Palma Africana
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“Cut-ups? But of course. I have been a cut-up for years and why not? Words know where they belong better than you do. I think of words as being alive like animals. They don’t like to be kept in pages. Cut the pages and let the words out.”

W. S. BURROUGHS, THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT (1964)

“Writers are sorcerers because they experience the animal as the only population before which they are responsible in principle.”

GILLES DELEUZE AND FÉLIX GUATTARI, A THOUSAND PLATEAUS (1980)
As of this writing my artist-colleague Simryn Gill is becoming a palm oil tree on the Straits of Malacca

Next step, bio-diesel

This is Big News

Or is it?

Such metamorphoses from human to tree or tree to human are maybe not that miraculous this day and age. Something strange is afoot. All mixed up and confusing. Used to be like the Cold War. Us here. Them there. Subjects knew their place and, as for objects, they were meek and would never dare trespass

But now? Objects! You have nothing to lose but your chains

Palm oil is already in half the packaged goods in your supermarket. By 2020 world production of it will double from what it was in 2000. Not only Simryn but you and I are becoming palm trees

Like the human stem cell capable of spawning all cells, palm oil is an elixir from which all manner of being emerges. The metamorphic sublime. An alchemist’s dream; finally

To think that the peninsula of Malaya was one of the world’s cornucopias of animal, bird, and plant life!

But today? Where has all that bio gone?

Not to worry. Things tell stories too and how much more is this the case with our supernatural palm of the metamorphic sublime as you shall hear in the pages that follow

I see Simryn or what was her now bedecked in a flurry of palm leaves like a giant ostrich feather
A blur

The head has gone

Oh! Oh! Here she is again, clutching a bunch of African palm nuts to her midriff as if she is pregnant. And why not? Stranger hybrids have happened, especially when you live by a palm plantation as does she¹

The animals may have departed but others have taken their place. For example, there are the morbid pig pens, low and dark of mien where all the pigs died recently. All. End of that little experiment. And then there are the strange houses, if that’s the term. Some are one hundred feet high. They have no windows but tiny port-holes. These are the “bird hotels” as Simryn calls them, built throughout the plantation in the hope that birds will come and nest inside and at the end of a year some poor Bangladeshi temporary migrant will have to get in there (which truly boggles the imagination, crawling around in that fetid darkness) and take out the nests from which birds’ nest soup shall be made of the mucus and whatever else that hold the feathers and twigs together

A blur

The head has gone

The forest has gone

And the animals? Where have they gone?

“Cut-ups? But of course,” writes William Burroughs in defense of his and Brion Gysin’s cut-up method. “I have been a cut-up for years and why not? Words know where they belong better than you do. I think of words as being alive like animals. They don’t like to be kept in pages. Cut the pages and let the words out.”²

Here we go

I

She is inside, in Malaysia, becoming palm.

I am outside in a village of 144 houses built on sandy soil on an island in the swamplands of northern Colombia.

Here the great rivers of Colombia converge on their way north to the Caribbean.

Every six months it floods.

Few of the villagers have title to land. They practice an increasingly meager cultivation. Some hunt and fish seasonally according to the flood. The better off (for there are certainly economic differences) may have one or more head of cattle which they pasture on or close to the swamps which are in theory baldios or unused state lands.

These are extremely hard to define. In theory such land today is open to anyone, with an upper limit as to the amount that can be fenced off. Sometimes title of ownership is granted, other times just the use-rights. The whole thing is a terrible mess, a hazy morass of words that work through lies and subterfuge to the benefit of the large landowners throughout Colombia which, so it is claimed, has the most extreme maldistribution of land in all of Latin America. “Terrible mess” is perhaps a misnomer. Charade seems more accurate, meaning deliberate falsification on the part of large landowners, corporations, state officials, and armies of lawyers. When you stand back and look at this, it comes across as theater and a sort of magic act in which the actors indulge in make-believe in a vast public secret which nobody knows and everyone knows.
This is the same logic of camouflage used by the paramilitaries, purveyors of terror, who more often than not are called in by the large landowners to enforce their spurious claims, especially nowadays with regard to oil palm plantations—what I call the “new sugar,” meaning that just as sugar, especially in the Caribbean, was to colonialism, so oil palm is the postcolonial equivalent in terms of economic, social, and ecological impact, with one huge difference: that while sugar in the colony required armies of workers, meaning slaves from Africa, oil palm plantations require only a very small labor force, thanks to modern technology.

Political theorists take note: The “hazy morass” of the baldios brings to the fore fundamental features of the nation-state. Huge swathes of Colombia whether swamp or dry exist as this ill-defined no-man’s land on which law and territory are founded and founder. What the turbidity of the swamp does is reveal the state-swamp nexus as the basis of the biopolitical where Machiavellian statecraft and sleight of hand engage with life and matter. Swamplands are what make the state a state (read on).

These past forty years have been rough. The swamp-dwellers have been harassed by wealthy cattlemen, then cattlemen-drugmen, then guerrilla, then throat-cutting paramilitaries, and now by (X)paramilitaries working for oil palm plantations expanding across the island, (X) as in ex but not really ex (read on).

I keep looking at this list, this past forty years’ list. It is a terrible chronology.

There are other forces to contend with as well, far from what we think of as natural but now become so. I refer to the world of Franz Kafka that floods the island with endless lawsuits brought by NGOs in support of the peasants and countersuits brought by the plantations and then by the Council of State weighing in on these rival claims. In 2012 the courts found that the land forcibly appropriated by the large landowners belongs to the state and could be (not should be) returned to the displaced peasants. Since 2013, starting four years ago, the Council of State has been holding preliminary hearings. Given the ability of the law firms
working for the plantations to raise objections every inch of the way, it
looks like these preliminary hearings will be forever. By means of a sep-
arate suit two key (X)paramilitary leaders of the Bloque Central Bolívar
working for the plantation have been arrested and imprisoned, a highly
unusual event.

Small as it is, the village over the past forty years has become iconic in
the annals of violence. Throughout Colombia people’s eyes light up at
the sound of Las Pavas. This name refers not to the village itself but to
the land around it, a flash point in the media since armed cattlemen
claimed the several thousand hectares of land close to the village and
called it hacienda Las Pavas.

At first blush a name (such as Las Pavas) unifies and makes something
fictitious seem real. That is how we use and understand names and that
is how names use us. But on even superficial examination the unity
disintegrates into moving parts each with a mind and history of its own.

Over the years the struggle has gone back and forth. But since 2007
something basic has changed. This is the spread of oil palm (called
palma africana) plantations. Through the building of drainage networks
as well as dykes against flooding, the aim of the plantations is to convert
the swamp into an (X)swamp. One thing is the war against the peasant.
The other is the war against nature.

But the peasants had another name for this disputed land which to
them is the best land on the island for cultivation because it is the high-
est (by one or two feet only) and less susceptible to flooding. Indeed at
times of extra high flooding they would leave the village and camp out
there until the waters subsided. To them its name is, or was, El Rastrojo,
which means the cleared field.

Archaeological remains of native Americans are abundant at this point,
including a raised field presumably for cultivation, probably made long
before the Spanish invasion of the New World.

At this site the oil palm company has a dark green building by the side
of which, cheek by jowl the displaced peasants return, when it’s not
dangerous, to occupy a makeshift camp of black plastic tents contesting the company’s claim to possession. At least that’s how it was on my three visits to the region in 2011 and 2015.

Was the company building haunted? I never saw anyone there. Once there were strong lights on all night and the grinding of a generator making it hard for us to sleep. Once I saw a large backhoe parked there, crouching like a prehistoric animal. The building had a square wooden tower which gave it the look of a fortress and some people such as Pedro and Efraín (on whom more, later) were positive that the building picked up on their conversations and even, so I gathered, picked up on their thoughts. They avoided the “fortress” as much as possible and would scuttle past it alert and fearful for all the world like hunted animals. Grown men, at that. The haunted and the hunted.

This conjunction of (1) the ancient Indian raised field, (2) the “fortress” of the *palma africana* plantation, (3) the black plastic camp of displaced peasants, and (4) the highest point on the island offers us a cross section through history such that I found myself referring to this constellation as “the ceremonial center.” But what was the ceremony? Was it me, the stranger, who froze history, at least for the moment, into a theater-like configuration? Walter Benjamin once suggested that in baroque tragedy (think Shakespeare, think Calderon), history petrified into landscape. Chronology became space. Was the whole island such a theater with its alter-reality surrounded by fast flowing waters?

The change in names from *El Rastrojo* to *Las Pavas* corresponds to some extent to what Marx called “primitive accumulation” with the accent on physical violence as a step toward the ultimate goal of capital breeding more of itself. Marx had in mind the violence associated with the silver of Potosí and the African slave trade. But has not nature long been subject to the violence of primitive accumulation before then?

The first generation of the villagers came here almost a century ago in canoes paddling along a tributary of the Magdalena River called the Brazuelo de Papayal when the island was (apparently) uninhabited, rich in hardwoods, wildlife, and the calls of birds. Why did they come? It seems biblical, a flight out of Egypt, a search for freedom from land-
lords and the state, the search for the land of milk and honey or their New World tropical equivalence. That or something like it is, after all, how Gabriel García Márquez begins his “biblical” novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, set in this very region, although, to tell the truth he is a little vague about the motivation of his characters since he sees such colonists as sui generis, as the beginning of time itself and as the center, the magical center, of the story that becomes history.

And today? There is no primary forest left as far as I know, and as for animals with valuable pelts, I doubt there are any. Even with nothing but a metal axe, a few traps, and an old shotgun, you can pretty much change everything in a couple of decades. When the cattlemen and then the cattlemen-drugmen came in on top of that, and now *palma africana* with its drains and dykes, the domination of nature seems total.

II

She is inside. I am outside accompanying the lawyer, professor, and anthropologist Juan Felipe García. Since 2009 he represents about half the villagers who in 1998 organized to reclaim what they see as their land and resist the paramilitaries whom, since 2006, spearhead the spread of oil palm plantations threatening their livelihood. The other inhabitants of the village, zealous Protestants for the most part, are indifferent to the plantations or in favor of them, although there are important exceptions.

The island has an endearing name, *The Island of the Papaya Grove*.

Nature comes with labels. Think of the oil palm here referred to as *palma africana*, then of the United Fruit Company a.k.a. the octopus (speaking of animals) that introduced oil palm trees into Central and South America, starting with oil palm trees from Sierra Leone first planted in the New World in Guatemala in 1920.³
In the heartland of oil palm land in the Niger Delta I read that palm oil is thousands of years old, found in ancient Egyptian tombs in 3,000 BC, and is today largely grown by peasants in the delta who interplant it as a subsistence crop with other tree crops.4

Let us dwell on these three words for a moment: subsistence, interplanting, and tree crops, a Holy Trinity. Subsistence here signifies household consumption, use-value or largely use-value as opposed to commodity production. Interplanting implies an ecologically sound practice probably of great antiquity. And by tree crops is meant a form of agri/culture radically different to the open-field system of North America and northern Europe. Such practices of subsistence interplanting of tree crops are common in peasant Colombia too. At least they were common until recently.

When I first walked into the peasant farms of the descendants of African slaves in western Colombia in 1969, I thought I was entering a rain forest. Later I realized that it was a replica of such using interplanted trees providing food for domestic consumption or for cash income from trees such as cacao, coffee, oranges, mandarins, mango, zapote, guyabana, citrus, and the basic staple plantain together with yucca and papa china, a great variety of medicinal herbs, flowers, leaves for packing, and firewood. Note all these are perennials. The walls and roofs of the houses were built from adobe from the farm. As opposed to monocropping plantation agri/culture, I regard this peasant “system” as one of “mastery of non-mastery” and the plantation agriculture as the radical inversion of that sinuous logic.5

is a palm oil tree native to Latin America but it produces less, and different, oil to the West African variety of *Elaeis guineensis*. The first plantations in Latin America were created by the United Fruit Company in Guatemala 1920, Panama in 1926, and Honduras in 1927.


Yet technological modernization driven by agri/business corporations and by a particular view and practice of science has destroyed these fundamental features of the peasant world. Mono-cropping amounts to one of those absolutely fundamental changes in world history comparable to the invention of monogamy and monotheism.

When Ralston-Purina inserted itself into the all-black town where I lived in western Colombia in the 1970s, setting up a corner store in the main plaza so as to extend the reach of agri/business from large landowners to the smallholder, the store did a brisk business peddling pesticide. With the spread of sugar plantations affecting the bug ecology, for the first time in memory the peasant farms were afflicted by plagues, especially the “witch’s broom” destroying their cacao trees, the principal form of peasant cash income. Moreover the government’s agricultural extension service was energetically persuading the peasants to cut down their trees as they were sick (because of the plantations’ use of chemicals) and plant open-field mini-plantations of soy beans, the very antithesis of their traditional practice. Needless to say this was doomed from the start.

Gaining first prize in the Ralston-Purina competition for sales in Colombia that year, one of the two brothers who owned this store was flown to company headquarters in the Midwest of the US. “So what caught your attention?” I asked. The houses there are not like here, he responded. “Not one built next to the other but each one apart with a lawn.” More impressive still was the research and development, with the company figuring out how to make eggs square so as to make their packing easier.

A year later one of the brothers was assassinated midday standing behind the counter. The brothers were called Los Monos on account of their blond features. They were recently arrived white men from Antoquia spearheading progress in this black town.

Since at least sixty years as governments the world over connive with agri/business giants such as Monsanto, Cargill, and Ralston Purina, the lives of peasants, the lives of plant stock, and the DNA endowment of the biosphere, are being torn asunder like in a science fiction novel. Shortly after the free trade agreement between the US and Colombia
in 2011 I was sent a photograph in a Colombian newspaper showing Colombian soldiers with automatic weapons preventing peasants from accessing the traditional seed they had harvested for replanting, the point being that the Monsanto seeds were said to be designed so as to be incapable of reproduction. Could it be true? Have we really gotten to this craziness? It's easy nowadays to produce such seed, Ignacio Chapela of Berkeley tells me. You implant the “terminator gene,” which Monsanto has promised never to use. (“Terminator gene”? Have we really gotten to this craziness?) Even if they stick to that promise it is beyond scary to think that corporations have the power to terminate (!) plant self-reproduction and even if the story with the photograph is apocryphal, it presents some fundamental truths. The widespread use of genetically modified seeds threatens to reduce or eliminate the world’s genetic diversity and place a handful of companies in control of basic food supplies. Furthermore the issue is as much metaphysical as physical, seeing that it concerns the reproduction or should I say termination of life itself. The struggle against such companies and their science is not only about the way in which they enable concentration of land and water supplies in the hands of the few. It is about life itself. The age-old fight for land reform now involves much more than acreage and includes the conversion of nature into a market via the invisible hand of the state. No wonder the collection of seeds as in the Rockefeller center of CIAT in Palmira, Colombia, or in the Norwegian arctic, are referred to as banks. These seeds are capital.

When I visited the CIAT seed bank in the 1980s, I was impressed by their collection of beans. So many classes of beans! All beautifully preserved in their temperature and humidity-controlled environment like prematurely born babies or million-dollar paintings in art museums. But how pitiful! The seed bank collected the seeds of the poor who were losing their farms to the rich. Only peasants cultivated beans, back then, and peasants provided the bulk of the average Colombian household food intake. Seed banks are booty, relics of despoliation.

Of course the websites of the seed banks tell a different story but those of us who actually do fieldwork and know some history of cropping see it differently, starting with the new and extraordinary language which goes along with seed-banking. These banks no longer speak of seeds
but of “germplasm.” They no longer roll our tongue around the word “plants,” but instead spit out “cultivars.” The CIAT website in Colombia has many graphs (it is science, after all) that refer not to results but to “agricultural emission,” their wet dream. After all, what could be more sexual and theological than seeds? Is this what Horkheimer and Adorno were getting at in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* with their mantra of “the domination of nature,” suggestive of sexual predation and Holy Cause?\(^6\) What then of my idea of “the mastery of non-mastery? What sort of seed is that? Is it the same as the logo on the side of a tote bag I saw in the slums of southern Bogotá?

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La Tierra
Es de quien
La ama
Y la proteje
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meaning

“the earth is for those who love and protect it.”

I struggle with this sentiment. It seems too simple, too naive, and thrilling. But what if?

It amounts to a shock, really, a shock, because in its prodigious simplicity this contrasts with land as private property to be bought and sold in ways that have nothing to do with love and protection.

III

She is inside. I am outside. This exerts a dizzying effect on the subject, no less than on the object. Magical realism as in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (first published in 1967) was rarely so intense, even though African palm is now planted around Aracataca, the birthplace of the author, Gabriel García Márquez, whose novel describes the arrival of the

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banana plantations of the United Fruit Company and the subsequent massacre of up to three thousand plantation workers and their families on December 6, 1928. The workers were demanding better conditions and were massed in the plaza of the town of Ciénegas (which means “swamps,” i.e., the Town of the Swamps). It is Sunday, day of the Mass when people come to town, especially this Sunday, to hear the Company make peace. Out of sight, soldiers with machine guns were stationed on the rooftops. Then they opened fire.

What could more impress itself on memory than this? But García Márquez leaves us bewildered, saying that this holocaust was immediately subject to collective amnesia and five years of ceaseless rain (see section XXXVII below).

But other forms of magical realism have taken its place. On the steep slopes of the killing fields of the mountainside known as La Comuna 13 in the city of Medellín, Colombia, for example, you can hear today young rappers singing of Álvaro Uribe’s government massacres of the inhabitants in 2002. Operación Orión it was called. Ostensibly to wipe out the ELN guerrilla, and employing paramilitaries as well as regular army troops, many civilians were killed. Helicopters buzzed overhead for days, the health clinic became a torture den, and small children watched traumatized in amazement. Now they are in their early twenties, memories aflame and every day new songs are composed by these gangs of roaming minstrels whose habitat is riddled by warring street gangs and paramilitaries alongside tourists coming for the frisson of a mountainside seeped in violence. You listen to the rappers as you fall head over heels down the steep hillsides into their brilliantly colored murals—surrealism avant la lettre—on the sides of buildings and on the walls of the cemetery. Despite the active presence of paramilitaries, they plant in parks and along the sidewalk memorials they call cuerpos gramaticales—flowers, shrubs, herbs, trees, and food crops—explaining that the plants are bodies, human bodies, at that, recalling corpses hidden deep by paramilitaries and the army under the concrete rubble of the city’s landfill way high in the mountain slopes that are Comuna 13. You fall head over heels into history as the trucks filled with concrete debris work their whining way up the winding roads to the dump. A sixty-year-old woman confined to a wheelchair on these steep slopes is
rapping too. Her legs are stayed but her arms gesticulate back and forth side to side like any young rapper in time to the beat as she pounds out her lines, her story, her song. Unstoppable. Changing all the time. Improvisation is the rule here. A way of life. A way of art. No need for a stage or an audience but the cell phone cameras track every second in makeshift studios the size of telephone booths perched on the steep slopes. It’s as if the entire performance is really for invisible entities, anyway, where the spirits of the dead meet the future. (X) President Uribe was awarded the Medal of Freedom a little after the massacre he masterminded by President George W. Bush. I can see the two of them, Álvaro and George, rapping together in a surreal mural as I write, the beat sounding like the Lord’s Prayer (just kidding).

I say “memorial” as in “they plant memorials,” and that is true enough. Yet it is more than that. The plants are held to be human bodies, live bodies at that, growing into the earth and pushing up to the sky as planted by these youngsters many of whose peasant parents were expelled by paramilitaries from land beyond cities.7

All this despite the doleful wisdom that today young people, especially young country people, throughout the world have no interest in agriculture. What an unexpected event, then, is this “return” to the land? Sure it is top-heavy with metaphor and poetry, all of this through a notion of language as with their strange phrase cuerpos gramaticales, meaning bodies that speak, bodies with language, hence the flood of lyricism that is rapping. Their logo is a human figure, a sylph, with a plant whose roots make their spidery way down into netherworlds. That is the cuerpo gramatical.

In more sedate language the plants and planting embody history, not only the 2002 state-promulgated massacre ably assisted by paramilitaries, but the history of the great movement of our time, the passing of peasants to the slums of the city, ably assisted by the relentless march of agribusiness and, as I keep saying, by paramilitaries.

7. See online AgroArte, YouTube, and other sources; also Sandra Milena Álvarez Ramirez, “La Escombrera: Entre la memoria y la impunidad; La búsqueda política de las mujeres, por la vida, la verdad y la justicia,” Pregado, Departamento de Sociología, Universidad de Antioquia, 2010.
What is surprising, indeed quite amazing given what seem like unstoppable trends throughout the world, is how these young urban dwellers have contrived a blastingly original remix of country-and-city via the South Bronx-derived art of Hip Hop, on the one hand, and a newly awakened mystique of plants and the sense of life they evoke. What is more this sense of life extends to a sense of territory and moral possession of land in the name of the dead, implicating pushback against age-old practices of violent displacement and current agribusiness spoliation.

One Saturday (July 29, 2017), AgroArte’s handwritten announcement on cardboard in a tiny park in the south of Bogotá reads: “Neighbors, join us in recuperating our spaces and our memory through planting, a communal meal, and a concert.” Unlike so many movements aimed at inspiring memory, this one joins memory to the struggle for space, meaning land-space plus metaphysical-space that is land in the widest possible sense. (Here you might want to recall the ill-defined morass that is the state land of the baldío, another metaphysical space.) Overnight, plants that were destined via Monsanto et al. for prime commodity status, have upturned the theology of the fetish of the commodity to become transcendant figures alive with their new language, music, and beauty. Remember. “Land is for those who love and protect it.” Nothing, but nothing, could be further from the metaphysic of agribusiness.

Like the metamorphic sublime of the oil of the oil palm plantations in northern Colombia making everything from diesel fuel to Body Shop lotions, the plants of the rappers of AgroArte are endowed with mighty mimetic power, raising the dead as efflorescent specters poking through the cracks in the sidewalks and Oh! What’s this! a plant stubbornly pushing its way through the slats of a park bench! They make me think of the swamp, these AgroArte songs as these AgroArte plants redefine boundaries in an up-for-grabs reality neither land nor water, neither city nor country, with all around us now slow-moving purple bubbles, fish gliding through shadows, and dive-bombing birds scattering the sky.

Most political killings the past sixty years in Colombia, the time span coinciding with technological modernization in agriculture, are due
to paramilitary death squads. Accurate figures are impossible to obtain, in good part because of the state’s collaboration in that violence. These squads have been directly or indirectly sustained by the army and members of the government including a majority of the cabinet ministers of the 2002–2010 presidency of Álvaro Uribe, one time fellow of St. Antony’s College, Oxford, who is widely acknowledged to have been a leading instigator of paramilitary force as president and before that as governor of the state of Antioquia of which the city of Medellín is the capital. Colombia lives in the shadows of this public secret, or should I say shame. No need for the literary genre of magical realism when reality itself is thus constructed and life imitates art. Everyone knows, nobody knows, not just because it is generally unwise to speak but because of what you might call blurred vision or double vision and the magma of fear under the surface of everyday life. You can never be sure of what’s going on, who did what, and what’s behind what. Secrecy magnifies reality and public secrecy magnifies it even more, encumbered by a brittle silence. At all levels is the state thus riddled and there is little need for organized paramilitarism which is now as much a state of mind as the mind of the state and well ensconced in the internet too, its natural habitat.

The number of killings tell one story. But the manner of killing is quite another, the paramilitaries being especially nifty with chainsaws. What is also missing from the statistics is the way the numbers are spun, the overwhelming and totally false impression being that the guerrilla are way worse than the paramilitaries, thereby legitimizing the (X)paramilitaries and their clones. Indeed this is one of the great mysteries: how in the US as much as in the Colombian media, the paramilitaries have virtually disappeared from sight. What did that beloved word, “peace,” mean? It meant getting the FARC to surrender. But not a word about the main assailants cutting throats, amputating live bodies, raping, etc. It is as if the paramilitaries are normal, like criminal gangs, and are part of the background of everyday life. The entire and much-acclaimed peace process (resulting in a Nobel Prize for Santos, the current president of Colombia) seems to barely mention paramilitaries, unless it is

8. For a useful history of the paramilitaries, see Maria Teresa Ronderos, Guerra Recicladas (Bogotá: Aguilar, 2014).
to compare them favorably against the FARC. The peace accord, which I doubt none but a handful of persons has read other than FARC leaders and the government’s lawyers, is a turgid document close to two hundred pages (Wikipedia claims it is unreadable). This lapse is all the more significant because with the FARC guerrilla laying down its arms, the paramilitaries and their ilk will in all probability enter into the areas where the guerrilla maintained order which, in my experience over at least two decades up the Timbiqui River in a gold mining area in western Colombia, has been beneficial.

In passing we should note that in Colombia there exist an estimated five to six million displaced persons (nearly all peasants) in a population of what was until the year 2000 some fifteen to twenty million peasants and that the vast majority of homicides in Colombia (and elsewhere in the so-called third world) are due to gangs of young men in small towns and cities killing each other, a humdrum feature of daily life commonly overlooked by the attention-grabbing news concerned with the guerrilla, drugs, and matters of state, while news of the (X)paramilitaries with occasional exceptions is conspicuously absent. After all, didn’t they give up their arms in 2005 and become integrated into society?

Meanwhile (X)paramilitaries, like palm oil itself, are morphing into other shapes and sizes. Hallelujah! another acronym, like that of BACRIM! What would Colombian violence and its murky reality be without acronyms sustaining its hollow certitudes? BACRIM = Bandas Criminales, a technicolored splash not of the magical but of the acronymic reality of the underworld that mimics stately linguistic practice with its plethora of acronyms. Such acronymic virtuosity exists because plain language has lost its value since nobody believes anything anymore. Acronyms are the dams meant to hold language from total collapse.

As with palm oil and its sublimity of metamorphoses and mimicries, so we move first through paras, then (X)paras, and now BACRIM, the upshot being the ontological shift from the shadow to the shadowed shadow and now to the shadowed shadowed, the upshot being a whirligig of atomized nastiness responsible and responsive to nothing and nobody. It’s in the air now clinging like mist in the palm trees at dawn.
In this context of myth and mayhem in the swamplands of oil palm plantations I want to ask if trees can speak. Do they, as in the now fashionable phrase, have “agency”? Are they as much subjects as objects?

Cashing in on an old tradition of flowers having language such as with God’s “signatures,” Georges Bataille had a shot at this question of agency in his essay, “The Language of Flowers,” his idea being that the beauty of flowers—their very being, we might say—is because they die and not merely die but effloresce for the briefest possible moment before they wither on the stem.² It was this cruel yet tantalizing juxtaposition of extremes that held him spellbound as yet another example of dépense, meaning in extremis or nonutilitarian expenditure—as we find with the paramilitaries and also with an AgroArte manifesto painted on the walls of their communal house in comuna 13 highlighting anti-utilitarianism as a way of life. The whole point of paramilitary violence is its excess, its “over the topness,” and it seems both miraculous and logical that a countermovement such as AgroArte would emerge with art as its raison d’être tied, be it noted, to an extraordinary mystique of plant cultivation as well as to the education of kids in the barrio in the making of rap music and alternative, nonviolent worlds, as percolated through the lyrics the kids compose together with their late adolescent teachers sitting on the floor huddled around a battered laptop.

As regards the soulful life of trees, early on in his novel In Search of Lost Time, Marcel Proust famously considered what he called the ancient Celtic belief that trees had souls when he was arguing that things could retain the memory of being looked at by humans, but that it was a matter of chance whether we would encounter objects—such as the famous madeleine—that would on tasting it divulge the memory of that event long ago in childhood with his Aunt Léonie and recur with considerable physical force. Baudelaire preceded Proust with his notion of the “forest of symbols” gazing back at the wanderer in the forest and the anthropologist Victor Turner acknowledged this in his book The Forest of Symbols when discussing the magical potency of trees in Ndembu land

in southern Africa where he conducted fieldwork with his wife in the 1950s. Turner kept a tight restraint on his language, metamorphosing notions of magic into the more acceptable language of symbol, but his southern African friends did not.

Walter Benjamin challenged Proust’s formulation of chance in two ways. First he claimed that objects did indeed have the capacity to look back at us looking at them. He called this *aura*. Second he thought it was not chance so much as the modern economy and culture that cramped the soulful life of things and our ability to perceive such. He understood Baudelaire’s poetry to be an inspired struggle with these limitations as the bridge between two channels of perception or capacity to experience. One channel, the far older one, that of *Erfahrung*, was geared to habit and tradition and was as much biological as cognitive. The other channel of experience, *Erlebnis*, was peculiar to what he called modernity with its early twentieth-century perplexing and rapid changes of pace, fragmentation, and shock. Baudelaire’s lyric poetry, wrote Benjamin famously, is the attempt to deploy the earlier idea of experience focused on the latter, which is what I believe we should keep in mind when considering whether palm trees in oil palm plantations exert “agency.” The instabilities, fragmentation, shock, and phantomlike qualities of the modern—meaning here agribusiness—are to be subject by the poet and the AgroArte-inspired anthropologist to the premodern modes of perception as well as the modern, rather than held apart and distinct. We must try to see the *Erfahrung* in *Erlebnis* and vice versa along the lines Benjamin claimed for Baudelaire (“lyric poet of high capitalism”).

For the question as I see it is whether terror may endow not only trees but nature more generally with soul or at the least magnify soulful dispositions. And here’s the point: *it is as if terror and not only secrecy magnifies reality* such that things acquire human and even godlike characteristics because when things become human they become superhuman as well as puzzling and able to open doors to the unknown.

Is this not the case with Kafka’s Odradek (“The Cares of a Family Man”) written during WWI as the Austro-Hungarian empire was imploding and ethnic hatreds emerged out of nowhere? An old cotton reel with wisps of colored threads that inhabits odd corners of the family home, Odradek, seems weirdly human while at the same time just a cotton reel (albeit with a mysterious name) with a laugh like the c(r)ackle of dry leaves. Neither an object nor a subject, Odradek is supernatural, like the trees around the palace of the dictator in Miguel Angel Asturias’s 1947 novel, El Señor Presidente, trees that transmit the secrets of the people and of rebellion stirring against the president.

But to strike a lighter note concerning the spirits of nature, what of the way Roland Barthes assimilates palm trees to language and to writing, which is what I want to do too, and what Walter Benjamin argued in his early essay, “The Language of Things and Language as Such”? At least in Barthes’s case it is humor and with that ensure the linguistic magic of trees, not terror, and does so through hermeneutics (which carries its own brand of humor and terror).

On a left-hand page in the autobiographical dalliance he called Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, he places a black-and-white photograph of two palm trees. On the right-hand page, he writes:

Toward writing
According to the Greeks, trees are alphabets. Of all the tree letters, the palm is the loveliest. And of writing, profuse and distinct as the bursts of its fronds, it possesses the major effect: falling back.

Then he quotes the mid-nineteenth-century German poet Heinrich Heine:

A hemlock tree stands lonely
Far north in a barren height
He drowses; ice and snowflakes
Wrap him in sheets of white

He dreams about a palm tree
That far in an eastern land
Languishes lonely and silent
Upon the parching sand\textsuperscript{12}

Am I that hemlock tree lonely and drowsy? I ask myself looking out the window at the melting snow in NYC but thinking of the suffocating heat of the no-man’s lands of northern Colombia from where I have just come from the Island of the Papaya Grove set like a jewel into that mighty river, the Magdalena.

A land of heat and swamps and a mighty river spilling its banks every six months, like a tidal wave it be.

Of heat and swamps and until recently paramilitaries with jackass names like “The Dog” and “Tombstone Face” itching to kill and kill bad so that the dreadfully if not desperately rich can establish palm plantations on lands cultivated by burro-riding peasants, long legs dragging on the ground that is no longer theirs.

The last section of the trip here from Bogotá in 2011 took five hours as the motor refused to start in the “Johnson” pronounced “yonson,” meaning these little launches thus named after the US-made outboard motors of long ago that made their way here in the 1950s or 1960s, I guess. Must have been revolutionary to have a motor displacing the paddle back then, like the introduction of motor cars and before that trains, things we take for granted. But till the 1960s here on the tributary of the Magdalena River called the Brazuelo de Papayal all you would hear on the river back then would be the sound of one or two paddles dipping into the water, on and on and the kids dancing in the river at sunset. The current was with us. We drifted as the motorista, sweating profusely, tried again and again to yank the motor into action. Up front sang the balladeer. He replies to my questions with songs—songs of violence and betrayal by the “black Judas” who swore a deposition in the state capital, Cartagena, that the peasants had not been forcibly displaced, this same Judas who now has a salaried job with the palm plantation.

The sun beats down. The great white herons spread their wings like the swan enrapturing Leda as we float downstream. The singer sings of the paramilitaries and the terror they create, chopping up bodies and heaving them into the river with its vivid flowers on which we float. He stops singing for a moment and tells me how, when swimming in this river, he felt an arm and then a hand clutching his throat.

I don’t believe a word of it. Why exaggerate like this? Did I hear right? Could each floating flower in its brilliance of color and form be such a body in a river become a cemetery? AgroArte, for sure! Then he starts singing again. We stop to fix the motor at a bunch of houses made of packed mud. A stout schoolteacher joins us. Her blood pressure fell suddenly and she was taken here for medical attention. The conversation turns once again to the violent and bizarre, stage two, you might say, of an ongoing dialogue as the launch, now moving briskly, raises a fine spray in a glistening arc overhead. Do these tales of atrocity empower us? What is our humanism, really, as we gorge ourselves on these stories? Why do they put the bodies in the river? I ask. Because they won’t let them be buried, the schoolteacher replies matter-of-factly. This takes time to sink in. Can refusal of basic rites be itself sacred? Does the
dumping of the corpse in the river (like in the landfill in *La Comuna 13* in Medellín) engage this very sanctification? Is not dumping religious? And the river? What of the river with its corpses bobbing up and down? Is the swampland of northern Colombia their ultimate resting point, their grave, where the mighty Magdalena ends its long journey, if the fish have left anything, that is?

A body is the ultimate territory and a chopped-up corpse adrift in the river is the absolute denial of such territory, the deepest possible exile of the soul. Could this be why the tillers of the soil all over Colombia are now talking a new talk, so it seems to me, in which like the bodies the word “territory” keeps popping up, meaning communal territory, meaning something very local and very “ours.”

After three decades of paramilitary violence in rural Colombia aimed at dismembering both land and body to make way for cattle and palm, it seems almost inevitable that dismemberment acquires additional, even opposite, meanings, which we could call dismemberment/rememberment thus playing with the word *re-member* as much as the dynamic of eternal return of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Think back to AgroArte in Medellín with the rappers in the slums getting off on agri/culture, finding a new mystique in plants and hence in nature. Such is the “dialectical image” short-circuiting the gaps and connections between nature and culture.

After all, that other body, the body of state, like God making man in his own image, is hell-bent on making reality conform to the agricultural *megaproyecto* such as that of *palma africana* which is more than a plantation. The *megaproyecto* is like a state in itself, a mini-state knitting together the market and private property through the interface of violence.

This is no metaphor. The lawyer points to the fate attached to this island since at least 1950, its destiny to become the showcase for centralized state planning of an agricultural utopia *sans* people, *sans* swamps. The celebrated economic planner, Lachlan Currie and the Interamerican Development Bank had this Big Idea and it wasn’t just the island of Papayal but most of the swamps of northern Colombia which they would convert into the richest land in the nation. It was a technician’s
dream with dykes and canals draining the swamp and having cattle everywhere. It was the Age of Development, meaning the Age of Anti-Communism that included ineffectual attempts at land reform aimed at holding back the ogre by distributing small holdings to the peasantry on marginal land (such as swamps). Later, in our time of the twenty-first century, African palm plantations reinitiated the dream of drainage. And what was and remains the specter of the paramilitary mission? It is exactly this US-inspired Cold War Anti-Communism, morphed into anti-terrorism.

In between these historical moments of ineffectual land reform and the arrival of the palm were the exciting times of cattlemen-drugmen taking over the island with their version of the megaproyecto fortified first by the EPL guerrilla holding the peasantry down and then the sworn to the death enemies of the EPL, paramilitaries, cutting throats, a lot of throats, so as to establish conditions appropriate for African palm.

But now, provided it is organized, the fragile malarial peasant body gets in the way, something to contemplate as our launch put puts through the flowery verdure.

This territory of the body that is the corpse is not lost on one of our passengers, Vladimir. He is an ex-paramilitary—who deserted through fear and, of all things, because he hated oatmeal for breakfast. I can’t stand avena, he explains. He was recruited in Caicedonia in the Valle, he declaims to all and sundry in the launch, and was taken to a training school lasting forty-five days near El Libano in Tolima. He spares no detail. They cut open the body of a guerrilla fighter, stuffed it with cocaine, and drove it to Medellín in a hearse. Another time he was working on a dairy farm in Antioquia and had to walk somewhere early in the morning. He saw the headlights of three pickup trucks in a stream and then he saw two bodies, one being cut to pieces with a belt around the man’s mouth to stop him screaming. The other man was dead and his body was being packed with what most likely was cocaine. Vladimir crept past. Walking up the hill he heard the sound of a motorbike of alto cilindrage coming down the hill, muy suave. The driver stopped and asked him if he’d seen anything down at the stream? Oh! No! He replied. Are you sure? Of course I’m sure.
Our launch pushes through flowers that spread like a floating carpet over the surface of the water, white, purple, and a bloody red. Herons stand solitary on one leg in haughty disdain, flying off slowly at the last minute as we approach, stretching open their enormous white wings like fans against the bright green. They are extremely clumsy and extremely graceful, catching themselves as they fall. Black ducks skid across the brown waters.

V

After flooding there are plenty of fish in the swamps. I got to know them well that first trip because there was so much fish as the floodwaters receded. In my two subsequent visits in the dry season there were no fish and we ate tasteless corn flour imported from the US fried in balls and occasionally almost as tasteless factory-raised chicken tasting like hot cardboard. (How the diet of country people has changed these past two decades! Now there are supermarkets in the towns with refrigeration, a huge change, for sure, but the food is not food anymore.)

This enormous area of swamps that seem to go on forever is one of the world’s natural paradises. What a fate to plant it in row after row of palm for diesel fuel and fingernail polish. “Green,” of course.

Known as the Momposina Depression, 80 percent of which lies in swamps, the area has been described as “the most boggy and flooded region of the country due to the vast quantity of inlets, rivers, swamps and marshes that form the rivers Magdalena, Cauca, and San Jorge.”13 The state of El Sur de Bolívar of which the island is part, is the state “with the highest number of wetlands in the country with 645 named swamps, corresponding to 34 percent of all the identified swamps in the country. In addition there are 3,549 unnamed swamps, corresponding to slightly more than 25 percent of all the unidentified swamps in the country.”

That’s a lot of swamps, most of which are unnamed. As the report says,

this makes (state) planning with a view to “develop” and “modernize” agriculture difficult. In this sense the area is undomesticated, or, more accurately, stateless.

Nameless and shameless. Imagine! Two-thirds of the swamps are nameless! You really have to ask yourself what naming does to nature and whether these nameless swamps are really nameless to local people anyway? Still other questions arise: Where does a swamp begin and end? Is that why swamps are nameless? Are not its boundaries always changing along with the rainfall and flooding every six months? Like the eviscerated body of the guerrilla beyond the law that Vladimir was talking about, stuffed with cocaine, the swamp is a body without organs that not only eludes definition but the idea of such.

Might we conclude therefore that swamps present something of a threat to the meaning and hence hegemony of the state with its need for hard edges? But then is not the state swampy as well, full of slime and stench? Is that why (the world over, it seems) there are laws protecting swamps as privileged entities (when they have names, of course)? It is curious, that’s for sure, this merging of the body of the land with the body of the state by means of the moist parts. It is as if the state has to embrace (read “protect”) the swamp so as to restrict its corrupting emanations.

This spread of palm into the swampland is doubly unfortunate, not least because such swamp habitat seems less than ideal for palma africana. The palm thrives in the moist tropics, that’s for sure, but not in wetlands. They will certainly have to be further drained and the mighty Magdalena will certainly have to be fought against with dykes to contain its flooding. But the river will win.

As the report cited above also points out, the swamps exist in a swamp-like political environment, what the authors call “an institutional vacuum,” in which state entities are at loggerheads with one another and nothing is clear legally or in practice while meanwhile the megaprojects, ensuring long-term destruction of people and habitat, advance.

Think of the swamps filtering and conserving life. Walt Whitman might have called the swamps “the great sluice of life” and seen democracy in their turbid turbulence. He probably did, just as Deleuze and Guattari conceive of Being itself as swamp worlds of interspecies metamorphoses involving packs of animals, fish, birds, and micro-organisms, not to mention us human beings in the multiplicity of our becomings akin also to language, meaning the practice of language, meaning putrescent swamp words drifting into oblivion.¹⁵

I am informed that swamps conserves biodiversity, carbon sequestration, control of flooding, filtration, storage, and de-pollution. As I reel off this list provided by experts I ask myself, Is not the swamp an exuberant entity swinging between pure and impure in an intoxicating mix of life-in-death? Is there not a mighty assemblage at work here, pulsing, in fact; the boatman sweating to get the motor to turn over connected thus to the balladeer concocting wailing winding songs that pull at your heart and history, curdling, really, connected to the flowers and to the herons passing by floating and flying as spirits of the dead take over what is assuredly, to coin a phrase, our “line of flight” downstream to the island that is our destiny, the Island of the Papaya Grove?

Above all feel yourself in water. Feel yourself floating and then sinking along with the fish and the mold, the decaying branches and slowly rising bubbles alive with putrid smell that is the swamp. In the Western world this has long been coded as a feminine zone, even of revolution as deployed by Monique Wittig in 1968, for instance, in her book of lesbian nomads inhabiting an aqueous archipelago of female genitalia, playing with words, playing with language, every bit as much as do Burroughs’s words become animals once the pages are cut. In the Colombian peasant world it may well be a zone of spirits and invisible underwater cities full of shining commodities to which Amazon shamans make long voyages underwater.

Two hundred miles west of the island I am writing about in the rain forests of the Chocó, south of Panama, descendants of the slaves brought from Africa to mine gold in the eighteenth century were tortured and massacred by paramilitaries and the Colombian air force in the mid-1990s clearing the way for palm plantations. Of course it was all in a good cause aimed at driving out the communist guerrilla and cocaine traffic so as to replace them with paramilitaries and cocaine traffic.16

But my tale in the pages that follow is less dramatic. Bold relief gives way to the sludge of swamp life, to the tedium of the everyday and the sudden insight that disappears pretty much as soon as it occurs nowhere more so than when considering the experience of writing experience. There is a lot of heat and monotony stuck to the pages that follow.

My belief is that detail, evanescent or banal, is necessary so as to unsettle reality, not because we need all the facts (which no reader pays much attention to, anyway), but because the cunningly rendered detail can, on occasion, sneak through the defenses we erect so as to keep reality from disturbing us. This is especially important and difficult when it comes to ethnographic writing about the lives of people in non-Western societies, especially in zones of warfare and violence, and this is what Jean Genet does in his last book, Prisoner of Love, a long series of uncoordinated snapshots or shaggy dog stories about his years with the Palestine Liberation Front in its infancy in Jordan, and later in Beirut in 1982. We should note that were it not for Genet’s name and commitment to the Palestinian cause, most of the book would be readily dismissed as a compilation of “mere” anecdotes, as if the anecdote is the most pathetic rhetorical endeavor in a writer’s armory, usually introduced with a lot of humming and harrering. Yet is not this estimate silly? Is not the “mere” anecdote the quicksilver flurry that combines the personal with the ways of the world, one eye open to the strange and the untoward, the other eye somewhat bashful and unsure? And is not this compilation of thought, analysis, meditation, and confession reaching for the stars, as it were, reaching for the mythological in the

everyday, quite the best form of response to the adventure that is life’s flow and eddies?

