

Christopher Courtheyn, *Community of Peace: Performing Geographies of Ecological Dignity in Colombia*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022. ISBN: 9780822947141 (cloth); ISBN: 9780822988786 (ebook)

Christopher Courtheyn's *Community of Peace* is an ethnography of resistance situated at a contested crossroads in the Americas. Geographically, the primary research site, San José de Apartadó, is located near the border of South and Central America. It is a particularly dangerous corner of Colombia, subject to the multiple forms of violence associated with the imposition of large-scale mining, plantation agriculture, and drug trafficking. Figuratively, the peace community persists at the crossroads of a *campesinado* (peasantry) confronting the unrelenting forces of state-driven modernization. It is a community that has continually resisted the fate of Gabriel García Márquez's fabled Macondo (i.e. physical and historical erasure) by refusing to side with any armed group, including the Colombian state itself. Courtheyn bears witness to this refusal as both an ethnographer and an international protective accompanier.¹ His presence as a US citizen has deterred armed actors from committing violence that he and other protective accompaniers could potentially witness. In these dual roles Courtheyn profiles as an embedded scholar-activist, participating in the life of the community, *walking with* the community in solidarity, and engaging in the "coproduction of knowledge against oppression" (p.27).

In that regard, *Community of Peace* is emblematic of social science research—particularly scholarship oriented by heterogeneous approaches to justice, decoloniality, and/or anticoloniality—that centers the actions and voices of people who refuse to be silenced. In the vein of other recent Anglophone books useful to understanding the *buildup to* and the *aftermath* of the Colombian government's 2016 peace agreement with Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) (Ballvé 2020; Cárdenas 2023; Dest 2025; Lyons 2020; Ruiz-Serna 2023), *Community of Peace* highlights why this internationally celebrated occasion has not fundamentally altered much for a lot of rural Colombian communities subject to murder,

¹ See Koopman (2011) and John Lindsay-Poland (2018) for additional context on the implications of international protective accompaniment in the San José Apartadó peace community.

dispossession, and displacement over the last several decades. And while many of the aforementioned books highlight how different kinds of communities resist those forms of violence, including communities conceptualized with more-than-human dimensions (Lyons 2020; Ruiz-Serna 2023), Courtheyn's book resonates with those struggles while also explaining how this particular community radically redefines what it means to pursue peace.

As a fellow critical geographer who conducts similarly inspired research in a different part of Colombia, my main takeaway from this book is that *ecological dignity*, “nonexploitative and dignified relations among all beings to ensure the sustainability of life” (p.6), requires rupture from the forces that will ultimately undermine *community* itself. For the case of the San José de Apartadó peace community, those forces not only include the brute force of armed actors but also the normalization of violent logics that are antithetical to the kind of peace being sought. *Community of Peace* is a blueprint to how that kind of peace, what Courtheyn terms a *radical trans-relational peace*, is achieved. He argues that the peace community originated and has persisted because, similar to Fanon's call for decolonial revolution, it has demanded “new ways of being, thinking and acting” (p.54). The table of contents, which is organized in three sections (What is the Peace Community? What is Peace? What is Politics?), guides the reader through these processes of radical transformation. For instance, Courtheyn describes the voluntary nature of participation in the peace community as an affirmative kind of political autonomy that rejects the “dominant forms of modern-colonial politics” that have divided the populace and failed to effect social change (p.80). Whereas peace is conventionally understood as “the absence of war” in modern-colonial discourses, the refusal to side with the state or other armed actors (one of many ruptures discussed in the book) has frustrated armed groups (including the state) who demand allegiance and threaten violent retribution against non-conformity. Likewise, the peace community has also refused to engage in state-based ethnoracial identity politics as a means to establish territorial claims. This choice reflects two kinds of ontological rupture. The first is a commitment to solidarity with marginalized peoples over participation in neoliberal multi-cultural governance that can engender conflicts between groups asserting their territorial claims. Secondly, the peace community has rejected the rigid demarcation of territory in favor of what Courtheyn describes as a “relational territoriality” predicated on ecological dignity. He writes,

“The distinctions they describe are precisely why we need a broader conception of *territoriality*, as the political relationship between subjects and space, and *territory*, as an animated set of practices, values, and places that produce a collective political subject, in order to analyze diverse political arrangements of space” (p.164). The conceptualization of “alter-territorialities” ultimately challenges the Western idea that geographic space can be owned (as well as stolen) and repositions land as the mother of humans (and other beings).

The unfortunate irony of the *peace* community is that these ruptures—such as the decision to not cooperate with any armed groups and the decision to not engage in state-derived territorialization practices—have meant that the peace community has been continually targeted for violence. The *peace* in the name *peace community* is more akin to a “peace of mind” with the choices that community members have made. These choices not only include those ruptures, but also active processes of creating solidarity by caravanning to neighboring communities subject to violence, building resistance networks, cultivating the conditions for food sovereignty, and memorializing fallen comrades so that their acts of courage continue to bear on the present. Courtheyn’s meticulous documentation of these processes fundamental to ecological dignity and radical trans-relational peace are interwoven with ethnographic details that underscore the dangers lurking in the shadows and the fortitude required to confront those dangers. For instance, early in the book he recounts a community member being threatened by an armed actor on a trip outside of San José de Apartadó while Courtheyn, referred to as one of the “gringo sons of bitches”, was momentarily out of sight. Later in the book, he describes the tragic scene of a community where most residents had escaped to the wilderness due to forcible displacement by paramilitary soldiers. Throughout these accounts, Courtheyn is mindful of the pain and anxiety underlying these moments but also determined to demonstrate how such experiences inform the community’s path forward. This determination permeates throughout *Community of Peace* with its chapters layered in such a way that makes sense of these heartbreaking details while also continually building on the core concepts of the book.

All that being said, it is difficult to critique a book that is as sincere in its writing as the author is in his personal commitment to walking in solidarity with his interlocutors. I selfishly wanted to know more about how religiosity informs the practice of protective accompaniment

and the discourses articulated by community leaders. However, I also acknowledge that more details on that topic might have ultimately distracted from the intentionality of this well-organized narrative. In the latter half of the book Courtheyn quotes a journalist whose critique of academic scholarship ultimately speaks to the overwhelming strength of *Community of Peace*, “Many of the big-time university academics study violence and conflict. But they do so from books. They have never walked with the communities in a pilgrimage like this” (p.174).

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