

Intervention Symposium—“Plantation Methodologies: Questioning Scale, Space, and Subjecthood”

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Plantations and Colombia’s Agri-Military Regime

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Thinking (with/through) Plantations

In this Intervention, we use plantations as methodological tools for analyzing the spatialization of structures of domination in Colombia’s rural areas. Thinking about, with, and through the plantation form has allowed us to understand the close interdependence between agriculture and militarism. We draw from our ethnographic work in the Colombian South Pacific and Caribbean regions to describe how oil palm plantations operate as powerful, yet disputed, agri-military regimes. Since the mid-20th century, in the guise of rural development, peace, and legality, oil palm has expanded through the convergence of agricultural and military logics and campaigns. The historical continuities between the Green Revolution and the War on Drugs illustrate how oil palm trees ingrain promises of agricultural progress, security, state presence, and legal authority in rural landscapes deemed “subversive” and “backward”. In Colombia, oil palm plantations are sites of dispossession, warfare, counterinsurgency, and grief in contradictory relations with spaces of interdependence, care, and resistance.

Colombia's Agri-Military Regime

Colombia is a prominent case study for analyzing the connections between war and agriculture. The over six decades-old internal war has its roots in the vast inequality of land access, and this remains a central problem after the insubstantial implementation of the peace agreement signed between FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrillas and the national government in 2016. Moreover, agricultural crops of different scales, including rice, banana, coca, or sugar cane, are the direct legacies of state formations and US imperial enterprises carried out through the Green Revolution and, later, through the War on Drugs. In this Intervention, we use oil palm plantations to inquire into the way in which plants, pesticides, corporations, agricultural missions, agribusiness experts, and governments have shaped rural landscapes as spaces of military intervention through agrarian development in Colombia.

Between 1945 and 1970, Western experts, private investors, and the state encouraged the cultivation of oil palm crops to “bring development” to “backward” regions through a strategy of “corporate colonization” (Prieto 2016), as the government characterized the anti-Black and anti-Indigenous practices of land occupation on supposedly empty and lawless spaces, turning peasants, most of them Mestizo/White, into *colonos* (settlers) (Serje 2011). In line with Cold War interventions in different countries of the Global South, the Green Revolution in Colombia saw the promotion of rice, beans, and corn monocrops, agricultural modernization, seed improvement, and phytosanitary control as an effective way of disciplining potentially subversive peasants (Patel 2013; Picado Umaña 2014). These strategies set the floor for the expansion of oil palm plantations during the 1980s. Oil palm trees replaced rice and beans subsistence crops in most rural regions, becoming thus the primary heirs of the Green Revolution, and years later, they became the poster crop of the War on Drugs.

With Plan Colombia's implementation in the early 2000s, funding from the US was channeled towards military and antinarcotic operations seeking to eradicate coca, opium poppy, and cannabis crops (Ciro Rodríguez 2019). Under the logic of curtailing resources fueling guerrilla groups and operations, the War on Drugs was a continuity of the Green Revolution's counterinsurgent actions (Ramírez 2010). Within this logic, oil palm plantations were featured as

the prime substitution crop, a silver bullet capable of counteracting the state's internal enemies—guerrilla groups, communists, coca growers, rebel peasants, and illicit plants.

As such, oil palm plantations make explicit the historical constitution of an agri-military regime: in Tumaco, where development experts and the national government have deemed oil palm trees the antinarcotic plant; and in Montes de María, where their implementation was justified under the need to counteract actual or potential guerrilla presence.

Plantations' Relationality

In Tumaco, oil palm cultivation began in 1960 and is today the main agricultural project in the region. However, oil palm trees are not the only plants that have shaped Tumaco's geographies. A complex network of local and transnational actors expanded the cultivation of coca crops in the last 25 years. Coca's arrival is rooted in three events: [i] the intense criminalization by the Colombian and US governments of coca growers and coca crops in the 1990s in the Colombian Amazon Piedmont using glyphosate aerial spraying as an eradication strategy; [ii] the forced migration of criminalized peasants to closer rural regions, such as Tumaco; and [iii] the increment of illegal armed groups seeking control drug traffic. Once coca cultivation expanded in Tumaco, the Colombian and US governments made the region one of their main military and aerial fumigation targets. Plan Colombia worked as the institutional framework to implement those tactics. But Plan Colombia was not only a military project; it was also an "agricultural development program" that promoted monocrops to "defeat" coca (Fedepalma 2002, 2014). Oil palm experts, corporations, and government officials have thus converged in the implementation of oil palm plantations as symbols of rural development and national security.