This is of a piece with Walter Benjamin’s enthusiasm for what he called “trash,” meaning the apparently irrelevant detail marginal to History and the Big Events that, in its profane way, trash illuminates far more than does a direct account. Using trash to elucidate trash, Benjamin meditated on the way kids love to hang out and play in construction sites, picking up the bits and pieces of debris to make dazzling new constructions, conducive to what he would later call “dialectical imagery” as the key to historical thinking in a revolutionary vein.17 This played into his enthusiasm for children’s toys and his many radio stories for children in the late 1920s and early 1930s, as well as into splicing his interest in the baroque with the commitment to the theory of montage in early film theory, to which we should now add Jean-Luc Godard’s “jump cut” as well as that cutting advocated by Burroughs and Gysin.

Hence the character of my serpentine text: detailed, anecdotal, montaged, and jumping through puddles of tedium.

With regard to the difficulties of ethnographic writing, an anthropologist wrote a structuralist account of some Indians in the Amazon and gave a copy of the book to his mother. “A lovely book, darling, but what’s it like to be there?”

Her remark was crushing (and the anthropologist tells it against himself). “What’s it like to be there?” Makes you wonder if anthropologists are like X-ray machines that can only show the skeleton with just a hint here and there of soft tissue? Do anthropologists have eyes like the shamans of Tierra del Fuego, as reported by Lucas Bridges and Father Gusinde that can see through human beings as well as mountains so as to reach the promised land, in the case of the anthropologist, of the

17. Walter Benjamin, “Construction Site,” in “One-Way Street,” in Reflections, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 68–69. This point was reinforced by Werner Herzog in an interview with Terry Gross on NPR. He explained that he was born in 1942 with allied bombs dropping on Munich and that kids loved playing in the ruins during WWII, especially because their fathers were not around. NPR “Fresh Air,” 1088, replayed August 22, 2014.
structure of structures? But unlike the shamans the anthropologists leave their clothes on. Thank the Lord. And thank Him doubly since it is said that those eyes that see so well are eyes that can kill as well as heal.

As for me, I’m trying to figure out what I’m doing as I go along. It’s not a case of thinking first and writing afterward but of thinking reality through writing in its shadow or should I say writing its shadow? This is not terribly conscious. It’s more that I was led by the nose like writing a diary skidding between events, with the sullen heat averaging forty degrees centigrade. Things arise in writing as in a dream or more likely as in “inner speech.” Other things then take their place. The pace is unhurried like the place and while there is no obvious order, there must be some sort of dance going on between disorder and order such that this dance, if that’s the word, provides the movement whereby the unconscious of the writer meets the unconscious of the reader via the pace of the place turned inside out by eruptions of violence and the clammy constant of fear.

What follows is as much about a place, a people, and a history, as it is about writing itself so as to render justice to that place, those people, and that history. Nietzsche asks that the histories we write be at least equal to the history written about.

Rather than feed theory with story, I have put them on the one plane as in Moby Dick without much by way of hierarchical distinctions. I have treated theory as a story and vice versa like rowdy guests at a dinner table each clamoring for attention rather than sitting around the campfire telling stories or listening to an expert on theory hold forth with ten-dollar words in the silent desert of an audience. (Where’s the oasis?)

My sense is that what is today called “theory” is a cross between magic and the need for mastery; mastery over other people and mastery over


reality. (That’s my theory, anyway.) As for stories, the range is as wide as are the implicit explanations that stories convey. Walter Benjamin is useful with his idea that stories resist explanation and that understandings of a story are multiple and change with time. Moreover, does not the story lend itself to melding with other forms of narration? Case in point, Benjamin himself writing theory with his essay on the mimetic faculty combined with his writing ethnographic snapshots, smoking opium, and writing about smoking opium, his recounting his dreams, and writing stories himself, all this done at the same time in the summers of 1932 and 1933 on “his” island of Ibiza in the Mediterranean. Shortly thereafter came his essay on the storyteller. Have I not gone multiplex like this too on “my” island in the Magdalena River?

I find myself engaged in a mimetic exercise as well, only mine lies in the indulgence stemming from a universe animated by fear and violence in which, so my conceit goes, words engage with what the writing is about as if the things being written about have climbed into the sentences and the thoughts those sentences convey.

Silence and rupture are crucial to this like the bars on a cage, each section of the text given its Roman numeral, a pause as when a musician turns the page of the score. Each section is a cut in reality, a swerve, as the snake of language slithers across the pages which Burroughs would have us cut and let the words, being animals, leap free as in a comic book.

Then there are words as animals in another sense as when Deleuze and Guattari claim that “writers are sorcerers because they experience the animal as the only population before which they are responsible in principle.” Burroughs is certainly an infinitely more gifted writer in this regard, as well as an arch-trickster, all the easier to attain because his books are fictions and not the earnest prose of rather humorless philosophers or of what we call “theory” (Barthes excepted). The philosopher Nietzsche is also an exception as with his reiteration of the “necessary fictions” we live by and not only live by but should be conscious

of, at least in spasms of self-insight before the insight drops away back into the body of the world.

Well, whatever that means it sure applies to me as I explain above re animals and it doubly applies because of some pet examples I have culled from anthropology re sorcery, apotropaic magic, and sympathetic connections between things relating to my body, your body, and the body of the world. (What more do you want?)

But get this.

Following Georges Dumézil, a mythologist, Deleuze and Guattari came up with the concept of the “war machine” as a pack (as in a pack of animals) that overlaps with the state but is opposed to it in fundamental ways.21 More like a loose congerie of beings (think of a swarm), the war machine may be appropriated by the state, and vice versa. Moreover it provides the sleight of hand without which the state founders.

The paramilitaries are just such a “war machine.”

But then is not what I am here writing also a war machine, mimetically deployed?

Could it be otherwise?

There is a concordance here involving packs of animals composing the war machine and William Burroughs’s figure of words as animals; cut the page and let the animals free. No wonder the literati of the Times Literary Supplement went after him in 1961 with the publication in London of Naked Lunch, bloodhounds after the fox. It was obscene and ignored grammar, they said.

Burroughs had written thousands of pages in Morocco, unnumbered, kept loose in a suitcase. At one point Burroughs’s pal, Brion Gysin (credited with inventing the famous “cut up” method) peeked into Bur-

roughs’s hotel room in Paris to see him throwing the loose pages out of
the suitcase, arms flailing “like an octopus.”

VIII

I visited the Island of the Papaya Grove three times, twice with the
Bogotá law professor Juan Felipe García and once on my own. The first
visit was a week in 2011 with the artist Lily Hibberd and Juan Felipe,
then three weeks in January 2015 with Juan Felipe, and another three
weeks on my own in November/December 2015.

As compared with other ethnographic writing of mine based on im-
mersion in the life of others, this book is superficial in terms of field-
work. (Of course one always feels that you are never deep or thorough
enough.) Writing on the fly you could say, but rooted in my having
visited Colombia every year since late 1969, and my having much con-
versation with Juan Felipe and reading his evocative anthropology PhD
dissertation on the legal aspects of the history of this conflict.22

My experiences on the island were never complete in themselves. They
triggered memories stretching back decades which unleashed a two-
tiered storyteller—the one of the now and the one of times long gone,
crisscrossing in a welter.

Neither anthropologists nor their words or images can be separated from
what they study. We are always biased and always vulnerable, linked to
the object of study which is barely an object, anyway. More like an efflu-
vium emanating from fields of chance allowing for a noisy conversation
between an objective subject and a subjective object. There is no getting
away from this entanglement crisscrossing binaries which provides an
occasion for play and therewith art, magic, and, dare we say it, for eth-
nography. The “field” as in “fieldwork” is as much the Self as it is the Other,
multiply so, especially now at a time in world history when the subjective
nature of nature objects to its objectification and strenuously so.

22. Juan Felipe García, “El Exterminio de la isla de Papayal,” unpublished PhD diss., Departa-
mento de Antropología, Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, 2017.
IX

What does Barthes mean by “falling back” when he extols the loveliness of the lonely palm tree?

Of all the tree letters, the palm is the loveliest. And of writing, profuse and distinct as the bursts of its fronds, it possesses the major effect: falling back.

Here “falling back” to me means interpretation looping back on itself in self-reflection as in hermeneutics, hermeneutical plants, hermeneutical frond action, and hermeneutical writing aware of itself as in a book entitled Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes which surely invites us to consider the possibilities for a book such as the one I am writing here which could be titled Palma Africana by Palma Africana.

In which case the object creeps into the writing about it, enlivening itself no less than the writing.

“Falling back” can also refer to ex-paramilitaries who are in fact still paramilitaries but now have an X in front: (X)paramilitaries. This indicates that once they were paramilitaries, then they stopped and posed for the cameras and got a government pension and psychology counseling from young women just out of college, and then resumed their prior existence, more or less, but this time doubly disguised, which is very confusing. As ur-paramilitaries they were clandestine, sort of, and as (X)paramilitaries they are clandestine clandestine. I say “sort of” because the art of the paramilitary is a peek-a-boo performance; now you see me, now you don’t.

What is generally overlooked here is the impact of all of this on the culture as a whole, its paramilitarization, so to speak, meaning its doubleness and epistemic murk. Which is why hermeneutics forces itself upon us.
Heinrich Heine (1797–1856) was a radical. In Paris he was a friend of Karl Marx. Famous in his youth as a lyric poet, his poems were set to music. He was quite a wit. In 1827 he published a poem on censorship which went like this:

----the German censors----

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---------------------idiots----

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Like Barthes’s citing the Greeks’ idea of trees as alphabets, or Walter Benjamin’s proposal that the visual shape of letters and words is important to their meaning, Heine’s censorship poem is every inch a spatialized, sculptured, or should I say choreographed, poem, evoking presence in absence and the hand of the state in such sleight of hand.

Speaking of sleight of hand, itself a marvelously shamanic practice, extracting octopi and mice from the quivering human body, no less, let us delve a little into Hermes the trickster since he will take us back to Barthes’s hermeneutical frond action making us wonder whether a tree is not only a letter in an alphabet, but a being that can think and be like Roland Barthes writing about himself.

Hermeneutics comes across as a strangely shaped word like the magic spell, *abracadabra*, yet the sounds are even stranger than the shape. Can we assume these words were first sounds chosen for their musical effects levering open doorways to the occult?

Hermeneutics points to an activity bound to Hermes and a legendary figure—Hermes Trismegistus (Hermes, The Thrice Born)—carrying the marvelous freight of creative misconceptions that assumed an
underground of magical tradition layered by myth. As Egyptian, Jewish, and Christian, Hermes Trismegistus was the fount of Neo-Platonic magic in the Renaissance, an amalgam of the Egyptian god Thoth with the Greek Hermes, both of whom are said to be gods of writing and magic, which suggests, surely, that writing is magic?

Just two steps into etymology and it’s already heady. A god of writing? Fine. A god of magic? Fine. But a god that mixes the two, suggesting that writing is magical! Did we sign on to this chicanery without knowing it when we became literate? Or was that the very reason we signed on so as to gain additional magic and instead of adding a drop of our blood or scratching a bold X onto a parchment wrote out our name, letter by letter and thus straddled the wor(l)d? Yet there is a difference between what we call writing and what we call spells. Surely? But why are they called spells?

In Thomas Mann’s The Magic Mountain this composite Egyptian-Greek god of magic and writing comes in for some rough treatment, being described as a “monkey, moon, and soul god—a baboon with a crescent moon above his head and above all, under the name of Hermes, a god of death and the dead, a grabber and guide of souls, who by late antiquity had become a great sorcerer and served the cabalistic Middle Ages as the father of hermetic alchemy.”

That seems to cover most possibilities.

But what intrigues and emboldens me is how hermeneutics points to what I call an animistic activity bound to Hermes wherein the object creeps into the writing about it, enlivening itself no less than the writing.

Creeping and enlivening here imply an animism that may have quite literal roots, in childhood, for example, or at least in the adult’s imagination of the child’s imagination. Not for nothing do our kids learn writing and reading with the aid of animals, as pictured, that is.

By such means do fusions between human and nonhumans arise and arouse—as between palm trees and paramilitaries and, as we shall see, between serpents, authors, and donkeys. Here there are different kinds of fusions, metamorphoses, contagions, touchings, and tracings like birthmarks. That is why I advocate a serpentine form that slides from place to place across the page quietly minding its own business until frightened as when a frog hops on to the path. (Could I be writing a book for children?)

As for the serpentine form, is it not already there in the Golden Age of the Garden of Eden tempting Eve, following which the language based on God’s naming gives way to words split off from their signification just as human beings became split off from themselves?

As for the serpentine form, does it emerge from the myth of the Golden Age as the recurring motif in Colombia referring to large landowners with their cattle and then plantations taking over peasant lands?

The serpent slides across these pages, driven out of paradise by cattle, cocaine, and now palma africana, mindful of the earlier history of Paradise with peasant-colonists displacing the Indians and taking out the valuable trees and pelts of animals.

Lost in the swamps, the serpent is the peasant-colonist offspring of European invasion, African slavery, and Indians.

Torn asunder, God’s language of names gives way to swamps without names no less than to words animated by what they signify in mimetic chains of nonsensuous correspondences.

XI

This breaks into an old question and an old anxiety. Why do we write?

But is this not a trick question? Is there an answer? You may as well ask why do we breathe?

One reason we write is because language comes loaded. It takes a thief
to catch a thief. We are born engaged. Trapped. Challenged. No way out. Writing removes itself from language so as to all the better better it. Same as “life.” Writing is rewriting, which is why we dream of style, spark, seduction, and speed—that is, of writing as more than the need or the desire to communicate but as an art-form that communicates with communication.

In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche suggests a “just so” story of the origin of language as first being a helpful tool for communication which, as people got better at it, created a surplus of expression awaiting heirs to spend it lavishly. Point #1.

Point #2, even so, language is only a tiny part of thinking, “the shallowest, worst, part.”

This suggests that once we move into the surplus zone we are likely to trip up ourselves, others, and language itself, hence demanding more of the same. Imbroglio #1.

Imbroglio #2. Insofar as language is only a tiny part of thinking, and the thinking addressed in these pages of serpentine text is manifestly concerned with the language of things, so writing is up against the ropes fighting for its life.

Sensitivity to this is what makes ficto-criticism interesting, at times divine—that is, writing about writing that is also writing about something, some thing.

Style, spark, seduction, and speed—this point I pick up from Hayden White’s essay (which owes much to Barthes) concerning the role of narrative in the representation of the real in what he calls scientific or modern styles of Western history writing coming after the annal and the chronicle. 25


His idea is that it is impossible to avoid literary forms and devices—figures of speech, metaphoric renderings, tone, mythic layering, the phantom presence of the author, and especially the over-arching reach of storytelling in such “scientific” history writing, the magic of which lies in its denial of such. Of course Nietzsche said this long ago. And said it beautifully.

Why, you might ask, is this not terribly obvious? How come we don’t see it? As Evans-Pritchard once pointed out in one of his famously casual offhand remarks, the obvious needs to be pointed out to become obvious.

Is the denial of the literary figuration busy at work in ethnography and modern history writing a denial using the very magic it denies; meaning that it uses all these “devices” such as storytelling and tone and atmosphere to deny the importance of such?

Is this not what “agribusiness writing” does, using magic so as to conceal its own? Against which in the following pages—thanks to a hermeneutic palm-frond action—I wish to engage agribusiness writing from within so that its magic concealing magic can be rechanneled from the plantation into the garden, as does AgroArte on the slopes of La Comuna 13.

Which is why the serpentine style emerges along with Hermes the thief.

Hermes is a pretty active fellow, quick and cunning, a thief, trickster, emissary, and messenger of the gods.

He is also the protector of herdsmen, thieves, orators, and wit. What holds this impossible mix together?

His first step in life was to make music and sing, then steal cattle. Born at dawn, by midday he had invented the lyre out of a tortoise shell and sang songs to his father and mother (Zeus and Maia). In the evening he stole Apollo’s cattle but later he gave Apollo a lyre (let’s forgo the pun) for which Apollo is famous.
In Hermes’ world people seem to have been as crazy about cattle and about exchanging stuff as they are about song and poetry. Cattle are the measure of value in Homer and are the choice offering for sacrifice to the gods, although we should take note of existence of human sacrifice in ancient Greek mythology and drama since humans and cattle feature in my drama of palma africana too.

Cattle played a key role in the way the rich came to occupy the island and convert it into palma africana. First the cow, then the palm. Pity the poor cow. Everyone wants at least one. This cannot be overestimated. Cattle are mythic. Cattle straddle the cusp between love, money, and poetry.

In the hands of the rich, herds of cattle were the shock-troops set free on the island like armored vehicles. At the same time they provided the means to launder cocaine money.

Especially in the 1990s the cattlemen-drugmen thrived on speed, cunning, and deceit, employing paramilitaries to drive back the ELP and FARC guerrilla who had established themselves on the island. To eliminate the guerrilla, the paramilitaries massacred many people along the length of the tributary of the Magdalena called the Brazuelo de Papayal on which many of the island’s villages are situated. That was in 1998. But now—right now, in 2016, and who knows for how long—the (X) paramilitaries lie low, coasting on people’s fearful memories. Nowadays the (X) paras and their handlers have to be even more Hermes-like, more light-fingered, working through the courts and state institutions such as INCODER (Oh dear!, yet another ACRONYM) that was set up by the central government to handle land disputes and, supposedly, facilitate restitution of land to peasants forced off the land. To date a lot of paper but not much land, I’m afraid.

One of the more curious aspects of this is that the (X) paramilitaries now use cameras along with guns as they ride through the settlements on their horses. Later some of their edited footage may appear on regional

26. See the abundant documentation for other related regions in Basta Ya! Colombia, memorias de guerra y dignidad, Informe General (Bogotá: Grupo de Memoria Historica, 2015).
TV alleging peasant aggression. These are not cell-phone cameras but bulky cameras with a protuberant lens that must bump something awful against your protuberant belly as you trot along with your grumpy face, eyes blazing hate and disdain. They are Big Men, too, too big for their big-boned, graceless, horses. I thought that at the least they would be mounted on sleek *paso fino* steeds. Overall ugly is the word. Doubtless
this is what Benjamin meant by “aura” which he thought was lost with the use of the camera.

X III

Today is “Palm Sunday.” I see African American children walking along the cold streets of Brooklyn carrying palm leaves clutched awkwardly to their chests. It is a strange tree for Brooklyn, that’s for sure, but clutched to the chest like this the palm takes on a life of its own.

I read that palm leaves displayed today by Christians on Good Friday come from a Jewish custom signifying victory when Christ entered Jerusalem on a donkey, not a horse, because the donkey was a sign of peace, not war, which is reserved for the horse. Another name for the donkey is ass.

X IV

The (X)paramilitaries make damn sure to cut down peasant tree crops such as the plantains, mangoes, cacao, and guava. Using the tractor-drawn harrows employed by the plantations, the (X)paramilitaries also destroy the seasonal crops such as rice, corn, and manioc, unless the peasants are right there even sleeping with their crops. It is as if the crops are their children. This gives “shifting cultivation” a new meaning.

Twenty soldiers of the national army were stationed close by the village for a few months in late 2014. They left ten days before I got there on January 13, 2015. Two days after the soldiers left, (X)paramilitaries destroyed some undefended peasant crops. People in the village wondered whether the soldiers left so as to provide the (X)paramilitaries with an opening.

From the journal of Efraín Albear Olivares, lame since childhood, currently living isolated in the forest with some of his adult children: January 23 and 24: Men from the security forces of the palm plantation of San Isidro (located in Bosconia) are repulsed by the Albear family. Since several days they have been threatened while cutting lumber. Today Mario Marmol and five others approached Jorge Isaac, his father, and brother, who were car-
rying posts to build a house with a corrugated iron roof. Mario Marmol threw himself at them in an attempt to grab their power-saw, but Omar, who held it in his hands, without ceasing to saw, yelled at him to stop, crying out “Come on! Come on! Take it from me!” Mario’s accomplices took offense at him and forced Mario to leave saying “You are crazy...”

Just about every day Efraín wrote in his journal, out there at the back of beyond.

It was strange, I thought, how he and other people refer to this (X) paramilitary by his first name, Mario. Even stranger was the fact that Mario’s mother lives in the village (and here I am using his first name, too). He and his retinue are often referred to in the village as “Mario and his combo.”

But the strangest thing to me upon reading this diary entry is how strangely innocent it is, like a squabble in the schoolyard.

Now we are stronger, says Efraín, referring to a visit from Miguel Velosa who works in the government’s “Victims’ Unit” in Bogotá.

Miguel Velosa told Mario he had to stop. This had no effect. He gave Efraín his telephone number together with his email address. But it is a long way from the island to the capital of the republic and the cell phone signal is practically nonexistent and emailing is not really an option here either.

Far off under a fierce sun I could see Efraín’s adolescent daughter washing clothes in the shade of a crude thatch ramada. I could feel the thump of the clothes being beaten against some solid object, then the sound of the heavy wet material whacked as if to death, on and on. Her shadow was a silhouette sliding on the horizon as she walked back and forth over the clothes spread on the ground while we talked. Another daughter, face lined by the elements, was a silent witness to our meeting, shelling corn in her strong hands, the thumb, like a curved chisel, taking the brunt of the action.

Efraín showed me weed-whackers that broke on first use. A present
from the state’s “Victims’ Unit.” Not only was this unit ineffectual, like the weed whacker. Some people felt it was demeaning to be classified as a “victim” and you wondered why there was not a “Victimizers’ Unit.”

This seems especially important when you hear the rhetoric of (X)president Uribe and his ilk claiming that there are no displaced people. “We were here first,” they say in court. “The peasants had no land. They are not displaced. They are day laborers working for us.”

This contrasts with a June 2010 report citing death threats and limpieza social ("social cleansing") in the El Regidor district where palma africana was first introduced on the island in 2004 which also cites the figure of 840 displaced persons culled from state offices for the municipality of which the village is part.27

But Uribe and his ilk have a vision. There are no displaced people in Colombia. People claiming to be displaced are landless laborers since birth. Compare with the magical realism of One Hundred Years of Solitude. “The sleight-of-hand lawyers proved that the demands lacked all validity for the simple reason that the banana company did not have, never had had, and never would have workers in its service because they were all hired on a temporary and occasional basis.”28

In 2011 with a new government a “Law of Victims” was passed by the Congress in Bogotá aimed at returning six million hectares of land to dispossessed peasants. Yet it seems unlikely to accomplish much, given the power of the landed class, the corruption, and the tangled web of conflicting laws and histories. Meanwhile the weed-whackers gather rust as Miguel Velasco’s telephone number lies forgotten.

As I read this last paragraph I am annoyed at myself. I am annoyed for falling into the temptation to be ironic, to despair, and to once again raise the issue of corruption. It is tiresome and debilitating, like a hypo-

chondriac who won’t stop complaining. But to ask for the “positive side” is as bad, isn’t it?

X V

In the village in 2011 I was shown this two-year-old photograph of riot police called in July of 2009 to remove villagers occupying what they consider to be their communal land but which the *palma africana* company claims belongs to it. The villagers have been corralled in the hacienda building that was erected by cattlemen–drugmen years ago. The villagers’ tents are close by. There is a terrible silence in the image. You hold your breath. Never before have I seen police like these huge men in their blue crustacean outfits complete with helmets and shields that give them the look of knights in Renaissance paintings, so exceedingly strange here in the forest far from anywhere. This is a fierce new ritual look imported from the US or Nazi Germany and Mussolini along with Bill Clinton dollars and his *Plan Colombia*. You ask yourself, What were the police expecting? Why this overkill? But we all know why. It is an old story, one of mythological warfare.29 Meanwhile the skinny villagers stand almost hidden in the shadows. They too are on show, their bodies saying, “We will not leave.”

That veteran chronicler of the Colombian peasant, Alfredo Molano, picks up the story as he heard it secondhand. The riot police are beating on their shields with riot sticks. The children are howling. The plantation’s lawyer arrives and along with the police inspector reads the riot act, explaining the forced removal is legal because the peasants have no land title. (But then it will be pointed out in court many times as the years go by that neither does the plantation. After all these are state lands which cannot be alienated without a ton of legal rigmarole and also because they are wetlands or enclose many such which makes them additionally complex and fragile, legally speaking.30) Suddenly state pickup trucks arrive with a dozen young men recruited in a nearby town by the Chief of Police. They sport bulletproof vests and

are masked. They tear down the shelters of the peasants. They set fire to the debris. The peasant association asks its members for calm. They retreat without a single cry. It is the fifth time, says Molano, that they have been forced back to the village along with their dogs, chickens, and pigs.  

Collective hysteria: The lawyer Juan Felipe García tells me of waves of young adolescent girls falling unconscious at that time and for long periods of time in the months that followed. Some said malignant spirits possessed them. One of doña Edit’s daughters packed and left forever leaving her four children.

XVI

It was strange to join the kids watching a video of the confrontation that I have just described. Memory and history are no longer the same once video enters auto-historiography. We think first of the event and then

its representation. But now, with video, it seems more like the opposite; first the camera, then the event with the video making it real or at least more real. The claims made for oral history—its authenticity, the art of the storyteller, etc.—melt when confronted with the reality-effect of the visual image. Especially when you are embedded in it watching with your feet in the sand along with the kids and dogs—all that authenticity—the same sand you see in the video a few miles east, and the same kids and dogs. This video is watched again and again.
In January of 2015 the men sat around and chatted a lot of the time, waiting, like fish out of water, but the women never stopped working. They would wake at 4:00 or 5:00 and finish their chores at 8:00 at night while the men waited for the rains that usually come in April.

Would they plant despite the threats which seemed to be increasing now that the legal case in the hands of Juan Felipe was tending to favor the peasants? That was the question on everyone’s lips. But we all knew the answer. Even the parrot in doña Edit’s ramada knew the answer but then he was pretty opinionated and could out-talk anyone, even doña Edit with whom he conversed quite a bit, so much so, in fact, that it was at times difficult to know who was talking, the parrot or Edit. He was in fine form those days, now that he had been cured of the Evil Eye.

Here is a drawing of where I spent much time in this village (see fig. 7).
It is where doña Edit Villafabia Rodrigues (aged 66) lives along with her companion, Misael Payares Guerra (67), her son Misael Jr (40), her daughter, Cheli (35), and another daughter Cheli referred to as “the special girl.” There are two other daughters living in Washington, DC, working as maids. After the confrontation with the riot police dislodging the villagers, Misael Jr.’s wife left him to live in faraway Arauca, leaving behind their four children: daughter Malvis (14), Michael (13), Juan Manuel, (10), and Cheila (9). The children adore their grandfather
who helps with school homework. He tends to be reserved, patient, and quiet. It falls on doña Edit to be taskmaster.

The mother and the daughter—Edit and Cheli—are here all the time. Misael comes and goes a fair bit although he is stationary these days, waiting for the rains to plant and for the next meeting with NGOs and government bureaucrats in Bogotá. Misael Jr. is building a house for the principal of the school, probably the richest person in the village with many head of cattle. (No one else was building a house, that’s for sure, and many people have no cattle.)

The life of the house I have drawn here is mainly in the patio and revolves around a rhythm and shape set by Misael, doña Edit, and the “special girl,” a strange young woman of uncertain age who wanders in and out of people’s awareness. In a Colombian city or in North America such a person would more than likely be placed in an institution for the mentally unfit. When neighbors come they will greet the parrot, but not her. She is invisible, socially speaking, because she is so extremely visible. At first she frightened me, this “special girl,” the way she would look at me for long periods never saying anything, then walk backward and spend hours digging in a sand-pit with a broken machete, quietly moaning.

XVII

I will start in the top left corner of my watercolor drawing of the house and work my way clockwise, spiraling inward as if tracing a shell.

1. A blue four-wheel-drive car like a museum piece that never moves, at least not while I was there. People travel by foot, donkey, mule, or the launch that passes once a day except Sundays. Along with three bodyguards the car was donated by the national government in 2012 “for security” to Misael as president of the villagers’ association, ASOCAB, that was created in 1998 and to which roughly 30–40 percent of villagers belong. (I could never get an exact figure and it kept changing.) Misael’s bodyguard, Pedro, is from the village, a sweet-tempered jovial fellow, a little plump and out of shape with what I think was a pistol bulge under his shirt. At times he wears a bulletproof vest. It was a little unsettling,
isolated in the forest in this tiny village of 144 houses to think that at any time there could be an attack. The thought disappeared as soon as it occurred. Seemed too unreal, what with Pedro smiling all the time. I would see him playing with his nephew and niece, six months old twins, in the house opposite, shaking a rattle. When I ask he does not know their names. He did a course in body-guarding (vigilancia) in Bogotá which is a common thing to do these days. My friend Lucy who cleans houses in another part of the country did a one-hundred-hour course for seventy US dollars, mastered how to fire an automatic pistol—which she loved—and learned a good deal about grenades and bombs as well as how to detect suspicious people (!). Beats housecleaning, she says, and she hopes for a job in a supermarket. Pedro always wanted to be a bodyguard. Sometimes I think there will be a bodyguard for all the middle class as well as the wealthy in Colombia, and then bodyguards for the bodyguards. After all it is a society encrusted in the ethos of slavery and live-in maids meant to care for your every need, even emotional, like the doormen in Manhattan. An extra soul and shadow they be, these Colombian bodyguards, at least when employed by the rich: slipping out to get you a cigarette when needed, lighting it for you, always in the big black SUV behind or standing nonchalant at the doorway to the restaurant where you feel it is safe enough to eat with their sixth sense hooked up to the stars; a mix of babysitter, savant, and killer of killers. But here in this remote village the role is a lot less noir. I was surprised at a certain theatricality, as when in a time of danger Pedro and his colleague would suddenly appear in their smart bullet-proof vests, ribbed black like the armoring of cockroaches, and sport an ornate badge, silver and blue, on their chest like some Hollywood FBI agent, along with a deadly efficient-looking pistol in a webbed holster on the hip. But it was the badge that spoke most to me.

2. The braying of the donkey which turns the world inside out—hee-haw, hee-haw. (On which more later, see LXVII.)

3. The street of sand (sand on account of the twice-yearly flooding). There is really only one street with a shorter less-defined street parallel to it (both nameless, like the nameless swamps). The village is a long ribbon of houses, separated from one another, running alongside the river which is called the Brazuelo de Papayal, papayal meaning a grove
of papaya trees, being also the name of a village two hours walk up-stream along the riverbank—brazuelo meaning branch or tributary, in this case tributary of the Magdalena River, the major artery of Colombia and which was, like the Congo in Africa, a major point of entry for European colonization of Colombia starting early in the sixteenth century. The street is some thirty feet wide, with most of the houses made of timber cut from local trees, otherwise cement block. Many of the houses are painted in bright vertical stripes, an aesthetic I have seen nowhere else in Colombia. Small trees planted some thirty feet apart line the streets and their trunks are painted so as to match the stripes on the houses. Dogs sleep in the street on which beady-eyed pigs roam, sniffing and grunting. A narrow path runs along the riverbank but the main entrance to the houses is from the street, not the river, making the street a social space in which people sit in the evening swatting mosquitoes with old towels or shirts; whack, and again whack; a ritual of twilight. But I see plenty of people sitting on their own too, looking despondent and tired. I never once saw anyone using mosquito repel-lent. There is none for sale. In fact there is very little for sale of anything and the ten stores, such as they are, are generally empty, dark, and sad. There is practically no beer or liquor and I never ever saw anyone smoking which ceased some twenty years ago, I am told. People make major purchases in the bustling Magdalena River port of El Banco, an expensive four hour's launch trip downstream and longer the way back. There is one lopsided Catholic church in need of care, no less sad-looking than the stores and locked except for Easter and Christ-mas. There is no resident priest or nuns. Yet there are four evangelical temples, two of which are smart and capacious, one funded so I am told by evangelists in the US. They spin sin. They wallow in sin. People moan and enter into a trance, awash in a continuous catharsis drawing on the memories of their sinful pasts and the proximity of Satan. But nary a word about the palm plantations or the killers paid to extend the plantations’ reach. They seem like a separate tribe within the village or is it the other way around? Another way of life. But later I see I am overlooking other dimensions of this Protestantism. When an important resistance meeting was begun in 2011 in what I call “the ceremonial center,” it was a Protestant, Efraín, who first spoke, leading us through a prayer. The atmosphere was one of great reverence. In response to the flood of 2008 causing immense damage to the palm plantations
as well as to the villagers’ homes, only three of which remained, there was spooky reference to the mystery of the Great Flood and hence to a divine purification, which, in January 2009, led to the reinvasion by the villagers of the hacienda Las Pavas.\textsuperscript{32}

4. The other entrance to the house is usually closed. It opens onto the river which I describe in this drawing as a dull nasty brown with lead (I must mean mercury) from the gold mining in the distant mountains. There is a launch tied up there. It is called \textit{Milagro}. Children and teenagers come and play and flirt in the river toward dusk. I tried to swim in the river once or twice but it’s too fast and shallow for a real swim and clambering down the bank was hellish in January and December. You must understand that this little river, this tributary, is alive and unstable. In the dry season the bank drops deep down some twenty feet, leaving the spidery roots of the trees along the banks exposed, but in the flood months of midyear and November the river rises and overflows its banks which is why many of the houses are built some three feet off the ground.

5. The door on the river side of the house opens into the dark kitch-
en which has two bedrooms opening off it. Here doña Edit generally
cooks on an electric stove rather than the wood fireplace outside and
prepares coffee with the electrical percolator that her daughter living
in the US sent together with a large set of cutlery and a strange video
projector joined to a small TV set that I never saw used. It was the
mystery object from Washington, DC, gathering dust, the sort of thing
García Márquez makes much of in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* which
begins with gypsies in the nineteenth century bringing unknown tech-
nology such as ice and magnets and eventually alchemy to the village
of Macondo, lost and isolated in the swamps of northern Colombia.

Misael also gets shirts from the US from his daughter, claiming that
as president of the peasants’ association he doesn’t have time to go
shopping for clothes.

6. There are two thatch roofs over the patio that provide relief from the
heat, especially compared with the other spaces roofed with corrugated
iron. I would spend hours sitting under one of these two *ramadas*, writ-
ing or chatting. All homes here have something like this combination of
a thatch-roofed open space and an iron-roofed closed part. On my last
visit there was a new thatch roof, beautiful, at five hundred pesos per
palm leaf (sixteen cents, US), requiring one thousand palm leaves paid
for by one of the daughters in Washington. This is not African palm but a variety now scarce due to spread of the palm oil plantations. They were provided by a man cultivating on state land. Misael would often be sitting in the front ramada making fishing nets, chinchorros, which he hoped to sell to the Christians and Human Rights people who came through every few weeks to bear witness and provide funds for the village association resisting the spread of African palm. It seems like Misael can do anything and make anything. And he is always busy, full of nervous energy, I was about to say, except that he does not come across as nervous at all; more like alert and attentive, with a kid’s curiosity combined with a teacher’s patience as when he helps Michael with his school homework. People come in off the street to chat. Occasionally
there is a meeting there in the early evening right when the mosquitoes are thickest. While waiting for the planting season he was busy making fishing nets in the national colors; large bands of yellow, blue, and red, the net being weighed down by small lead weights attached to the circumference of the net. Sometimes his younger granddaughter hammers the weights into shape and attaches them to the net as he weaves. My lawyer friend sits there too, patiently asking his questions about what happened when, and why, each response begging more questions as if weaving its own fishnet, a lawyer’s fishnet. There is a raised hearth here for cooking with a wood fire.

7. On one side of this **ramada** is a plastic clothes washing machine on wheels powered by electricity which was installed in the village in 1997 from the town of El Banco. About a quarter of the homes in the village have such a machine. Next to it is a never-ending heap of clothes to be washed which is what occupies Cheli most of the time. The dust in the
dry season dirties clothes within a day, and in the wet the mud is terrible. People are very concerned to have neat clean clothes and sheets. Women seemed to me to spend most of their time washing even with a washing machine. A woman who doesn’t have a washing machine or running water might construct a flimsy shelter over the river’s edge like the one pictured here.

8. There is an orange tractor to one side, just behind the blue car. Its tires were shot out by (X)paramilitaries. Another museum piece or is it a monument? When I walk past, I feel it is more than stationary. It is slowly sinking into the ground under the weight of history. The tractor was donated by the state government in 2001 but has not been used since its tires were shot out. To one side lie the crumpled inner tubes like black slugs.
9. In front of the second *ramada* where Misael sits weaving is the building where everyone sleeps and where there is a rarely used TV set and a water-flushed toilet along with a basin for washing and a shower.

10. The seats are light plastic, white or blue, with backs, and are very comfortable. They are “nomadic chairs,” convenient to this mode of life in which people move around the domestic space depending on the sun, on visitors, and on whom you want to talk with.

11. The floor in the patio is sand. Waste water from washing dishes is simply poured onto it, to one side of the main patio, and it sinks in rapidly. The women walk barefoot. Now and again you see soapy water from the shower running into the street.

12. *Money:* I could not figure out where it came from. (What an admission!) In this village you can’t figure it out from a wage or anything approaching a single source of income. Instead “the economy” (as we are wont to call “it”) is a scramble of ad-hocery. For thirty years the vil-
lagers have been unable to plant with any certainty on account of death threats by paramilitaries, before them the guerrilla, and before them the cattlemen-drugmen.

As regards sources of income: *First, the state incomes*: the salaries of the six or seven teachers and nurse (whose post was eliminated by the municipal government on my third trip); a meager old-age pension of 150,000 pesos (roughly USD 50) per month for people over sixty, which amounts to three days’ pay in these parts; monthly government child allowances plus lunch in the school for the kids; a food program for kids under five not at school; financial aid limited to four small pay-outs for officially designated displaced persons. *Second*, cattle; some 70 percent of people have at least one cow feeding on the swamps (Misael and Edit have none); and there are odd jobs for the people without cattle tending cattle herds belonging to the more affluent. Young Alex milks cows early morning and has his motorbike taxi while his wife sells fruit drinks in the street Friday and Saturday nights, the ingredients bought in a supermarket in El Banco. *Thirdly*, cultivation, when the political situation is favorable, which is rare. *Fourth*, fishing in accordance with the twice a year flood. And *finally*, the remittances from the many young people who emigrate to the cities. I suspect this will be the main and ever-growing part of the villagers’ income.

13. The radio in the house is rarely switched on. Kids watch cartoons on TV. The outside world feels remote. Cell phone reception is erratic. There has been no postal service for twenty years. There is no landline telephone service. A few weeks ago before my second visit in early 2015, an internet connection was installed in the school with four desktop computers, open to everyone in the afternoons. But few adults use it. The majority of people there are slender teenage girls dressed like *Vogue* models. They are explorers of the world of fashion and pop culture which seems to have no trouble accessing the village, heightening the mystery of the cities and the faraway world. In his dissertation the lawyer cites the young girl in the household, thirteen-year-old Malvis: “When will I be able to get away? Here nobody can do anything! Here nobody has money to do what they want like my mom. Oh! When can I get away! Here these paramilitaries and palm people took everything from us. They took away the possibilities that we could grow like
my mom.” (“I recall this,” writes the lawyer, “and after I heard her I remained silent.”). \[33\]

14. Theft: Last visit I was surprised to be told to lock the doors of the house where I was sleeping alone. I was also advised not to walk out to what I call “the ceremonial center,” an hour’s walk through the forest because of the risk of mugging not by the (X)paramilitaries but by local youth. That made me wonder about a lot of things, especially what sort of support there really was for the peasants’ association formed in 1998 when the paramilitaries arrived and the guerrilla fled? I felt there was

strong support for the association from about half the villagers or a little less. Some of the other villagers, however, were actually working for the palm company and had allegedly sworn false testimony in court in Cartagena supporting the company’s claims. Beyond these considerations lurked the question concerning the maintenance of public order and the settling of disputes. For there is no formal authority present, no mayor, for instance, no police, and not even a lowly “inspector de policia,” while the county seat with those sort of offices is an expensive three-to four-hour launch journey away. This makes the village all the more vulnerable to (X)paramilitaries. I only realized the absence of formal authority when, choking at night from the fumes of burning plastic bags that people burn along with garbage besides their homes, I suggested it would be good to stop this, and was told there was no village-wide council to discuss such matters. But there is no doubt that the peasants’ association is powerful with its own launch, NGO funding, and frequent visits by human rights associations. The peasant association is the major reason, I think, why the (X)paramilitaries and the palm company, for the moment, at least, keep a low profile and why the terrible massacres elsewhere in the region and in many areas in the Chocó in the 1990s have not recurred in this village (see LI).34

15. The generation of life by animals—let us at once call it animation—is crucial to this space: the four dogs, the parrot, the cats, the pig, and the chickens. They are crucial sonically and they are crucial metaphysically. The pig sleeps with the dogs—first point, the intermingling of the species; second point, he is the kid’s pig, says Cheli, they will eat him; third point is the pig’s agility and love of garbage; here he is actually eating a plastic plate he found with some chicken smeared on it; Malvis, who is washing dishes with ear buds listening to music chases him so as to retrieve the plate but he is far too quick, winking at her with his little red eyes. Are they really red? Then he munches on a plastic bag. Misael castrated him, Misael who seems to know how to do anything, including how to cure the Evil Eye, which is what the parrot suffered from. The dogs are yelled at in thunderous performances of pained exasperation between tears and rage; and the parrot is continuously conversing, mainly with doña Edit, to such a degree that many times I was confused

34. Basta Ya!
as to who was speaking, she or the parrot. The parrot mimics the cries in this little concert hall that is this home. He loves it. All on his own, resolute and fearless high on his perch, he is appreciative of the fact that the explosive cries in the household rise to a peak and as suddenly disappear leaving brooding emptiness. In general people here speak very fast and I found it hard to understand them unless it was in a quiet space, one on one, or out walking with someone. I asked the lawyer, a native Colombian, from Bogotá, about the mode of conversing here and he chuckled, saying it cost him an enormous effort to understand too, at least at first. Together with this speed there is a great deal of overlapping conversation with two or more people speaking at once. A real tumult. And this is where the dogs and the bird reach their finest moment with the dogs creating a swirling raggedy-tag movement through the patios that can be a little unsettling, as if life itself, performed like a DNA double helix, is continuously unwinding as the dogs chase one another, clinch, let go, rotate again, clinch again, and so forth on and on with the parrot on high. Then there are the crazy bird calls. The roosters start at 4:30 a.m., while the birds start later, at dawn, like orchestras tuning up for the hot day with one sound in particular, a piercing sound like a hammer on an anvil again and again, the musical accompaniment to the sun beating down.

