or with which [people] do not want to live" (Blaser 2013b, 552). At stake in *Bajoatrateño* territories is life itself and the possibilities of fostering a life lived in worlds different than the one John Law (2015) refers to as the "one-world world," that epistemologically and ontologically flat world that modernity presents as superior, leaving other realities out of the picture. A form of violence still reverberating, that overturns entangled continuums of human and other-than-human relationships, and that has the power of shaping territories: these are the afterlives of war. When forests and rivers run amok, their ecologies become erratic and often unpredictable, but more importantly these ecologies alter the properties of beings, such that these beings may begin to cause havoc. When rivers and forests run amok, a violent form of indeterminacy permeates the places and beings that render life meaningful in Bajo Atrato. When forests and rivers become so intermingled with armed violence, one wonders to what extent these militarized ecologies can be fully dismantled. Let us then embark on this journey up the rivers and along the muddy trails that cross *Bajoatrateño* territories in order to cultivate a form of ethnographic attention capable of perceiving an ecological violence that extends beyond environmental impacts and human rights violations.

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