Even as Plan Colombia formally ended in 2015, the narrative of oil palm as an antinarcotic plant remains today. Plantation owners and managers state that "oil palm is a realistic alternative to confront the coca economy and bring hope to small producers" (Personal interview, 2022). They argue that oil palm has the material infrastructure and, most importantly, the market to compete against coca. Some of Tumaco's peasants reiterate this belief. Although they cultivate in their gardens other plants and subsistence crops that are crucial to sustaining their families, food practices, and cooking traditions—such as cacao, plantains, yucca,

chontaduro, chilangua, and coconut—they remark that these crops cannot compete against coca. Oil palm, in contrast, emerges as a more convincing economic alternative to coca leaf crops. However, peasants do not conceptualize a rigid binary between oil palm and coca; instead, they point to their interrelations. Many peasants have worked in oil palm companies and on coca crops. Also, many have grown both plants on their lands, spending their daily routines walking across, talking to, and caring for them. More than a fixed rivalry between oil palm and coca, they underscore that both crops help to maintain their families, pointing to their interdependent ecologies.



Image 1: Oil palm and coca, Tumaco (photo by Andrés Caicedo, 2023)

On the other hand, the implementation of oil palm plantations in Montes de María responded to the armed incursion of the AUC (United Self-Defenses of Colombia), a paramilitary bloc that took control of agricultural land in the subregion by means of massacres, assassinations, sexual violence, forced displacement, and confinement in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Nonetheless, paramilitary control was not the last step in the history of campesino, Indigenous, and Black dispossession in Montes de María, as entrepreneurs bought the stolen lands and used state subsidies to implement oil palm plantations (Ojeda et al. 2015). In public and official discourse, the pacification of Montes de María through the establishment of oil palm plantations was effectively separated from its violent past (and present) as it was framed as development and peace. Local communities often mention that the green deserts of palm were only possible because they were “fertilized with their people’s blood” (Personal interview, 2014).

Like in Tumaco, palm oil plantations were supposed to purge from Montes de María guerrilla groups and their potential allies, constituting a violent agri-military regime that extended in time and space beyond direct paramilitary operations and morphed into everyday forms of dispossession that included water poisoning and enclosure. Nonetheless, despite growth during the last three decades, palm oil plantations do not constitute homogeneous and finished projects. Feminized spaces like gardens and homes stand in relation to the plantation, while interrupting it. They exist “in the cracks of violent territorial regimes”, where care practices open possibilities of life sustenance both within and beyond the plantation (Berman-Arévalo and Ojeda 2020: 1596). Along with herbs and spices, gardens produce eggplants, peppers, and green beans that feed entire families and contribute to the reconstitution of the material and symbolic ecologies that were torn apart by war, forced displacement, and the imposition of oil palm. They also provide much needed medicine for tending to the sick and dealing with trauma. Growing in the interstices of the plantation, gardens are “bio-cultural refugia” (Carney 2021), and important spaces of memory and resistance.



Image 2: La Suprema, María la Baja (photo by Camila Páez, 2016; reproduced here with permission)

In such interrelations, plantations constitute contradictory objects in their historicity and geography. They defy binaries such as industry vs. agriculture, modernity vs. colonialism, and labor vs. forced subjection (Gilmore 2007; Hartman 2016; McKittrick 2013; Mintz 1986; Trouillot 2021; Wynter 1971). In the same direction, Tumaco and Montes Maria cases reveal how oil palm operates as an agro-military regime, undermining rigid distinctions between military occupation vs. agricultural settlement, war vs. rural development, and antsubversive operations vs. agrarian missions.

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