16. Queer Family Making: I think it strange that I include animals and their energy in my depiction of a household and even stranger that I take succor from Maggie Nelson’s pathbreaking book, *The Argonauts* (the title of which comes from Barthes). She goes out on a limb to urge that in the US the concepts of family, kinship, and the household become queered so as to more faithfully reflect reality rather than long-standing ideologies of what a “family” should be. The desire to queer the concept of kinship/household in the US is triggered by the implications of current sexual orientations, household compositions, and the symbolic meanings of “mother,” “father,” and so forth. What is at stake is the creation of new genders, crossovers, and transforms of gender binaries as much as the meaning and practices of sex and sexual pleasure, not to mention the overarching issue, that of dealing with society’s investment in bodily and sexual repression. And key to

all that is the high-voltage humming vitality and erotic energy of the world and its beings which we can just as well call “life.” Including the animal in the household is recognition of that, especially when vitality is so persecuted and enfeebled as in a zone of persistent paramilitary terror as here. On a more personal note, Maggie Nelson’s is very much an autobiographical book as well as philosophical and she is fabulously disarming in discussing sex in personal as well as general terms. My account of people on the Island of the Papaya Grove cannot do that. In the field as an anthropologist I am a sexually neutered being whose becomings are restricted to threading the various strangenesses of my physical surroundings into my changing self and body; I do not know people’s lives in enough detail, and I would find it awkward to write about the islanders’ erotic lives, especially if I am not prepared to first write about my own. This of course admits to a huge deficiency in anthropology. It’s like most of what makes life lively is off limits. Yet maybe there are certain advantages to being an outsider? Maggie Nelson achieves an outside/inside position by deft writing which means more than fluid sentences. She too sees the animal in the sentence that hums with escapees from the page as what is being written about enters into the writing.

17. Completing the spiral we find the raised water tank into which water from the river is pumped and from which plastic hoses carry water to neighboring homes. There is no all-village system of water supply or sewage for the village as a whole. Many houses have a septic tank. Next to the water tank is the sand pit where the “special girl” sits digging furiously. There is a forty-seven-year-old foot pedal Singer sewing machine, large flowerpots with shrubs, a ladder for the chickens to climb up a tree at night, colored plastic tubs for the washing of clothes, two machetes, three cane brooms, two big trees to the side of patio, one with shiny green gourds, and a gas cylinder—all of which makes me realize there is no end to the enumeration of stuff, large or small; that my list is endless and that women’s work is never done.

So why do I persist? What is this nod toward things and a belief in the power of detail? The answer, or should I say response, would be no less lengthy, including a sharp reaction to system thinking and, curiously, some sense that merely mentioning a thing such as a gourd tree or a
machete gathering dust in the corner is enough to make a bond of empathy with those otherwise insignificant things and hence with the all too taken-for-granted and hence invisible world of things of which they are part. And this is no small achievement. I might also add that this list technique provides a welcome break from narrative-based exposition and is in some ways more interesting, too, especially when combined with illustrations. But most of all, I think, and most fun, is the way a list of things allows you to associate heterogeneous elements in a continuous if jerky and whimsical unreeling as with my spiraling. This brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s famous essay concerning the passion to collect in which he suggests that a true collection achieves the character of a “magic encyclopedia” with divinatory properties and that, furthermore, the items collected do not so much come alive in the collector as he or she comes alive in them to the point of disappearing therein.\footnote{Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library,” in \textit{Illuminations}, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 59–67.}

What I worry about is how such an enumeration, like hoarding, may be of interest only to the collector. What is the point of my making such a list, given that the reader is always in a hurry and wants to skip over details as do graduate students in the US swamped with insanely long reading lists? No wonder they pivot to “theory” as alchemy that through magical shorthand provides the promise of explaining most everything. So why do I immerse myself in things to the insane degree that I become but a thing midst things? (Is it the heat? The boredom? Danger of ethnography taken too far?) Is the idea here that enumeration leads to questions that mock explanation? Cannot description be explanation? Is there a naive if not obscure idea on my part that the list is not so much a description as it is a “presencing”? In which case is there an object-subject reversal or even a fusion? Finally, to bring these questions to an arbitrary end, are all the things herein enumerated what the psychoanalyst Winnicott calls “transitional objects,” meaning objects that stand halfway between my autonomy and my dependence (such as the child’s teddy bear), in this case halfway between my selfhood and my dependence on my hosts and the villagers, between a dependence on narrative, on the one hand, and on the serpentine form, on the other? And does not this entire book
partake of this “transitional object” dynamic? It has no chapters, only paragraphs. It is a swamp world of life-in-death. It is hermeneutic. Is there a further idea here that the list-technique overwhelms writing, meaning “good writing”? In which case, what of the connection to the photographs and drawings?

Such then is my drawing of the house.

Oh! One more thing. Is it possible that the thingliness of things is both exacerbated and animated, even spiritualized, by chronic terror? Is this the reason for my listing of things, so as to obsessively compulsively “bureaucratize” them and keep terror at bay though the de-animation of the thingliness of things? Cheli would often mention the “psychological warfare” fomented by the plantation and (X)paramilitaries, and added to that is the splintering and souring of relationships between villagers. Now and again I would hear of attempts by the plantation to bribe the villagers into denouncing their neighbors in court. What’s more, at least some of the (X)paramilitaries have family in the village. For instance, Mario Marmol’s mother lives in the village and in another
case the lawyer presents in tense detail how Misael could not attend the funeral of a close friend, Ramón Martínez, because the three sons of Ramón were paramilitaries and the risk of his being assassinated was too great. Misael refused to stay put and briefly attended the wake to pay his respects to the three sons but it was deemed unwise to join the actual funeral. Instead the family, along with the lawyer and Misael’s security detail, bolted themselves in their house as the funeral cortege carrying his friend’s body marched by.\textsuperscript{37}

18. Now we have come to the end of the rotating spiral that is this home where space and time compress, at least for the moment as I write it into existence, the place where life begins and ends animating everything with its light-fingered touch of freaky realism.

XVIII

That is one image, the rotating spiral, tracing the shell pattern through the object world until finally you become part of the collection yourself.

Another time-space compression is the queering of the kinship bond when the cultivator sleeps by growing plants as if they were children so as to protect them from the (X)paramilitaries. Perhaps we can think of this opening in the forest or along the riverbank as a household too—a little shelter with its hammocks alongside growing corn and yucca open to the sun, rain, and stars.

The first formulation I had of this constellation came spontaneously to my mind, or rather to my tongue. I had a phonetic-gustatory concept of connectedness between person and plant, which I referred to as one of “glutinous intimacy.” I guess I was unconsciously assuming a sort of glutinous sap, the sap of growth, binding the sleeping cultivator to the plants pushing up through the soil, in the case of the corn, winding rhizome-like down into the earth, in the case of the yucca.

Sleep: I was about to say binding the sleeping cultivator to the sleeping plant, but then I hesitated, wondering if growing plants slept, what it

\textsuperscript{37} García, “El Exterminio,” 139–43.
means to think of a plant as sleeping, and what it means to say “growing plant” as opposed to simply saying “plant”?

It all sounded wrong, yet right, like Roland Barthes on the palm tree and the poet Heine on the dreaming hemlock. It all sounded terribly anthropomorphic yet rightly so.

Stranger still was my notion that growth was bound to a sleeping human-plant nexus understood as a soft pulse spreading along the waterways and swamps of the island as if they were the veins and arteries of the human body. Such a notion parallels Misael’s understanding of the island as possessed of its own circulatory system, before the crucial waterway communicating with the Magdalena River was blocked by cattlemen-drugmen.

My reflections on this “glutinosity” are also reflections on writing itself, on the way spontaneity gives rise to reflection once “inspired” words leap from the mind or the mouth to writing. Once written down, such words emit further images and not only images but sensations especially those hidden in trick words like glutinosity that connect my tongue, palate, and mouth, to the plants and the sleeping caretaker. For heaven’s sake!

I say “writing itself.” But am I not short-changing something here, for is it not writing in the context of the sleeping human-plant nexus? In other words the context of things—in this case growing things—seeps into the writing about those things and we note, in addition, that these things, these growing things, are under great pressure of imminent destruction by the (X)paramilitary death squads yanking the “children” from their beds of soil. It is this agro-genocide that brings to the forefront the very being of things as they are torn from the earth (see section XXXII).38

XIX

The cultivator becomes a guerrilla cultivator, one step ahead of the predator. Perhaps nomadic is a better term. This gives the standard nomenclature of “shifting agriculture” another meaning.

38. And also see the detailed elaboration of this idea in my book, Defacement.
Regarding predators, I heard stories concerning tigers patrolling the one street of this tiny village when it was founded some eighty years ago, the tiger mixing it up with the villagers. (“Tiger” here actually means jaguar but country people say tiger.) Padding softly in watchful quiet along the sandy street at night, this tiger moving in and out of the newborn village is a sign of the disorienting wilderness of the frontier while today the (X)paramilitaries give new meaning and new mythologies to that wild—all of which suggests an upgrade to the idea of “cannibal metaphysics” put forward in a radical reorientation of anthropology by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro.39

Such cannibal metaphysics very much includes the transformation of person into an animal (or plant, for that matter), most famously that of the South American lowland Indian shaman into a jaguar, and back again, to such an extent that it would be more accurate to think of the shaman—and to some extent humans in general, first the Indians, and then us, too—as hybrid or potentially hybrid beings.

I saw this happen in 1975 to my friend Santiago Mutumbajoy a few miles from the small town of Mocoa in the Putumayo region of southern Colombia. He was sitting in his hammock singing with his feet on the floor. The legs stayed the same, human legs in dark blue trousers and bare feet, but his chest and head turned into that of a tiger, both friendly and fierce, hybridinal all the way.40

What Viveiros de Castro’s “cannibal metaphysics” is driving at is a view he derives from an imaginative not to mention ambitious interpretation of all (!) American Indian mythology and modes of thought in which nature is conceived of as human. In Western terms we would call this an all-encompassing anthropomorphism and see in it older, Western notions of “animism,” albeit dressed up in new readings of Claude Lévi-Strauss as a post-structuralist (!); all of which is taken to be a slashing critique of the subject-object distinction in Western philosophy since Plato.

In cannibal metaphysics the world is wonderfully in flux with all manner of changing forms, connections, and possibilities, very much including the hermeneutic component that feeds back into and thus alters one’s original point of view, ad infinitum. This I myself call the Nervous System, or the nervous nervous nervous system. But now we need an “upgrade”—an upgrade of cannibal metaphysics.

This is because of colonization by cattlemen-drugmen and by palm oil plantations. The upgrade is necessary to make up for a strategic short-fall, a blind spot in cannibal metaphysics which in fact is not cannibalistic enough, not for today’s world it isn’t, now that the cannibals inhabit the dark canyons of Wall Street as peasant crops are wrenched from the earth by the storm troopers of agribusiness.

XXX

I very much like the image of the tiger padding softly along the sandy street when the village was forming. It is an image elaborating on the tension of the border between settlement and wilderness. The mere notion of a “street” pulls me in, into history you might say, and I see the text I am elaborating here as such a “street” with a tiger padding softly along at night writing in the sand.

I refer to the founding of the village, but what does that mean? It is a mystery we take for granted, the mystery of society, neighborliness, and the social bond. “No man is an island,” writes John Donne, but it seems he didn’t take into account envy and sorcery disposing people to dwell apart as they do, for instance, in the south of Colombia in the Putumayo. Why do people living in separate houses scattered along the rivers decide to come together in a village (as was told me by an old man living by the river close to the cemetery downstream from the village)? It is this mystery that colors the beginning of One Hundred Years of Solitude with the creation of the village of Macondo knocked to hell three generations later by the banana plantations of The Octopus a.k.a. the United Fruit Company.

Other animals come to mind straddling this boundary between the settlement and the wilderness. The nurse, who was born here and whose mother had been the village nurse and was now one of two midwives, laughed when I asked about alligators (in Spanish, caymanes). With a faraway look in her eyes she responded, “Hay caymanes y caymanas,” meaning, I thought, from the way she laughed, lusty boys and horny girls. Are we, therefore, in the best anthropological tradition, meant to see a connection between human sex and alligators and therewith rewrite the book on animals, animality, species, and human sex?

I once saw a fat turtle (but how did I know it was fat?) sunning itself on a log in the river, the picture of contentment. Old Pedro and I stood stock still, but it sensed us and slid into the river quickly and easily. I really can’t figure out why it held us, spellbound. People spoke with reverence about the turtles. That other Pedro, the young bodyguard, was also spellbound by a turtle he saw with his girlfriend even though we were in the thick of a confrontation with the (X)paramilitaries at the time (see section L). I was told it is prohibited (by whom?) to kill them and in that conversation it was mentioned that the last of the manatees had died choking on a plastic bag. (How did they know it was the last?)

These are images that seem straight out of One Hundred Years of Solitude which is a story of isolated swamp dwellers like these people living in the steamy woods of northern Colombia. One Hundred Years of Solitude is a foundational work of “magical realism,” a genre that lends itself to sentimentality and gratuitous exaggeration, easy to overdo (as with Isabel Allende and Salman Rushdie), and now rather dated for reasons that are not obvious. One Hundred Years of Solitude hit Colombia like a freight train in the late 1960s. I recall my friends, two women owners of a bookstore in Bogotá, exulting over this strange work, struggling to put words to its philosophy as they repeated what García Márquez was said to have responded in an interview: “Magical realism? No! It’s realism.”

Hermes at work, again. But now Hermes is up against the ropes.

Some twenty years after the publication of One Hundred Years of Solitude, a strange new term, “the imaginary,” became fashionable in US anthropology, and to some extent in the social sciences in general. Not “imag-
ination” but “the imaginary,” an ugly reifying word, giving to the verb “to imagine” or to the noun “the imagination” an abstract, no-nonsense, status—the sort of obtuse scientism that Jacques Lacan and the cult around him found irresistible. It amounted to a backhanded admission that images, stories, fantasy, and sentiments (later called “affects”) were of importance in history, in social life, and in what made humans human, only now they were not human anymore but “post-human.” At the same time, however, did not this discovery of “the imaginary” impede the free play of the imagination? It was a crushing embrace.

XXI

I recall graffiti on the mildewed walls of the town hall in the beleaguered sugar plantation town where I worked in the 1970s in the southwest of Colombia. Macondo was what the graffiti said. Just that name. Macondo. The town hall was a long way from those banana plantations that García Márquez wrote about in northern Colombia, yet the destruction of the local peasant economy was the same. It was Macondo redux except... except I had the nagging feeling that the name on the wall registered not that destruction but attraction to a dubiously relevant fairytale Colombia.

By the year 2000 the sugarcane fields stretched from one side of the valley to the other. The peasant groves of shade trees, cacao, oranges, mandarins, coffee, and plantains were almost gone. The volcanic soil, three meters thick, had been magnificently fertile and the rivers ran high. But by 2000 the soil was exhausted and the plantations were using ever greater amounts of chemical fertilizer along with herbicide, insecticide, and irrigation, whereas the peasant mode of tree farming never had need for any of that and labor requirements were few. It should be noted that at least half of those farms had been owned and managed by women.

By 2000 the rivers were a mere trickle. Now they were sewers for industrial waste as factories employing white, skilled workers were established. Outside of the town there was barely a person to be seen. No dwellings either. No trees. Just swirling dust and the sad, monotonous landscape of cane fields with enormous trucks roaring through clouds
of dust. Only a crazy person would walk beyond the town. The physical environment choked you and the gangs of young kids were lethal.

A peasant agriculture built on a cornucopia of extended families caring for perennial tree crops had in the short space of three decades been destroyed. The pitiful remnants of tiny plots, an acre here, half an acre there, with the women sitting idle amid plastic waste in shadeless patios doing each other’s hair would make you weep. Was it any wonder that the kids turned their backs on agri/culture to run drugs and kill each other in gangland?

What then is Magical Realism?

One Hundred Years of Solitude begins with a memory, a memory of gypsies bringing miracles once a year to the swamp village of Macondo. Facing the firing squad during endless civil war, a man from the village suddenly recalls his childhood experience with the gypsies binging ice, a miraculous thing which the villagers have never known. That is how we begin, seconds before death, in what could be called the Eternal Return. Then there is the cyclical time of the family over many generations in the one house. With the arrival of the plantation economy, linear time emerges and we move from the inner worlds of the characters to the destruction of time itself in one galvanic heave of energy just before death.

In a 1982 essay on photography John Berger, who sees himself as a kindred spirit to García Márquez, contrasts time with history. The photograph fixes a specific time. The photograph says “This Existed.” Such a moment partakes of time as a window onto the infinite, meaning the miracle. But history cannibalizes time. History, meaning modernity, speeds up time to the point that there is no time left.42

This is patently obvious in One Hundred Years of Solitude as well as in my serpentine text. Berger’s photographic image—that window onto the infinite—today amounts to the debris history leaves washed up on the shores of memory as with each of my numbered segments, relics

framed by once-upon-a-timeness shot through with updated cannibal metaphysics and magical realism.

XXII

Can One Hundred Years of Solitude be seen as a variant of the tale of people like the poor colonists with whom I’m staying in the swamps—the story of them paddling their canoes eighty, maybe one hundred years ago up the Brazuelo de Papayal through the dark forests and magnificent bird life?

And what of the Indians? We don’t hear much about that indigenous world in the novel, or from the current inhabitants of the rivers and swamps—but what I do hear on the island is pride and wonder at that ancient way of life and the apparent mystery of their disappearance. Sometimes the land comes alive with this phantom presence. Misael points to his almond eyes as evidence of his Chamila Indian ancestry and with much pride in the earlier inhabitants shows me stone tools found in the forest. He exhibits endless curiosity about the Chamila Indians. He mentions other Indian societies, Jimiras and Maribuye (as I spell them), expelled, he says, into the Sierra Nevada. Confronting the riot police dislodging the peasants from what I call “the ceremonial center” in July of 2015 he said, “Look Officer, with all due respect, I have just turned seventy six years of age. Seventy six years I have lived in the countryside, here in this island of Papayal. Whenever I heard talk of the law from peasants, it was always something working against them. My grandparents were Indians. They said the law existed so as to take their land... and never once despite all the atrocities committed was there justice.”

The ghosts of the Indians are present in the curious coincidence that the symbolic location of the struggle against the (X)paramilitaries and the palm plantation is the platform of raised ground least exposed to flooding built by the Indians. I have been told by César Martínez, who comes into my story later (section XLVII), that it was twenty hectares in size before the plantation used it to plant African palm seedlings.

Yet in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* the Indians, past or present, barely feature and are certainly not exoticized. The ethnic exotic is provided by the annual visit of the gypsies bringing with each visit a new wonder such as ice, magnets, flying carpets, and alchemy—the stuff of fairytale upon which modernity’s utopian promises are built.

Today’s alchemy in the region exists in the chemical processing of the purple and red nuts of the palm oil tree. These are the fertilized female part of the plant from which all manner of magical issue springs forth such as diesel fuel, kids’ paints, and nail polish.

This last paragraph leads me to ask why gender and sex seem to mean something quite different when applied to plants and animals as compared with humans? When I write about female purple and red nuts, and fertilization of orchids by wasps in the paragraph below, for example, the words “gender” and “sex” seem either clinical or metaphoric. But what if we expand the bio and consider connections between species?

*XXIII*

We see this in the sex work of women in the plantation spraying male seed into the female flowers so as to engender new life, meaning stuff
like diesel fuel. The beauty, mystery, and ingenuity of science, not to mention the miracle of sex, are here harnessed to the needs of trucks and ships carrying sneakers and blue jeans, etc., along the highways and across the seven seas.

The reason the laboring women do this is because the hybrid palm OxG (a blend of the African palm with an American palm) is unlikely to reproduce naturally, yet more able to resist plagues (for the moment) while at the same time it is highly productive.

OxG is also named “The American Hope.”

I see these women inseminators hard at it in the lustrous photographs provided by the Colombian Palm Growers Association. One woman is kneeling by an adult palm with a plastic tube in her mouth blowing sperm into the tiny flowers. In another photo a dark-skinned young woman wearing bright pink jeans and a coal black jacket and cap guides the inseminating tool in her right hand while with her left she pushes back the palm branches studded with fierce thorns. With a look of equally fierce concentration she guides her instrument into its target all because “Hope of America” can’t get it up. One would hope for more from “Hope of America.”

So what is more magical, the gypsies in One Hundred Years of Solitude or agribusiness sex grafted into the biopower of the domination of nature?

Magical or not, this articulation of the woman laborer with the genitals of “Hope of America” surely adds up to what Deleuze and Guattari (henceforth D & G, the assemblage behind the assemblage) call “assemblages,” for which they supply as an example a wasp fertilizing an orchid. Here the orchid mimics a female wasp such that the male wasp, thinking the orchid is a female wasp, has sex with it, carrying its pollen to the next orchid, etc. To see this in close-up on video it is impossible not to think of this assemblage as wasp–orchid pornography, another assemblage, and one that assembles the human of today

with the animal of forever by superimposing the concept of porn!
Another question: How do we know, why do we say, that the male wasp thinks the orchid is a female wasp? Maybe the male wasp likes having sex with orchids! Don’t we all love flowers? “What counts is that love itself is a war machine endowed with strange and somewhat terrifying powers.”

This wasp-orchid example is an ingenious choice, for to my mind there is something sinister yet beautiful and wildly unexpected in the wasp-orchid combination. The orchid is the femme fatale and as for the wasp, well, it’s a wasp, meaning nasty, mere mention of which makes you shrink away, especially when a beautiful orchid is involved.

Once triggered, assemblages tend to proliferate and somersault, one leading to the next. For example, when I invoke the femme fatale I also invoke an assemblage of paradox concerning self-awareness as to an unstated anthropomorphization.

Another assemblage concerns the larger framework of relevant political cliché and self-awareness as to such—namely, third world women of color ministering to the sexual requirements of an impotent masculine “Hope of America” designed to stall the plagues brought by the very act of mono-cropping. We could continue.

Thus does the assemblage principle provoke movement, speed, and metamorphosis. This is the way of things as much as of thinking with things.

Yet is there not something peculiarly specific to this example of “Hope of America” on account of the profound destruction of things and of life wrought by the domination of nature? For all the comic and at times curious and disturbing analogies with human sex (analogies that are not perceived as analogies), the sexual wound here speaks to a fundamental shift in the life force of nature caused by another assemblage, that of agribusiness forcing nature into sterility (as

is rumored about Monsanto’s capacity to manufacture sterile seeds with its “terminator gene”).

For D & G, the wasp-orchid mise en scene is an appeal to reconsider ways of connecting things in a nervously nervous nervous system that keeps changing as you focus in on it. Wholes decompose and recompose in different ways. The frame is that there is no frame, not for long, anyway. Things connect and disconnect. It’s messy. It’s real life. And also the dizzying outcome of the logic and illogic of the metaphysics we all need and live by, perhaps unconsciously, as Nietzsche delights in showing us in his chapter “On the Prejudices of Philosophers” in Beyond Good and Evil.

An assemblage is like my drawing of doña Edit’s household in which each thing rubs shoulders with a host of others. That drawing-and-its-pages-of-commentary is basically a wasp-and-orchid assemblage, too.

In a letter to Allen Ginsberg from Morocco, William Burroughs put it well when he said his writing of Naked Lunch was based on the idea of opening a drawer in your bedroom dresser and perceiving the medley therein; an old theater ticket, a button, a broken pen, a cotton reel, etc. As with my spiraling and seemingly endless description of Edit’s home, the curious thing, the marvelous thing, is the way unexpected combinations creep into such lists through the incongruous medley of the aggregation. A fact is a fact. But two facts together? Why, that’s a wasp-and-an-orchid!

XXIV

Why, that’s a wasp-and-an-orchid! It is worth mentioning that a major implication of any assemblage is its “pack” quality, as in a pack of animals, which is itself likely to be linked with the “war machine” which is and is not part of the state.47

Paramilitaries and (X)paramilitaries are a fine example of a pack that is a war machine. They overlap with the state but their logic is distinct. They are the wild component of the law, its necessary underside. They

are definitely not your oedipalized pet animal begging for a bone or chasing a ball with the owner running behind with a plastic bag.

Other assemblages come to mind: the packs of paramilitaries fused with the packs of palm trees; the assemblage composed of swamp and cattle; the assemblage of cattlemen-drugmen; the assemblage of the ancient Indian raised field with the plantation’s “control tower” alongside the villagers’ black plastic campamento; the assemblage of paramilitaries and (X)paramilitaries... and perhaps the most critical of all, the wasp-orchid type assemblage of the hierarchical logic and social organization of the state disappearing in the putrescent blue-green ooze of the life-in-death that is the swamp. This is why the state, although it may have lost the monopoly of the means of violence in Colombia, tries to maintain a wasp-and-orchid relation with the swamp, especially if the swamp is unnamed. This is not—I repeat not—a functionalist relation but an assemblage like a Hegelian coupling of opposites where the very depths of nature meet the very heights of stately Being in a maze of see-sawing contradiction. Bataille’s Big Toe comes to mind, or at least his essay of that name, the big toe being the swamp, the head being Hegel’s state.48 Round and round they go in fury and laughter while the nearest they get to a resolution is a reconfiguration of the human body wrenched away from a vertical axis of head and toe to enter the wavelike motion of the internal organs—namely, the intestines “in more or less incessant inflation and upheaval.” Next stop, Solar Anus.

Another example of the war machine is the serpentine text you are reading here, top-heavy with animals for reasons that remain obscure but would seem to have everything to do with a proclivity to metamorphoses meaning becomings, stemming from

- language itself
- need for, dependence upon, and hence inevitability of figuration (tropes, metaphor, rhythm, etc.)

• swamps as an epitome of life-in-death and death-in-life
• swamps as sinkholes of stately being
• (X)paramilitaries
• frontier zones of political violence and the domination of nature
• the metamorphic sublime of palm oil
• the tribulations of metaphysics (God, Platonic Forms, Depth, Self, Cause-and-Effect, etc.), convenient yet ultimately inconvenient fictions we can’t do without

If this is the world of the sorcerer, let us say the conjuror, it is even more so that of the writer! Filmmakers too! As with Sergei Eisenstein’s police spies becoming animals in his 1924 film *Strike* in which with loving detail police spies are shown through montage turning into animals: bears, owls, foxes, and bulldogs. This is the power of cinema especially when engaged with stately being (so manifest in *Strike*), thanks to the magical effluvium that the state emanates, thereby converting its functionaries into double-men and animal hybrids nowhere more so than with police.

There is mirth here as well despite the terror of secret police, spies, bureaucrats, and loathsome capitalist functionaries: mirth at becoming an animal, mirth at fooling the people being spied upon, and above all, I think, mirth at being mimetic, which is to say becoming not similar to something, but just similar (as Roger Caillois once wrote).

*Strike* suggests that as with its tie to the swamp in northern Colombia, the state has a strange affinity with the animal and that the state-animal assemblage is as much part of the state of nature as it is of the nature of the state. This is why animals feature in cartoons watched by children, forever bearing the yoke placed on them by parents and school. And this is why Franz Kafka has so many animal stories in the dark shadows formed by his two chilling works on the state, namely *The Castle* and *The Trial*; stories such as the famous “Metamorphosis” and including “Josephine The Mouse Singer,” “Investigations of a Dog,” “Report to An Academy” (about the ape Red Peter), “The Burrow,” “Jackals and Arabs.”

49. “Writers are sorcerers because they experience the animal as the only population before which they are responsible in principle.” Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 240.
“The New Attorney,” and others. In his famous essay on Kafka (straddling the opposed poles of Scholem’s Jewish mysticism and Brecht’s pragmatic communism), Benjamin made much of the swamp creatures in Kafka, referring first off to the assistants and messengers and then the underlying sense in all his work of “swamp mysticism” (which Brecht understood to be the alienation of modern life).

Small wonder that a writer such as myself is easily recruited into serpentine text-making which, in its Hermes-like way, in its Hermes Trismegistus-like way, in its baboon with crescent moon, great sorcerer way, doubles back on all this human-animal doubling so as to channel its spiritual power to certain elsewheres. Please note there is in this text no autonomous animal or plant just as there is no autonomous human. Every plant and animal in this text is always already connected, some more than others, to a human and human grouping. This we call “contagion,” as in a ramifying and effervescent connectedness being one of the two varieties of sympathetic magic put forward in Frazer’s *Golden Bough*. How could it be otherwise with *palma africana* become “Hope of America” breathing down everyone’s and every thing’s neck, changing history at furious speed? Every plant and animal is always already an assemblage animating the text. How could it be otherwise?

XXVI

It is late January. From the plane I see brilliant yellow blossoming trees as we come in to land at the city of Valledupar. They glisten like jewels on the mountain sides. As the lawyer and I are driven west to the Sur de Bolívar these trees catch the afternoon sun in a glory of incandescence. Sometimes they are pink.

We take this roundabout route because the more direct route is infested with (X)paramilitaries, says the lawyer. It is also roundabout because where we are going is a “dark hole” in Colombia, a lost inaccessible space with no direct way of getting there by roads. Politics and geography coincide.

In between somber African palm plantations—dark, spiny, huge, and frightening—are piled up junk towns of what look like dog kennels
built the past decade by the government for the hordes of people displaced by oil palm and paramilitaries. Scattered elsewhere, other displaced peasants live in broken-backed adobe houses. Once I saw miles of straight-walled, manmade, flat-topped mountains made of the waste of coal mining from the open-cut coal mine run by the Drummond company headquartered in Alabama, US, which, in Colombia, hires paramilitaries to thwart the guerrilla and kill pesky trade unionists.

Through the waves of heat by the side of the road are young girls and boys selling eggs of iguanas in narrow plastic bags about a foot long. They hold one bag in each hand, aloft, like offerings to the gods. After all, the eggs are supposed to be aphrodisiac and, after all, iguanas feature in One Hundred Years of Solitude as the offspring of incestuous unions; all of which implies that this is an animal with a close tie to human sexual activity. This bespeaks a strong human-animal loop.
Humans who are too close in kinship create wildly nonhuman beings; the too close connects with the too far, and the animal-human world is solidified in a totemic delirium.

There are also teenagers by the roadside selling bottles, like wine bottles, of contraband gasoline smuggled from Venezuela. The bottles are piled up like pyramids on the side of the road. The vendors grasp long black funnels and filters, ready to pour the gas into the car tanks. They swing these funnels back and forth at the passing cars to attract attention. The funnels seem like giant poppies meant to pull motorists into their petaled interiors. These pyramids and swinging poppies make standardized commodity fetishism look pretty feeble. The ad hoc efforts by the kids must be the envy of TV advertisers.

I never saw a gas station in over three hours of fast driving.

We stopped briefly in the intense, dry, heat for a late lunch in a large building with a lofty roof but no walls, the *Fonda Paisa* it was called, serving corn, potatoes, rice manioc, and three types of meat. Overwhelming, especially in that heat. But the driver and the lawyer eat
voraciously. Behind a pillar I saw—or thought I saw—a young man with a long machine gun resting on his hip and shoulder. A mirage, maybe. My overheated imagination, maybe. Gray, with licks of camo. The wind howled across the plain.

All the towns along the road are controlled by (X)paramilitaries except the small town of Codazzi. The town is named after the eminent Italian mapmaker commissioned by President Tomás Cipriano de Mosquera to travel over Colombia in the 1840s with a team of surveyors counting people, bridges, weapons, and livestock. There were artists in tow, painting watercolor sketches with a sharp eye for ethnically different customs, architecture, and clothing. Codazzi died close by here with his map of Colombia almost done. Yet there is nothing remarkable about this place other than its name—and one significant geopolitical feature which surely would have caught the eye of Codazzi, the geographer, if he were alive today, and that is the absence of paramilitaries because the mountains are close by, providing guerrilla-friendly terrain, so the lawyer tells me.

XXVII

On a whim I ask if we can stop for a moment to feel the connection, physical and spiritual, with the famous mapmaker. We buy freshly squeezed, spittle-warm orange juice sold in sausage-shaped, flimsy plastic bags that are the devil to drink from.

As much a symbol as a thing of practical use, the map Codazzi prepared can be thought of as a portrait that made the fledgling nation real after the wars of independence from Spain, a two-dimensional representation that could take its place with other nations that already had their maps, like visiting cards, along with postage stamps, a flag, a national currency, and an anthem.

To the notion of the map as a portrait or as a visiting card has to be added another significant feature which is the map’s spectrality. What I mean here is that the map of the new nation ties science to nationalism no less than to an accountant’s sensibility counting everything deemed important to a modern, newly independent state. Quite a feat,
really, to combine the passion of nationalism with the abstractions of a theodolite-based bird’s-eye-view map. There is only one word for this mighty achievement and that is re-territorialization.

It was as if Colombia was to that point in time a half-formed, hollow entity without an interior. As a colony of Spain and unofficially of Great Britain and pirates, it was segments of coast that had been mapped in profile in the manner peculiar to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as seen from the heaving deck of a ship. But with independence and Codazzi all this changed. Now the interior was cartographically accessed not as profiled from a moving ship but from a bird’s-eye-view of abstraction, although it should be mentioned that many a time over rough terrain Codazzi et al. were carried by silleros, sturdy blacks or Indians with a seat strapped to their backs. Was this the equivalent of the heaving deck of a ship?

The interior of the country was no longer an irregular mosaic of local knowledge and practices possessed only by those who cultivated the land and paddled its rivers in rhythm to the passing of the seasons.

It was now destined to be a whole, ever so much larger than the sum of its parts. It was now meant to lend itself to new practices of administration removed from bodily engagement, meaning engagement with actual people and the bodies of nature such as lakes, rivers, coasts, burning plains, icy páramos, soaring mountains, and, lest we forget, the endless archipelago of swamps in northern Colombia.

Question: How can you draw a map of ephemeral, capricious nature such as this archipelago? The state maps buckle before this wildness of nature, this rabid inconformity to the drawing board of the state and its “royal science.” But then Efraín, soaked in local knowledge(s), provides a solution, “messy” as it is (see section LXIV).

And then there is the question of the dead. After all, is it not they who incarnate a place? The locality becomes a locality because that’s where you buried your dead. But as far as I recall the Codazzi maps and statistics did not include cemeteries, although careful note was taken of bridges and firearms.
Another form of knowing was ascendant, born of being carried on the back of an Indian or an African, all in the name and stirring sentiment of the new nation and science. I have read a lengthy account of being thus carried over the southern Andes in the early twentieth century by Miguel Triana. (Who would believe that even at this late date the practice still existed!) He found it intensely uncomfortable and as the hours passed he experienced, he says, a prolonged reverie in which he and his carrier become united, analogous to a rider and his horse with the latter sensitive to the merest wish of the rider. Like telepathy the rider now commands by thought alone. In this trance the fable of the blind man carrying the lame man occurs to him. The physical dependence of the ruler on his subjects is inverted such that the dependent man riding on the back of the Other becomes the commander in what amounts to a situation of pure bluff.

With that in mind we imbibe orange juice sprung from the sandy lots of orange groves in the village of Codazzi. With that name and maybe a few iguana eggs thrown in we drink to the country and of the country, urged on by this post-Codazzi animus.

It must be that same animus working on the driver of the car taking us west when he begins to talk of herds of domestic animals gone feral; horses, cattle, and pigs, running loose on these great plains, partly swamp, partly dry, depending on the season.

Within a few years of the arrival of the Spanish four hundred years ago, feral animals were reported. The pigs, horses, and cattle brought from Spain escaped. The buccaneers of the island of Far Tortuga, in the Caribbean to the north of here made their living killing feral animals and selling the smoked meat to passing sailors, especially pirates, a meat-preserving practice supposedly learned from those Indians who now and again surface into my story. The word “buccaneers,” some say, is derived from a Carib Indian word for barbecue.

Doña Edit once told me something I could not fathom—that before she was brought here by her father and mother in 1965, her father had had

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some five hundred head of cattle, never sold them, and they became wild, roaming wheresoever, what D & G designate as a “pack” with their multiplicity of becomings.

From the backblocks of that backblock country, Paraguay, the Italian anthropologist Valentina Bonifacio writes me of wild cattle roaming the woods. They are called *sagua’a* and one story has it that they are impossible to domesticate or capture for slaughter. They have to be shot in the head and are too heavy to move. She met a man who bought a gun from France used for shooting elephants for this task. He bought it by mail in 1979. Valentina writes me that when he sold part of his land and had to count the feral cows that were included in the deal, a helicopter fired rockets into the wood twice a day for one month to push the *sagua’a* out into the meadow and catch them. “The ex-workers told me that plenty of animals came out crying, wild boars running together with cows and jaguars, escaping from the woods.”

I think it likely that all over Latin America such criollo animals as described by our driver existed in giant packs well into the nineteenth century. I recall a story by a US writer trapped by an endless herd of wild horses in early nineteenth-century Chile. For hours they roared past him, a great river of horses. In “Toomai of the Elephants” in *The Jungle Book* Kipling talks of elephants breaking away at night from the British army to dance in the forest together. Evans-Pritchard writes of the spirit herd of cattle among the Nuer stretching to the beginning of time. What are we to make of these giant packs broken away from oedipalized domesticity?

Perhaps today in South America such packs exist only in fantasy, a mystical pack of domestic animals gone wild roaming on the horizons of the imagination. That is the frame, the domestic gone wild, rampant through history but largely hidden from sight. It responds to a wish, does it not, our wish, to escape from history and become wild? On the other side there is that other escape, that other wildness, that of Drummond and oil palm reshaping society and the land. And that is why the heart leaps to see the scattering of yellow blossomed trees anarchically distributed in the hills and declivities of the land, along with those aphrodisiac iguana eggs—such fantasies—lighting up the
landscape, glowing incandescent in the afternoon sun, giving it beauty and soul.

XXVIII

African palm was once wild, in Africa, then domesticated, then wild again but in this new way, this “green” biofuel paramilitarized way. That resurgence of the “wild” must be why I asked Misael about fences meaning barbed-wire fences, first erected in 1957 when the first outsider cattleman, Aberlado Ramírez, invaded the island saying he had title to some four hundred hectares of the best land which he proceeded to enclose in barbed wire, the first ever seen on the island. (By “best” here I am thinking like a cattleman-drugman. But is not the swamp the “best”?)

He also made money by killing alligators so as to sell their skins in which, after a few years, he used to conceal cocaine.52

As for the legal status of his supposedly titled land, he was the first person in the area to be granted a real title by the newly formed Agrarian Reform Institute of Colombia, created as part of the US initiative in 1961 to grant land to the poor to stem the spread of communism throughout Latin America.53

There is certainly a kaleidoscopic reality here tied to the colonization of lands called *baldios*, theoretically owned by—or should we say part of—the state but with insufficient state presence or concern to back that up, hence the (X)paramilitarization.

With this toehold purchase Ramirez and the cattlemen-drugmen to whom he sold were able to expand their domain and eventually sell to others who came after them, the chain eventually extending to the African palm growers who came in 2007. From her study further west in Urabá, lawyer-anthropologist Meaghan Morris reports on the inflation legally possible. Deploying a dubious instrument of law called “acces-

sion,” it was possible to expand, for example, a plot of eighteen hectares of what had been baldio to 5,908 hectares of privately owned property. One has to admire not only the blatant contradiction of owning unownable state land but also the exactitude of the numbering: not 6,000 hectares but 5,908, like a child cheating on an exam in school.

I don’t think this is clear. I try to get around it like a lawyer by talking of “blatant contradiction” but is this not barking up the wrong tree? It is not so much a question of true or false as it is of a fairytale?

When it comes to the banks of the rivers and the swamps the situation is even murkier as when Currie and Nathan pointed to much confusion in national law which held these to be state lands but to the local people was theirs owing to custom and tradition.

A later assessment re wetlands is that “the law permits only those uses which guarantee the conservation of their eco-systems. They are public goods. In other words they are under intensive protection, obligatory sanctions that transcend all other laws.”

And here a correction: we say “the state” but in actuality there are many states and states within “the state” as when old Pedro in answer to my repeated question—my whining, really—as to how some villagers can on their own sneak into the swamp and fence off a portion for their own selfish use, says to me repeatedly, “No hay gobierno; no hay gobierno” (There is no government), by which he means the state of the nation. He kicks up dust with his battered shoes as he walks with that leaning forward gait of his. He feels deserted.

Alfredo Molano, who knows more about rural Colombia than anyone I know described the cosmic shift in the landscape and waterscape of the island as the old, meaning common, story of “the axe versus legal paper” (“del hacha versus papel sellado”), a telling phrase, the legal paper

being blank paper with stamps glued on, the tax stamps of the state.\textsuperscript{57} More magical realism. Is not such paper itself a \textit{baldio} or “empty land” belonging to and \textit{part} of the state on which the rich and powerful write their story?

With the next wave of cattlemen in 1983, most especially those distant relatives of Pablo Escobar, a lot changed but at the risk of getting ahead of myself let me first tell you of this Escobar dynasty’s three symbols—cock, bull, and Porsche—as perceived by the lawyer, Juan Felipe García. The first comes with Jesús Emilio Escobar, the owner of Las Pavas, who also owned the most famous cockfighting establishments in Medellín. So he’s the cock. Then there is his sister, Margarita, brutally murdered in Pereira. She had her prize bull, while brother Gustavo, he has his horse, Porsche, named after his car. He is reported to have sold four or five thousand cattle each month with a fleet of five hundred trucks. Together the three owned around 170 haciendas throughout the country. I could continue, but you get the idea and it’s an important idea because you now see the apparently remote island of Papayal as actually existing on a national stage directed by unimaginably wealthy and violent people, paving the way for \textit{palma africana}.

The lawyer tells me this bunch of crooks needed the cattle to launder money. But could it be more than that? There are surely many ways of laundering money, but land and cattle (not to mention freshly laundered money) are divine, are they not?

Owning cattle is a rite of passage, a passport to bliss like owning a gun in the US. My shaman friend Santiago Mutumbajoy way to the south in the Putumayo used to tell me in the 1980s about larger than life personages he called \textit{millionarios} way out in the eastern plains of Colombia who had so much cattle they had to be herded by helicopters. He and I liked that image a lot: looking down on the land swarming with cattle as seen from up high in the sky, like looking down on maggots crawling over old meat, an image that Elias Canetti could have


\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 169–70.
used when likening crowds to the sea and to fields of corn rippling in the wind in his book *Crowds and Power* which we could call *Cattle and Power*. Every so often the Colombian air force, adroitly “advised” by the colossus to the north, would be flying helicopters over our heads keeping tabs on the guerrilla and maybe on us, too, in the same way the *millionarios* kept tabs on their cattle.

Sometimes peasant colonists in the Putumayo would spend the night with cattle when they had drunk of the hallucinogen *yagé* with don Santiago; phantom cattle, of course, hallucinogenized cattle, mooing and soft of muzzle, creatures desperately desired but actually not all that practical—not like the jaguar of the forest or the boa of the rivers—as they would get stuck in swamps unable to move (which is one reason why the cattlemen–drugmen wanted to drain the swamps of the Island of Papayal).

Karl Marx speaks of human labor power as the pivotal commodity under capitalism since it can, as a commodity, be made to convert its unique properties into more exchange value than required for its maintenance. All this assumes a vast cultural and material infrastructure but surely cattle deserve a special place in any world historical reckoning of value, too? David Graeber provides African examples of the nexus between bridewealth and cattle which suggests we take the long view; that the archaeology of capital—the story of capital, if you like—lies in the exchange of cattle for fertile women evolving into the trans-Atlantic slave trade evolving into modern capitalism.59

Yet in the forests of the Putumayo, at least, cattle as capital were hardly a success you could chalk up to the “domination of nature.” Rather, the reverse; nature dominated the dominators and the poor cow was stuck in the mud up to its haunches bellowing its heart out, providing an André Breton surrealist image of the “fixed explosive” in the midst of the forest, not of a locomotive but of a cow.60

60. André Breton, *Mad Love*, trans. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 10. “There can be no beauty at all, as far as I am concerned—convulsive beauty—except at the cost of affirming the reciprocal relations linking the object seen in motion and in its
All of which brings me to consider the marriage not merely of heaven and hell but of swamp and state. They are a couple, that’s for sure. For is not the swamp the ethereal materialization of the state? Forget trumpets and gold leaf, Twitter accounts and guards of honor. The swamp is far more resonant with the concept of the state than these trinkets. This is because the swamp is the quintessence of life-forms gestating with death and decay. The swamp is “proto-life,” the form of forms, the plasticity of metamorphosing possibilities like the oil extruded from our new friends, the African palm and the “Hope of America,” which likewise possess this stem-cell characteristic of being able to create most everything except that Hope of America can’t reproduce itself.

Under Western eyes the swamp is the fetid sinkhole of pestilence and rot, frightening and worse on account of its ambiguity; a nothingness, an everythingness, neither land nor water, neither life nor death but a life-in-death bubbly purulence conflating subject with object and, with that, writing with what the writing is about.

Like Carl Schmitt’s idea of the sovereign as he who decides on the exception, the swamp is the state of exception to the rule that makes the rule, the mystical void that allows for meaning elsewhere. The exception, notes Schmitt, is a lot more interesting than the rule. State and swamp embrace in this pestilential darkness and this is why the swamp in Colombia if not throughout the Western world, since the origin of the state is classified as a baldio meaning state property that cannot be alienated. The citizenry may use it under certain conditions and in certain ways, but cannot own it or any portion thereof and certainly not alter it. It is like a fairytale in which the king’s power ultimately rests on an untouchable thing, in this case something squishy and malodorous.

The swamp is more than a national issue and more than an international one. It is a metaphysical issue. The swamp is not the innocent and reposed. I regret not having been able to furnish, along with this text, the photograph of a speeding locomotive abandoned for years to the delirium of a virgin forest.”

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vulnerable female to be protected by the patriarchal state but it is the swamp that protects the state. Think back to the contradiction and false consciousness of the lame man (the state) being carried across impassable terrain by the blind man (the swamp). Then consider the next step launched by Bataille’s Big Toe careening wildly, adrift in the currents of unresolvable contradiction.

Nowadays we tend to think that at least some of this makes sense because overnight, it seems, swamps, now linguistically beautified as “wetlands,” are seen by many people as hallowed guardians of the biosphere. But that is now, while for most of history, certainly from the eighteenth century onward in European history, the swamp was blatantly negative space. It was where all manner of spooks reposed, strange balls of fire emerged, phantom cities lay beneath its opalescent surfaces and, what’s more, it stood in the path of progress meaning agricultural production. No wonder, therefore, nay, maddeningly curious, how the swamp is the elixir of the state where monarchs and presidents come into their own. This is parallel to the relation in Western Europe between the king and the executioner, the one resplendent in the light of the sun, the other mired in the evil of the dark underworld, untouchable, alone, and endowed, like the king, with great magical powers.62

This is why only the state has the right to alter the swamp and the state has done this big time through public works begun in Mesopotamia and then in China, preconquest Mexico, postconquest Mexico, and Western Europe with its extensive drainage projects and canalization transforming the face of nature. The control of the swamp is not only the foundation of what today is called agribusiness but also of stately prowess in its singularly potent expression as biopower as recently made manifest by one president of the US vowing to “drain the swamp” that is Washington, DC, a task that has proved impossible. For good reason.

In declaring the swamp a baldio, meaning state property for common use, the state acknowledges its debt to the swamp as the set piece of biopower giving suck to the state. The swamp in all modesty allows the state to

strut and preen, bestowing guarantees and laws, in much the same way as wives console their anxious husbands and, one step behind, allow them to assume the limelight.

Strange how much is made of land as in terra firma dry and hard underfoot in polemics about power when it’s actually the treacherous swamp dark and brooding that sits at the heart of power. Is this why, as in Hegelian drama, the Island of the Papaya Grove and specifically the hacienda
Las Pavas shot to the Number One slot in the national consciousness, a Dickensian *Bleak House* legal dispute dragging on endlessly in the swamplands of law? (You really have to ask yourself why the swamp is so bountifully metaphoric?)

The Island of the Papaya Grove is full of swamps. With Efraín instructing me I draw a map of the island. It looks like Swiss cheese. Full of holes. A sieve, it could be, overrun by water twice a year with the holes connecting the water below with the skies above.

The biggest swamp by far is called Mataperros, an odd name reeking with death meaning something like “kills dogs,” which is in keeping with pestilence and incomprehensibility as well as with games with naming and language. Seventy-year-old Samuel told me the name comes from the fact that this swamp is so mosquito-ridden it kills dogs. Now, that is an image to contend with. In my mind’s eye I see a whimpering dog covered with mosquitoes and making itself as small as possible, at other times a whirl of fury lashing out at invisible daemons. Other old people say that a dead dog was found there. Whatever the story, animals are always invoked. Many hectares in size, Mataperros fills with fish after flooding. The palm plantation drains it, but the villagers buttress its waters with dykes of boughs and mud. The peasant, too, manipulates water and ponds.

XXX

Fortunes of war: The cattlemen-drugmen formed an alliance with the guerrilla, ELP, and later the FARC. Misael described the guerrilla as the *fuera militar* of these cattlemen-drugmen, hostile to the villagers and their claims to land and swamp. But within a few years the guerrilla began to kidnap those very same cattlemen-drugmen, presumably for paying insufficient protection money. This prevented the cattlemen-drugmen from visiting the island such that in 1994 the peasants were able once again to invade the land that the cattlemen-drugmen had invaded.

But then the guerrilla themselves fled in 1998 when the paramilitar- ies, no doubt funded by the cattlemen-drugmen, made their historic
excursion of assassination up the Brazuelo de Papayal. You can still see the faded acronyms of the guerrilla, FARC, and EPL, painted on the old school wall in the village (yes! more acronyms, mimicry of stately practice). The guerrilla retreated into the mountains to the west known as the Serranía de San Lucas where there are gold miners whom—so I imagine—paid the guerrilla protection money.

While I am on the subject it should be noted that most of Colombia is subject one way or another to “protection money”—the vacuna or “vaccination”—and by no means is this confined to the guerrilla. Instead it is also practiced by paramilitaries, local hoods, gangs, and who knows to what heights of society it extends? The guerrilla merely put into practice what everyone else was practicing, all of which puts notions of corruption in perspective since it is not some character defect, personal or national, but is instead the democratization of the state’s practice of taxation.

I do not know why or how the tides of war on the island changed so rapidly, but I assume the US determination to provide massive military aid in the year 2000 as the major part of the “Plan Colombia” played an important role, providing a shield for the paramilitaries throughout Colombia. The violent spread of African palm was a direct consequence. (Be it noted that this US government plan occurred alongside a sharp increase in incarceration of blacks and Native Americans in the US, while cutting welfare.)

What also changed on the island during this time was the ecology. Not only did cattle effect the environment but the cattlemen-drugmen were able to reroute what the lawyer, in close conversation with Misael, describes as “the key to the circulatory system of the island.”

And what was this key? It was a narrow waterway known as Rioviejo in the south of the island which allowed waters from the vast Magdalena River, flowing north, to pass laterally by the south of the island so as to enter the tributary known as the Brazuelo de Papayal and thereby flood the island periodically, sustaining the fish ponds and the overall fer-

tility of the island. It was this that was blocked in 1983 so as to convert flood-prone land and swamps into pasture for cattle.

The lawyer provides a vivid example of the sardines that entered the Rioviejo serving as “pollinators” for the big fish known as bagre. This cycle ceased with the blockage. The island lost its bagre, only to witness the rise of another wondrous cycle, that of cattle being able to find shade in the newly sprung Campano trees that grew beautifully from their shit. The lawyer provides a charming photograph of contented cows seated in the shade of one of these capacious trees.64

Many people alluded to the drying out of the island and it was not lost on me that, throughout Colombia, peasant people use the verb “to dry out” (secar) when describing the withering away, “the drying out,” of the human body as it dies. I have heard it most often in descriptions of dying due to sorcery.

“Drying out” added to the monetary value of land (another form of sorcery). Even before then peasant interest in private property increased apace when the Land Reform Institute in the 1960s registered some holdings for small holders who were then able to take out loans from banks. On the heels of that, so I was told, came merchants and a consequent jolt forward in monetizing livelihood. It should also be noted that Land Reform in Colombia generally has not cut up large holdings but instead encouraged peasant colonization of remote or swampy land as a substitute.

It was certainly not beyond the wily peasant to invade unalienable state lands, usually wetlands, with a view to selling the mejoras or “improvements” in lieu of actual land titles (since such lands cannot in theory be titled). It is tribute to the peasant association, ASOCAB, to have resisted this and fought for a quite different, more communal, vision of land ownership and use.

Ultimately, however, how successful was the attempt of cattlemen-drugmen and the palm plantations to control the river? I heard of

floods in 2011 that swept the dykes other than that of the Roviejo away, along with big chunks of the plantations as well. Eleven thousand palm trees were swept away, Efraín told me. The river was angry.

And in late 2014 a group of around one hundred villagers and other peasants nearby did something quite unexpected. Under cover of secrecy they broke the dyke that prevented the Magdalena River from entering the island via the Roviejo! Misael’s heart danced for joy, reports the lawyer. Now the circulatory system of the island, the sardines and the bagre, had a fighting chance of renewal!  

As regards the war within nature, the flood is what gives the island

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its bounteous fertility. It makes life hard and it makes life flourish. It is exciting as well as dangerous, this convulsion of nature that for me was captured in a photograph I saw in doña Edit’s house of svelte young Swiss human rights people diving bravely off trees by the village into the Brazuelo de Papayal approaching full flood. They looked enraptured.

I believe that Georges Bataille, who did a lot of diving into the flood and was a great admirer of the swamp, would think of flooding as what he called dépense, meaning squandering in the sense of a massive blowout. Indeed this was his view of nature as a whole, amounting to a metaphysic in which the sun, for instance, gives without receiving, providing an excess of unusable energy.

Such a view butts against standard habits of thought we call “utilitarian.” Neither the businessman looking for profit by harnessing the flood, nor the ecologist looking for cybernetic balance, get this. The one builds dykes, the other builds mental dykes. But the true state of affairs is represented by the crazy writ(h)ing of the tree roots along the riverbanks visible in the dry season, and in the serpentine character of this text. Look at these roots; at the patterns they make and unmake, tease, and break. Check out the ruggedness and fragility of weave.
XXI

Being common land that no citizen can in theory buy or fence off, thanks to the state-swamp marriage, the swamp is also the salvation of the landless villager with a cow. Along with the swamp, the cow. A holy couple. Misael and old Pedro figure that three-quarters of the villagers owns at least one cow and that cow would be feeding free on the swamp.

I had been thinking in terms of cultivating crops and of issues concerning ownership of the land since that seemed to me what defined the dispute with the palm plantations. But now I started to see the cow and free swampland as not only crucial to the village economy but as indicating a different way of conceiving of what we in the West with our view of economics call “the economy.” In his wonderful book, *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams makes a similar point about the early twentieth-century salaried Welsh worker with a small patch of land acting as a subsistence buffer, like the swamp. It is a point made repeatedly with verve and poetry by the historian Peter Linebaugh in his formidable essay “All the Atlantic Mountains Shook.” I still recall its photograph with the caption, “An Unexpropriated Romany Man Holding Rabbit Snares, Worcestershire, Winter, 1979.” Whether it is because the burly man pictured is so prepossessing or whether because his face and eyes are concealed in shadow by a shapeless felt hat pulled way down on top of enormous whiskers spouting like a fan of seaweed, the puny rabbit snare in his hand acquires almost supernatural power. Presumably the man is a poacher like the peasants on the island of Papayal poaching in the swamps and for me he represents a bridge between the way I envisage the island and the way by which British Marxist historians in the 1950s approached the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Britain, which in Linebaugh’s hands, thirty years later, is enlivened by what has come to be called “the Black Atlantic” together with his emphasis on resistance to wage labor and to workplace discipline as the major factor in the so-called capitalist crisis of the seventeenth century.

Here the 1979 photograph of the Romany man ("unexpropriated") calls to mind the multiplicity of ways, legal and illegal, of making a living on the margin, as with the swamp-cow "complex." Catalina expressed this best for me when she compared her life on the island with that of her parents in the town of El Banco. "In El Banco todo es comprado," she said, "everything has to be bought with money." A stick of firewood costs three hundred pesos! Whereas here, on the island, along with her seven smart kids, she forages outside the money economy—in addition to which she makes money washing clothes for other households and selling the *mondongo* soup she makes from the cattle slaughtered by her companion, Ariel, once or twice a week.

Why did her parents, who lived next door to her, go to live in town?

Because her brother, who was involved in running drugs, was killed by paramilitaries and her parents feared for their life. They are now legally classified as "displaced" which provided them with a small amount of money.

Her mother, she says, adopted two orphans with AIDS. Once a month her mother takes them to Santa Marta on the Caribbean coast for blood exams. They catch the 2:00 a.m. bus and arrive at 8:00 a.m. The government does not pay her anything for this. They return to El Banco the same day, catching the bus at 1:00 p.m.

I don’t know why I am telling you this about her mother, but to Catalina it all hangs together. "Lines of flight," say D & G. Opening the dresser drawer, says Burroughs. My need to communicate intricacies, says I, those vectors of raw facticity that become the marvelously real that is Catalina along with the slithering of the text back and forth across Roman numerals where nature and history weave unexpected webs on the edges of the commodity economy.

XXXI

"Along with the swamp, the cow. A holy couple."

How holy and how vital was borne on me when I met Catalina's com-
panion, Ariel, when I was sitting with the recently fired village nurse, six months pregnant.

It had been almost a year since I last saw her and we were talking shop, me being an (X)medical doctor, and all. She was with her boyfriend. He was in the medical business too. He came from another town far away with a magical box—I don’t know what else to call it—which looked like a portable, old-fashioned radio with dials and knobs that fit right into the gypsies’ repertoire of tricks brought every year to Macondo such as ice and magnets and alchemy.
Her boyfriend would leaflet villages, then return a week later with his magic box and for a modest fee proceed to check people out for illness, turning the dials and reading the blinking lights and numbers while my friend, the nurse, would take their blood pressure.

As he described this to me, I became aware of a grotesque tree towering in their yard, the limbs of which had been cruelly amputated for fence posts. Perhaps it was this affront to life (although they assured me the tree would be just fine), perhaps it was the aesthetic of the form, but whatever the reason, I was uncomfortable. But why? Only a tree for Chrissake! And what did I mean—Why did I say—cruel?

Later I realized it was a Ceiba tree, the “king” of the forest, the tree that an anthropologist told me the Secoya Indians of Ecuador understand as the most spiritually potent of all trees and from which at dawn and dusk come spirits wearing hats.68 (Is that why my drawing resembled a person, albeit hatless?)

It was late afternoon and the conversation turned to different medical specialties in the village. We talked of the two midwives, one of whom is her mother, and also of the spiritual or magical healers who cure Evil Eye. The conversation then turned to the art of the sobador who sets bones and deals with dislocations and sprains, an art with which I have had no direct experience but have always understood from the way it is talked about to be an unfathomable mix of the empirical and the mystical. The name itself seemed weird enough.

At that moment along the sandy path by their one-room home came a man in a bright yellow hat, unusual for this region of Colombia. He walked as if on springs. It was dusk, the time those tree spirits I just talked about emerge with their strange hats.

This was Ariel, who grasped my hand fervently as the nurse, elated by the coincidence, exclaimed that Ariel was a great sobador!

68. See section XLI below.
In my notes I find written: sixty years old, a strange guy, looks and mannerisms very vital, a D. H. Lawrence figure radiating animal energy; swift athletic movements; wild, wild, eyes. Turns out he is one of the two cattle slaughterers in the village, a position he inherited from his father whom he started to assist at the age of seven. He made a point of adding that they worked by the light of a petroleum lantern at night.

I recalled Roger Caillois’s essay, “The Sociology of the Executioner,” written for the Sacred Sociology Project of the Collège de Sociologie in Paris in 1939. In it Caillois emphasizes the hereditary nature of the state executioner’s position in France at that time as well as the folklore uniting the executioner to the king, not unlike the nexus binding swamp and state. And here was Ariel, light of step, executioner of cattle fattened on the king’s (I mean state’s) grasses, emphasizing the dimly lit character of his profession.

In a half-crouching position he massaged his arms briskly, as much a ballet-like demonstration of athletic grace as a functional exercise, explaining that his arms and shoulders are becoming increasingly painful because he has to plunge again and again into the still warm open chest cavity of a cow when he has killed it and begins to break it apart.

This very language of mine or of his makes me wince. It was painful to envisage this architecture of immersion in the still warm—nay, hot—rotundity of what moments before had been a life-endowed wonder with eyes like church windows and ears like church bells.

It was like looking at the amputated tree.

I had no idea of what he meant other than my half-formed image of a scantily clad man at night crawling into a bloody morass and becoming a man-cow. Only this cow was dead or almost dead with hot blood issuing from its body, eyes glistening on their way to opacity.

The cruelly amputated tree and the man-cow weighed on me.

The tree had become human or least something that could feel like a human or an animal, thanks to its disfigurement. Didn’t I say that the
tree was cruelly disfigured. Didn’t I feel that cruelty as if it was my own body that had been amputated? As with sacrifice, I identified with the victim.69 How could I ascribe feelings to a tree? I was anthropomorphizing, instinctually and unthinkingly. I was empathizing. I had become a cannibal metaphysician! I was locked in a mimetic, contagious unity with an amputated tree. I needed no ecologist ranting about the unities of nature and wonders of species diversity. Nor did I need European romantics, no Wordsworth, no Novalis, not even maestro William Blake and his angelic drawings nor Martin Heidegger with his gaze fixed on the thingness of things aglow in their thingness, for while they dwelt with the perfection and symmetry of nature unadorned by the cruelty of man, I was face to face with wounded nature rearing way high, the village’s Eiffel Tower or Tatlin’s monument to the future torn apart for... fence posts.

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,  
In the forests of the night;  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry

But note even here the “amputation,” the asymmetry within the symmetry of the poetry, with “eye” rhyming yet not rhyming with “symmetry.”

Then there was the image of Ariel (and who can read this without thinking of The Tempest, “where the bee sucks, there suck I”), of Ariel becoming a man-cow by crawling into the still warm body of the cow lying spread-eagled on its back. It is the act of killing and then dismemberment, involving his crawling into the carcass that ensures this “awakening” of the animal in the man as the animal comes alive through death in new ways as he massages his painful arms and shoulders. Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost.

Crucial to me here is that the empathy with nature and the personification of nature comes about not because of symmetries and perfection

of nature’s plan but because of the opposite; because of human destruc-
tion and of the domination of nature. And this is why nature speaks,
why nature becomes human. It is here that Barthes’s resurrection of the
ancient Greek idea of trees as alphabets and Heine’s conceit of the hem-
lock tree and the palm tree gain traction. Did I say “resurrection”?

Several consequences are worth mentioning. First that nature, in this
case the tree, is given a voice. It becomes part of a conversation as its
disfiguration passes through my body causing a chill, even a nausea and
a sense of instability vis a vis the things of the world.

Second, this holds out hope for the future in that by such a morbid
and roundabout route, nature is not seen as the dead, soulless object
of European modernity but as something roused into life through the
wounds and war conducted against it. Like the swamp, death, or more
specifically disfiguration, makes it alive and more than alive churning
with vitality.

Third, check out the drawing of the tree again. Is it not the asymmetry,
is it not the rupture of structure and wholeness that boosts the myth-
ological power that winds through my body, your body, and the body
of the world? The “cannibal metaphysics” that sees the things of this
world, especially plants and animals, as human, is here awakened by the
wound, just as the shaman is aroused by the sorcery of a rival creating
disease and misfortune. Would God exist if there was no devil?

XXXIII

Is this why my writing on African palm plantations becomes an ani-
mating exercise in which objects become subjects, animation leaks into
animalization, and animals and swamp-life become different registers
of the same life force? Indeed, all manner of hybrid forms rise to the
surface because of the wound, meaning the violence of the paramil-
itaries, the (X)paramilitaries, and the amputations and assymetries
intrinsic to plantation mono-cropping.

Let me take this one step at a time.
Paradoxical as it might seem, disfigurement adds life and may even humanize what it disfigures. I relate to the amputated tree as if it was human. I feel it as wounded and I enter into its being as if it were a person. And when I draw the tree (and drawing has affinities with writing, does it not?) you can see how absurdly human it has become. It is a bewildering and off-putting picture. Indeed (and this is crucial) the wounded tree has become more human than human, what we call “superhuman” same as “supernatural.” Thus do “cannibal metaphysics,” which understand animals and plants as “human,” become relevant to the age of agribusiness.

Disfigurement adds to life-energy, but with a perverse twist, animating that which it destroys, spreading connectivities alongside death and amputation, including, of course, writing about this and hence the writer’s words, these “animals” escaped from the cage. After all, Burroughs and Gysin called it a cut up method, meaning a disfiguring method.

This last point cannot be emphasized enough.

This is why animals keep running through this text before you, not by design but by caprice, and why Heidegger waits in close watch for those evanescent moments when, thanks to the art of the work of art things jump out at you, unconcealing, he called it. James Joyce called this sudden arousal of the sacred in everyday life an epiphany. Michel Leiris drew on his childhood memories so as to explore these secular-sacred things and moments, most notable of which was speech that misheard or played with adult words, similar to the way Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre emphasize in their autobiographies the way, when children, words seemed intrinsic to and animated by what they referred to.70 What jumps out at me as I write this is Ariel, the cow, and the man-cow with eyes like church windows and ears like church bells.

Ariel still kills at night. It is quiet and cool in front of his house on the sandy street by the inky river. The cow is stark white against the black night, illuminated by a jerry-rigged lamp. The cow is gaunt, ribs flaring; overall pathetic, tied to a massive tree on the bank all day, dark eyes anxious. Ariel has searched all day with his sons chasing this cow out by the swamp. It is hard for him, he says, to raise the money to buy a cow. There are days he can’t slaughter because of his lack of cash.

As they slaughter they hang the meat on hooks piece by piece as they are cut off the carcass: a back leg, a front leg, a rump.... Then Ariel lies swinging in his hammock by the side of the hanging meat and waits till dawn when the first customer comes.

Why at night? I wondered.

To give the meat a chance to desanguinate, he says. And the coolness. I think to myself, but there is more going on.

The mystique was overwhelming. Night seemed the only possible time, the time of the “negative sacred” when untoward acts are permitted and the sons of slaughterers now slaughterers in their own right roll up their sleeves and get to work together with their own sons by the river at the end of the village where the forest begins.

Ariel invited the nurse, her boyfriend, and me, to watch next evening.

He introduced his thirty-year-old companion, Catalina. Mother of his seven children, she introduced herself proudly as his “foster child,” a witticism playing on the fact that they had been a couple since she was thirteen. She had put on a bit of weight since then, I gathered, and had nasty varicose veins on one leg that had ulcerated. Her smile was enchanting. Like doña Edit she was not just full of life but boisterously so.

“He has seven children,” she paused for dramatic effect, “and seven more in the street.” Her smile was beatific.
Ariel explained how much he liked sex and went on, at my asking, to explain how he became a sobador.

He can barely read or write, he said, and learns everything “en la practica,” like slaughtering cattle with his father. But like animal slaughtering, “la practica” relevant to setting bones, so it seemed to me, was also of a special order. Born and raised in the village, he had spent nineteen years in Venezuela and to my ear he certainly had a Venezuelan accent and mannerisms. There he was given a book of magic by a friend with spells and rites such as the one where you split a black hen in half at midnight. He learned some of the prayers and shortly thereafter a young fellow with a dislocated ankle approached for help. Ariel massaged the ankle while repeating one of the prayers and, lo and behold, it worked!

Now it is midnight. I could barely see him crouched under a heavy bench sharpening his knives. Why under the bench? The man was underground, barely emergent, a gnome, a dwarf bent double, strong shoulders erupting from the earth in chthonic splendor, sharpening steel.

I asked how much the cow weighed. Twelve arrobas, he told me, three hundred pounds.
Why my question? Is it not absurd?

Is this question meant to “reify” the animal, meaning make it into a thing before it actually becomes a thing, meaning dead meat? Casting it in avoirdupois is already a form of killing, a pathetic attempt to forestall the blood and guts of slaughter.

A strongly built assistant prowled around with a sledgehammer. Four skinny dogs came out of nowhere, and several skinny teenage sons were at the ready. It is a multi-person, multi-species job.

Eyes wide in panic, the cow seemed to know it was about to be attacked. It stood strapped to the tree trunk peeing, its front legs braced in resistance. The assistant lunged, trying to hit the forehead with the sledgehammer but missed. The dogs ran in circles. A small boy got a lasso on the cow and made it extra secure. Next time the man with the sledgehammer connected. The cow crumpled.

Everything thereafter happened fast. There was a lot of teamwork with a lot of precision and high focus, especially when skinning the cow, which was the first thing to be done after Ariel had punctured a major blood vessel in the neck and let the blood flow into a gourd, leaning on the body to squeeze out more blood as the dogs fought one another to get to the wound and lick the blood.

Ariel was a different person. No more wisecracks. No gestures. Compacted concentration. Demonic intensity.

The carcass was spread-eagled, laid out on its back with its legs in the air.

Two of the sons, aged around ten, carefully cut off the teats after milking the pathetic amount of milk therein. Gnomes, they were, flitting through the half-light down by the cow’s underbelly with their sharp little knives.

One of the sons, fifteen-year-old Jesus David, is a mechanical genius. He left school to tinker with machinery, makes fans from old washing machines and also makes outboard motors from weed whackers. His
dream is to make a mini-racing car that can get to 120 kms/hour using the motor of a power-saw. Catalina tells me he learns it all from the internet (God knows where). He built the solar-powered electrified fence around the new plantings of the villagers' association to help ward off the (X)paramilitaries.

While the skin was cut off with great care so as to avoid any cuts or tears, the dogs were busy licking the inner side.

Most terrible I thought was watching the legs get cut off at the knee. “For mondongo,” Ariel said.

I also recall the blue ballooning, a misty almost translucent tentlike ballooning emerging from the abdomen casting its blueness over the shadows and streams of blood.

From start to finish it was only an hour.

Ariel set aside a prize steak of lomo biche for me for breakfast. When I arrived next morning Catalina was busy over a huge wood fire with a
stout elderly women with a crutch boiling the intestines and forelegs and who knows what else, making *mondongo* for sale. The blackened aluminum pots seemed alive, bubbling furiously with a creamy white liquid of fats and shards of meat and bone. The sun rose. It seemed like it would be a long job. The old woman with big hips and gray-white hair was stooped over with a knife cleaning the *panza*, which I took to be the omentum, that bluish ballooning “tent” that had caught my eye the night before.

Like the blue ballooning, this white creamy bubbling-over made a deep impression on me, as did the dogs greedily licking up the blood that poured from the stab wound in the neck when the slaughter began.

For all their practicality and efficiency, both the actual slaughter and the cooking of the *mondongo* struck me, the newcomer and outsider, as permeated by sacred force yet it is the mix that is so interesting and significant, the mix of the sacred and profane, the sacrificial and the commercial that I assume would be a lot less evident in a modern slaughterhouse.

Killing grounded me.

As is often the case, food and cooking consist of a bounty of gendered contrasts. While the men kill the animal and do so under the magic mantle of night with the steaming heat of the freshly killed animal, it is the women who cook and do so in broad daylight by the heat of the fire. They cook the beast’s insides: its organs, intestines, legs, and hooves, and they do so under a rising sun to produce a thick creamy substance that bubbles over the black pots onto the ground. It is as if they, the women, are playing with an alchemical force of fire combined with the inner and “impure” elements of life—notably the intestines—so as to create more life, which is to say a life out of death and a life-in-death.

All over Colombia it has been the women, never men, who sell the intestines in the marketplaces. They are called *triperas* and occupy a section in the market apart from the men. I always thought of them as a tribe of their own, with their long knives and leathery smiles. Smeared with grease in their everyday clothes they seemed polluted, while the leering
butchers dressed in blood-stained whites were the epitome of masculine confidence.

Now I think this feeling of mine about the *triperas* had a lot to do with their proximity to both birth and death, to the “insidedness” as of life-in-death, the impure (of the intestines), and the yellow-white ambrosia of the *mondongo* bubbling foam over the edges of those big black pots.

One other contrast: My first image concerning Ariel was his complaining of chronic pain in his arms and shoulders. He said it was an illness caused by his mixing hot and cold when entering into the body of the beast spread-eagled on the ground with its chest cavity open like a sorcerer’s cave. Here we have a man oozing vitality, like the swamps, but also a victim of those insides that will soon be alchemically worked upon by the women to make *mondongo* which, like the swamp, brims with life.71

XXXV

One month later in a palm oil plantation in Malaysia with the artist Simryn Gil I witnessed another white creamy bubbling over as third-generation Tamil laborers from South Asia performed a harvest festival which here is called *Pongal*, literally meaning “the overflowing” (back to Bataille and the flood, once again).72

It had nothing whatsoever to do with the palm trees but everything to do with their displaced selves and with life celebrated as harvest.

In this case the bubbling over effusion was not *mondongo* but a thick whiteness of milk and rice, coconut sugar and ghee. It bubbled over onto the red flames below to be soaked up by the earth.

What I am getting at here is a semiotics and anti-semiotics, by which

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72. I am indebted to anthropology Professor Valentine Daniel, a native Tamil speaker, for advising me here on terminology, terms of reference, and the implications for semiotic theory.
highfalutin jargon I wish to pay homage to both the intricate, baroque symbolism of the shrine, together with the life-gushing force of the thick creamy whiteness bubbling over into the fire below.

For me the most fascinating feature of this conflation and collision of life-gushing force with intricate symbolizations concerns the core of the shrine—namely, the enormous tree at the rear which, so speak, props up the entire shrine, not just physically but spiritually. The name of the tree in Tamil is *Arasamaram* (the “king of trees” also known as the sacred fig tree through much of Southeast Asia and South Asia). This tree, I was told, is the spirit “informing” the shrine which I later learned from Professor Daniel is the spirit of emotional excess, heightened joy which opens a door to the world of illusion and wisdom. This species of tree is also what the Buddha sat under and obtained (unrepresentable) enlightenment.

Likewise the “informing” spirit of the tree seems to me to be something that is not and cannot be symbolized by manmade representations. Yet it is a presence that emanates from the tree and hangs over everything.

As if to ram this home, the rest of the shrine exudes a plethora of symbols, an overflowing abundance of animals and lesser gods. This representational frenzy seems to me to assure the non-representable power of the spirit that is the tree.

In front of the tree and dead center stands a life-sized statue of a male warrior with a sword. His name is Munandi—“a lesser god” I am told—and people also tell me he is a “mannequin” or “doll,” as if to emphasize his function as a “placeholder” for the very idea and work of representability. He is a sentinel that watches over the community of villagers and, so it seems to me, by the same token, watches over the limits of representation.

To one side of the warrior-mannequin is a painting of a dog and on his other side a painting of a horse.

Separated by four lotus flowers are two large sculptures of white kneeling cows—Oh! My!—so gentle, one to the right, the other on the left.
In front of them a sculpture of a horse, to one side, and a dog, on the other.

The ritualist is a middle-aged woman, a grandmother, with flowers in her long black hair. Her movements are quick and deliberate as she arranges the fire and puts the pot on bricks, each one of which is carefully painted with vertical stripes and a central red dot. The shrine belongs to the one extended family. There were about twenty adults and an equal number of children.
As the milk mix starts to heave and bubble, the children, playing in the shrine, are exhorted to yell in unison as if to encourage it to boil over onto the fire. Professor Daniel tells me that the cry is “Pongoloi, pongoloi,” meaning “Overflow, oh please!”

After the gods were served, we each received a portion on a banana leaf. It was as if our eating, our consuming, our internalization, of the life force was meant to commune with the spirit of the mighty tree.

And all around as far as the eye can see are countless oil palm seedlings, light green, about two feet high, little spears catching the light.

But I was assured that there is no palm spirit. A preposterous idea.

XXXVI

I am left with these questions.

What are the implications of such “tree worship” for ecological sanity (and bear in mind we saw many similar tree shrines in the palm plantation)?

How can I relate to the fact that these oil palm plantation workers in Malaysia, of Tamil origin, practice a harvest, life-bestowing, ritual, not of the oil palm but of a tree sacred to the Buddha?

Why is so much energy spent on the animals (cows, horse, dog) in this “bipolar system” of unrepresentability combined with a frenzy of representation?

What sort of representational logic and illogic is at work when the pot set in front with milk and butter is put to the boil, whooshes over, the kids scream, urging it to boil all the more, and the overflow cascades onto the flames, red and yellow, and thence into the ground?

“Pongoloi, Pongoloi”

“Overflow, oh please”
As regards my account of the slaughter of the cow by Ariel and his sons, I have without any special effort allowed magical atmospheres, events, and things to pass through my account. What we see is a spectrum of magical phenomena: (1) There is a narrowly defined magic as with Ariel’s account of how he became a sobador or healer of sprains and dislocations; (2) there is the strange magical effect of the “amputated” tree amounting to a magic of disfigurement which anthropomorphizes the tree, a trope which for me extends to the monsterlike character of the palm trees of the palm oil plantations subject to the rigor of agribusiness mono-cropping; (3) the diffuse magical atmosphere permeating the slaughter of the cow. This is a strange affair, this slaughter, combining theater-like scenes with the utmost practicality under the cloak of night by the river with the dogs lapping the blood before it soaks into the ground; (4) tightly connected to this is the male/female magic of killing/cooking, and outside/inside, with Ariel’s insertion of his body into the carcass as a mediating element—which he told me about when I first met him in the backyard of the nurse’s house while I was looking at the amputated tree which, in a sense, is what he emerged from with his yellow hat and springy step; and finally (5) there is a magic of abundance and life in the making of the mondongo and also in the Tamil harvest festival in the palm-oil plantation in Malaysia, a ritual which has nothing to do with the palms but with a lost past in South Asia connected to a sense of life’s force that has nothing particularly ethnic about it but is instead premised on the overflow of depense, the flood, as with the children addressing the boiling pot of milk and butter and sugar.

“Pongoloi, pongoloi”
“Overflow, oh please!”

Would it be too much of an overflowing poetic reduction, exaggeration, and simplification to say that the magic behind all these events and diffuse atmospheres is that of global capitalism; that what we see with my rendering of the slaughter of the cow is a too obvious allegory of palm-oil plantations sweeping across the tropical world? If we can say that the Tamil harvest festival is an attempt to restore life to a beleaguered Malaysia (and Indonesia) overrun by palm plantations, then by the same token we can say that the slaughter of the cow is the drama of slaughter-
ing tropical biospheres as well. Doubtless these formulations of mine are forced, histrionic, and fanciful, but then so is global capitalism whereby anonymous forces shrink the world into a paramilitarized nightmare of monstrous creations and violent disembodiments. I am reminded of John Berger’s polemic against globalization in 1999 using the hell section of Hieronymus Bosch’s triptych The Garden of Earthly Delights. What needs emphasizing is the sense of the overflowing abundance of anamorphosis in Bosch’s hell of distorted forms and human, vegetable, and animal hybrids. Is it not this hell or rather the whole triptych that underlies the animal-plant nexus of my serpentine text?

XXXVII

An unnerving moment in One Hundred Years of Solitude is the massacre of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of workers on strike in the United Fruit banana plantations on the Caribbean coast in 1928. Yet with the exception of one witness, the massacre passes into oblivion. The bodies disappear as if by magic, the ultimate act of magical realism.

The one eyewitness with whom we readers have contact finds himself at night on a banana freight train speeding through a sudden deluge of rain toward the sea. The train is full of corpses and the author makes the parallel between these corpses and bananas clear. Our dazed eyewitness crawls to the front car, jumps off, and the longest train he has ever seen rattles past. It is a dark streak running through the night with the shadows of soldiers and machine gun fixtures on top.

It rains and rains. It rains for four years, eleven months, and two days. Nobody understands our witness when he asks about the dead. Nobody has seen this ghost train running through the swamps. “You must be dreaming,” they say. He retires to his room and will not bathe because he did not want the vision of the train leaving the village loaded with dead people on its way to the sea to recur.

How are we to interpret this, given that perhaps as many as three thou-

sand people were killed by Colombian troops opening fire on children, women, and men, gathered after the Catholic mass to hear the governor of the state?

The army had sharpshooters on the roofs and closed off the square. US marines stood aboard ship close offshore. Labeled as “communists” the strikers wanted to be paid in regular money, not company scrip, one day off a week, written contracts, and decent housing.

I say perhaps as many as three thousand were killed, but there are figures as low as nine. What does this discrepancy tell us about the society back then and now when such variation in numbers is not uncommon? Is it not the case that such hallucinatory uncertainty (with the numbers expressed with hallucinatory certainty) reflects a world in which truth, like justice, is forever hostage and, what is more, everyone knows that? Is that the basis of “magical realism” and, perhaps more to the point, is this the motive for writing magical realism, fighting fire with fire, so to speak, parallel to my idea of apotropaic writing using magic to challenge the concealed magic of agribusiness writing?

And how does this compare with the situation today, not with banana plantations owned a century ago and managed by El Pulpo, but with today’s African palm plantations owned and managed by Colombian entrepeneurs? The violence now is a good deal worse than the massacre of the bananeras.

Worse? What is worse? How do you measure such things?

One feature that makes it worse, I think, is that it is today’s normal and, as in One Hundred Years of Solitude, the violence disappears into indifference. It is not the peasants who forget, but the larger society. It’s all a blur, nowadays. The language and image stock seem exhausted despite government-funded academics documenting the worst atrocities and gathering people affected to talk about them. Indeed “historical memory” has become an official, even a bureaucratic, industry in itself, more

74. See Winifred Tate, Counting the Dead: The Culture and Politics of Human Rights Activism in Colombia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
often than not isolating itself from the more visceral emotions, obscuring memory in a sea of clichés or bloodless statistics like a police report.

Which is why the “cuerpos gramaticales” of the AgroArte group of rappers, graffiti artists, and performers from the slums of Medellín make such an impact and are so relevant to my concern with African palm, seeing as how AgroArte breaks with predictable forms of remembrance to implicate an agriculture averse to agribusiness, that same agribusiness that sent their parents fleeing to the city from the countryside years before. What they do is plant seeds everywhere in La Comuna 13 of Medellín by the sides of streets, in vacant lots and parks and cemeteries, seeds that grow down into the soil so as to connect with the people assassinated by the army and paramilitaries in the infamous Operación Orión of 2002.

A memory: Last time I visited Santa Marta, famous for its exotic Indians, mountains, Joseph Conrad’s Nostromo, and its once beautiful bay, I met a wealthy woman living in one of the houses the pulpo had built for its US managers in the early twentieth century. They certainly were different, those houses, starting with the mosquito screens you never see elsewhere in Colombia. The houses formed a colony with a Norman Rockwell look to it. She told me a story—that the wealthy there used to dance with fistfuls of flaming US dollars.

XXXVIII

In the plane from NYC to Bogotá in early December 2015 I overhear a middle-aged US woman with the demeanor and dress of a business executive asking the Colombian man next to her in English, “But things are much better now? Colombia has changed? It’s safe now?”

But this common perception, edged with anxiety, is not shared by the young anthropology students from well-to-do families with whom I spoke in Bogotá a little later, even though they seem to know little of the wars going on in rural Colombia. That is another reality altogether. Yet they tell me how their anthropology department is about to prohibit fieldwork by undergraduates as too dangerous no matter where it is done, rural or urban; that there are networks of students and outsid-
ers providing exam-cheating services for a fee; that some students are
suing the university for poor grades; and that one woman professor was
recently freaked out by a soldier sitting in her class with his hand on
what seemed like a concealed gun, so she cancels class but is accosted
by the soldier in the corridor telling her she has to improve the grade
she gave to a particular student (who is one of the lower-class students
to whom this elite, private, university has recently opened its doors).
Anonymous right-wing students in the country’s most expensive pri-

date university use social media to humiliate a woman on the faculty:
“What would you rather eat? Pizza or professor X?” Her photograph is
included. She retaliates with a gutsy email. They post more offensive
challenges. She is fired for causing a disturbance. Some students tell me
it’s her own fault. So the war is not so far away after all—and this is the
improved Colombia, not like the bad old days 1990–2010. Has one form
of (X)violence taken the place of another? Is there an active archaeology
of violence resonating through historical layers? The violence is every-
where even if it doesn’t carry a chainsaw.

XXXIX

Green liquid fills the gutter. A pig wallows. A stench hangs over the
street baking in the sun. Welcome to El Regidor, an African palm town
on the Magdalena River, the other side of the island. It does not look
much like the photographs of smiling children and happy palm work-
ers that the National Association of Palm Growers puts out in lavish

color.75

Googling the town in May 2015, I find it is described by Wikipedia in
two lines as a center of African palm production which has displaced
subsistence farmers. Not even two lines. Simply a fact to contemplate
as the imminent future awaiting our village on the Brazuelo de Papayal,
the other side of the island.

Yet I am comforted by these two lines for they tell of an uncomfortable
fact that is usually forgotten or actively repressed by agribusiness and
city slickers. On the other hand, perhaps these facts are no longer un-

75. Palma de aceite colombiana (Bogotá: Villegas Editores, 2013).
comfortable and the word “displacement” is simply a neutral word like in a physics experiment?

El Regidor is where African palm started on the island in 2004. It is the ur-village, we might say. In going there I am traveling back in time into the future surrounded on three sides by palm, the fourth by the mighty river glinting in the sun making you squint.

It was appalling. Burning heat joined to hopelessness, sadness, decay. Rusty oil barges float on the river on their way to the refineries at Barrancabermeja (an oil town famous for its left-wing trade unions and massacres by paramilitaries; the name Barrancabermeja is picturesque and means purple bluff). Ten thousand people live here in El Regidor. A factory for processing African palm nuts lies on the outskirts of town with but a handful of workers. None of the men I talked with (family of Efraín’s) had work or land. “Making do” was the economy; rebusque they call it. Some had a head or two of cattle let loose along the roadway, a few had a moto-taxi, others probably cadged off a schoolteacher relative or a daughter working as a servant in the cities.

No tiene tierra, la gente
La empresa compró todo
No tiene
Unicamente el patio

No land. The people have no land
The company bought it all
The people have nothing
Just the patio

I had seen it all before, in 1969, to be exact. This wreckage. These green sewers running by the side of the street. But without pigs. That was in the flatlands of southwestern Colombia when the sugarcane plantations arrived and the peasants sold out.

But at least there, in those northern Cauca flatlands inhabited by people of African ancestry with very little miscegenation (unlike northern Colombia), and only an hour from a city, there was music and a dense
cultural life of enormous energy while here in El Regidor all is silent as the grave in this oven with palm on three sides, the glinting river on the other.

I am sitting under a black plastic awning on the side of the street with four men pleased to have a visitor. They have fierce black moustaches, emblems of vitality in a dead world. A woman comes to buy cooking oil. Philomena pours a small quantity into a Pony Malta bottle. I ask if I can look at the oil. _De palma_, it says. Palm oil.

I thought of the houses in the village on the other side of the island from which I had come, painted in gay vertical stripes with shade trees overhead. Would it, too, fall into this abyss?

I thought of Efraín with whose relatives I was speaking in El Regidor, I thought of him full of energy and curiosity writing most every day away there on the frontline in the center of the island on his little patch of beans and forest as his daughter pounds the clothes by the well.

When I got back to the village, darkness was falling, the mosquitoes were swarming, but who cares! After El Regidor it was paradise. I clambered down the bank into the shallow river and tried to swim against the current but couldn’t make headway, watching the kids leaping and diving under soft pink clouds.

XL

(Some literary archaeology.) Like El Dorado, the legendary Golden Man, African palm has been around a while in South America, longer than I realized. With African palm we come face to face with El Dorado redux as William Burroughs discovered in 1953.76

Writing Allen Ginsberg from Lima he describes an encounter in the jungle riverine port of Pucallpa with a naval lieutenant, a furniture salesman, and an old German “who is planting African oil palm. This

76 Many thanks to Cyd Hedgpeth for this reference.
is a new business and everyone thinks they are going to get rich at it. I don’t think so. Everything fails in this country.”

Before getting into oil palm the old German had an interminable story about a hidden treasure of forty tons of gold, the whereabouts of which was revealed to him by a person he cured of “paralysis agitans.” He eventually found the gold but all the people he was with died and there was no way he could get at it. When not thinking about planting oil palm he now spent his days typing out documents concerning this alleged treasure. Burroughs concluded he was “a little touched like everybody in this country.”

Reminiscent of Céline’s ship companions on a tramp steamer bound for the French colonies in Africa just after WWI, the white man in Pucallpa was “disintegrating into his component parts.” The naval lieutenant disintegrated into a silly queer, goosing the waiter, and the furniture salesman wanted to get into the cocaine business and get rich so he could live in Lima and drive a fishtailed Cadillac. “Oh God,” sighed Burroughs, don’t these people realize that business, “shady or legitimate, is the same fucking headache.”

I like this letter because it conveys a sense of the myths gripping people caught up in the colonial fantasies of frontier exploitation. Even though the “old German” of 1953 is hardly typical of the modern palm companies in Colombia, symbolically he strikes a nerve that goes deep into the Spanish conquest and the gangster ethos present in today’s palm oil corporations in northern Colombia.

Do oil palm trees have spirit-masters? Seventeen years ago the anthropologist Stine Krøijer lived with some Secoya Indians on the Ecuadorian–Colombian border. Influenced by evangelical SIL mission-
aries and a troubled history of displacement, the group with whom she lived clear-cut their reserve of forest and planted oil palm trees in plantation format. How would this affect the spirits? The shaman was unsure.

The shaman’s perplexity gives me pause. Is it the palm tree per se or the plantation thereof? Is it the newness of the tree species that creates the dilemma? Do tree spirits change when the tree is no longer in a primary forest situation surrounded by different sorts of trees? Do all species of trees have spirits like the sacred fig tree in the Pongal ceremony with the kids leaping and chanting their exhortation: “Overflow, overflow”? Most intriguing is whether the entire tree is spiritualized, so to speak, or merely provides the woody home for a humanlike spirit the same as a squirrel may make its nest in a tree to store acorns? I am as puzzled as the shaman.

I recall Salvador Moreno, the Cofán shaman on the Guyamuéz River in the same general area as the Secoya, telling me in the 1970s that he was puzzled by cattle, a newcomer to the rainforest. Did they have a spirit-owner like other animals such as jaguars and boa constrictors with whom he could on special occasions communicate? He was unsure. I recall him saying we humans are the owners, implying spirit-owner of cattle, because we decide when they will die, just as God is our owner because he decides when we die.

But with *palma africana* on the Island of the Papaya Grove, is it not the other way around? Is it not the *palma* which decides when the peasants shall die? Does this mean that far from disenchanting the forest, *palma africana actually re-enchants the forest* and does so with what I call the metamorphic, anamorphic, sublime? (See sections LI and LXXXIII.)

What would the poet Heine have made of the man sitting in the doorway onto the street with an IV drip in his arm in that afternoon heat?

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Suspended above his head, the IV bottle was half full of a yellow liquid, Vitamin B complex, the nurse said, because there’s a rash on his chest and because of chiconguña. A strange name from nowhere, spelling yet to be standardized, which seems appropriate for this mysterious new form of dengue that’s gotten city people terrified.

Chee-con-goon-ya is how I heard it the previous week in the hysteria of the capital city which had long run out of mosquito repellent despite the fact there are no mosquitoes up there in Bogotá at eight thousand feet. Not that that mattered here on the Brazuelo de Papayal because the locals never use repellent even though the mosquitoes are so mean they bite through your clothing. The nurse, always upbeat and optimistic, says the worst of the chiconguña is over.
I read later that this variety of dengue fever gets its name from an African language. It means “to become contorted,” and is spelled Chikungunya. The taxi driver in the city told a friend that it hurts the joints of your hand so much you can’t even push the buttons on the remote for the TV. Such is the beginning of the apocalypse, dying on your couch unable to change channels.

Both in English and in Spanish, names of illnesses seem bland by comparison. Their metaphoric origins have long been lost to sight, biopowered into gobbledygook oblivion without somatic signification. Acronyms abound—for example, AIDS—perhaps as part of the general push these days to euphemize if not bureaucratize death and disease.

But then there’s the Other, the Global Other, we hear so much about we can’t keep up. It’s not just that Swiss girls bearing the cross of Peace and tubby French Canadian Christians come through every few weeks or months, and not just that the British government bestows peace awards on the villagers, but now exotic diseases make their way here as well, all the way from Africa, like the palm.

No less strange than the name of this epidemic was the tranquil look on the face of the man with the IV drip glowing with the beatitude of a martyred saint. He was sitting there speechless on the street like he was on display without moving for at least half an hour. I felt it was his one moment in life to be a spectacle, framed so beautifully like that, smiling like that.

The nurse tells me that 80 percent of the kids here are malnourished when measured on the standard weight for age scales. But to me they seem nothing like the malnourished kids I saw in the sugar plantations of southwestern Colombia in the 1970s with their protruding stomachs, reddish hair, and edematous feet. She is on her own up here: no doctor, just her bare three-room “clinic” and loads of gumption. The village also has two rezanderas. With their spells these two women treat even the parrot and flowers suffering from Evil Eye.
When I read what I have just written here I am shocked by the image of those malnourished kids, by the sugar plantations, yet how quickly I got used to that situation and even more important how resigned the parents were. Resignation is not quite the word. It was normal or should I say “normal.” That is a cliché, one you can’t get your head around; the apparently infinite capacity for tolerating the intolerable on the part of the parent, the kids, and the anthropologist.

The nurse emanated confidence and was, I believe, very effective. Once at midnight when I was there she made a lightning-fast dash at midnight with a woman in obstructed labor to the town of El Banco downriver, three hours if you push it. Must have been quite a trip in that inky darkness. Then there was the man writhing with a twisted testicle. She kept a sharp eye on him and was about to ship him out too. Nothing fazed her, not even my rejection of the fried iguana eggs she offered me as a treat.

When I first met her, like the schoolteachers, she was part of the local “aristocracy” with a fixed salary and a crucial skill. She then lived without a partner with her parents and teenage son and had a flock of sheep that, like the donkeys, seem to know exactly where to go and when. And I thought donkeys and sheep were stupid.

We first spoke outside the clinic on the sandy street where she was having a manicure dipping her feet in an orange plastic bowl with a bunch of kids watching. The manicurist offered to do my nails too, which I accepted. My first manicure ever, there in el Sur de Bolívar!

Every afternoon I would see her with three pals, like herself, middle-aged women better off than most, walking for exercise along the river when the sun was going down just before the mosquitoes came. No other women would exercise; most women had enough exercise with their household work and grew strong and solid from that until they passed a critical age when, as with doña Edit, the body betrays you, asymmetry sets in, and the pain of arthritis consumes your vitality.

The nurse had a small amount of mosquito repellent for sale but nobody bought it, either because they were too poor to buy what would
be considered a luxury or because they preferred their own solution swatting mosquitoes with a towel. For hours! Imagine the gallons of repellent one would use on one’s body over a lifetime!

On the other hand, people clamored for injections of vitamins and antibiotics. For sure injections are sought throughout Colombia but not as popular as what I experienced here. Doña Edit has arthritis of the hip and drags her leg something awful, so she sought relief with shots of vitamins along with injections of lidocaine in the hip area which the nurse would charge for. The nurse would herself take antibiotics at the first sign of a sore throat, which was a common complaint in the dust of the dry season.

I couldn’t help feeling that the injections were as much a ritual as pharmacologically justified. Probably more so, perhaps another response to what Cheli, true to form, melodramatically called la guerra sicológica.

As a newcomer I was mesmerized by the whacking rituals of the early evening which seemed more pronounced when people were in groups than when alone. You talk. You listen. You nod assent. Stare at nothing. Whatever. And all the time whack yourself with an old shirt or towel. Was it a form of language itself with its modulations of aggression and irritation, its music and special drumlike rhythms, assents, and denials? It was easy to imagine so, especially with the Christian from Canada who passed through, hail fellow well met, expert on any and everything, on his way to do good. My! How he would whack! A real flagellant. It was scary to see the venom in those whacks.

Speaking of stress-reducing aids, nobody smoked and I never saw anyone drink alcohol either.

In horror-town El Regidor on the other side of the island, I mentioned to a woman tending a store how few people smoked. “Ah, but those suizos,” she said, “they buy many packets of cigarettes when they pass through; the expensive ones at that, Belmont!” She was referring to the Swiss Human Rights personnel coming through to our village on the Brazuelo de Papayal.
Correction re liquor: The village is some two-thirds evangelical and that alone would cut down on liquor, cigarettes, music, dancing, and Christmas decorations. Yes! Even Christmas decorations! Does the strength of this religion lie in its denial of the flesh? (An obvious question.) A religion of Taboo like all other religions in this regard but more so, with chanting, swaying, and trancelike states, clapping hands, etc., as the equivalent to the catharsis of the Catholic Confession. By and large there seemed to me a pall hanging over the entire village making it a pretty dull place with many long faces, especially of the women midday and afternoons staring vacantly into space, bored out of their minds, it seems, and sad to boot. But the evangelical temples are huge, the equivalent of Egyptian pyramids in relation to the village, dwarfing everything; and the clapping and chanting at nights within them can be thunderous. The evangelicals seem assiduously apolitical if not reactionary, and largely side with the palm plantations. Karl Marx comes to mind concerning religion as the opiate of the people. Yessir. Forgive me if I think of these temples as palm plantations not of the land but of the soul.

But as I think some more about the oppression, its internal psychic powers as much as its external force, I realize that this salve, in its fury and tempestuousness, in its madness and Bataillian extremity of physical, bodily, upheaval, offers far more than Catholicism and living “normally.” I am thinking especially of the combination of terror, secrecy, and silence, how that works inside you, bearing in mind that the onus for social control in the village is one’s persona.

The nurse’s brother is a fervent evangelical. He joined, she tells me, out of a feeling of being crushed by sin, which if I recall correctly meant sex and liquor. Of course their being sinful is what makes sex and liquor pleasurable, in the first place. But we must fight that and with God’s help we will win. I can only surmise or suggest on limited knowledge drawn mostly from my years in other parts of Colombia that there is a most marvelous self-reinforcing spin cycle here of becoming excited to the point of quasi-spirit possession not only because of the fervent group chanting and clapping and rocking of the body, but by the images
and thoughts of sin and sinning. The more you choose this means to escape sin, the more it claims you, like a drug, like you are sin’s most dutiful slave and purity—the supposed goal—recedes that much further to be claimed that much more fervently. As for whoring around, Misael, forever the cryptic one, and not evangelical, told me the greatest lechers were the pastors themselves and no doubt this made them doubly put upon to clap and chant with their ever-ready microphone and ear-splitting music cutting through the night air. Their flock is meant to pay 10 percent of income and it is said the pastors have their kids in expensive schools in the US.

All the more astonishing to me was how five days before Christmas I was suddenly grabbed late afternoon by Ariel like a madman hauling me over to a circle of men seated in the middle of the street and, as I quickly learned, astonishingly drunk. One man smothered me and tried to kiss me while another with suspicion written all over his face, pugnaciously asks what I was doing here. I am offered an Aguilar beer. I am pummeled physically and verbally and given no chance to respond. Mute like a statue, a woman with a kid stands pathetically behind one of the men, silently pleading while at the same time protecting him.

I manage to escape, marveling at how crazy these men get when they drink, “unto an animal,” I wrote in my notebook, and then they pass into oblivion as I note with Misael Jr., shirtless, sprawled across the dining room table dead drunk.

“Unto an animal.” What did that mean?

XLV

*In defense of life, honor, property, and free circulation*

The other day in NYC (March 29, 2015, to be exact) I received an email in Spanish from the lawyer Juan Felipe García using the internet connection in the school where the winsome girls congregate in the hot afternoon. This letter made me think of Foucault’s nitty-gritty method, depicting in fine detail (mirroring bureaucratic ordinance, no detail too small) the arts of discipline and punish, with a keen eye for the unstated
presence of ritual and theater. As I said, “no detail too small.” Think of my shell spiral method following the drawing of doña Edit’s home (see XVI).

“Querido Miguel,” was how it began.

“So, it’s a constant struggle, one demanding patience, learning, and stamina. The days melt into one another while all around us dramas are played out concerning control of the area.

I have made a list of what’s happened these past weeks:

On the 6th of March, 2015, Mario and the other members of his security team provided protection to a group of workers from El Varal (in the municipality of San Martin de Loba), traveling to a section of Las Pavas called La Quinta on the banks of the Brazuelo de Papayal. It was there that members of the peasant association, ASOCAB, were clearing land in preparation for planting, but were frightened by the arrival of these men.

On the 8th of March, 2015, another worker for the African palm company called Juvenal came to the village and in front of several people threatened to kill one of the members of ASOCAB.

On the 17th of March, 2015, in the early morning we decided to break the lock of a gate that was impeding the right of free circulation on a public road. Returning in the afternoon after work we found the lock back in place. Members of ASOCAB again forced the lock, and an employee of the African palm company set a tractor on fire and directed it onto the peasants of ASOCAB. Juvenal threatened to kill us.

On the morning of the 19th of March, 2015, two members of ASOCAB set out on the roadway and found the gate again locked. They came across Mario who warned them that anyone daring to go further would be decapitated. They were unable to proceed.

On the morning of the 20th of March, 2015, we returned again to force the lock. In the afternoon in the hacienda Las Pavas, the commander of the national police, Captain John Alejandro Bermudez arrived, saying
he would guarantee the rights of citizens living here, especially the right to life, honor, property, and free circulation.

On the 21st of March, 2015, Mario accosted a member of ASOCAB saying as soon as the police left he would replace the lock and if anyone tried to force it, they would be assassinated and a reinforcement of twelve men was coming to protect the interests of the palm company. Despite this we returned and cut the lock which till now remains open.

On the 24th of March, 2015, Mario and other members of the security group provided cover for workers from El Varal to proceed to where peasants of ASOCAB had been working in a site called “the stream of seven skins.” Four families were staying and working there. Under Mario there are approximately eighty people intending to plant African palm. In the afternoon today we are meeting to plan our response.

As you can see there’s a lot’s going on.

You have to be patient and calm to defend the territory.

“Te envío un fuerte abrazo!!!!”

XLVI

In the thick of events the lawyer presents a detailed snapshot. You can see a lawyerly cast of mind here with careful chronology, dates, names of the main characters, and the courtlike presentation of events such as the cutting of the lock plus threats of assassination and decapitation, all of which is quite consciously framed at the beginning of the email as dramaturgy, suggesting that a crucial aspect of the struggle is ritualized and choreographic. It is somewhat like a game, but it’s not, same as war can be seen as a game (as with much of game theory) and as theater (as in “theaters of battle”), but is not.

There is also a spiritual impulse alongside the dramaturgical. We see this in the “bookends” at the beginning and at the end of the email. This combination of elements—psychological, spiritual, dramaturgical, legal, and cinematic—all bear on the salience of minutiae present in Michel
Foucault’s focus on the micro-physiology of power. But here in the swamps of northern Colombia the “blood” or physical violence element that Foucault relegates to the “premodern” is no less important than the “norms” or “rules of the game” element of discipline that he was at pains to distinguish from the “blood” dimension. Actually we need to add Nietzsche as much as Michel de Certeau here since we are talking of wiliness and creativity born of struggle that exceed norms, which takes us back to Hermes the thief and hermeneutics. Foucault is oblivious to this fundamental element.

XLVII

When we had lunch in Bogotá a month before this email, the lawyer remarked that (X)paramilitary Mario and his security detail usually had a video camera, filmed a lot, and sent the footage to persons they knew in RCN, one of the largest television and radio networks in Colombia, so as to portray the villagers as aggressors. I realized how naive I was, never having thought of video participating in these armed confrontations and threats, but as anyone who accesses YouTube must know, everything is there from ISIS to Mario. (Why bother with fieldwork?) More to the point perhaps is my need to consider the role of the visual image in the virtual disappearance in the media of the paramilitaries and the political and economic forces behind them, while boosting a positive image of the army. It would not be at all surprising if this turns out to have been largely the result of a well-orchestrated public relations campaign, even involving the same titans on Madison Avenue contracted to the armed forces as in the case of the campaign to get FARC fighters to desert.

Regarding provocations, I remembered the refrain I heard in the village never to be violent because that was what the (X)paramilitaries wanted. With a laugh Cheli told me how the (X)paramilitaries would taunt the lawyer in these confrontations, chanting:

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Marijuanero  
Marica  
Chupame  

Dopehead  
Faggot  
Suck my dick

While to the NGO people who came through the village they would chant:

Dopeheads  
Land thieves  
Faggots  
Get Lost

The lawyer even got a farewell chorus along much the same lines as I have described when he left the village for a long period. He laughed when he told me this. The (X)paras danced up and down on the riverbank shouting as his launch floated downstream. I recall the dancing up and down of the killers in their leather outfits and big brimmed leather hats in the 1969 Brazilian film *Antonio das Mortes* directed by Glauber Rocha. Here fairytale and violent struggle over land reform coexist with high-pitched folksong rolling across the stony desert of the *sertao* of the Brazilian northeast. I hear these songs still in my head.

How did they know he was leaving?

XLVIII

This brings me to a strange phenomenon which is the mix of violence and friendliness, or if not exactly friendliness, then restraint and humanity. By this I refer to the death-in-life collation, similar to the swamp, manifested by the (X)paras with these childish taunts reminiscent of the schoolyard, the laughter as well as the fear they provoke, the use of first names by the villagers when referring to the (X)paras, (e.g., Mario), and the kindnesses as well as the counterviolence the villagers can exert.
This was borne strongly upon me when Samuel took me for my last visit to the “ceremonial center” and we walked beyond it to a newly built house by Lozano Creek while Samuel reiterated how the men in what I call the “control tower” in the ceremonial center would make excursions to damage the crops and threaten the villagers belonging to the peasants’ association, ASOCAB.

A few days before, the plantain grove around this new house had been ravaged by the (X)paras, destroying around one hundred trees. That’s a lot of trees. It was a starkly simple house, recently made of wooden planks cut from the forest close by and the two men stationed there, Eduardo Martínez and César Martínez Gil, explained that they worked shifts...
with other villagers, staying a week or two at a time. I could not take my eyes off the chair they had made, as if straight from the NY Museum of Modern Art while they served me smoky coffee in a red plastic mug.

Check out the brush marks on the ground. How clear the ground is through daily sweeping with a broom made of nearby grasses. How finely the chair meets the ground in an elegant balance of angles and forces. Two grains meet; those the broom makes on the ground and those of the grain of the wood of the chair. The fine grooves in the ground are like those on the maker’s face and also of the wood on which the maker rests his right hand. That plank is probably one he cut from the forest close by. The frame of the maker’s body, as photographed,
mirrors the frame of the chair. His face, surely, is history, a definitive stance in history and a physiognomy of such.

XLIX

On the path to the house winding through strands of still remaining secondary forest the bird calls never stopped; some high-pitched and excited, others low and meditative and a little mournful, some fast, other more measured, some close by on top of you, others remote, all at once on and on nonstop. I was immersed in a rolling sea of sound. That was it. I was immanent in immanence and the air was clotted with life. Further along the path I felt a stick hit me and on looking up saw three monkeys way high skipping from branch to branch. Samuel was delighted.

But on entering the palm plantation it all stopped. Nothing stirred. No birds. No monkeys. But there was something stirring there, same as you feel in a cemetery.

We encountered two kids on a donkey with their mother walking behind. They are part of a family that works for the palm plantation, Samuel told me, as he greeted them in a formal but not unfriendly way, and their house was nearby. A few hundred yards further on we encountered another house at the edge of the forest with a solitary man who also works for the plantation. He had been given food by the villagers’ association fighting the plantations and had their permission to use their well. Samuel also told me how they had taken a sick plantation affiliate in their launch to the city when sick.

Yet these affiliates are actually an advance guard invading what the villagers see as their territory.

L

Violence can explode, however, as when the (X)paras went a shade too far, man-handling a kid, so I was told, who tried to stop them dismantling an electrified fence around the recently constructed Women’s House (as it was called) twenty minutes’ walk from the village with its fenced-off plantings of corn, beans, yucca, and fledgling orange trees.
It was a tense situation. Everyone was on high alert due to mounting threats by the (X)paras objecting to the villagers building this house, planting crops there and then, with NGO assistance, renting a backhoe and operator from the other side of the island to come and dig not one but three huge fishponds. Its arrival was imminent and the (X)paras would saunter by on horseback, then pause in the shade watching as the unarmed villagers milled around awaiting the backhoe.

It was a few days before Christmas. A priest had arrived from far away for a few days and joined the melee dressed in shorts. I could not help thinking what a mistake it was for the clergy to forsake the habit and make more visible the hand of God.

Other people, however, did dress for the occasion. I noticed a strange squaring of the shoulders military style by Misael, then two bodyguards appeared out of nowhere with bulletproof vests and black pistols at the waist surrounded by a swarm of kids. Rumor was that the backhoe was arriving and that the (X)paras would stop it before it got here. We waited. The sun was unrelenting.

We heard the backhoe before it hove into sight; and what a sight. Ever so clean and polished it came in its glowing redness pounding into the village bigger and brighter than Santa's sleigh. Kids ran in front and were shooed away. Others clambered onto it. Remote in his sealed-off,
air-conditioned cabin, the driver appeared like a creature from another planet, remorseless and unstoppable. Overhead electricity wires were swiftly removed and then the backhoe plunged into the forest to fight its way through an overgrown path, chomping its way through like a wild animal. A crowd of some fifty people followed behind on foot. The (X)paras were nowhere to be seen but everywhere to be felt.

Without pause the backhoe went to work by the women’s house, digging the first pond the size of a small football field. I was surprised how quiet it was. Just now and again the scraping of the hoe. Like me the kids were entranced and till well after dark sat on the growing walls of soft soil thrown up, the machine with its glowing eyes flood-lighting the excavation. The methodical progress of the machine combined with its tearing apart the earth was hypnotizing. The soil was a crumbly soft brown. “Very fertile,” muttered the priest. After all we were basically on the riverbank and this was the silt of millennia. A member of a Protestant temple who was part of the peasants’ association asked us to hold hands in a circle and he then gave a short speech. Not to be outdone the priest followed hard on his heels. The machine purred. Later it occurred to me that this pond was a replacement for Mataperros, the huge swamp that had been largely dried out by the palm growers. But of course it was only an artificial replica and God only knows how you replicate a swamp.

Suddenly becoming aware of the (X)paras’ threats, the backhoe operators took the first opportunity to leave before the work was finished. It was a devastating blow, especially as they were so sneaky, claiming at first they had run out of gas, which seemed absurd, and then that there was a mechanical failure, confusing everyone, especially me. The villagers were madly working their cell phones wherever there was a signal. A day later thanks to a miraculous intervention by the NGO responsible for the project, a police unit was cajoled into protecting the backhoe and it returned. Given that the police had never come to the aid of the villagers before, this was a historic event.

During much of this I was at the other end of the village with Catalina making mondongo. Doña Edit advised me to return quickly to the pond as there was a lot of trouble. (How she hears such things is beyond me.) I rushed along the path by the river and saw a strange sight. Four heavily
armed police were leading the tallest man I have ever seen toward their pickup truck. He was bedraggled, unshaven, scowling a twisted, wicked scowl. Head bowed he was limping bad, carrying a bottle of water which looked like a thimble in his massive paw of a hand.

What I was told was that a kid had tried to stop him and other (X)paras from cutting through the electrified fence (made by Catalina’s son) around the villagers’ crops and that the kid had gotten roughed up. The villagers closed in on the big man and beat him bad. Some said he had been stripped naked. Others said his leg was broken. There were conflicting accounts but one thing for sure was the writing in red on the back of the khaki shirt he was wearing.

\begin{verbatim}
NO MALTRATA
AL PUEBLO DE
BUENOS AIRES
DEJAMOS TRABAJAR
AMEN . . . . .
\end{verbatim}

Obviously at least his shirt had been taken off and this message inscribed on it: “Don’t Mistreat the People of Buenos Aires; Let Us Work. Amen.” (Buenos Aires is the name of the village.) I wondered if he knew what it said. He seemed oblivious, cowed, and shocked.

But by the time he had limped to the police pickup it looked like he was free and that far from arresting him, the police were acting more like an escort.

Next day the backhoe returned with four or five police protecting it. Colombian employees in the United Nations High Commission of Human Rights also turned up for half an hour in their smart all-terrain vehicles. What makes a commission high, I wondered?

\textit{LI}

Could we say that the situation I am describing is more magically real than \textit{One Hundred Years of Solitude} because of the irradiation of the negative sublime?
With this admittedly top-heavy phrase I am referring to the death pall cast by the (X)paras and palm plantations; death of people and death of rivers, swamps, and land. This must seem a strange and melodramatic formulation, “irradiation of the negative sublime.” It sounds like a curse, plucking at language, twisting it into knots and reality too. What I have in mind is the spectral quality of evil or, in less biblical terms, the spookiness of cutting throats.

But then has not the black magic of magical realism soured and become stale thanks to the now all too familiar mix of legalisms and brute violence? Max Weber alerts us to the “routinization of charisma.” Has not violence, too, become routinized the past few decades the world over? What in One Hundred Years of Solitude was a peak event, the massacre of the United Fruit Company’s workers and families in 1928, has become today’s postmodern sludge, same old, same old, what Cheli calls “la guerra fría,” the cold war, at other times “la guerra psicológica,” psychological warfare.

But certainly one event stands out in her mind: the massacre of the 15th of December, 1998.

As she tells it (and different people tell it differently), five launches ascended the Brazuelo de Papayal with roughly thirty paramilitaries in each, some in uniform, others with masks. Many people were murdered, the names being on a list of alleged guerrilla collaborators. In ascending order upriver the villages were, as she listed them:

- Chapetona
- San Pablo
- Las Delicias
- El Maval
- Playita
- Buenos Aires
- Papayal
- Macedonia

And thus the paramilitaries came to stay, first things first: beat back the
guerrilla by terrorizing the peasantry, then swagger for a few years like opera stars in the street shooting off a few rounds for the hell of it; assassinate the schoolteacher in Papayal ’cos she is said to be a girlfriend of the guerrilla and because, well, who knows? for the hell of it; demand stuff free from the few shopkeepers that exist in these pathetically stocked villages; and eat the peasants’ meager livestock; while all the time one never knew when it could get really nasty, living on the edge of nonbeing.

The lawyer provides a wider picture encompassing not just the island. He notes that before ascending the Brazuelo de Papayal on December 14th, the paramilitaries:

Massacred eleven people the 25th of October, 1998, in the neighborhood of La Pacha in the municipality of Altos de Rosario.

Cut the throat as a public spectacle of guerrillero Michael Hernández in the capital of that municipality.

Burnt seven hundred houses and assassinated around seventy people, 8th November in the neighborhood of La Mocha de Barranco de Loba.

Once in place they taxed beer, gasoline, cocaine paste, lottery ticket sales, and took possession of all forms of transport. For infractions considered major, the paramilitaries would cut the body into pieces and then usually throw these into the river.83

LII

I used to wonder about a rusty piece of machinery in the corner of the ramada upon which, like guardians, two hens would sit toward nightfall in oracular solemnity. As the light receded they would become more and more humanlike, wizened old folk sharing the space with the dogs, the parrot, the pig, other hens, and us humans as the mosquitoes joined in. I would wonder why it required the light to recede for this to all come together, like going to the movies.

The machine was what remained of a motor that had been removed from the commercial freezer indoors when that room, with a doorway to the river, functioned as a store with cold drinks for sale but, owing to the frequent incursions by the paramilitaries demanding stuff free, had to be abandoned.

The lawyer writes that Misael had with considerable difficulty been able to resurrect an electric motor and establish a business selling cold
drinks. The motor was salvaged from the hacienda Las Pavas which had at that point in time been sacked by the paramilitaries. However he ran afoul of the paramilitary, Mario, who also had a business selling cold drinks and beer and forced Misael to close down.84

The paramilitaries used to drink and dance here, Cheli told me. “There were forty in here; dancing. Me too. What else could I do.” Once she saw a local man have his wrists tied and led away, and then heard the sound of a shot.

Young Michael chips in: “They had a house at the edge of the village and would shoot at night. A bullet went straight through the ceiba tree.” He points out the door. “They would shoot at the donkeys and pigs and take them to eat.” They had their own cook, he tells me, a woman, but there were no women paramilitaries, at least not then (not like the large percentage of women fighters in the FARC, maybe 30 percent, nationally).

Misael Jr. adds: “They quartered a woman at Papayal with a power-saw. You could hear her screaming.” He gestures on his body carried away by his actualization.

Misael jumps in to say that paras still exist and Cheli says that following their demobilization several have been killed; some say by the state prosecutors...

It was in that dark room with the door to the river closed that I used to have breakfast around 9:00 when the three kids came in from school for their first break, just me and Misael, served by doña Edit who would eat later, standing. Sometimes young Michael or Misael Jr. would join us at the table. Doña Edit would heap our plates with sculpted whiteness: rice, manioc, and balls of fried corn flour, often with lentils. Every second day there would be two or three fried eggs on top of the rice. Sometimes there would be chicken, not the oracular guardians but frozen store-bought hormonally rich from the town of El Banco.

The air was hot and thick so we rarely sat inside, other than for meals. I

was always hiding from the heat, steeling myself against it. The greatest luxury was to be up early at dawn and feel the cool soft air or be on the street after nine at night. It was if we had been granted another life.

Before eating, Misael would mutter a prayer of his own devising, each time different, often incorporating, as I recall, something relating to our present situation, political and personal, a “sacred newscast,” and it made me wonder, naturally, to whom was this newscast addressed. Could it have been to God himself? But surely God knew the news already? True, there seemed a petition of sorts involved as well, but my sense was that this prayer speech was more an acknowledgment of the recent past than asking or pleading for something. That would not be Misael’s way. He was too dignified and practical. And the role of such acknowledgment of the recent past? Does it not provide a steadying of the way, a sort of yoga of the mind as well as of the spirit but also a checking in with fate, that other side of chance? As president of the village’s peasant union since 1998, Misael had a lot on his mind.

He was a deeply spiritual man, I thought, but without show. On Sundays he would sit on his own watching Catholic mass on the television which in fact was one of the few times in that house I saw anyone watching television. The Catholic church in the village was run down and rarely used, always locked, mysterious, and sad, even malign. A priest came every six months, like the flood, last time in a smart all-terrain vehicle. In a village where the vast majority of people were zealous evangelicals, Catholics like Misael were thrown onto their own resources. When the priest came at Christmas bearing presents it was only women and small children who celebrated mass.

Three times a day we would pray in that dark kitchen with each meal. In that moment of velvet quiet with words pitter-pat like the footsteps of mice I would feel the proximity of God alongside the ghosts of the paramilitaries lounging on the freezer, giving the local girls a twirl.

Scrupulous as the paramilitaries may have been regarding control of transport, taxes, and the dissemination of fear, they nevertheless
allowed the villagers to reoccupy Las Pivas, something I cannot un-
derstand. This lasted till 2003 when they were again forced off. The
villagers’ association, ASOCAB, was formed during this time. Now
closely connected with NGOs and Christian peace groups in Europe
and North America, it also receives grants from the British government
as well as being served by two Colombian law professors working pro
bono, Juan Felipe Garcia and Roberto Vidal. These lawyers originated
in a far-reaching Jesuit program set up in the 1980s by Pacho de Roux,
SJ, a visionary as regards the Medio Magdalena region, the mere name
of which struck terror in my heart when I heard it mentioned in the late
1980s as cattlemen-drugmen formed a militia called MAS to combat the
FARC guerrilla.

That was the time when paramilitary troops were being trained in the
little town of Puerto Boyacá by ex-army Israelis and Brits next to the US
oil company settlement the other side of the Magdalena River.85 I recall
a huge sign by the roadside when I visited with two young Colombian
anthropologists in 1990.86

Welcome to Puerto Boyacá
A Town of Progress
Colombian Capital of Anti-Subversion

It was a fearsome place suspended in a bitter silence as unforgiving as the
sun. I was unable to speak with anyone in the town other than a fidgety
barber gray of mien who was the friend of a friend of mine whose sister
was married to a Colombian in the oil business. “Look!,” said the barber
in the café next to his salon. “I’ve lived here twenty six years and I owe
nobody nothing!” That was our conversation. That was Puerto Boyacá.87

A woman friend of that friend had a brother who had joined the para-
militaries (then under the rubric of MAS or autodefensas). She told us

85. Carolina Ardila Behar and Olga Behar, El caso Klein: El origen del paramilitarismo en Colombia
86. Maria Teresa Salcedo and William Torres were my companions.
87. For background see Maria Teresa Ronderos, Guerras recicladas (Bogotá: Aguilar, 2014), 29–75;
and for its powerful and imaginative ethnography, Aldo Civico, The Para-State: An Ethnogra-
phy of Colombia’s Death Squads (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).
that there were some four thousand men in arms on the payroll (which seemed an exaggeration) but this had dropped to a mere one thousand because of problems with cocaine. “Cattle is not enough. They must have drug money,” she insisted. “They know everything and everybody,” she added, as if we weren’t uncomfortable enough despite the lavishly surreal appurtenances of the oil camp across the river from Puerto Boyacá with its two hundred engineers and office workers, each one an island, alone, drinking at the bar.

**L I V**

We fled Puerto Boyacá in a bus east up the wooded slopes of Boyacá. A skinny boy got on laying his four-foot-long power-saw carefully in the aisle. It seemed longer than he was tall and you could only feel sorry for the forest and for him. The driver took us into a hotel in the first town we came across in the mountains. It was getting dark and we wanted to stretch our legs. No sooner in the street than a voice hissed from a top floor window, “Get back! Get back inside! Nobody can walk here once it gets dark.” The wizened old woman pulled her head back from the window like a turtle retracting under its shell. I see her as I write this, her face all angles and gray as smoke. Meanwhile the driver and his young ayudante settled into a large bedroom full of jolly drivers, plump like beach balls, bouncing on their beds playing cards. That was my departure from Puerto Boyacá. Next day at the wheel the driver pulled up his shirt to reveal a jagged pink scar like taffeta stretching from his groin to his ribs where his socio had gone for him in a dispute over emeralds for which this area is famous. How lovely he was, eventually driving the bus off course deep into La Soledad in Bogotá to our front door.

On the way to Puerto Boyacá we had stopped at La Dorada, a town by the Magdalena River with an elegant new stone-fronted hotel for the Cattlemen’s Association complete with its sinister radio communications tower and computers—even back then, January of 1990. But that was nothing compared with the glamorous secretary at the front desk sitting directly under a huge cattle head fixed to the wall. Another “hybrid.” The hotel was said to belong to an intermediary of the notorious José Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha (“El Mexicano”), a leading figure in the Medellín cartel, also owner of the local discos, agricultural equipment
stores, supermarkets, and so forth. It was the usual sinister, even before the US built a base and airfield close by.

In the café men lounged, sporting the big purse worn over the shoulder called a *cariel* (not cartel). These are fascinating objects, the very quintessence of hybridization they be: leather and plastic assemblages made of an accordion type base so they can expand and contract, combining a polished black plastic façade with brightly colored plastic trim, yellow or red. And they generally sport some fur in loving reference, perhaps, to the days of the hunter, or pubic hair, or that animal we call money and trade, expanding and contracting because once upon a time the *cariel* was associated with wide girthed coffee traders stuffing their *cariels* with pesos to buy coffee from peasants. But by 1991 who cared about coffee? The furry *cariel* no longer carried cash but a checkbook, a gun, and that primordial Colombian credit card, Diners Club.

Although it was obvious enough that the Colombian paramilitaries certainly displayed aptitude and inventiveness in the arts of slaughter and mutilation, it is said that the origin of the modern paramilitaries owed much to US military efforts as early as the 1960s so as to—you guessed it—fight the “communists.” Their target may not have actually been “communists” at that time but, thanks to this inspired effort, the peasant and Indian groups targeted by the US advisers certainly became such, driven into the arms of the Colombian Communist party—much to its embarrassment—as an armed guerrilla force known as the FARC which eventually reached eighteen thousand men and women in arms, for decades the largest guerrilla army in the world. (Of course like all numbers related to conflict and the guerrilla, this one is probably fictitious.) When George W. Bush’s close ally, Álvaro Uribe, ascended to the presidency in 2002, his strident “anti-communism” morphed into a no-holds barred “anti-terrorism,” not only justifying state terrorism but an (X)paramilitarization of everyday life along with state-stimulated “megaproyectos” such as *palma africana*, I mean “Hope of America.”
three so that every two to three days a new group stayed in the black plastic tent city and the others remained in the village by the river awaiting their turn.

I see a young man and woman walking back from there to the village carrying their belongings in a plastic trash bag. No LL Bean or North Face wilderness gear for these folk.

At sunset the peasants form a guard along the fence dividing this black plastic encampment from the hacienda building with its fortress shape that I call “the control tower.” I look for a place to take a shit and find there is none, or rather everywhere is possible, and I am pointed to a field of young African palms, like fat pineapples in neat rows. It is hard to walk anywhere because of the mud. It is a satisfying, indeed a sublime act—is it not?—to shit in their palm field as the sun sets over the ridge. I am told that a guard of Indian people all the way from Cauca in the south of the country have been here recently armed with nothing but their staves to provide support and there is a group of Swiss who do the same thing, “bearing witness,” as they say.

Looking out over the fledgling African palms I sit with six of the younger men sprawled on a piece of plantation farm equipment quietly watching the colors in the sky as the sun sets. The mood has shifted from the practical to the poetic. Alexander is here, aged twenty-nine. I call him “the poet.” He has no job, he says, and has never worked. What does he mean? His father allowed him to finish high school and that he did aged twenty-three. The valleys in the far-off ridges of what I take to be the Serranía of San Lucas fill with a golden haze while along the hilltops the gold forms a thin ribbon running along the bluish green of the hills. Not a word passes between us. Triggered by the hysterically ascending price for gold, the serranía is now subject to a gold craze with miners using mercury which gets into the waterways here, a man told me. But not much, he adds. The serranía is also the home for the guerrilla, first the ELN and now the FARC. All that is there, in the thin ribbon of golden light on the horizon. And now the sky is flecked, purple and red. Meanwhile the employees of the hacienda switch on an electric generator which makes a terrible racket. Their lights will glare the night long making our sleep difficult. It is all so strange, our
camp and their camp, cheek by jowl, our camp of black plastic sheeting, theirs a solid-looking hacienda building with a menacing backhoe glaring at us the night long. It gets stranger still, as two of the men hired by the hacienda are accomplished accordion players who join us on our return canoe trip, complete with tambor and aguardiente. Best of pals.

As the darkness gathers I decide to copy Lily who has been accompanied by a group of women to a bathing place by the side of the African palms. I walk through the mud with a flashlight accompanied by a one-armed young man named José who appears out of nowhere. We reach a small pond the size of a bathtub four feet down a muddy slope which has crude, slippery steps set into it. He holds my hand in his one hand. I slip as I descend. His grip is firm and comforting. It is pitch black. He wears swimming trunks and nothing else. With infinite care I take off one sandal, then another. Then he hands me a container for scooping up the muddy water so as to douse myself. Out of fear of offending him I do not strip completely naked. Then like a crab I make my way up again. This one-armed gentleman who appeared out of nowhere has become my guardian angel.

LVI

On Saturday Cheli took me to the neighboring village of Papayal; Saturday, indicating that even here lost in the swamps at the end of the world—forgive me my exaggerations—the seven-day Christian God-given week holds sway. Interesting, no, how this seven-day Christian calendar based on pagan reckonings swept across the world with its weekend and day of rest? More interesting still is the sense of physical and emotional estrangement suggested by my surprise that even here there should exist weekends and Sundays.

Papayal, such a sweet name, meaning a grove of papaya trees. How sweet, how innocent, and how much a contrast between the name and the place! A fierce mountain of boulders baking in the sun with the little Brazuelo de Papayal glistening green and picturesque in a sweeping curve in front of it. “I had the curious impression of looking at a painting in a gold frame,” says the narrator in William Burroughs’s book,
Cities of the Red Night, set in Panama, dedicated to “all the characters and their real-life counterparts living and dead.”

You step in and out of the frame.

LVII

Getting there: To get there we walked for an hour weighed down by heat along the river under tall trees and then across open country. Two motorbike taxis gave us a ride the rest of the way and how wonderful it was to rest and cling to the waist of Alex, the young driver, as he twisted our way over the path. That seemed today’s ticket to manhood: to own or manage a softly purring motorbike and with your cell phone make

some sort of living as a taxi navigating the island. But for the life of me I could never figure out who actually used such a taxi. Could it be NGO people? Could there be that many?

We had lunch in the home of a friend of Cheli’s near the top of the hill above the village which reminded me of the bleached-out village on a hill that is the setting for Glauber Rocha’s *Antonio Das Mortes* also known as *The Dragon of Wickedness against the Holy Warrior*, filmed in the legendary northeast of Brazil in the late 1960s. To watch this film about messianic bandits challenging the local landlord on the issue of land reform is unsettling. Land reform here means a lot more than acreage. It is the trigger to the apocalypse and without your being aware of quite when, or how, you become conscious of the fact that you too are inside the film; inside its operatic lines, its biblical sentiments of good versus evil, its dancing that is energizing body and soul for Holy War, its bandits as saints, and then the slaughter. It is no longer a representation. You have moved into the frame and gotten stuck there.

Walking through the stifling heat that is the village of Papayal was filmic, like the way children disappear into colored images to become part of what they are looking at, only here it was the bleached out absence of color and the oppressive heat that melted you into the image. No more subject, that’s for sure, and no more object, either. More like paste on paste. No wonder I slept for an hour suspended in a subjectless void in a shaded room as the daughter chatted with Cheli.

Her friend said he had no income other than his motorbike-taxi but a few years ago he had, with his wife, a small store in the center of the village which, so Cheli told me, they had to abandon because the paramilitaries would come and take stuff for free. The wife showed me a photograph from about the year 2000 of a paramilitary crossing the street with a conspicuous weapon slung on his shoulder. We passed the photograph from hand to hand, a blurred relic of unreality, momentous and weighty yet disappointingly brief and empty. (Why?)

But Cheli’s friend had a different take on things when we had a chance to talk alone sitting outside on the stoop looking down onto the village. He said he and his wife had to give up the store because of *envidia*, or
envy, which, as it stands, unqualified like that, could well mean sorcery, which is what I think he was actually saying without saying it.

How do you know? I asked. Because disaster strikes all of a sudden, he responded. Everything goes downhill suddenly for no good reason. (I know the feeling.)

There are people here, he went on, who can cure this with prayers and incense as well as with sprinkling liquids prepared with herbs. Or maybe you kill the sorcerer, he added with a show of nonchalance. He knew one such case here. The problem, he added, starts when you begin to sell on credit, yet how can you refuse? After all everyone is either a neighbor, a relative, or a friend.

And then young Michael, who had accompanied us, awakening like a shot from his customary dreaminess, told me that his village is full of envidia. Just full! he said with added emphasis. And then I remembered my astonishment at Cheli telling me on my first visit that the parrot had suffered from sorcery, or at least from the Evil Eye, and that flowers in one’s patio garden were also susceptible to the Evil Eye.

Later in the afternoon Cheli told me her friend was making it up because he does not like to talk about the paramilitaries (which I thought was a strange thing to say), but then seemed to contradict herself, at least to some degree, mentioning he was caught up in witchcraft on account of having had three wives.

In a famous essay called “The Sorcerer and His Magic,” Claude Lévi-Strauss elaborates on the idea that different interpretations of a specific act of sorcery made by different persons within the community amount to a dramatization of a society’s axioms and fault lines, a dramatization in which each interpretation of the alleged sorcerer’s machinations provides another layer, another probe, questioning the preceding layers, thickening the mix. Of course being Lévi-Strauss, the mix sets like reinforced concrete.89

But was not something quite different going on in Papayal with its shifting layers of concealment working against one another like tectonic plates? This was not so much a structure as the illusion of structure necessary for wily Hermes to play his games. Here sorcery claimed another metaphoric reality. Here the sorcerer was the paramilitaries swaggering in the street and able to survey everything from their hilltop aerie overlooking the weekly passage of cocaine to the mountains to the north.

Is it any wonder that the evangelicals wail and sway in a trance that denies sorcery other than the devil and that the burros, racing riderless past the houses at midday, swerve wildly kicking up their heels with plastic canisters bouncing up and down on their backs in mad drum beats, gathering the berserk energy that at night shall be expelled in those horrendous cries the burros make of love and war?

LVIII

Another celestial image comes to mind: the world as seen from a glass-walled office on the top floor of the tallest building in a once picturesque port whose once sparkling waters are now black with coal dust.

The office looks over what had been an exquisitely beautiful bay at the foot of cascading mountains where Joseph Conrad set his novel, Nostromo, a story of revolution and corruption.

Conrad was there on his ship a few days only but that magical landscape of sea and steep mountains was enough to situate this novel which the celebrated critic F. R. Leavis, with his criteria of moral integrity, regarded as Conrad’s finest. Conrad changed the name of Colombia to Costaguana with an echo of guano, the excrement of sea birds, a fertilizer in great demand in Europe and North America and a principal South American commodity found in Chile and Peru. But his novel concerns silver, not bird’s shit, although the name of Costaguana suggests a connection, especially when in the first few pages Conrad evokes what he calls peasant superstition concerning buried treasure that can only bring ruin on those who pursue it.

Now the blessed port of Santa Marta is devoid of that sort of romance
but with even more shit awash from the ugly tourist hotels and coal dust from the lighters carrying coal from two of the largest open-cut coal mines in the world close by in the Guajira peninsula, legendary home of tough Guajira women with long black hair streaming in the wind off the sea making their own laws there in that hook of desert poking into the blueness of the Caribbean.

On the walls of the outside office hung spectacular color photographs of oil palms, close-up and intimate, suggestive of a new genre, “pornographic botany.” In particular I recall—but this was at least fifteen years ago—close-ups of the massive bunches of palm nuts with mysterious shadows like dark-skinned grapes. Are these the female organs of “Hope of America” awaiting their lover, something to liven up the office with its beautiful women secretaries?

In the inner office surrounded by glass walls sits the mild-mannered owner in his aerie, owner of so much in the coast where wealth in the twentieth century came first from bananas and El Pulpo, then marijuana in the 1950s, and then till now cocaine. He is “mansplaining” to us (I was with a distant relative of his) in an oh-so-casual a way how the presi-
dente asked him why he didn’t get into African palm and I told him, “Oh, I dunno, you need so much money and technical know-how to process that stuff [not like cocaine]” and the presidente said, “Oh! We can help you with that...” And this up so high, so lofty, we must be right by God’s ear or at least by his shaggy nipple with photographs on the wall of our mild-mannered host arm in arm smiling with the then presidente of the republic, the lovable Álvaro Uribe Veléz, taking time off from chasing terrorists and, like Inspector Renault in the film Casablanca, shocked to hear there is gambling on the premises, meaning that chainsaw-wielding paramilitaries not only exist in Colombia but are essential to its capitalist expansion.

One family member of the man-in-the-aerie was imprisoned for smuggling cocaine to the US and was under investigation for links to paramilitaries. Another was the link man for the secret pact between the state government and the notorious paramilitary leader, “Jorge 40,” a chubby bespectacled man who liked having his photo taken in military fatigues and is held responsible for thousands of assassinations.

On his wrist the mild-mannered man wears a slightly frayed cotton thread bracelet as made by the Indians high in the mountains behind the port. The whites say these carry magical power, both the bracelets and the mountains. The hordes of anthropologists and tourists, plus the pre-Colombian goldwork smuggled out, testify to this allure. Needless to say the Indians are poor, short of stature, spin cotton, weave their own clothes, which are all alike, speak little to no Spanish, and live in beautiful cone-shaped thatch houses which in important respects are microcosms of the cosmos as they see it. The magnificent landscape, the soaring mountains and the sea below, form the body of the mother. White people love these formulations, the mother and so forth, and now the presidents of Colombia all make a quick helicopter visit to talk with the Indians’ priests in time for the seven o’clock news.

It is huge, this office, minimally furnished as if to emphasize the spaciousness which spreads before you as you enter, catching your breath as, for a moment, you seem to be flying out into the emptiness of the ocean where the sky and the sea become indistinguishable. I recall the paramilitaries like eagles occupying the highest point in Papayal, that
village of baking boulders as the world must have been at the moment of creation.

L I X

Tacked to the wall of the campamento at “the ceremonial center” is a color-printed poster with the title Historia de Nuestras Historias, which I translate as “The Stories That Are Our History.” The Spanish is more allusive than the English as regards the overlap of the words “story” and “history,” the crucial point to my mind being that historia can equally well mean story (as in English) as well as history (as in English). This ambiguity in the Spanish is grist to my Hermes-mill as well as to the emphasis Hayden White places on the storylike dimensions latent in “scientific” history writing.

I chose three of the six historias.

Royver Machuca Navarro, thirty years old, two children

Since early 2013 we work in groups of ten. Up till then, each person worked alone and was vulnerable to attacks by the company who cut down our fences and poisoned and cut down our plantain trees. But since we form groups, things have gotten better. We have fifteen thousand yucca pants in production, as well as rice and corn. We take turns to watch over the plants and when there is work to do, we do it together.

Apart from cultivation we hunt. Yesterday we set off at 6:00 in the evening and checked out a field of rice. The chiguiros had not yet arrived. (Chiguiros look like guinea pigs but are a lot bigger. They stand knee high to a human being and weigh between 75 and 145 pounds.) We set up our hammocks and waited. Around 10:00 we heard the cries of the pups. We got up and saw four chiguiros. We selected the male, leaving the females and the little ones alone. It’s easy to hunt them at night because when you flash the light they stand stock still. You can get to within three or four meters of one and it’s easy to kill them with a shotgun.

So far I have not seriously thought about leaving the territory and try my luck elsewhere. Once I tried to settle down in Bogotá but what I
earn there is not enough to support my family. That was the test. So I decided to come back for good. I feel that I have to be here in this land, in Las Pavas.

Mario Alvear Olivarres, sixty-three with one daughter

Last Sunday I learned that everyone was going to the village so I decided to stay with two companions so as to keep watch over the camp here in Las Pavas. At lunchtime in the place where we eat I suddenly heard an explosion. We raced out and saw a fierce fire consuming the communal hut. There was a strong smell of gasoline. We raced to the hut but there was nothing we could do but save a few things. I was left without clothes, without shoes, without hammock, and without a mosquito net.

The people who work for the African palm company took photos of the fire as proof to show their boss that they had accomplished their task. The day following as I was looking at the ashes, one of the men who had started the fire yelled: “Hey! Looking for some classy underpants?” And he laughed himself sick.

I was stung to fury and wanted revenge. But I thought better of it and walked away to cool down.

In spite of all the insecurity we suffer in Las Pavas today there is food in abundance. Just imagine our production in different circumstances!

Erika Daniela Alvear Narbaez, thirteen

Every morning I go on a donkey to the pueblo of Buenos Aires with my sister. We leave Las Pavas at half past 5:00 in the morning and it takes us a good half hour to get there. We go to school, play with our friends and cousins, and visit our grandparents.

In the afternoons we do housework, like pumping water and helping in the kitchen. We sleep in a tent. The whole family shares the one room.

When the administrator of the farm threatened us, I was very frightened. No longer did I want to go to school. He told my father to take his
kids out of school, otherwise he would violate us when we were alone on the path. But up to now, nothing has happened. We still go to school, but we’re afraid that one day something will happen.

LX

Below are the names of the paramilitaries Cheli remembers, not their formal names but their nicknames. I was fascinated by how well people knew them, like characters in a soap opera. It was as if the village, the river, and daily life had been cast into a netherworld of humans transformed as in a comic book into animals, freaks, death, and pop idols.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Nickname</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cara de Lápido</td>
<td>Tombstone Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Perro</td>
<td>The Dog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapido</td>
<td>Speedy (the leader)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Macarcán  Big Guy (character in a TV show)
El Viejo  The Old Man
El Gato  The Cat
El Santo  The Saint
Ojito  An Eyeful, or Watch Out!
Chaquira  Name of pop idol (woman) and bling
El Henano  The Dwarf
Guajiro  Wild One (another leader)

They chose the village of Papayal as their base, I was told, because cocaine was shipped through there. People recall helicopters landing once a week with loads of cash and before that a fantastic firefight between the army and the guerrilla either side of the church full of children. I say “fantastic” but actually the way this was told me was absolutely humdrum.

Just about every day during the three or four years following the initial massacre, the paramilitaries would turn up in the village. Young Michael’s mother was pregnant during that time and plenty nervous. His aunt Cheli tells me he was born with nervios and susto (fright) which continued till he was seven and today, aged twelve, he is a dreamy kid, the long planes of his face aslant, who goes long spells without saying anything then bursts into torrents of words delivered at breakneck speed. But Malvis, also born in the time of the paramilitaries, seems fine; audacious and quick, somewhat aloof, changing her clothes during the day to look sharp like the teenage girls in this “village of the swamps at the end of time” (forgive my hyperbole), so very different to their robust mothers and aunties, solid of girth who dress for a hard day’s work and walk barefoot. What does the future hold for these winsome girls so far from the city? I think of the two daughters working as maids in the US every morning when Edit pours coffee out into big ceramic mugs from the percolator sent from Washington to this village of the swamps at the end of time.

LXI

Efrain and his wife and daughters live twenty minutes’ walk from the black plastic campamento in which they lived for two years. Now he
thinks it is a bad idea to live there as, in his words, it makes it easy for the palmeros to practice surveillance. “They hear everything and have cameras; están vigilando todo. That’s why I live here. No stress.”

I couldn’t believe him but I had to take the paranoia seriously. Did Efraín, the model of reason, really think the plantation had some sort of high-tech, quasi-magical apparatus installed in what I call their “control tower”? (But then didn’t the nurse’s partner have a magic box with winking lights and dials capable of surveilling the human body and make money from its diagnoses?) The ubiquity today of the camera and video camera is perhaps what triggers this fear but the more basic cause could be years of physical harassment combined with the transcendant, abstract, forces of the law, the state, and the limitless power of the rich creating a paranoid sense of supernatural powers of surveillance. You might also recall the waves of hysteria afflicting teenage girls after the
confrontation with the riot police that some people said was due to being possessed by malignant spirits (see section XV). The way Misael’s brother, Pedro, my guide, aged seventy-five, scuttled past this “fortress”, I had no doubt about the fear the plantation generated. Bent double in a twisting gait like a crab he hurried me along as I stood and gawked. Every time he spotted someone in the distance he would stiffen like an animal sensing a hunter.

Here is my 2011 plan view of the villagers’ campamento with its small black plastic tents in regular rows and large central meeting place.

Efraín recalls vividly the night watches, patrolling the perimeter of the
campamento with Misael. These patrols and talks made a big impression. He regards Misael as immensely wise. “I wrote down a lot of what he told me,” he says, “and he gave me a Remington typewriter which had belonged to his son. Then I learned to type. Now with cataracts in both eyes,” he says, “keeping the journal by hand is easier.” Since 2014 he has cut back a bit and only records incidents rather than keeping a daily log. Meantime he is writing an essay called “Winning without a Gun.” He is always writing out there in the heat and mosquitoes. This was something important that he and I share.

Like Misael, he never went to school, although actually Misael did spend a terrible year in school, as I will presently relate and which to some degree accounts for why he, Misael, told me several times how patient you have to be as a teacher. Most afternoons and all the weekends he would, with his glasses on, be instructing young Michael in English and other subjects, patient as could be, with Michael staring up at the clouds with a distant look in his eye. That’s Michael, inveterate daydreamer, head to one side as if taking it all in or nothing in. How could you tell? Misael is some sort of genius, I got to see, a most rare human being. Above all, he himself was somewhat like a kid fixing machinery, weaving fishnets, cutting hair, teaching his forty-year-old son the finer points of house-building, carving exquisite wooden bowls for panning gold, making wooden canoes, fixing Michael’s backpack zipper, on and on, master of all things mechanical and agricultural, utterly logical and blessed with a marvelous eye for political strategy and social planning. Obsessive, too. When the priest came with a chain-smoking woman professor friend for Christmas, and they put a lot of work into the Christmas masses (attended only by children and women), Misael would stay at home weaving the back of an old rocking chair as if his life depended on it.

His skills were combined, as I said, with the most lovable, childish enthusiasm for life, full of stories and flights of fancy. Of course all that outsiders saw was a canny politician who since 1998 miraculously brought a group of some 120 families together and steered them through the perils of displacement while garnering support from Bogotá, Europe, and North America. He showed me photographs of himself in Geneva as well as a sheaf of awards from European peace or-
ganizations and one from the current president of the republic, Santos, which surprised me with its warmth and un-patronizing, intelligent encouragement.

Misael has been president of the association since its inception seventeen years ago and there have been no elections for officeholders of the association in that time.

He told me about his one year at school in 1956. In those days the schools were run by the church. The teacher had the pupils tend her cattle (once again, cattle!) so Misael decided after a while to stay away. One night police came and arrested his mother and father and took them in a boat to jail for his not being at school.

He was nine years old.

This same teacher whipped him so severely that he still has the marks on his leg. He gets off the chair and shows me the marks seventy years later.

So, after a brief return to finish the year he never went back to school; yet he is surely one of the most knowledgeable people I know. He thinks that this experience is what made him a rebel (and in my notes at this point I have written down that like me he regards with disdain the use of the word “victim” commonly used to describe people like himself and fellow displaced villagers).

Later I got to see how this child, Misael, was a pawn in a political game. When the schoolteacher asked him to round up her cattle, his father—who could not read or write—heard his cries urging on the cattle and went to the teacher to complain. The teacher’s father-in-law was the representative of the state—the comisario—whom I guess today would be called the inspector de policia, and at midnight police arrived in a canoe, taking his mother and father away to prison in the town of San Martin de Lobo, leaving the kids alone and shit scared.

On the way to jail in the canoe paddling in the river, his parents were able to negotiate a fine of twenty sacks of corn equivalent to thirty pesos. The going wage for a day’s labor then was three pesos.
Upon Misael’s return to school, the teacher blamed him for creating a disturbance. It was then that she whipped him. He stuck out the year but never returned. He learned the alphabet, and how to form letters, but his reading was very elementary. I notice that today when he reads he forms the letters and sounds with his mouth.

LXII

Efraín’s trajectory was different. He was crippled since a young age with a lame leg, learned to read and write from an evangelist, became an evangelical preacher, hated it, yet learned to make maps from a fellow evangelist using a theodolite and compass. At the evangelical college in faraway Ocaña in the state of Norte del Santander he studied literature, history, theology, and, yes!, hermeneutics.

He chuckled when I asked if he had read One Hundred Years of Solitude. “It’s a little exaggerated,” he replied. “You know how people like things exaggerated.” But he did see gypsies when he was seven, like the gypsies that appear at the beginning of One Hundred Years of Solitude. He saw them in a circus in Playitas where his grandmother lived.

There is a curious loop here in that people like Efraín and of his station in life form the cultural seedbed out of which One Hundred Years of Solitude grew.

I want to emphasize how strange it was to be discussing literature—García Márquez of all people—sitting with Efraín in blistering heat at the back of beyond with not a shred of material comfort, a plague-riddled bean patch, barely any trees, and African palm all around. I think of middle class readers in bed or in libraries and coffee shops, I think of the arts pages of the newspapers, and I am blown away by this quite other form of intellectual at the back of beyond with no creature comforts busy writing and mapmaking. He was calm and pensive, open to everything. He invited you in to himself, and with that into the world.

When people speak of having to reduce personal consumption so as to reduce global warming and change the capitalist system, then someone like Efraín shows us how that is possible. But it won’t be an easy life.
In the drawing of mine on page 165 made in 2011 in the “ceremonial center” by the Indian raised field and the plantation’s “control tower,” Efraín is standing with Pablo Gómez, the lawyers’ assistant, examining maps of the disputed land that Efraín drew, comparing them with the official maps issued by the state’s Codazzi Institute that were brought by the lawyer in 2011 for a meeting of some fifty men and women from
the village to discuss strategy, a meeting that began with a prayer led by Efrain whom I did not know at the time.

I was not expecting a prayer. But in the case of Efrain’s prayer that morning as the waters receded from the island, July 2011, with the lawyer shuffling his crisp new maps, this was spirituality in another key. The lawyer spoke, urging a “new language.” The African palm people had their language. It was a language of “development” and of agribusiness, a language that diverts attention from the use of paramilitaries, a language claiming the villagers had no legal right to land. Hence it would be good to go over the maps, to see the struggle cartographically as well as to map out a vision of what we could do once (and if!) the 2,500 hectares of the hacienda here are secured by the villagers.

That vision was generous, bound to swell the heart with its mix of private plots, forest reserve, and communal fields.

Even utopias need a history and emerge from such while changing it. People were called forward to relate the history of settlement. I was surprised that this was not known or not well known to all. Or perhaps it is well known to all but through ritual like this one—if we can call it a ritual, and why not?—both history and a communal sense of purpose acquire resolve. Old people, nearly all men, would approach the table on which the maps were laid and with a shaky forefinger trace details with their voices soft and their back to the group, which struck me as strange. Sometimes there would be laughter. As the sun rose people drifted away leaving but a handful of men around the map-filled table, while to one side women stirred cauldrons of mojarra fish caught in the slime-covered green pond a stone’s throw away. I was surprised how few young adults and teenagers were present.

LXIV

It was stifling hot. It was tedious. Like inkblot tests the maps aroused knotted memories of who was where first, who married who (or maybe they weren’t married, after all or any longer...), where the first houses were built, where exactly on the map the swamps were, are, or had been,
and much else besides. The peasant mental maps confronted the official maps. That was the ritual.

The *mojarras* kept gliding through the murk of the pond as the heat rose under the black plastic. Other memories come to my mind as I write: gliding up the river to get here at twilight with the white herons standing one-legged in the shallows; walking through the forest in the swamps mud up to your knees; my far too small rubber boots getting stuck in the mud so I had to be dragged out. Oh! so humiliating! Nasty Nature! Memories of Efraín’s world-encompassing smile, the way it radiates intelligence and love; the two girls on the burro coming back from school every day through the forest made dangerous by the (X) paramilitaries; angels on burros; the burnt beams, blacker than ink with the shine that comes from charred wood, beams of what had been a small house set afire by the (X)paramilitaries; and the orchestra of frogs in a slime-covered pond filling the night, the moon trembling along with the evangelicals wailing in the village far away. Sympathetic magic. Chains of. Funny how writing prods memory, hauls it forth, even when the writing is about something else.

The state maps emit an aura of finality like a locked safe, whereas if you looked at Efraín’s maps—which magically appeared on the table alongside those of the Codazzi Institute—you were struck by meandering traces of histories at work in lands of collective memory. In a literal manner Efraín’s maps deterritorialize the state at its basic level, the lay of the land and the flow of its waters.

What is also notable is the unfinished quality of his work. The journal picks up afresh every day or so and, parallel with that, the work of memory and mapping is never done. His is a memory-map as well as a map of nature in motion like the rising and falling of the river and the moving back and forth of displaced people. It also differs from official maps in that it is communal; animated by communal concerns as much as by the give and take of local discussion in contested, changing fields.

Efraín’s maps coexist with his journal, two sides of the one coin. In fact the maps are a journal, so full of annotations they are barely legible, each stream and landmark its own story.
In the state maps, the reader and the mapmaker are distant observers removed from that which is being mapped; transcendent over it, not immanent in it. The map makes damn sure that subjects are subjects and objects are objects, fixed, static, and moribund. Nor do places have stories in this scheme, the purpose of which is to reproduce segments of the nation-state, by means of abstraction.

It is tempting to think of Efraín's maps as the sediment of tradition. But that would be wrong. It's not tradition so much as mode of existence. Anyway, the villagers are newcomers. They are colonists who have come here from different places at different times (which is one of the reasons why there were different histories being voiced around the table). The curiosity I sense with Efraín and his mapmaking is the curiosity of the peasant colonist in a new land, accentuated by the fact or threat of eviction, striated space rendered fluid.

I now realize as I write this that I never once asked him why he wrote and wrote so much, just as I never ask myself. And are my drawings equivalent in some way to his maps?
I read some of the foregoing paragraphs aloud to a group of professors and graduate students from many countries in a philosophically oriented program in an art school in Finland recently. It was early spring, still cold, by a lake outside of Helsinki where there was a sauna, an old wooden house, and donuts sprinkled with sparkling sugar. What were my listeners thinking? I wondered. Could they possibly picture the scene I was describing? Could they relate? These are fundamental questions, the aim of my labor, after all: to serve as a witness even though it be a little less tied to real time than Efraín and perhaps a little more hermeneutic, like Barthes’s palm tree.

I was intrigued by the red building next to where we were talking there in Finland. It was a tiny barn, more like a doll’s house, I thought, than a house house. It was perched on sharply angled stones. It looked as if at any moment it might tumble. What bizarre constellation of forces kept it stable, like a dancer balanced tiptoe? This image sticks in mind not only as an image of precarity but of the picturing that depends on such when it comes to presenting one reality in terms of another, balanced on pointy stones.

Could my audience connect to my presentation, or were we all trapped in worlds not of our own making that make us what we are? Come to think of it, does anyone really connect with another? My words are like the tablets of color in a watercolorist’s paint box. Each listener uses them to paint their own picture.

Am I too skeptical? Isn’t the human imagination wonderfully capacious and able to gear into foreignness if we find the right image and rhythm, the right mythology and places to cultivate, like those communal wetlands washed over by the flooding Magdalena, drying in the fierce sun?

But then I thought that’s naive thinking on my part insofar as I assume there is a more or less definitive “understanding” or “relating” possible. (Once again, beware, be aware, of one’s hidden assumptions. Easier said than done.)
Instead, what is possible is only a “best fit relative relating,” or many thereof, by which I mean not the truth out there in El Sur de Bolívar swamplands but the relationship between the outsider’s understanding and (get ready!) the possibilities for understanding given by that which is to be understood, mediated by all manner of archetypes and myths, donkeys and horses, iguanas and caymans.

LXVI

Along with cattle and African palm in these parts of northern Colombia you get statues too, of upstanding men in bourgeois suits and hats and
spectacles like the ex-president of Colombia, Alfonso López Michelson, standing with much gravitas on the tarmac of the Valledupar airport ten hours from the Island of the Papaya Grove by launch and bus and whom my lawyer friend tells me got early into the marijuana trade and then the more and more cattle trade ending up with humungous cattle spreads across northern Colombia. Just a story, you say. After all, cattle are ever so much more respectable than marijuana et al. Such a nice, respectable cachaco, too, my friend Rosario told me.

The planes take off and land while Alfonso stands rooted, sentinel of all this coming and going but, as is the wont of statues, doesn’t see or say much. Perhaps like blind Tiserias he is wise to play dumb, for there are many secrets here. Gray warplanes are lined up on the tarmac, straight from the arsenal of the US which has showered the Colombian state with weaponry. Now, that’s statuary for you, that brooding flock of warplanes pregnant with bombs. Was I therefore wrong to think of them as cattle? Maybe not. Cattle that can fly and defecate on the guerrilla who say that when the bombs drop you have to lie down with your mouth open in a pathetic effort to protect you eardrums. Picture that. Picture that as statuary, bodies prone flatter than flat on the ground with mouths agape as lightning flashes and ear drums burst as themed by Breton’s “fixed-explosive” in his little book, Mad Love, and by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti expatiating on the convulsive beauty of war, especially aerial bombing as practiced by the Italian state in WWI and now by the US-Colombian state shattering the grand equatorial forests and pouring poisons on peasant crops at the bidding of the US War on Drugs.

If it is difficult for the sculptor of the bourgeois male in our less than heroic age to manifest manly power without seating his subject on a horse (remember the venerable palm leaf on Palm Sunday with the Messiah as sacrificial victim entering Jerusalem on an ass, not a horse?), at least the sculptor can place him by all this aerial coming and going. I mean, imagine how hard it would be to create a sense of dignity and power if the man was a peasant riding a donkey with his sandaled feet scraping the ground. But then the peasant does carry a machete.

And then there are the angels, another form of statuary as with the
small girls on their donkey riding back and forth to school through the forest alive with (X)paramilitaries, chattering birds, and monkeys throwing sticks.

LXVII

Another thing about donkeys compared with horses is the noise they make. Late at night in the village I would hear a donkey bray—such a strange word, *bray*—right outside my window, like a giant with an asthmatic attack vomiting its heart out. The air seems to get sucked in with a rasping sound as if the donkey was swallowing an African palm tree, fronds, thorns, and all, followed by a gurgling and a rumbling and then this terrible vomiting as if everything within is being torn out guts and all in an explosion turning the universe inside out. It was thunder not out there but in my soul in the black of night. Sometimes another donkey far away would bray in response. Turning the world inside out in sonic delirium in the darkness of the night, this animal cry out of nowhere opened up a swathe of mimeses. Was this a love song or a declaration of war, or both, as young Michael and doña Edit insisted?

The pain in that sound was too much for me to bear. No wonder Plato goes to such lengths as to warn against imitating horses neighing. And if he was so uptight about a horse, one can only imagine his horror at the thought that the future guardians of his more than perfect republic would dare mimic a donkey! Language would give up the ghost, logic would disappear, and the republic would fall just like I hear it crashing to the ground outside my window. Is this why the cry of the donkey shivers the soul?

But if you pause to think about it, despite his critique of mimesis in other texts, Plato here subscribes to the magical view of mimesis that in imitating something I can or will become that thing. He cannot put it baldly like that since that would be to admit to the truth and the reality of the magic of the mimetic faculty. But like the British administration in colonial Africa and elsewhere he is caught in a bind; to outlaw magic is to entertain the possibility of its efficacy.

90. Plato, bk. 3 of *The Republic*.
Plato is not alone here. The history of the West is the history of the repression of mimesis along with and tied to the domination of nature.91 Together with its embodiments in poetry, myth, and storytelling, mimesis threatens yet also exploits and plays with Western epistemology and ontology, which is why we love it while officially relegate it to children and primitives, as Kafka makes much of in his tale of the ape, red Peter, who is such a good mimic that he becomes human, indeed a distinguished speaker to the honored academy, underscoring the idea that to mimic is to ape and indeed that is what we humans all are and all that we are which is why, strange as it may seem, the great film animator Chuck Jones famously said it is easier to humanize an animal than humanize humans.92

The tale of the ape, Red Peter, captured by sailors on the coast of West Africa is amplified in Dialectic of Enlightenment to include what the authors, Horkheimer and Adorno, call the “organization of mimesis” as the key component of racism, but with a twist, a “mimetic twist,” we might say. Although it is generally the oppressed, marginal group that is credited by the politically superior as possessing mimetic potency, the superior group actually practices a subversive, concealed mimesis in order to subdue the racially defined class of people.

In simple terms, the Other in such situations is framed as animal or as animallike—which strikes a resonating chord with my interest in animals’ relation to writing in the book I am artificing here. In short, the animal can be understood here as the sign and bearer of the mimetic faculty in language as well as in the violence of displacement, meaning the displacement of peasants from the land, from life, itself, and from justice.

In more detailed terms the “organization of mimesis” involves the superior group’s practice of the mimesis of mimesis or, more complex still, the mimesis of alleged mimesis. Writing in exile in Hollywood during WWII these German Jewish authors, Horkheimer and Adorno, string together relevant tropes accentuated by Nazi propaganda including the

91. Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment.
92. Chuck Jones, animator of Bugs Bunny and much else. See Steven Spielberg’s foreword to Chuck Amuck: The Life and Times of an Animated Cartoonist (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999). The actual text there is “it is easier and more believable...”
alleged sensuality and sexuality of the Jew (combined with their physical weakness), their alleged cunning and dissimulation, and above all, the role of smell and the sense of smell understood as a sensitive index of what has been called “the civilizing process,” the idea being that the “more civilized” class of people don’t smell (bad) and have a poor sense of smell (as compared with animals, for example). The epithet “civilized” is itself profoundly problematic, assuming the transcendence of an animal or barbaric state which perforce creates a fundamental tension and anxiety which Freud termed “repression.”

Here “smell” as both noun and verb confounds the issue, adding to the richness of the theme. Something can have a smell, be smelly, etc., and an animal like a dog or cat has an acute sense of smell. This is why much attention is paid by the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to the symbolic functions assigned the “Jewish nose,” with the authors claiming that of all the senses smell most powerfully fuses subject with object, something anathema, they think, to what much of Western philosophy and common sense depends upon, which is why smell is regarded with ambiguity if not visceral horror. Added to this is the disgust and fear of “body odor,” one’s own or that of others, along with a highly ambiguous relation to one’s body and the human body in general, at once repellant and desired, as with sex. (This comes out forcefully in the appendices to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* called “Notes and Sketches” which, truth to tell, seem to me among the most interesting things in the book, especially those concerned with woman, animal, and the body. Can we think of *Palma Africana*, the entire book, as a series of appendices?)

As for the mimesis of mimesis, the argument here is that the police and storm troopers appropriate what they see as the mimetic skills of the enemy to dissimulate, smell them out, and eventually kill them. It requires little imagination to transfer this to the US throughout its history since white settlement and slavery, African-Americans being stereotyped as mimetically and sensually/sexually superior to whites. Nietzsche sees policing and prosecutorial investigations in terms of mimesis also, with a further twist; that the police mimic the criminal but sink to a lower moral level in that they do this in the name of justice.93

In conclusion, let me be as clear as I can be about this argument: that mimesis occupies a key role in political oppression, in both the representation of the exploited Other and in the actual oppressive practices. Second, that mimetic prowess is widely understood to be a property of animals, especially with regards to smell. Third, that policing and social control require the appropriation of this prowess, hence the mimesis of mimesis. And fourth—note carefully—that all this highlights the role of the animal in the cage of language and hence its being cut loose is akin to a declaration of mimetic war, meaning figuring out a way in which the mimesis of mimesis can be turned back against itself as the ultimate hermeneutic maneuver. (Back to Thoth–Hermes, the baboon with the crescent moon and its evolution into the great sorcerer. See section X.)

Agribusiness presents a pointed instance of the repression of mimesis along with the twists and reversals I have just mentioned. Agribusiness—as with African palm plantations—is premised on an imitation of nature so as to commodify it. In Nietzschean terms this process can be interpreted as a form of ressentiment, imitating the Dionysian impulse to imitation so as to convert it into an anti-Dionysian and anti-nature form, these terms being manifest in Euripides’ tragedy *The Bacchae*, with the male monarch of the city-state taking up arms against the magically endowed wilderness of the forest and mountain inhabited by the half-god, half-animal, half-woman that is Dionysus, alongside the women who have fled the city in rebellion against the patriarchal state.

Palm oil plantations are stately projects in the sense that not only do they enjoy the solid support of the state (see section LVIII) but offend the mimesis of nature’s physical and aesthetic forms so as to imitate the state’s military formations of troops in rows and columns with an overall threatening, mono-cropped visage. Then on top of that come the fabulous mimeses of modern chemistry in the processing plant playing with the infinite mimetic endowment of the benzene ring so as to come up with the metamorphic sublime. And let’s not forget that fabulous mimesis with women of color impregnating the “Hope of America.”

But then there are the gypsies, notable for their arts of mimesis, mean-
ing dissimulation, artifice, and trickery, not to mention the dread they create if you get too close. They thread their way through the magical realism of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* starting on page one just as they come every March to the village of Macondo with new wonders like ice, magnets, and alchemy.

Yet across national borders and throughout modern history gypsies are taken to be iconic of the danger inherent in the mimetic faculty. Danger to whom? And of what?

For Peter Linebaugh, author of the pathbreaking essay “All the Atlantic Mountains Shook,” gypsies represent in the eyes of the larger society, as in sixteenth-century England, an amalgam of magic, dissimulation, and resistance to regular wage labor. They were greatly feared, he writes, these nomadic, roaming people, offering an example of “living without land or master,” and the laws against them were brutal including capital punishment *simply for existing*. He traces a series of connections between their mimetic powers and the inability of the state, Church, and entrepreneurs, to create a disciplined labor force, forcing the English government to embark on the following strategy: extradite troublemakers to the Caribbean colonies, facilitate the creation of plantations there, and get into the trade of African slaves—some of whose descendants from mixed-race partnerships made their way to the Island of the Papaya Grove eighty years ago.

What could be more crucial to modern history and the development of capitalism? Not only does the play of the mimetic faculty threaten labor discipline, but it stokes the threat of revolution and does so with animals and animal imagery. One of the many instances of the “world turned upside down” theme from the sixteenth century on in England is quoted by Linebaugh as follows:

> If buttercups buzzed after the bee  
> If boats were on land, churches on sea,  
> If ponies rode men and grass ate the cows,

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95. Ibid., 117.
And cats should be chased to holes by the mouse,
If the mamas sold their babies to the gypsies for half a crown;
Summer were spring, and t’other way round,
Then all the world would be upside down.

Similarly in the book *Thoughts and Sentiments*, published in 1787 by an abolitionist African man, the ex-slave Ottobah Cugoano, there is reference to a well-known print called “The World Turned Upside Down.” It depicted “a pig roasting a cook, a horse saddling a rider, and the like.”

It is pertinent to observe here the role of the animal as a revolutionary actor. Is it because humans were far more familiar with pigs and horses then, or is it because the gypsy-like mimetic faculty could be accessed more readily by humans with reference to animals? There is a density here of specific animal connections with the human world. The pig is the figure of the banquet and we can watch it being roasted on the spit slowly for hours on end, fat bubbling. The pig is also the greedy intelligent creature that wallows in filth as George Orwell makes much of in his *Animal Farm*. What is cooking here in the image to which Cugoano refers us is more than meat and more than the roasting of a cook, with the fat bubbling. It is a mimetic delight and revolution is a mimetic banquet as well as comedy and carnival. Mimesis is joyful. In Orwell’s fable the revolution has foundered, with Stalin, and the joy is that of the humor of satire, a variant of the mimetic banquet.

While Linebaugh traces the connections of the Romany and of the mimetic faculty through time to what has come to be called “the Black Atlantic,” I see a similar connection with AgroArte on the slopes of Medellín in our time in history. Similarly predisposed to turning the world upside down, the AgroArte members practice digging and leveling as with their focus on cultivation—on “green,” we might say—alongside what defines the Black Atlantic, meaning song, storytelling, and dance—those eminently mimetic, protean, “gypsy” arts, which in the case of AgroArte derive from Hip Hop and Rap originating in the

96. Linebaugh, “All the Atlantic Mountains Shook,” 116.
South Bronx, another instance of the network that is Black Atlantic, this time however being carried not by ships but by the internet. Like the Diggers and the Levellers of sixteenth century London they are urban, with roots in peasant agriculture. They straddle the divide. In that regard it is also worth noting that in Marxist terms they are classless or “lumpen,” which implies a state of social being that lends itself to enthusiastic exploration of the mimetic faculty.

Today the calculus of land and labor has changed since the origin of the plantation in the sixteenth century. If before the problem facing the capitalist was labor, now it is land and uppity peasants resisting enclosure, and the (X)paramilitaries provide the solution, for the time being, at least. The (X)paramilitaries too are protean, meaning mimetic dissimulators, note the (X), part of a fascist patrimony laying claim to a specific brand of primitivism as with their terrifying use of chainsaws and decapitation. They are everywhere but nowhere, their greatest mimetic feat being their inhumanity.

Throughout the ages mimesis has been considered dangerous. It is banned in Plato’s republic, just as it is a worry to those who need a docile labor force. Nevertheless as the mimesis of mimesis illustrates, the mimetic faculty and the arts of mimesis can also be exploited as by the war machine of the paramilitaries and the stories the palm plantation lawyers spin in court. Dissimulation engages with dissimulation. Social control and resistance to that control create a never-ending circle or spiral. This is the dilemma facing shamans (and Plato): how to interact in worlds made of imitations of imitations. That is why Shamans are not only able but need to be able to transform into animals like jaguars.

But what better symbol of all that is dangerous about mimesis than to regard it as wrongheaded and stupid, as with the (cry of the) donkey?

LXVIII

I believe Deleuze and Guattari would regard the crying of the donkey as a sound accessing what they call the “plane of immanence.” Indeed such a sound has express-track status in this regard because it is a sound, like chalk scraping the blackboard, that takes the human body out of itself.
But what is this “plane of immanence”? It is not so much a place or a thing or a surface as it is a network of metamorphoses and anamorphoses that D&G regard as “becomings” very much including “becoming animal.”98 And furthermore it would be quite wrong to think of the plane as one thing and the metamorphoses of “becomings” as another. Instead the plane is itself constituted by these becomings such that *impulsions running wavelike through the bodily unconscious* might be a better phrasing or offer a better picture of this “plane,” understanding “bodily” here as referring to my body, your body, and the body of the world.

Is this why parts of Bogotá—especially around the main cemetery with the road to the airport running by—have become sites for huge wall paintings by anonymous or little known painters that throb with color, fantasy, ghostly human figures on the run, and animals? They certainly make the early surrealists in Paris look pretty feeble. Fantasy swirls of form and color metamorphose into trees and flowers, humans and animals. One wall displays the body of a dark-skinned woman lying horizontal. Her body is capacious, like a canoe, in which or by the side of which sit two men and a woman while another, spirit-like, woman with arms outstretched seems anxious to explain something to them. Her right arm reaches out to the “canoe woman.” They clasp tight. With her wide outstretched arms, her piercing look, her beads, and the light blue sky dancing above her, this “spirit woman” centers the image. The man closest to her is fondling what seems like a fox, a cute fox, while the woman behind him, with a questioning look, mouth agape, is trying to give a small yellow flower to a jaguar pup. A full-sized jaguar is creeping around the trunk of the tree that forms the left-hand side. Toward the right-hand edge there is a black-and-white momma cow with two young offspring. By their side, stippled in fine black stripes and dots are two armadillos with their huge ears, long snouts, and armor-like bodies making your skin creep. Blue ferns seem to be their playmates while the outstretched hand of the woman in the canoe dwarfs them like in *Gulliver’s Travels* written by Jonathan Swift, subtitled *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World*. Well, that’s certainly relevant here, our remote nation of fear and violation with its mimetically capacious

creatures both adorable and deadly. The grass from the pavement is growing up along the edges of the woman whose body has become the canoe while she stares, mouth open, at the sky above, mute but for a tiny bird hovering over her. The painting is thus locked into the street, the city street, winding its way from the international airport eventually to the countryside far, far away.

On one wall in huge block letters: 4,150,000 Victims; Displaced Persons; Forced Out.

Along the walls of the Bogotá cemetery are many more images in which birds, raptors, and domestic fowl are dominant with their beaks flashing cruel and wings outstretched, legs thrust forward, talons exposed. Their wings seem to be trembling with fear and rage in attack mode, third world no-nonsense birds, like Benjamin’s angel yearning for paradise.

Connecting words to animals, one enormous painting contains a wide, spread-out word, MORA, in block capital letters. Within and clinging to each letter are painted scenes forming something like a comic strip showing indigenous people being kicked off their land and out of their home. Some people are climbing in and out of the letters.

The M contains a scene of the village, the messy plaza, children playing, a woman fixing a roof. The V-shapes making up the letter M are black and vicious, like spears. The R shows a woman holding a young child in her arm with another child by her side as if they have just emerged from the hollows within the R form.

The paintings began in earnest with the election to mayor of (X)Guerrillero Gustavo Petro in 2012 who was able to legalize or semi-legalize graffiti. Two years later Santos, the current president, forced him to step down on a charge of corruption. Be it noted that Santos himself was minister of defense for that angel of rectitude, Álvaro Uribe, while the famous “false positives” was taking place in the army under Santos’s command. This was a scheme in which soldiers killed more than three thousand new or potential recruits and dressed them in guerrilla uniforms and were rewarded for their success with promotions and money, hence the term,
when it was disclosed two years later, of “false positives.” There have been few indictments. Santos later got the Nobel Prize for peace while we take note yet again of the swathe of mimeses and how all this imitation, cruelty, killing, and deception gets “washed away” by the sludge of state machinery and the amnesia highlighted in the massacre of the banana plantation workers in One Hundred Years of Solitude.

It should also be noted that it didn’t take long for the Bogotá wall paintings to be commoditized and subject to tourism. In none of the YouTube or other portals that I have looked at, however, was there the slightest indication of the terror from which they sprang and to which they ultimately refer. How cruel that the paintings aimed at the restoration of memory should be subject to its annihilation, as in the magical realism of One Hundred Years of Solitude. On the other hand, in the infamous Comuna 13 of Medellín, its history of violence features as a tourist attraction! And not only its history but, to a lesser extent, the ongoing gang violence which, according to taxi drivers, is not a problem for tourists as los duros, the chieftains, literally “the hard ones,” in consultation with the businessmen behind tourism have ordered their followers to leave tourists alone, which is to say, protect them.

Violence has become a titillating tourist attraction to which, I believe, nobody is immune (including anthropologists, human rights workers, etc). Can we draw the bizarre conclusion that actually tourism is a better guardian of the history of violence than the well-meaning efforts of the memory professionals in universities and government? Or if not a better guardian, then at the least a more successful mode of attracting attention? But then it seems most unlikely that the real instigators of the violence will be named, either by the professionals or the tourist guides or the internet sites. Not only can that be dangerous, but the histories are complex and not easily translated to outsiders, or translatable. What one is left with is titillation, meaning the outer skin and sensation of the untoward horrible, another mimesis, this time of terror.

LIX

Back to the cry of the donkey like the chalk walking and singing across the blackboard, taking you out of yourself. It is as if the very plane of im-
manence turns on itself—which is pretty much Walter B. Cannon’s idea of what happened to the body in shock due to massive blood loss in the trenches in WWI as the autonomic nervous system, meaning the bodily unconscious, meant to protect the body, is also what kills it as it reaches and bypasses the extremes of auto-regulation. The cry of the donkey is a premonition of this, a reset of the plane of immanence, a flushing out of sound and the mimetic potentials therein.

Such bodily impulsion refers me to mana, the magic behind magic as delineated by Hubert and Mauss in their general theory of magic (1902), mana being for them a way of contesting intellectualist theories of magic based on the utilitarian logic of the individual as famously advanced by Frazer in The Golden Bough.

Borrowing the term mana from the indigenous people of the South Pacific (via the missionary and proto-anthropologist, R. H. Codrington), Hubert and Mauss were at pains not to follow the conscious thought of the calculating individual but the unconscious thought of the collective which I myself understand to include a whole lot more than people. Animals, plants, swamps, and rivers are there too in that collectivity with its unconscious thought.

For me, mana is the magic of magic that lies behind what Walter Benjamin called “the mimetic faculty” and his related idea of “nonsensuous similarities.” The latter was a dodgy move on Benjamin’s part. He wished to preserve the exactness of mimesis and its associated thrill while acknowledging the fact that most correspondences à la Baudelaire did not, certainly not at first sight, match up as one-to-one imitation or embrace a physical connection.

In fact Benjamin made his “dodgy move” more as an hypothesis and method for investigation of the mimetic workings of language. Behind this was his tinkering with speculations as to the origins of written language in magical practice, something I myself have in previous pages emphasized in my discussion of the gods Hermes and Thoth, being gods of both magic and writing (see section X). According to The Magic

Mountain, these same gods evolved into a “great sorcerer” (see section X) which fits well with my trope of the sorcerer-animal-writing nexus alongside Deleuze and Guattai’s statement that “writers are sorcerers because they experience the animal as the only population before which they are responsible in principle.”

Behind this interest in the mimetic and magical properties of language lay Benjamin’s fascination with similarity as a basic principle of thought, as with macrocosm/microcosmic models. A stunning instance of this “doctrine of the similar” is that of the Cuna Indians of the San Blas Islands between Panama and Colombia made famous in the anthropological record by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his essay “The Effectiveness of Symbols” based on Cuna texts obtained in the 1930s by Baron Nordenskiold of Gothenburg, Sweden, concerning a song sung to a woman in the throes of obstructed labor, unable to give birth. Levi-Strauss assumed that the shaman singing the text was singing to the woman, but later fieldwork suggests that this is either wrong or incomplete in crucial respects. Summoning his spirit helpers by means of animating his wooden figurines through song, sitting by the distraught woman as she lies in a hammock with raw cocoa beans burning, the shaman (a man) sings a drama, like a movie in slow motion in which he and these spirit helpers enter the birth canal to clear the way for the delivery of the baby. But it seems that this body of the woman is actually/also the spirit body of “the great mother” of this matriarchal society, providing a powerful instance not only of macro/micro simulacra but of the magical potential therein.

The Cuna accounts are also important in demonstrating that for all of the exactness of copies, there is nevertheless room for wildly fanciful divergences as well. Far from being a “faithful copy,” the copy can be flagrantly surreal, which would fit nicely with Benjamin’s idea of “nonsensuous similarity.”

Moreover what gives magic and shamanism its edge, here and else-

where throughout the world, is the confusion created by the fact that
copies can be contrived by other shamans and by spirits in life-worlds
given over to illusion and illusions of illusions, thanks to “the doctrine
of the similar.” It is this that makes shamans indispensable, both cause
and cure of mimetic mysteries. (Writing is not far off.)

The child being a windmill standing tall and waving outstretched arms,
and my artist friend Simryn Gill becoming a palm tree, are fine instanc-
es of a one-to-one mimesis. But the mimetic connection gets a lot trick-
ier with palm-reading, divination using the cracks in a burnt caribou
scapula, reading a person’s character from their handwriting and, let’s
not forget, astrology, upon which Benjamin lavishes such keen-eyed
interest in his contrast with astronomy.

This contrast is pertinent to my serpentine practice of writing, meaning
a “mimetic writing” that is both a faithful and an unfaithful copying practice (or at least the appearance thereof, thus placing it well within shamanic practices of copying). Empiricism was never so alive! In Benjamin’s view astrology radically displaces a context-bound relationship binding the human body to a particular, time-sensitive constellation of celestial bodies as well as to birth date and time. By contrast astronomy represents a science that displaces the body by ocularity (as in peering through a telescope), erases context, and uses mathematics in place of mythology. Indeed, Benjamin saw astrology as tied up with trance forms of consciousness (which I take to be the wisdom of the body that I call “the bodily unconscious”) that includes collective ritual and, as in southern Mexico, may well include the nahual or animal familiar.102

Freud’s fascination with the transition from four-legged to two-legged human status is a fascination that bears on this shift from astrology to astronomy as well as adds depth to my idea here of the practice of mimetic writing which I now see as a four-legged practice. With the shift to two legs from four, the sense of smell, once predominant, gives way to the priority of the ocular and—get this!—now the genitals are more visible and shame enters the picture and along with that disgust and repression. Freud emphasizes that with the animal the entire surface of the body is sexual, while with the two-legged stance this is reduced and concentrated in the genitalia. Furthermore the genitals, having become a source of shame, are covered over, concealed and disguised, as with the story of Adam and Eve in which, might I add, the snake plays a decisive role, the snake being the anti-Christ or devil, famous for his art of deception, disguise, and swathes of mimeses. All of that deception (and temptation, remember the apple!) is preordained with the assumption of the upright posture. Animals are famous for their powers of mimicry but this new, this human capacity for mimicry, represents a radical reorganization of the senses in relation to the body and eroticism in which secrecy and deception are, so to speak, built into the new, two-legged body and its relationship to the environment, preeminently an ocular relationship of subject to object, forever estranged from the object.

102. Benjamin, see the last entry, “To The Planetarium” in his “One-Way Street” in Reflections, pp. 92–94.
Hence a mimetic practice of writing cannot be two-legged. It has to include the entirety of the human body as an erotic entity just as it has to embrace the recurring and ever-present reality of bodies, meaning the astrological insistence of my body, your body, and the body of the world as implicit to reality. This certainly makes the practice of writing interesting.

In other words “nonsensuous correspondences” bear on my practice and passion here in these pages which is with writing and not just with writing but with a writing in which the things written about enter into the writing itself. It is as if writing can summon what it refers to into itself. On this view writing is not about something but is that something. It is not a label. It is a call, just as the cry of the donkey is a call.

The cry of the donkey holds me to this. It is the cry that leaps off the page as blindfold children try to pin the tail back on the donkey and we laugh at the anatomical dislocations as two sides of the one coin, the cry that erupts and the tail hanging forlornly off the donkey’s nose or left floating mid-air amid the raucous laughter of the onlookers. Cacophony all around. Mimesis unhinged. “Let the animals loose.” Cut up. Burroughs and Gysin.

It makes you wonder if the donkey has been selected through millennia as the Great Mimetic Toy, nowhere more so than in the milieu of the adult’s imagination of the child’s.

But there is one question that plagues me here. Why are donkeys so photogenic?

LXX

Benjamin’s concept of nonsensuous similarities presumes the notion that language is a net to be found everywhere like a fact of nature. (Think of Barthes and Heine on the palm tree.) Hence the following electrifying statement where the young Benjamin writes in 1916 that “There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of all to
communicate their mental meanings.” At one point in all earnestness he asks to whom is the language of the lamp directed? To the fox? To the mountain?

And as if this is not enough, as if this is not more than engaged with the animal-language-tree nexus to which my text is beholden, what of Benjamin’s next step, namely, his invocation of magic, claiming that “mediation,” meaning the “immediacy of all mental communication,” is the “fundamental problem” of linguistic theory and that this “immediacy” can be called magic. Small wonder he concludes by saying that “the primary problem of language is magic.”

However, as he became caught up in Marxist ideas after reading Georg Lukacs’s essay on the fetish quality of the commodity in 1924 on the island of Capri, Benjamin changed his position to one that kept juggling the aforesaid magic of the language of things with the magic of commodities. Now there is another understanding of how the lamp speaks differently to the fox, to the mountain, and to man.

More bracing still are the insights into Benjamin’s “language of things” essay provided by documentary filmmaker Hito Steyerl in 2006. She advocates a documentary filmmaking that amounts precisely to this view of the language of things, especially now in the globalizing commodity world where our oil palm is situated. Benjamin would have been delighted! A feature film tells a story. A documentary is more inclined to follow the language of things through imagery, especially by means of “nonsensuous correspondences.”

After all, capitalism does this effortlessly, via your credit card, for instance. It is one thing for Roland Barthes in 1975 to elicit the strangeness of trees pulling linguistic stunts, especially palm trees, but today this is the new normal, recirculating fairy tale worlds in which things speak to things like in an enchanted forest. The stupendous forces of marketing, especially its visual imagery, persistently co-opt

104. Ibid. Also the epigraph to Hito Steyerl’s essay “The Language of Things” (European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, May 2006).
Benjamin’s language of things, allowing the capitalist public sphere to swamp all other circuits of translation thanks to the Universal Equivalent of money, the ultimate mimetic flux. This is pointedly the case with palm oil and the oil palm (as we shall see later, LXXXIV) for is not palm oil the metamorphic sublime, that thing from which all other things are made? Is there any commodity other than gold and fossil fuels which gets so close to being like money, the Universal Equivalent? And surely this very sublimity is what makes my task here both necessary and easier, the task, that is, of tracing circuits of (nonsensuous) correspondence in which the things written about enter into the writing itself?

As for capitalist circuitry, is this not a gift to a certain class of documentary filmmaker, anxious and excited by the possibility of eliciting an alternate world through an alternate web of things that are not so much things or thingly things as they are nodes in webs of ongoing translation that allow for the co-optation, so to speak, of the co-option provided by the commodity form? Can we out-palm the metamorphic sublime of the palm, seeing that we have such an abundance of mimeses by which things talk to other things, first the magic box of tricks supplied by the capitalist commodity form and second the Faustian chemistry of palm oil itself?

The challenge for such a filmmaker, like the mimetologically inclined anthropologist, is to figure out a way of “talking” with things via nonsensuous, mimetic correspondences. My drawing of doña Edit’s house together with my baroquely detailed verbal description of its contents, one by one, spiraling clockwise like tracing a shell, is an example of a swathe of mimeses as things morph into other things, endlessly it can seem. You can think of this drawing plus its associated list of things as my equivalent to a palm oil processing plant from which an abundance of products come, products meaning swathes of mimeses from diesel fuel to kid’s paints and crayons plus the basis of most of what you walk through in today’s supermarket, that new forest of symbols.

There are thingly things and not so thingly things running together here (running like Burroughs’s animals). There is the never-driven
blue car next to the orange tractor with its tires shot out, machetes, and gourd trees, etc. But then the blue car hauls in Pedro. The blue car converts into Pedro the bodyguard and therein lies a tale. In fact several tales. And not only about Pedro but about Lucy and bodyguards in Colombia, and so forth. Ovid fits right in.

You can think of this spiral shell-tracing in at least three ways (Oh! Oh! Another list!):

First, as arrant Positivism, one damn fact after another, bearing in mind, however, Adorno’s stricture of the first draft of Benjamin’s Baudelaire, Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century, essay, as involving a method lying at the crossroads between Positivism and magic. What was anathema to Adorno, however, I take to be a great gift. I think we all need like the trickster to sit at these crossroads, if only because we have no other choice no matter how many negative dialectics you negate.

The second way you can think of the spiral shell-tracings is as a Denkbild or “thought-image” foray into ethnographic realism, or is it ethno-graphic surrealism?, the image element of which is not only the actual drawing of doña Edit’s home but the pictures-in-the-mind of the thingly things enumerated.

Third, you can think of this exercise as the ethnographer in search of a method, of a way of responding to the question, How best to get across a sense of people, place, and history which, in this case, will help change history, meaning the paramilitarized invasion of oil palm?

Thus the serpentine form, articulated by the nuts and bolts of Roman numerals.

But, you ask, what is the aim and end-point of such an exercise? Steyerl puts it well, I think. “By reflecting on the conditions of production in which this documentary translation is being achieved, new forms of a-national public spheres and postcapitalist production circuits might emerge.” Which I read as the urge for an uncoupling of the mimetic faculty from capitalist appropriation.
(An esoteric aside.) Thirteen years after his “theological” essay on the language of things, we find Benjamin warning against the occult, advising the reader as to the need for a dialectic optic which sees the everyday as impenetrable and vice versa, all in the name of the overarching concept of “profane illumination” which meshes the theological with the material, or, in our terms, God with the donkey.

Is not the donkey the epitome of the profane? But what of the illumination aspect of the “profane illumination”? Illumination certainly suggests theology (and also enlightenment) but does it not also indicate the sonic delirium of the cry of the donkey opening up swathes of mimeses? For is not profanation itself sacred? Is not the donkey on which the Messiah enters the Holy City a profane illumination or at least an indispensable part thereof?

As for the magic of language, is not the donkey (like the snake) the Antichrist, challenging God who created the world through the word? Is this why the donkey is held to be the very quintessence of stupidity, another word for which is “dumb,” which means not only stupid but without speech?

In that 1916 essay on language of Benjamin’s that I have just cited, he works through Genesis in the Hebrew Bible to pick up on stage two of the making of the world which is when God breathes life into the clay that is mankind and thus provides humans with the gift of language freed of God.

Is the donkey’s cry the memory of that moment liberating language from God, and is this action repeated by Burroughs as Antichrist cutting the pages, letting the animals out? Does this account for the eviscerating alienation-effect of the cry of the donkey, that equine Antichrist?

After all, the representation of the devil as an ass is not only very old and disturbing, but is what brings a mighty nonsensuous correspon-
dence into focus, namely the correspondence between the equine ass and the human backside also known, in English, at least, as the arse and American English as ass. Indeed kissing the donkey’s arse is part of European folklore concerning the cult of Satanic witchcraft. Now, that is mimesis! And let us not forget the common story that men in the swamplands from which I write in northern Colombia are said to have sexual intercourse with donkeys. All this raises the question as to whether Benjamin adhered too strongly to a visual understanding of the mimetic faculty at the expense of the bodily, visceral aspect.

LXXII

(Another esoteric aside.) In any event the perception of similarities, consciously or unconsciously, is what underlies the relays and swathes of mimeses in my search for a mode of writing that links the writing with what the writing is about (which is what this book is about).

Fascinating and significant here is Benjamin’s claim that the recognition of the similarities he has in mind is fleeting. It surfaces as a flash, only to disappear. “It flits past, can possibly be won again, but cannot really be held fast as can other perceptions.”

This applies with special force to the play of the mimetic faculty in writing and reading. If the words we write and read across the page are linked by virtue of nonsensuous correspondences to what they refer to, then it is the physical and barely conscious activity moving fast across the page which allows this “uploading” into and through the correspondences evoked. Like a spark, a mimetic connection is ignited as the (reading) eye and the (writing) hand make their move while moving on. “Thus the coherence of words and sentences,” writes Benjamin, “is the bearer through which, like a flash, similarity appears. For its production by man—like its perception by him—is in many cases and partic-

ularly the most important, limited to flashes. It is not improbable that the rapidity of writing and reading heightens the fusion of the semiotic and the mimetic in the sphere of language.”

As for the magic of mimesis, it is this that makes mimesis thrilling without us quite knowing why. Mimesis is thrilling because it allows you in your imagination to become Other, which is the reason why we engage with and enjoy reading—and writing. Both are magical acts—and arts.

And when I write “thrilling” I also mean the joy of mimesis, which in turn invokes play as with the play of children and our understanding of play as experimenting with reality and investigating it.

With the braying of the donkey this sensibility opens like a fan. Then the bodily unconscious takes fire. “People’s habits are continually disturbed by things which trouble the calm ordering of life,” write Hubert and Mauss, “drought, wealth, illness, war, meteors, stones with special

shapes, abnormal individuals, etc. At each shock, at each perception of the unusual, society hesitates, searches, waits."

"These shocks "turn the abnormal into mana."109

As regards shocks, not only meteors and droughts but surely—surely?—(X)paramilitaries and the palma africana they advance?

Does this mean I am connecting if not equating the expansion of the palma africana plantation with the braying of the donkey? Is that a nonsensuous correspondence, an assemblage held together with sticky mimetic glue that shakes the world as it compresses at midnight outside my window?

This question channels us into Surrealism, especially because it seems to me that Walter Benjamin folded mana into his often quoted observation in his essay on Surrealism that "we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday."110 In the surrealist lexicon this is "the marvelous."

That patron saint of Surrealism, the young Comte de Lautréamont, put it well in his epic poem Maldoror (1868) when, on hearing dogs howling at the moon, the narrator’s mother tells him "When you are in bed and hear the barking of the dogs in the countryside, hide beneath your blanket but do not deride what they do: they have an insatiable thirst for the infinite, as you, and I, and all other pale, long-faced human beings do."111

Dogs howling at the moon evoking the infinite for us humans via the wisdom of the mother—it hangs together so strangely you feel the hairs on the back of your neck rising in parallel to the cry of the donkey while

I hide beneath my blanket. Ask yourself, How do we read the mother saying, “When you are in bed...”? Do we read it for substance, or for tone? Do we read it for content? Certainly. But what floods over us is its tone. That is what I take to be mana and as such, as mana, it is of a piece with Maldoror’s continuous evocation of extraordinary animal worlds engaging with what Benjamin, in explicit reference to Maldoror in his essay on Surrealism, calls “the cult of evil.”

To read Maldoror is to shudder. It is the “cult of evil” which does this but also—I insist on this—that evil depends on the writing, the poet’s ear so fluid with resonance, yet so unexpected, something much more than a poetry of aggression combined with the swallowing of time, which is how Gaston Bachelard puts it in his study of Lautréamont. Benjamin suggests that in harness with Dostoyevsky, and Rimbaud (whose poems are full of animals), this “cult of evil” provided, thanks eventually to the Surrealists, a radical sense of freedom. To be sure both Lautréamont and Rimbaud (“I is an Other”) were the patron saints of Surrealism, but what does this phrase, “cult of evil,” mean? Does it not refer to a mimesis with evil meaning empathy with it as a means for distancing bourgeois values as well as a no-holds barred investigation of hell, an empathy at times so detailed and diabolically artful it insinuates itself into the heart of the reader?

Distinct to liberal (bourgeois) humanism, for Benjamin this freedom is tied to impulsions of the bodily unconscious opening up “the image sphere—the sphere, in a word in which political materialism and physical nature share the inner man.” Repeatedly Benjamin emphasizes this interpenetration of body with image as a profane illumination, one that predisposes to “revolutionary discharge.” Is this not the visceral, corporeal, aspect of what five years later he would call “the mimetic faculty”?

Maldoror itself is a mana-machine because its writing engages with what the writing is about. This is more than an expression of mana. It creates

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mana. In reacting to shock and in converting shock into mana, more is made in defiance not only of bourgeois culture but of Newton’s laws of the conservation of energy.

In his Introduction to his translation of Maldoror, Paul Knight writes that “the reader, far from being borne effortlessly along to the next point in the narrative, is shocked into awareness of the process taking place on the page before him.”

What is this process? It is the ultimate turn of the screw of realism, which is to say, mimesis, when the writing becomes increasingly inward looking and, thanks to the animal, is when “the process of writing itself becomes the subject of fiction.”

As a capstone let us acknowledge that the name Lautréamont is itself not only a disguise or a pen name. It is in itself mimetic magic at war with the state and with literature; it is a mask for the author, the absurdly young Isidore Ducasse (1846–68), who combined in himself the criminal wanted by the police with the author defying literary convention.

LXXIII

If the cayman and the iguana provide a sexual cadence in my narration, along with the artificial insemination of the “Hope of America” palm oil trees, the donkey does too. The eminent sociologist from northern Colombia, Orlando Fals-Borda, informs us in his three-volume work on this region that generally speaking human sexual liaisons are fluid and open—heteronormatively, at least—and that this not only lends itself (in his opinion) to anti-authoritarian attitudes, but to sexual intercourse of men with female donkeys as a way of being initiated into sex. The two-legged male couples with the four-legged female. Burreo, they call this, and one informant tells him that the difference is that we are frank enough to admit this while in other parts of Colombia hypocrisy reigns. I am also informed by a young Colombian anthropologist that

118. Fals-Borda, Historia doble de la costa, 151B–152B.
in the Guajira peninsula north of here it is said that men sexually mount female donkeys so as to enlarge the penis, or at least that is a side effect.

In his memoir, *Eminent Maricones*, published in 1999, Juan Manrique writes of his time as an adolescent spent in the vicinity of El Banco with his cousins who lived there “fucking all the animals in sight: chickens, pigs, and, above all, the female donkeys.” Later he suffered what he describes as a terrible infection of his testicles “that I had caught, probably while fucking donkeys with Uncle Hernán.”

Misael told me that actually the donkey (*burro*) is a relative newcomer that was instituted there in the 1960s, once the cattle, brought by the cattlemen–drugmen, firmed up the ground. I really don’t understand this but in any event *burros* weren’t of much use in the early days. They got stuck in the mud of the swamps (their hooves are the same as horses and mules, not cloven like the devil and cattle), and in the early days tigers would eat them. Now, there’s an image for you, almost on the same scale as André Breton’s image, or is it a concept, of the “fixed-explosive,” the image of which was a locomotive abandoned in the forest? Breton’s idea of “convulsive beauty” fits in here too, with the image of the beautiful burro—so gentle and so sweet in appearance—rearing and screaming as the tiger lunges with its stripes through the dappled light of the forest. Perhaps like me, the tiger—meaning jaguar—found that braying unsettling, scooting along the plane of immanence.

Is it because of the memories of those days that *burros* cry so much, even though there are no tigers anymore? Maybe they are frightened that randy men will hump them or don’t hump them enough? But they seem happy enough, at least during the day, trotting along the street all on their own without any obvious human being leading them, making drumlike music with empty plastic canisters bouncing up and down on their wooden frame saddles. Once or twice I saw a pair in full flight down the street midday as if racing each other, swerving from side to side. Quite mad. Autonomous beings with a mind of their own, yet slaves to man and history, crazy and photogenic.

Photogenic? This is strange.

Most every middle class person with whom I discuss the matter agree that donkeys are ravishingly cute.

So here’s the (Bataillian) question: How can a being be considered so cute and so dumb and so willful and so aligned with witches, Satan, the human backside, and Christ’s birth, not to mention the unmentionable sexual couplings or stories thereof? The *burro* is a mimetic volcano.

Is it because donkeys are considered the ultimate beast of burden that they are so beautiful? Is it because they are so beautiful that their cry unhinges Being itself, giving full throttle to the mimetic faculty?

LXXXIV

Why is it that animals such as donkeys and tigers feature so much in my memory, or if not in my memory then in my writing? They haul themselves in, these animals, into the sentences, clamoring for inclusion.
Inclusion into what?

Burroughs insisted on cutting the sentences and juxtaposing the fragments set free to form other configurations that tapped into repressed dimensions of being. The aim was political as much as psychological, to challenge control, meaning the links between language, image, and stately being.

Like the poet Heine composing poetry about the hemlock tree dreaming of the palm tree, Burroughs was kidding so as to get his point across. “Kidding” as in playing a joke, “kid” referring to a baby goat or to a child “acting the goat” and especially kidding as in comics and animated cartoons such as Tom and Jerry, Mickey Mouse, and Bugs Bunny (the list is endless), it being easier, as the great animator said, to humanize animals than it is to humanize humans.120

Which could be why animals feature so vigorously in Freud’s case studies. Think of the Wolf Man, the Rat Man, Little Hans’s horse, and also Freud’s dogs that shared the couch with the poet Hilda Doolittle as she was being psychoanalyzed—all these attempts to humanize humans besieged not only by trauma, according to Freud, but by the memory of trauma. Think of the trail-blazing patient known as Anna O. who virtually invented psychoanalysis, the famous Bertha Pappenheim; the little dog of her English lady-companion that so disgusted her that she stopped drinking water; and the hallucinatory black snake that multiplied as she looked at her hand into each finger becoming a snake with a death’s head (the nails) precipitating paralysis of the arm as she nursed her dying father. Could it be that the animal lends itself to an Otherness which, while inseparable from trauma, also suggests the way out from trauma, as with the Jews who become mice and the Germans and Poles cats and pigs in Art Spiegelman’s Mauss? And if not the way out then at least a way of approaching trauma that acknowledges it through the animal? 121 Could this be why animals run through my text? Is this what shamanism is too, a comic book type animation with jaguars and boa

120. See footnote 92.
constrictors not to mention the yagé vision of my friend Florencio years ago in the Putumayo way to the south of the island with angels, jungle birds, soldiers dancing in the mountain valley in their golden uniforms and golden boots and, lastly, three Capuchin monks in black sitting by waterfalls of gold issuing forth from golden books?

In this vein I keep thinking of the monkeys in the forest by the side of the palm plantations acting the goat by throwing sticks at me. Those sticks must be words too, like the iguana eggs, the dogs swirling around doña Edit, and that world-changing cry of the donkey that rips out your heart.

There are other, more staid and literary ways of referring to this kidding maneuver. It could be called a “conceit” meaning make-believe. Let’s pretend to see reality this way, is what it means, so as to understand reality better.

“Camp” is another way of thinking this. We perform, we exaggerate, our bodies take flight as does the voice expressing dreams and desires by virtue of parody and affectation. Oscar Wilde comes to mind. Beautiful wordplay, that’s for sure. Such “camping around” is built out of the conceit of knowing what not to know with a wink and a nod. Such two-layered presentation magnifies reality, as Georg Simmel pointed out in what became a famous essay on secrecy.¹²²

Inhabiting this world and the Other world, such kidding and such camp mocks this world which it embellishes no less than does a monkey in the canopy throwing sticks at human marauders below.

This two-layered world of canopies and pedestrians is the form taken in cannibal metaphysics, too, in which animals and plants are considered to be humans disguised as animals and plants. Who knows what that monkey really is? No wonder Michael so insistently asked me if I truly believed we humans came from monkeys. Maybe the monkeys throwing

sticks were asking the same question? You need a shaman dreaming to sort this out, sifting through the various layers of copy and reality that reality assumes. (But it never really gets sorted out.) Simmel’s essay on secrecy would benefit greatly from some shamanic input. After all, when you frame the copy/reality dilemma as one of secrecy very much and inevitably including inter-shamanic hostilities, rivalry, and envy, the issue is no longer only philosophical or (get ready, some big shamanic words) ontological or epistemological. It is sociological and hermeneutic.

Let’s take the word “disguise,” for example, as in a human disguised as a plant or merely acting as one (e.g., Simryn Gill got up as oil palm). Disguise means something done willfully with intent to deceive. That is the secret. Acting means make-believe. Both magnify reality into a two-canopied affair. In the case of disguise there is always a deeper thing going on but most of the time most of us don’t know what that might be, and if we do, how can we be sure, anyway? There could be a deeper deepness, in fact there always is this suspicion and possibility, and this must be even more acute for the Cofán shaman wondering if cattle have spirit-owners or the Secoya shaman trying to figure out the nature of oil palm spirits, these trees being new to the area (see section XLI). And there is no end to this uncertainty and disguise, nor disguises of disguise. The shaman is no guarantee. Far from it. Most of the time the shaman is the problem. This is what terrifies Plato, this rabbit hole in which (his version of) reason is helpless.

Tradition demands that in Christian nativity scenes there are two animals on either side of the infant Jesus: an ox and an ass. There is much symbolism in this, of course, but for our purposes let us step aside from symbols (it is possible) and see the animals for what they are as animals attached to the savior meaning redemption and revelation. That’s a lot to ask of an animal, but they seem more than up for it which must be why, thanks to strange detours of whimsy, my text has come to highlight donkeys and cattle, redeeming the text as a whole by means of something more than spiraling descriptions at the crossroads of magic and positivism, something more than swathes of mimeses, namely, that trump shamanic card, the alternating current of skilled revelation of skilled concealment.
Together with the animals and plants I find I write with images or, more specifically, in “thought-images” that flip over between being a picture and being an idea and back again, and again. There’s barely any stopping once you get started because the thought-image is restless, certainly animated, literal yet abstract, story and idea in one, close to what Benjamin calls a “dialectical image,” an image that holds still, for the moment, the past in the present.

By images I mean not only two-dimensional flat pictures but theater-like three-dimensional scenes as with the fiction writing of Genet and Burroughs, both of whom have no hesitation in placing without warning theater or, in the case of Burroughs, movie-making, in their books wrenching at reality this way. By “images” as in “thought-images,” I therefore include sound, feelings, and most of all atmospheres; as with the heat that is like a hammer-scald, the soft air of the night and early morning, the hard balls of pig feces scattered across the street like discarded cannonballs from Sir Frances Drakes’s attacks on Riohacha on the Caribbean coast north of here, the soft purr of the motorbikes on the sand of the one street, the slap of the dominoes the young men play next door out on the street on weekends and at night, the grunting of domestic pigs wandering loose in the street and backyards waking me in the morning, frightening me with their anxious, grunting urgency, the yellow guavas scattered across the ground out back where I wash in the morning, and the good cheer doña Edit puts into the day as the sun rises. And so forth.

“And so forth.”

I am walking along the river to watch the backhoe purring like a cat doing its job in the light of the full moon, the soft night of stars. How enchanting this light! People are sitting still outside their homes like statues sculpted of light. The river shines. Pedro talks of the tortoises he saw here today swimming joyously. One of the older local men with an embarrassed giggle reaches for the hand of the beautiful young Christian aid worker from Canada who barely speaks a word of Spanish.
“And so forth.” Atmosphere here suggests something quite different to subjectivity or objectivity or thinking in terms of that set-up. It suggests another realm of being and thinking about being, the openings to which are lined by animals and plants, leafy creatures, four-legged, finned, and feathered, creatures summoning a world of leaps and speed, slowdowns and sudden swerves as with certain types of music such as the shaman’s singing in the southwest of Colombia even though that’s a long way from the Island of the Papaya Grove.

The shaman dispenses gourds of the hallucinogen yagé singing with its swarms of angels, swarms of jungle birds filling the room, swarms of snakes being vomited out and then returning swimming upward in the stream of vomit, swarms of yagé people that are shamans that are soldiers dancing in the vision come real as you try to clamber out of your hammock to dance with them. Seeing them, you cure? Yes! He says as you collapse back into the hammock and allow its folds to wrap you tight in the womb of time.

“And so forth.” What is hidden in this phrase are the automatic relays of body-image and thought-image that are propagated once you start this process. It is like a key has been turned, opening a box of memories such that each hauls out the next according to some barely decipherable plan or grammar that is hard to understand because such images “speak” another language and their logic lies elsewhere. “Language” is apt to be a clumsy metaphor here because images tend to “presence” in ways that words do not, reveling in circuits of skilled revelation of skilled concealment like shamans becoming jaguars and then reverting to their outer human form extracting octopi and mice from someone’s chest and stomach, only to have those octopi and mice disappear again as part of a grand game with inner and outer worlds not to mention fatal duels of magic with other shamans, which is why so few shamans are left, real ones, I mean.123

All that is, as I said, a long way from the Island of the Papaya Grove, referring to earlier times of my life in southwestern Colombia, but the lesson applies fulsomely to the Island, too, by which I mean, must

mean, *writing* about the island. Yes, that’s it. Those yagé-nights live on as the “editing-device” for parsing reality.

Benjamin presents us with something similar to those octopi and mice in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” where he several times evokes the notion that, at a moment of danger, images suddenly surface only to just as suddenly disappear, a spasmodic rising and falling brought on by what he calls “the state of emergency” and the changing quality of experience in modern times bound to flashes of imagery.

Like Benjamin, Burroughs, and Genet, Hito Steyerl thinks of images in this more theatrical sense, but brought up to date with digitally created realities entering into the viewer’s body or the body entering into the image. It is her opinion, and here we might recall Guy Debord’s 1967 classic, *Society of the Spectacle*, that what we call reality today is mightily influenced by images that erupt from screens.124 “They pass through the screen,” she says in a 2013 talk. What, I ask, could be more magical than that? (Benjamin was saying this in his 1920s essays on color in illustrations of books for children, then later in 1936 in his “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”) It is as if the forward thrust of history and technology has spun the world back into so-called prehistory while a turbulent, fractured, incomplete quality to reality forms and forms us as we insist on a certain minimum of coherence.

What a burden this puts on words.

Or not? Maybe words like this? Maybe it reminds them of when they were animals and stars and apples pictured in children’s language primers, jumping off the page? Not all words, of course, but a quorum.

Wittgenstein cavils against this picture theory of language learning. He advocates instead the idea of a game as in a grammar shared by a linguistic community and if you don’t know the game or there is no game,

then shut up, and if a thought is there shimmering on the horizon but won’t divulge itself, then let it be, hold your tongue. As you can see, I don’t agree.

But game is good. Think of Hermes spinning his tricks. Or think of my friend Simryn Gill becoming an oil palm in Malaysia, a transformation she owes to her other artwork in which she cuts up words she finds in books to make beads with the letters visible and then strings the beads together to make necklaces. Other times she has words so small you can barely read them streaming across the gallery wall like birds in flight. Murmuration is the word for such bird action; countless birds filling the afternoon sky, wheeling and soaring in unison, changing direction in a split second, scattering the light. Words become birds become flying this way then that way without a care in the world, it seems. *Murmuration*, such a strange word. What would Plato have said? It sounds suspiciously close to what he warned against, imitating neighing and gurgling, etc. Not that etymology will help much here. We are beyond history with this one, I’m afraid. What’s important (always) is the newness.

I could just as well have spent my writing engaging not with animals but with the motorbikes that purr through the wilderness and along the sandy street. Surely they too provide the elixir action I crave, the elixir that allows writing to display its self-awareness and, with that, bring forth the untoward? Or as Paul Knight said with regards to *Maldoror*, the writing process becomes part of the fiction itself (tied to animals).

How animals perform this function for humans is beyond me. Is it because they serve as a screen for human projection and imagining and, in so doing, quiver on the borderline with science fiction and other fantastic states of being that infiltrate core features of signification and language? Think back to Kafka’s and Freud’s animals, black snakes that displace one’s arm and fingers, wolves outside my bedroom window with their big tails, the scary horses outside in the Vienna street clomping and chomping, and don’t forget the poor little rat-man consumed by nail-biting neuroses changing his mind all the time. If here the existence of the animals is cause for pause, you might also consider the nicknames lovingly attached to these case studies by posterity: the rat
man, for instance, and the wolf-man, and then Kafka referring to his fatal tubercular cough as his animal.

In other words, are not all animals surreal, except that pet-lovers and biologists have erased that sensibility? The former make the animal human while the latter seem to have lost sight of the animal in a welter of “data.”

But here history intrudes, as with the child’s imagination of the adult’s imagination. Are not today’s children pretty much the world over the repository of the great archetypes of animals and magic? And is it not through their imagination of children’s imagination that adults connect with animals as human?

I am thinking of animals as not only surreal as in Blaise Cendrars’s unforgettable description of an anteater, but of animals as surreal-making, endangering and engendering all of reality.125

Cendrars’s anteater came at me like a fierce summer storm. Was it Gertrude Stein who said “description is explanation,” or words to that effect? But here description changes the rules of explanation with the anteater unrolling its endless tongue on an ant heap.

Added to which is Benjamin’s notion that surrealism performed a “pro-fane illumination,” meaning that Surrealism exploits the aura of things in a process that points in opposite directions at the same time; into the earth (the profane part) and into heaven (the illumination part, so much for Enlightenment). Surrealism is like the ladder the storyteller descends and ascends between the depths of the earth and the heavens above.126 In Marxist language this translates into the commodity as both thing and spirit (as reification and as fetish). In my language it is God and donkey or, if you like, donkey and God.

Thus is the animal—mainstay of the surreal in everyday life—charged

with profane illumination. To be both infrahuman and superhuman is to be a generator of life and of meaning, not to mention non-meaning.

As for the animal, so for plants. Think of Heinrich Heine’s palm in an eastern land, transposed to the harsh realities of northern Colombia as noir Surrealism.

L X X V I

In his memoir, *Eminent Maricones*, Jaime Manrique lists animals abounding in the 1960s in the forest when he visited his family home in El Banco four hours from the Island of the Papaya Grove: scorpions, caymans, anacondas, herons, ducks, iguanas, monkeys, sloths, anteaters, deer, agouti, and more. Then he moves on to the creatures of the rivers. When you read his lists in his book written in English and published in the US you might think he is trying to impress you with his exotic background. But what is also inescapable, I think, is the jarring note that his animals provide, propelling the reader into another register of being and another register of feeling.

L X X V I I

I compiled a list of the animals providing philosophical elixir for this text. (Now there’s a funny sentence.)

They are neither in alphabetical order nor in order of their appearance but in order of how I recalled them just now.

There must be a story in that.

(Some of these animals appear later on.)

turtle
caimans
mojarras (fish in the ponds, a.k.a. tilapia)
parrot

pigs
dogs
donkeys, burro, ass
horses
tigers (tigre, meaning jaguar)
boa
cattle
Cendrars’s anteater
chiguiros
white herons
bagre (fish)
inguanas
monkey
apes
hens
mosquitoes
Venus the Morning Star
spirits of the dead—silhouettes of kids dancing in the river at twilight

That’s pretty much it, I think, although the tail end is pretty raggedy, tumbling into stars and spirits and shadows of kids. How come? Is the boundary that porous? Can a dancing kid in the twilight skipping through water with other kids—stick figures—be a spirit, be a star, be a mosquito, or at least have something in common?

These would be idle questions were it not for one hugely salient fact and that is the animation of African palm in this our day and age, an animation which, as property of the object, creeps into the writing about it on account of its mix of life and death, inverse of the swamp.

LXXVIII

With regards to animals and gods I recall a conversation with young Michael (aged twelve) in which he asked me if I believed in God. No! I replied. His uncle explained that meant I believed not in creation but in evolution. People looked at me bug-eyed. “Do you really think we came from apes?” It seemed an urgent question with the power of a child’s curiosity, not to mention the power of the monkey tethered next door
running in circles and performing somersaults. It had huge eyes in the center of the most marvelous halo of hair circling its face, a longer than long tail, and a skinnier than skinny body.

LXXXIX

Waking one morning in the village on the Brazuelo de Papayal I realized with a start that all my work—if “work” it be—that all my work in Colombia has been by rivers.
Coming so late in the day, that realization seems strange to me if you consider the length of time I have spent in Colombia living by rivers. I remembered how when I first arrived here on the island in the launch at twilight we would pass boys and girls playing—it looked like dancing—in the shallow water at each of the villages we passed. I would wave and found myself daydreaming—or should I say “twilight-dreaming”—comparing the kids, the canoes, the houses, everything I saw, with their equivalents far away on the Timbiqui River on the Pacific Coast where I have spent much time since 1972.

Some filmmakers call dawn and twilight “magic hour” on account of the quality of the light and many cinematographers consider it the best time for filming.

My understanding is that at this time in this light when the sun is just below the horizon and the sky dark blue, there then occurs a feeling of unreality mixing with its opposite, a feeling of stark reality like cut-outs (here we go, again). This is partly dependent on the vast difference in the light and shadows depending on whether you face the dying sun or have your back to it, but it is more than that. Everything becomes real and unreal simultaneously and this is enhanced by the river with its capacity for moodiness, coloration, and reflection. For Balzac,

In the half light the physical tricks used by art to make things seem real disappear completely. If one is looking at a picture, the people represented seem both to speak and to walk; the shadow becomes real shadow, the daylight is real daylight, the flesh is alive, the eyes more, blood flows in the veins and fabrics glisten...at that hour illusion reigns supreme; perhaps it comes with the night? Is not illusion a kind of night for our thoughts, a night we furnish with dreams? 128

Within minutes at this equatorial latitude Venus is the first to arrive, holding open the door to the stars, and at dawn the last to leave, shutting the door of night behind her.

So for one reason or another I conflate water, river, twilight, stars, and swamp, yet only now did it hit me how much of my fieldworking life was owed this mix.

I first arrived in Colombia in November of 1969, returned every year since then, and over that time lived on four rivers: by the confluence of the rivers Palo and Paila that run into the Cauca River; by the Mocoa River that runs into the Caquetà River that runs into the Amazon; by the Timbiqui River on the Pacific Coast that runs into the Pacific; and now by the Brazuelo de Papayal, itself a tributary of the mighty Magdalena that runs into the Caribbean. That’s a lot of running.

Palo y Paila
Mocoa
Timbiqui
Brazuelo de Papayal

In these four places I never slept far from the river and in the case of the Timbiqui and the Brazuelo de Papayal I slept close indeed, a few meters away. Is it much of an exaggeration to say these rivers run through my sleep and dreams? Upstate New York I live by a river, the Rondout Creek (tributary of the Hudson), which has many rapids one hundred feet from my bed. I hear the water playing the night long. I made up a protest song to accompany the street demonstration when the Good Old Boys in 1999 managed on the sly to sell the three-quarter-mile section of the river forming a public swimming hole to the tax collector of the neighboring town of Accord, New York, so he could erect a fence to keep swimmers out. This section of the riverbank had been deeded since decades to the people of the town for their recreational use. It was communal property—like the swamps of northern Colombia! Same story (in many respects).

The Rondout Creek runs fast and deep
The Rondout Creek runs through our sleep
But never in our wildest dreams
Did we think they’d sell our stream

This prevalence of rivers seems to me at first blush quite by chance, but
then has not fate selected rivers and ports as the hub of world civilizations for thousands of years, very much including modern times because ports were the hubs of long-distance trade and rivers provided the means for colonizing powers to access unknown and otherwise impassable places? I recall the triumphant journey of the Spaniard Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada with his hordes of native carriers fighting through the forests alongside the Río Magdalena (flowing the opposite direction to the Spaniards) in the sixteenth century and also, closer to home, the poor colonists in their canoes finding a way through the swamps of northern Colombia mid-twentieth century, up the Brazuelo de Papayal, for example, tributary of the Magdalena. They say most of Jiménez de Quesada’s native porters died but the horses were protected with cotton quilts, just the eyes showing, to protect from the poison darts of Indians. The horses were lifted up from the Magdalena Valley in nets made of creepers to the savannah of Bogotá. Stage one of the Conquest.

The word *tributary*, as used with branches of rivers, is a strange *anthropomorphism*. We speak of paying *tribute* to a lord or to an esteemed person or friend in recognition of their might, talents, or goodness of person. Whether forced or voluntary, with bitterness or with a glad heart, something of us flows into that larger entity, but it is we tributaries who make it larger just as I can’t help anthropomorphizing African palm because it extracts tribute from the land and its people.

However, twice a year, in May and in October, the flow becomes a flood. The tributary system, we could say, goes crazy with an overabundance of gift-giving. Like the sun, the river gives without receiving. We would like to emphasize the ecological point of view which sees this as “natural,” but then what is natural in today’s world? The rains rain in an annual rhythm, the small streams in the mountains far to the south swell every year greater on account of de-forestation and join with other tributaries until a mighty volume of mud and water rampages north sweeping all before it including human settlements.

We would like to emphasize an “ecological” point of view emphasizing rhythm and the quid pro quo; fantasizing about the Indians before European colonization advancing and retreating in rhythm with the
flood, cultivating and fishing in accord with the flow of water, and then, coming after them, the poor peasant colonists who have adapted to this same rhythm imposed by the *amphibious mode of production*, as Fals-Borda termed it.129

*Homeostasis*, like Newton’s third law, holds that every action causes an equal and opposite reaction. It is a conservative view of nature, a basic principle that sees everything eventually in balance like a well-kept account book.

In the mid-nineteenth century the great French physiologist Claude Bernard saw such a balance as preserving the “internal milieu.” Later the great US physiologist Walter B. Cannon took that idea and came up with the principles at work in shock following acute blood loss on the battlefields of Flanders in WWI which he later applied to what he called “voodoo death” due to sorcery in Haiti and in indigenous Australia, his point being that in both shock (blood loss) and in sorcery (soul loss) the self-correcting mechanisms ensuring homeostasis turned out to be destructive. Homeostasis had its limits. Once surpassed, ruin set in

because a quite other set of forces came into play as just happened with the Mocoa River leaping its banks killing three hundred people turning homeostasis inside out. In other words not only does homeostasis have its limits, but it metamorphoses through shock into something else that can be monstrous (speaking of animals and the Comte de Lautréamont). This is how a serpentine text works too: as disequilibria issuing from the breakdown in homeostasis. Harmonies have been swept away, which is why the animals, I mean words, are escaping their pages in tumults of shock and sorcery we designate as hermeneutics.

LXXX

Roland Barthes assimilates trees to writing, seeing the palm tree as “the loveliest of all letters,” citing Heinrich Heine’s poem in which the hemlock tree and the palm tree speak and think like humans.

It is strange, is it not, that this making-human of the palm tree occurs in Barthes’s autobiographical work with its title in the third person, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes (which, by the way, is also a serpentine book). After all, what have palm trees to do with Roland Barthes let alone with Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes and, on top of that, what motivates this humanizing (if that’s the word) of the palm tree and the hemlock?

Could it be the writing?

That’s it! Barthes sees himself as a writer consumed with interest about writing; an interest that combines Marxism, post-structuralism, an evanescent sexuality, and a persistent closeness to his mother—all of that—funneled into some wonderful imp that has him turning ficto-critical cartwheels and pulling faces, all for “the pleasure of the text.”

Yet, still, why the palm tree? And its photograph?

It seems like matter way out of place in this book Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes. True, there are other photographs with plants and shrubs shown but they are all of northern France in gardens of houses where he lived as a child sans palms.
Nearly all the other photographs are of Barthes, young and middle-aged, or of his parents and grandparents.

And then we have this tree, this palm tree, standing out like a sore thumb.

The first forty-two pages of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* display the abovementioned photographs, one or two to a page with a brief paragraph, curt and whimsical. They are not captions so much as extensions of the image, strange pseudopods that extend and retract back into the image.

Several of these “pseudopods” invoke Proust. There is a picture of the infant Barthes in a white dress, dark eyes gazing straight at the camera, curious, inquisitorial, with chubby little legs in boots firmly planted on the floor. It is accompanied by “I was beginning to walk. Proust was still alive, and finishing *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*.”

The tiny heading here reads, *Contemporaries?*

And of course Proust wrote lovingly on trees and flowers, just as some of Barthes’s photographs here are of gardens at the back of the house in which he grew up, others of trees along the riverbank, and all these gardens and trees come with mysterious allusion to sexual activity.

But still—but still!—why the palm tree? Why the “sore thumb”? He insists he is repelled by what he calls stereotypes, and yearns for “freshness.” Yet is there anything more stereotypical than a palm tree, “signature” of the tropics and colonial nostalgia?

Yet there it be, aiding and abetting his hermeneutic palm frond action, turning it back on itself in true Hermes fashion back to where we want to be, namely, “the pleasure of the text.”

If it seems perverse and bewildering of me to bring together the pleasure of the text with the forward march of the plantation economy mono-cropping the life out of existence, so be it, bearing in mind that
“textual pleasure” means paying attention to how words work, especially when cut out. The critical move, I believe, the one animating my text here, is the approximation of textual pleasure to the search for an alternative economy to agribusiness thanks to the shock-and-sorcery philosophy agribusiness arouses.

LXXXI

Like the pleasure of the text, the alternative economy has to be pleasurable otherwise what’s the point? As I write this I am struck by how strange it is (or is it?) that political economy never alludes to pleasure, unless it be the behaviorist-inclined clinician’s pleasure-pain of Bentham that seems far more attached to pain than pleasure. Political economy and Marxism are a puritanical business (but not Fourier and not Wilhelm Reich, nor Simone de Beauvoir). Ditto for human rights’ organizations. But not AgroArte (see section III) on the walls of whose communal house in Medellín I find what looks like a guiding set of principles including:

Love: an act that makes us indomitable, unconquerable, unproductive, slaves of our own creation.

Non-government: We make networks and collectives that we maintain on the edge of the state that forbids us love and self-government, the state that wants us to be productive and not lovers. We do not need leaders or controls and we are going to reclaim the city that we invent.

Unity and Solidarity: Solitude is a method for better understanding. It is a right and a pleasure, provoking love.

Every few months a new set of new principles is painted on the wall, in keeping with a quote by the front door from the aging Samuel Beckett: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

Thus Barthes, again.

According to the Greeks, trees are alphabets. Of all the tree letters, the palm is the loveliest. And of writing, profuse and distinct as the bursts of its fronds, it possesses the major effect: falling back.

Could “falling back” here be hermeneutical failing à la Beckett, failing better, like waiting for Godot which for our purposes here can be thought of as the pathos of needing a god or a leader? I know this is a stretch, exploiting the elasticity of interpretation as Sisyphean and endless. Put another way, Nietzsche not only saw a world of stormy hermeneusis following the Death of God but suggested that the communicative function of language, its practical function, gives way to an excess which artists and writers delight in squandering. So if language defines reality, which sort of language are we talking about? Is it the workhorse everyday instrumental language of communication, or is it this other sort of language of squandering, excess, and delight, of love, playing with, taunting, looping the loop around the workhorse?

It seems that the more important language is not a language at all but a “language” outside of language and consciousness both of which, Nietzsche supposes, are quite trivial since “man, like every living creature is constantly thinking but does not know it; the thinking which becomes conscious is only the smallest part of it, let’s say the shallowest, worst part.”

The sense of words invoked by Burroughs, for example, as animals awaiting the pages to be cut, are words belonging to this other, this bodily unconscious, language. It is a creaturely language partaking of swamp and cow alongside the rising and the falling of the rivers.

The trick here is that the stylist has to stretch language which means stretching reality in order to allow this other plane of being its instant of bodily, not mental, recognition, before subsiding into from whence it came. And why is that? Why does this other plane of being, swamp-like,

flood-like, have to subside? With Nietzsche it’s a matter of knowing what not to know, as in the second preface to The Gay Science. With Benjamin it’s a question of not exposing the secret, which would destroy it, but of a revelation that does it justice. With Proust it’s a matter of intricate description of plants and people and situations, educating the eye and consciousness of the reader, then suddenly switching gears and letting all that fall back and disappear into the bodily unconscious, leaving but a tremor, yet that tremor is more than enough. With Benjamin, again, it’s the dialectical image tensed and stilled and all a-tremor like the famous Angel of History or the mimetic surge of an image flashing up at a moment of danger, only to subside. With the shamanism I have written about it’s a matter of the skilled revelation of skilled concealment as speech gives way to song and the song is wordless while the body hums.133

LXXXII

Barthes and Heinrich Heine supply us with conceits, “make-believe,” might be the better term. But they come easy, these make-beliefs. They seem right, “natural,” we could say, on account of the ease whereby the metaphors translate into literality and back again thanks to the poet’s wit by means of which reality becomes really made up.

They perturb us these make-beliefs; they perturb reality and cast the current laws of I and thou, of subjectivity and objectivity, of humans and trees, in a different key, as does the “magic hour” of dawn and dusk.

For the writer like myself maneuvering my way between fiction and nonfiction (there is no other way), there are striking possibilities given by this conceit, by the “as if,” in its being natural yet perturbing of the nature of Being.

We let the poet Heine and a scallywag like Barthes get away with it because, well, that’s how they be and because they are charming and

because we are more or less ready and willing to indulge the poet since his humor—or should I say his shock tactics—open our eyes to the art in nature as well as to his art of nature, another and striking instance of shock and sorcery.

Bottom line is that the conceit in Heine’s poem of trees as subjects—meaning human subjects—is greatly boosted by the violence of plantation agriculture endowing the palms with a poignancy of meaning way beyond that solitary palm languishing lonely and silent in a far off eastern land.

Nothing, not even humor, not even Rabelaisian humor, induces the slide of the metaphoric into the literal and back again as does this violence.

LXXXIII

Have I gotten carried away by my own rhetoric here, assuming personhood and spirit power in palm trees, let alone my having cows, donkeys, iguanas, and statues, also greasing this mill?

Here the word “spirit” gets in the way. Heine and Barthes “spiritualize” the palm tree as if it were human with similar feelings to a human possessed with the gift of what James Joyce thought of as “interior monologue.” This implies the whole tree. But the shamans I knew in the Putumayo region of the Upper Amazon did not think like that. Sure, they thought of spirits of the forest and of the river as human or vaguely human in appearance, except a lot smaller, but neither the forest nor the trees were spiritualized entities. Rather they were “homes” for humanlike creatures we could gloss as spirits, little persons clothed as Indian shamans in the Putumayo or, in the case of the Secoya, with colonist’s hats. My Ingano friend Santiago Mutumbajoy once described to me the spirits of the river as a malignant force “looking like a duende, like a cristiano, dressed in pure ice, nothing but ice and water and spume, shoes of spume and hair everywhere from his head all over the place.¹³⁴ They are tiny, about a meter high. They’ll do a lot of damage.

¹³⁴ By cristiano he more than likely means human being.
if you are not careful.” It was hard for me to see how such diminutive creatures with what seems like a playful disposition could be dangerous and scary.

“Do they attack people?”

“Sure.”

“Why?”

“Out of envy.” 135

(Is that why the river overran its banks and killed three hundred people in April 2017? Perish the thought.)

Does this suggest that the river or the tree or the forest is not only the abode of such spirits but that these spirits partake of the properties of their abode? Conversely can we say that the abode—the tree or the river—partakes therefore of these spirit powers, dressed in ice and spume, for example, capable of transformation and much mischief? In passing we must note the tremendous poetic amplification here entailed. There is no ice in these tropical rivers, for example, and Nike has yet to come up with shoes of spume.

In any event all this suggests something quite different to what these days is referred to as the “agency” of things, harbinger of ontological revolution in a post-human world. To my mind this world of spirits and things such as rivers and trees is first of all an uncertain, insecurely known world, forever beyond understanding, a fairytale but real world within worlds.

For the Cofán and Ingano Indians whom I knew in the Putumayo, transformation is what seems to me a more useful term than spirit or “agency.” Transformation suggests worlds of shimmering mercurial changeability, a constant potential within Being itself whose “motor” is mimesis. This is what becomes apparent on drinking hallucinogenic

135. Taussig, Shamanism, 349.
plants such as yagé administered by a knowledgable shaman. Here the Heine-Barthes type spiritualization kicks in (along with Viveiros de Castro’s “cannibal metaphysics”). Notable here would be the shaman-jaguar transformation, but there are plenty of others inflected by colonial history, as with the yagé journey told me by my Ingano friend Florencio (who was not a shaman) in which he saw in sequence, like playing cards, angels with quartz crystals that were placed on his chest and tongue so as have a good heart/soul and speak well; jungle birds like turkeys filling the room; houses in the steep mountains soaring above us with each house having its own hallucinogenized painting and music; Colombian soldiers dressed in the same finery as Ingano shamans dancing in and out of these houses (these are yagé people, meaning the spirits of yagé itself); and finally three Capuchin monks giving him their blessing in a room with golden books spewing gold; return to everyday reality (needless to say, buoyed up). As I write this I see that each entity is in fact its own generator of further images and musics and that goes for the angels, the turkeys, the houses, the dancing soldiers, the black-robed Capuchins and their golden books spewing gold. In fact this last image could stand for all the images.

I say he “saw” these things but it’s more than seeing. It’s bodily impressed. You are vomiting and shitting, evacuating the world within while attaining unheard of levels of insight tied to vulnerability to human sorcery and to the spirits of the forest and the river. Your body is shaking. The angels place crystals on the tongue. The birds crowd around. There is no space left, just this twitching, fluttering, feathery mass. The Colombian soldiers are dancing and you struggle to get out of your hammock to dance with them because that is how the curing of illness will be achieved with you dancing with these soldier-yagé spirits. And when I say “curing” I must mean transformation and metamorphosis (of the illness), no? And what is this illness that courses through human society making the society what it is? That is the question our sociologists have yet to explain and with which we writers try to keep pace or, better still, outwit.

Bearing this in mind makes me want to underscore Barthes and Heine’s conceit regarding the palm tree by understanding it as a work of art, not ontology, demanding suspension of disbelief and something like
the poet Keats’s “negative capability” by which I mean the ability to place oneself and not just the palm tree in the place of the Other so as to become it or something akin to it. This is Benjamin’s definition of the mimetic faculty except that Keats emphasized the uncertainties bound up with the suspension of disbelief. But perhaps for Benjamin such uncertainties are present as well; in the concept of “nonsensuous similarities” and with the curious ephemerality of the images that appear at a moment of danger, only to disappear.

Certainly Santiago Mutumbajoy could strike out boldly, but he would be no less inclined to prevaricate or laugh and tell a story that kept you in epistemic limbo, and this seems to me the core of shamanic practice (see section LXIX) which we can see in other realms today locked into a perpetual puzzle as to the reality of spirits and copies of copies nowhere more so than with the virtual realities now foisted by digital screens, gov-
ernment scamming, (X)paramilitaries, and the metamorphic sublimity of palm oil. These virtual realities are powerful and destructive, but it is the older shamanic practices which provide the core of virtual reality as well as the cure even when it means dancing with soldiers whom we have converted into golden spirits. After all, what did the angels do? They put lightning-shot quartz crystals on our tongue so we could talk well while the shaman, singing and chuckling, may even become a jaguar, at least his bottom half may be thus endowed which, when you think about it, is far more wonderful and scary than if all of him became a jaguar.

“They provide the core as well as the cure,” these practices, at least as I have presented them, which is surely why, without at first knowing it, I recruited them, as I have presented them, to the present task? And what is that task? I have presented it as a writing task, which is here an art of documentary, a writing task that is very much an engagement with monoculture and the “terminator gene.”

Which is why I so like the image of the blanket with the image of the dog hanging from the rafters, drying in the sun. “What’s going on?” is what the dog is asking. And like the donkey the dog is not short on cuteness. As is the wont of dogs, this one turned up just when needed when I walked along the path by the river past Ariel and Catalina’s house where the cow was slaughtered.

LXXXIV

And when I ask myself if I am being carried away by rhetoric regarding spirit-force within palma africana, what do I mean? Merely to pose that question is to reinforce the possibility as to the physical power of language, carrying oneself (and others) away, like the river. And what is meant here by “rhetoric”? Is rhetoric the spirit power of language and hence equivalent to the metamorphic sublimity of palm oil?

Being carried away here has a lot to do with the overwhelming chemistry of palm oil as mimetic salve, by its wondrous capacity to produce cells like the human stem cell capable of becoming most any and everything entering into all manner of life-streams in the supermarket, in your body, in your gas tank, and across what you think of as your being.
Similar to a human stem cell, the nuts of this mighty palm now transformed into OxG or Hope of America elbow their way into world history to be processed in factories to make a cornucopia of slippery, sliding, bubbly commodities including fats, oils, margarines, sauces, emulsions, soaps, shampoos, cosmetics, creams, inks, paints, resins, lubricants, glycerin, and green diesel fuel.

This is the chemistry, meaning alchemy, of which the Neoplatonist magicians of the Renaissance dreamt, nowhere more vivid than in the body-image realm of the lavish 336-page book published in 2013 by FEDEPALM, the Colombian Federation of Oil Palm Growers, tipping the scales at four pounds even, as stated in the front matter.136

How strange is that! Announcing how much your book weighs! Universities should learn from this. To be a full professor you need at least ten pounds of publications. In the Ivy League it’s more like twenty. (I recall asking Ariel crouched under the bench, the weight of the cow to be slaughtered.)

Right after the title page you see a full-page color spread of palm plantations in their vivid green exuberance stretching from horizon to horizon as if the universe is naught but palm heaven. In this photograph taken from a plane, each palm appears like a little green star.

In the lower right-hand corner, like the signature on a bank check, we see the small black shadow of the plane from which I assume the photograph was taken.

It is a dizzying experience, that’s for sure, as we oscillate between a soaring sense of our domination over nature and the opposite feeling that this nature is dominant over us. A lofty feeling of transcendence gives way to one of immanence, of having the palm embrace and overwhelm us. (Is that a “dialectical image”?)

Immediately following on the next page is a saucerlike glass container—think of a martini glass—in which a lustrous liquid swirls, golden and

136. Palma de aceite colombiana.
purple. Freed from gravity, different sized ovoid bubbles like spaceships float imperturbably in this elixir.

In the brilliantly lit online version of this book, this martini glass image lies directly beneath the aerial view of the plantations. The overall effect of the montage is such that the dazzling universe of brilliant green star-bursts of palm trees stretching from horizon to horizon is imagerically united to this magical liquid with its floating spaceships.

The luminosity of the images online ensures they bore into you (see section LXXV). Benjamin called this *aura*, previously restricted to religious art in churches and palaces, shrines and grottoes, but now transformed into the razzle-dazzle of the fetish splendor of the commodity as welded to an unstoppable power of mimetic technology.

To turn the pages of this four-pound tome is to witness cute monkeys playing between the palms as if in a jungle paradise. A striking colored drawing, attributed to an eleven-year-old girl, Nelly Angulo, in Tumaco, shows just one tree, the trunk of which is foreshortened, stout and compressed, the color of dark chocolate, with a sense of boiling energy within. The green palm fronds sweep majestically forth like a crown on top of the tree, while underneath them, snuggled up either side of the trunk, are two brilliantly orange clumps representing the nuts like gigantic, inflamed testicles. We might note that a plague known as “bud rot” or *cogollo* took out most of the palm trees in the Tumaco region around 2008 and the palm planation companies abandoned the region.  

Such magical realism, reinforced by the fact that this image is said to have been drawn by an eleven-year-old girl, is equally manifest in other photographic images that spiritualize the palm. This is notable in the shadowy close-ups of the palm nuts themselves, so close and beautiful that words like “inviting” and “touch me” leap to mind in gusts of animating intimacy.

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137. Mark James Maughan, “Land Grab and Oil Palm in Colombia,” paper presented at the International Conference on Global Land Grabbing, April 6–8, 2011, at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. This is one of the few essays on palm oil in Colombia worth reading for its fluency, subtlety, and depth of comprehension.
As regards insects in the palm oil plantations by her house where she was born in Malaysia, Simryn emails me:

“You don’t see them as often; at least not big and colorful ones: beetles, butterflies, large carpenter bees, praying mantis. Haven’t seen a scorpion in years, and those pesky millipedes, I actually miss them. They used to be everywhere. Very few now. Beetles in particular are considered to be serious pests to oil palm trees, but any poison aimed at them will pretty much take out a whole spectrum of insects i imagine (including bees, which are seriously in trouble in temperate zones, don’t know about here, I’ve not seen anything written on that). There are elaborate traps made for the rhinoceros beetle in estates, a particular foe of the palm.”

In effect, the nature of the palm as second nature pushes me, the writer, to plant ideas and images in gardens other than agribusiness. It is because of agribusiness that I can do this. I am invited if not forced in this direction by the early twenty-first century’s state of nature’s new nature. Nelly Angulo’s drawing of chocolate palm trees with inflamed orange testicles acts here like a flashing neon sign pointing the WAY OUT.

The path to the garden lies open. This is not an act of resistance; nor is it trying to go back in time.

To the contrary. New understandings and new possibilities for life intrude and they do so on the margins where forest meets plantation, where birds never stop singing and monkeys throw sticks like messages at old Pedro and old me passing below.

These songs and stick-throwing are provocations, the shock-and-sorcery effects of agribusiness. They are neither the life of the once-upon-a-time primary forest nor of the swamps nor of the way it was in the good old days.

Instead, the songs and the hurling of sticks from scampering beings up
high are impulses from an animated “fertile crescent” activated by the plantation impacting forest and swamp. (I think of this serpentine text of *Palma Africana* as itself a fertile crescent.) The birds and monkeys of the fertile crescent abound with an artificial super-life stimulated by the proximity of death. They are swamp creatures of life-in-death swinging from branch to branch and from musical chord to musical chord in ecstasies of dialectic image-making as death draws nigh. The swamp has gone aerial.

Of course nothing here is certain, but I take this text I am writing and lay before you as evidence of something afoot, something aerie, something swampy underfoot; of the way the animals keep emerging, animating the writing such that the very substance of my existence in you delights in the swarming of words as if they were birds on Simryn’s gallery walls or even more so when she herself becomes palm.

And when we lie awake at night when all is said and done, do we not hear the murmuring of tall tales of tigers padding along the village street of sand long ago wondering what’s this, a village?, and then the tiger regresses into its shamanic self making a few passes with its hands, or are they paws?, humming the while.

LXXXVII

Poor palm, once heralded, still heralded, as world-saving “biofuel,” salvation of ecocide and, thanks to Body Shop, abetting of bodily beautification. How magical is that! Smothering a palm plantation across your face and tummy so that like the Phoenix, beauty of lustrous skin shall arise newly born! But now all of that is becoming the equivalent of the abject coalfields of the Ruhr and West Virginia. The clock is ticking.

All of which adds another sort of biofuel, meaning the irradiative phlegm that writing about this tree brings forth. Was Bataille’s notion of *dépense* or *wasting* ever more applicable than here? Spreading across the swamplands at the point of a gun and a knife at your throat, OxG “Hope of America” not only appropriates life but destroys it, as testified by young Malvis and in the agronomists’ claims that these plantations are biologically unsustain-
able. Basically Malvis, aged thirteen, draws the equation that while the plantation grows, her growth is stopped in its tracks.

It is unlikely you will see anything more pathetic than a field of dead palms afflicted with bud rot. They stand dark and tall like totem poles designed to memorialize death itself as far as the eye can see, some naked, others with a misshapen tuft at the very top, the last sign of misshapen life.

My! What happened to those myriad starbursts stretching from horizon to horizon we saw as the opening image of FEDEPALM’S four-pound monograph!

Which, then, is the more significant image, the myriad green starbursts as seen from a plane, or the death-spasm of the negative sacred rising from the ground like the Holy Ghost?

Undoubtedly the latter because it is the irradiative phlegm of the negative sublime that generates the curious life of the adjoining “fertile crescent” of chattering birds and missile-throwing monkeys. The singular contribution of these aerial forms of life of the skyborne swamp is to ensure an animated writing, meaning a writing not only populated by animals and their song but a writing that engages with what the writing is about, as with Barthes’s falling-back palm fronds doing their hermeneutic thing. These birds and these monkeys are the advance guard of the rip in the cage of the page that sets words free.

This is all present in Heine’s poem in which we entertain that ultimate conceit of the Great Reversal by which humans become trees as much as trees become human as Simryn did right at the start.

LXXXVIII

In a little hotel downtown in the capital of the province with tree-lined streets and a gentle breeze I sit by a fountain with mosaics on the wall

from which jets of blue water gurgle. To one side of the fountain are two palm trees, signature of the tropics, fronds rippling in the breeze. Colorful hammocks are suspended under a lofty ramada. A postcard come real.

Before it became a hotel it was a good-sized family home in the center of the city when it was still a country town. The guerrilla set off a bomb by the house because the cattleman-owner would not pay their tax. It ripped off one side of the house. The wife went into shock, never spoke a word till she died several years later. The town became notorious as the center in Colombia of paramilitary force led by such charmers as Jorge Cuarenta with a face only a mother could love, jefe maximo of the Northern Bloc who, in good pantomime fashion, went through the motions of demobilizing his two thousand troops in 2006. The city is musical, too. Every boy learns the accordion.

Only two days ago I had left the village on the Brazuelo de Papayal. I was numb and disoriented by the change.

In the hotel were two middle-aged hippies (I don’t know what else to call them), nice warmhearted people with that astonishing naiveté which makes you reconsider in a fundamental way what it is to be human, what is parody, and how it is that we ever understand one another.

They were preparing a fish to cook for a dinner party to which I was invited. He spent an hour preparing the fish (what was he doing all that time?), talking loudly without the slightest embarrassment about “Mother Earth” in English and she kept pretty quiet—not that there was much choice with that chatterbox—her feather earrings bobbing, busier than busy chopping lettuce into finer and finer pieces until it was unrecognizable. She was from Colorado. He was born in Colombia but raised in the US from the age of seven—the demographic that is now I think having an important impact on Colombian middle-class culture, trying desperately to literalize the fantasy of “Indians” and “green.” She explained they were “into original people” as the means of saving the planet, had just been in Australia for a week, visited Uluru (a.k.a. Ayers Rock) near Alice Springs in the central desert, had talked with “elders” there and in Byron Bay, and were leaving for the mountains of Ecuador.
tomorrow with Indians from the nearby Sierra Nevada to join a group of “shamans” to further the cause of saving the planet, connecting, thanks to these “shamans,” key sacred sites throughout the world. In between his cooking he kept working his cell phone trying to call his Indian pals in the Sierra to see if they were ready for the trip but seemed to be having difficulties getting through.

These two are missionaries. Aflame with their cause they bore into me. I thought of the shamans I had known over forty years in the south of the country, now dead. Would they have understood what these earnest “hippies,” not short on cash, it seemed, had in store for them? What a brilliant future! No longer be a shaman dealing with local sorcery, whether maleficio or chonta, but saving the planet through “eco-shamanism.” And I am sure there are plenty of young and not so young “shamans” who willingly oblige. But the truly painful thing here is not only the ideas held by the “hippies” but those of the equally self-assured “realists” who cannot entertain for a moment the utopianism necessary to save the planet.

LXXXIX

My thoughts revert to the Brazuelo de Papayal. I am going back. In my imagination. I am bending backward along with Barthes’s palm frond hermeneutic action. I am in the busy port of El Banco on the Río Magdalena. There is a decaying hulk of a mafia hotel on the riverbank looking like it exploded from within. Its black gaping windows, like the eye sockets of a skull lost to time, signal that state beyond putrefaction we call “development” as with oil palm plantations, a variation on a mafia hotel exploded from within.

A tomato-red bicycle-taxi with cheap plastic cushion-seats rests in the shade, reminiscent of a horse-drawn carriage, the cyclist lying on his back on a bench under a lonely tree as if awaiting tourists, but although tourists are generally considered stupid, there is none that would be so stupid as to come to El Banco.

The air is stagnant and deeply black at night, blacker than black. Why
is that? It feels like being lost in a mine—a long abandoned mine. I am served a huge helping of chunks of bagre fish from the river swimming in grease. Faded warnings about dengue fever peel off the walls. Bourgeois white men with big stomachs bring their children and look glumly at the wall waiting to be served. Those people always drive big SUVs with big stomachs while the river men are slender as reeds.

In the morning it’s worse. The Río Magdalena stares at you malevolently like molten steel, an ugly river for sure, perhaps angry with what’s happened to it this long while since the Spaniards came. Yet it’s only ten in the morning and the sun has a long way to go. Refuse pustulates thick and creamy at the water’s edge alive with dead fish, dead animals, nameless rotting substances, and black plastic bags.

Into this pustulance infusing death with life, spidery long-limbed, dark-skinned men delicately edge their river-craft in and out of the muck.

All over rural Colombia from Puerto Asís way south to El Banco in the north, the scene is the same: the pitiless glare, the purulent soup of heat and humidity, Lebanese shopkeepers, and stick buildings collapsing into
the river; places unknown to most Colombians from where so much of their wealth and food and drugs come. Oh Dear! Where is our clean-cut Alfonso López Michelsen busy directing middle and upper-class passengers onto the tarmac at the airport in Valledupar where the planes come in and out and US warplanes brood, safeguarding the nation?

Going back further I envision the one hour walk to what I think of as the “ceremonial center” of the raised Indian field by the green “fort” with its control tower belonging to the African palm company standing cheek by jowl with the peasants’ plastic “cathedral” by the side of a stagnant pond. It was bleak out there my last visit with but two families, five people, defending the space. A young woman made me lunch. I gave her my son’s pocketknife. Slept on a bench for an hour. Then walk back with Pedro hunched over, furtive, ever alert to shadows in the forest. He shows me a peasant hut burnt down by Mario and other (X)paramilitaries.
My thoughts go back to when I left the village. Misael wakes me at 4:00 in the fresh night air with only one star hanging in the sky. Her name is Venus. Every so often we would hear the cry of the boatman, like a wounded animal, or was it an angel, announcing his arrival as the boat wrapped in shadow floats quietly toward us, a blur in the river below.

I had come to the village over two weeks before at twilight, and now I was leaving at dawn. These are the times of “magic hour,” as filmmakers say, when the dead return and the quality of light de-realizes the world, accentuating and de-realizing what we call reality.

I had arrived at twilight after we had spent a day in the swamps and lagoon of Zaraposa close to where the mapmaker Codazzi died and where what seem like all the birds in the world come to play filling the sky with swerving flight which never ever stops, on and on, wheeling and playing, transforming space and light and themselves in the process such that when we ascend the Brazuelo de Papayal, with kids dancing in the river leaping and waving like shadows and silhouettes moving through water and spray like the spirits of the dead, I see those swerving birds, like me, another spirit, of words, perhaps, in my mind right now writing, returning, with that insane chatter in my ear of the hippies saving the world though eco-shamanism, and now I was leaving; I was leaving at the other “magic hour” of dawn with Venus, the morning star, hanging westward behind my shoulder as if I was carrying a lantern for the passengers who would board every few miles, the boatman flipping a metal bench up from the floor of the boat for them, making us like a bus with rows of seats one behind the other.

Lord of the evening and lord of the morning, one foot on the land, the other on the shore, wrote D. H. Lawrence in his last book, *Apocalypse*. But Venus is a woman and she is hanging high above my left shoulder and in that light and clarity of zest floating on the black water I realized, I felt, this is why one lives.

I looked back, and Venus had gone. The sky was empty.

Her place was taken by a white heron standing in the shallows. There was one every few meters waiting till the last moment when, with the utmost
nonchalance, each one separately would open its huge wings, fold its dangling black feet under its body, and glide away so clumsy, so graceful.

It was the most emphatic display of the mastery of non-mastery I could imagine. Timing was a big part of it; the way the wings opened was another; the languid quality of the action, still another.

Am I once again attributing human qualities to things and animals, stars, and birds? Or am I myself, thanks to the writing, becoming a bird and all the words I mediate are birds, too? Am I coming halfway here, halfway to becoming a star with one foot on the land, the other on the shore? Am I not becoming a star or a heron with one foot in the shallows, the other tucked nicely underneath?

Yet far from imposing myself and my fantasies, am I not being invited by the animal that is language, no less than by those animals and things, those stars and birds, to do precisely this? Have I become an image that is also a word as in a child’s primer of language? “Prince is a word with a star tied to it.”

Am I not being invited? And this not because of nature or archaisms or the magic of the inky black river at dawn with Venus hanging low on the horizon—well, some of that, of course—but also because of what Roland Barthes does with what the poet Heine does with the dreaming hemlock tree in the north and the palm tree in the south as it all goes south impacted by the irradiative phlegm of the negative sublime.

Along with the metamorphic prowess of palm oil, the violence upends any and everything. But the upshot, the staggered end point where all this metamorphosis undergoes its wildest act of all and where *palma africana* undoes itself? That is with the heron with whom we are invited to seek that other way when the morning star disappears from the sky as the mastery of non-mastery opens its wings.

THE END

Afterword

I wrote the first draft of Palma Africana in Istanbul in May of 2015 prior to traveling to Kobane in Kurdish Syria where, against all odds, the Kurdish movement of stateless democracy was taking place combined with the theory and practice of an anti-patriarchal ideology (not to be confused with sexual liberation).140

Captivated by my surroundings in Istanbul, while writing that draft, I spent a lot of time looking out the window. As I wrote I would idly sketch drawings of what I saw. At the same time I would scribble thoughts on the drawings about what I was seeing.

When I was a teenager I read a writer saying that when he was sitting writing he would spend nine minutes out of ten looking out the window.

A little exaggerated but seems right.

Today, in my college library in NYC, however, I see that the students rarely look out the window, even in the spring when the world is radiant. Instead they look at their cell phones, email, and the world passing by on the internet. Then they write but never, as far as I know, draw.

Freud famously wondered about the role daydreaming played in our writing, about the exchange of unconscious processes that eventually gets onto the page.

Because ethnography is very much about looking and writing, and because it is not often we have the chance to see parallel texts such as what follows here, I have included as an afterword what I wrote at this time, called “On Looking and Writing: Fairy Castles Gliding Like Swans.”

Of course there may be no connection between *Palma Africana* and this, other than the coincidence that both pieces of writing were occurring side by side.

Yet surely there was an energizing back and forth going on, what we might call a symbiotic relationship?

Here I think the drawings provide a key. This is because the drawings provided an interstitial space of activity—like the swamp—in which all manner of life-forms, metamorphoses, and anamorphoses could take place. In fact the specific content of the drawings were exemplary of such, with ships as swans, for instance, mysteriously passing through the forest.

The drawings also provided the amalgam of two set pieces in Benjamin’s method, insofar as he has a method. One is the idea of “nonsensuous similarities.” Thus the drawings act mimetically as a bridge between distinct realities (a major point). The second element I have in mind here is the *Denkbild* or “thought-image,” with the drawings performing the same function by means of analogies, allegories, and the flummox of the “dialectic at a standstill” yearning for release as with the statement in Benjamin’s theses on history that “the state of emergency is not the exception but the rule.”141 With this is meant a buildup of tension in the state of emergency predisposing to the emergence of an image flashing up at a moment of danger.

Was there subconsciously at least an overlap in my mind between the

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Kurdish struggle and that of the villagers on the Island of the Papaya Grove? It was impossible to avoid the crackling energy of Kurdistan. It elevated people I got to know and me as well. Spiritually, I mean.

*Palma Africana* would not have come into existence without that energy, nor without those drawings and those ships become swans.

Think of words as being alive, like swans.

*On Looking and Writing*

FAIRY CASTLES GLIDING LIKE SWANS

20.IX.15

I

There were times on Bogazici campus that I felt myself flying. Walking downhill from North Campus, for example, I had this out-of-body sensation of falling into the Bosphorous, of being swallowed up in a reenactment of Icarus flying into the sea that is our mother. People would be taking photographs of that divine landscape but reality defied the image.

Wysteria draped everything in rippling sheets of mauve. The chestnut trees were vibrant with white flowers pointing skyward—so naturally unnatural—like lit candles on a birthday cake.

One day walking uphill from my apartment halfway down the hill I turned around and the scene collapsed in on me.

What did I mean with those cryptic remarks written on that drawing above the tower’s turrets?

“They ‘frame’ everything. They are the sky.”

“These turrets loom at me above the trees from every window (15th c)”
Which comes first the chicken or the egg, the drawn-image or these words, and does it matter? The words in the drawings certainly add a great deal but I think the power is with the drawing (if only because my milieu is tilted to books and writers such that I relish the contrast). It is as if there was a half-formed thought which was also a feeling—a bodily feeling—to which the drawn-image adds weight and texture such that the feeling becomes clearer and finds its own way, emerging
like a butterfly from its chrysalis, then charting its own, unpredictable course. (You never know where the drawing will lead.) With that, the thought clinging to the feeling, comes clearer in the sense that you have sidled up to the recent past, sidled up to “nature,” the out there (the hill, the chestnuts, the sudden whirling feel of incomprehension and loss of balance). You have met the “out there” with your drawing, a marriage of sorts, bringing the body into the scene and the scene into the body via color, line, and hand.

What the drawing does, I think, is preserve these stages of the metamorphosis and not just the final stage (which makes me ask what then is the status of this afterword? Is it that butterfly I just mentioned?).

All of which refers me to that magician of the word, Friedrich Nietzsche, who will not accept the superiority of language nor of consciousness over the bodily unconscious. What my drawing does is tap into and emerge from that Dionysian impulse, which, as he says, is a highly imitative impulse.

All of which is to say that this drawing concerns being sucked into nothingness, into a vacuum of disorientation and proprioceptive anarchy; the sort of thing Nietzsche describes as the breath of empty space after the Death of God.

II

Equally unnerving but in a different key was the view from the window where I would write every morning. My apartment was on a steep slope looking down on the Bosphorus, screened by large trees decked out in their spring foliage.

Looking up from my writing I would discern a strange shape moving through the trees. Every few seconds it would metamorphose into something else.

I say “shape” but really it was a “half-shape” or an intimation of a shape somewhere between shapelessness and a shape. Was this why I loved
it so and why it had me sitting on the edge of my chair in anticipation. Strange how all this half-ness and all this changing drew me in. Not constancy but inconstancy and the half-seen was the formula of this seduction.

Sometimes this thing, or was it a force, was up high, other times so low I could barely see it. Sometimes it was white like the snow. Other times it was bright orange. Sometimes it was a bulk—that’s all I can call it—a white bulk bulking bringing out by contrast the fine tracery of the tree branches. Other times it was long and flat and colored and could only be seen in segments like the body of a caterpillar divided by the trunks of trees. And still other times it was like the trees themselves were moving, tall latticelike structures that as I got to know them turned out to be cranes on board container vessels making their way north and south on the Bosphorous.

Every morning as I was preparing my seminars for the Anthropology and Sociology Department of Bogazici University, or writing about my time three months before in the village in the swamps of northern Colombia, observing the cancerous spread of plantations of African palm, I would look up and gaze out my window at this other, different, reality. Back and forth I would travel, suspended, between these realities.

What is the mind in such a situation? What is reality? I made a drawing while I was writing. It was a drawing of one of the ships as I imagined it whole and unobscured, as though I needed to have it unfractured if only as a drawing.

We think—or at least I do—that a drawing in some way represents reality. Fine. But what about a drawing that, cunning as a thief, pierces reality, in this case the forest, so as to access the hidden, otherwise disfigured, phantom behind? My language here is decidedly plush, but such drawing could be considered to be sparse, no-nonsense instrumental, like a scalpel, an X-ray, or those shaman’s eyes that can see though the human body or the body of a mountain as described by Lucas Bridges in Tierra del Fuego a long time ago.142

Or something else? Consider drawing as an hypothesis like in a scientific experiment, or as a model, or as something to think with similar to the spirit-images I got to hear about in the all-night hallucinogenic healing sessions I was part of in the Putumayo river valley in Colombia over many years. These images (or visions; the terms are vague) are associated with wordless song and it is a moot point—as with the relation between words and drawing—which comes first, the image or the song?

By a spirit-image I am thinking of an activated and activating image to think with while one sings to it or with it, although some people tell me the image is singing through you. But then this “you” is not you anymore.

III

Actually I made three drawings. The first two were with grease crayons, trying to picture the ship moving through the trees. But the third, a watercolor, was unfettered. Just the naked ship, except for one thing; a swelling sea of written commentary to which every day I added another thought, then another; that the trees had become words forming cryptic sentences clustered around the drawing of the ship.

My meditations took two directions. First, which need detain us but little, was the contrast between the ships moving behind the trees, on the one hand, and the car and truck traffic on the majestic bridge spanning the Bosphorous way to the north in the upper left corner of my visual field. I resented this traffic and moved my desk so as not see it. That bridge traffic expressed all the panic I felt with life, accentuated by what I perceived to be the calm of the ships sailing underneath the bridge. In my drawing I wrote “Neurotic like ants scurrying; sun shining off their bodies,” and went on to write: “Makes you ask Why? What’s life all about?” with a little arrow to another thought, “whereas the ship comes across as an end-in-itself.” A little later came another afterthought: “So why can’t I romanticize or positively aestheticize these ‘scurrying ants,’ for instance as ‘shimmering quicksilver?’”

You see with these thoughts chasing thoughts how an image draws things out like pulling at the loose end of a skein of wool.
These ants, means to ends that forever recede, were the pulse of modernity while the ships, well, were they not ancient and lovely in their unhurried, slow grace? What more can you say, given they were so ghostly; fragments of fragments adrift through the trees, only partly revealed and ever-changing? Walter Benjamin expressed these two sorts of experience as Erlebnis, meaning the flash-like experience of the pulse that consciousness cannot retain, as contrasted with Erfahrung,
an historically and biologically older layer of the capacity to experience that sinks perception deep into the body.

Was that the “proprioceptive anarchy” I felt, sucked into the vacuum with the flaring chestnut trees reaching for the sky, was that \textit{Erlebnis} sparring with \textit{Erfahrung}, reaching down into the farthest reaches of experience where it all comes unstuck?

IV

The second meditation leads on from this and had to do with the art and the act of perception because the ships stimulated many reflections about perception itself.

I say “art and act of perception” so as to highlight the creativity involved in perception. Far from being a passive receptor, perception involves all manner of games, repression, and sublimation, although normally we are not aware of this. We live blindly, so to speak, at one remove from that sort of self-awareness until out of the blue our senses are opened, as with Proust’s \textit{À la recherche}, and we start to think about thinking as an activity dependent on imagery, an act that ripples like those waves of mauve wysteria that make the Bogazici landscape dance in early spring (mauve being Proust’s favorite color in that great book).

What seems important here are the possibilities that daydreaming provides while looking out the window at that postcard called Istanbul while writing about the murderous swamps of northern Colombia, two planes sliding back and forth across one another like that.

So, here’s the question: Did the act of drawing function so as to “deflate” or loosen up consciousness and thus ensure hovering back and forth across the border of consciousness?

As for hovering, is that what lends itself to what I call “the mastery of non-mastery,” that anarchist bag of tricks I thought of as the answer to the “domination of nature”?
I first thought of this mastery of non-mastery when faced with the contradictions in classical anthropological accounts of shamanic-type healing.\textsuperscript{143}

I developed a formula to cover shamanic performances therein described such as extracting a foreign body from the afflicted person. I called it “the skilled revelation of skilled concealment” and most definitely aligned it with trickery as well as with secrecy and sacredness. (The “trick” turned out to be a pretty complicated idea.)

And I found this skilled revelation of skilled concealment in other places where what I call the bodily unconscious is “raised” ephemerally into consciousness, then “dropped” back to where it came from, but subtly altered, as in Marcel Proust’s \textit{À la recherche} and Nietzsche’s notion of “knowing what not to know” in the second preface of \textit{The Gay Science}, not to mention the changes in light and shadow at twilight and dawn known to filmmakers as the “magic hour.”

The daydreaming required for creative work is precisely this swerve into and out of, this hovering on the borders of consciousness dipped into the friction that is the paradox of the mastery of non-mastery.

Yet there was something missing here and that was the changing concept of the body in relation to consciousness. With climate change the sense of the body and the bodily unconscious expands. It is no longer only my body but my body, your body, and the body of the world.

v

In emails to friends I found myself repeating one image and that was the ships’ likeness to fairy castles moving silently through the forest. They glide, I wrote next to my drawing, they glide like swans.

Fairy castles and swans! So here’s my bestiary, awaiting not only Ovid’s metamorphoses but Gaston Bachelard’s little book on the animals in

\textsuperscript{143} Taussig, “Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism.”
Maldoror written by the twenty-four-year-old Comte de Lautréamont whom I was reading at the time I was in northern Colombia: swans and fairy castles moving through the enchanted forest ablaze with wysteria and chestnut flowers shooting forth white stars.

So, actually I had a tripartite scheme: (1) my writing on African palm, (2) my watching the ships glide through the forest, and (3) my bedazzlement with Maldoror’s animals via Bachelard.

I became conscious of the presence of animals in what I was writing on African palm but for the life of me couldn’t figure out why or how this activity functioned and the same could be said about those fairy castles gliding like swans.

As regards the African palm writing, what was the role of those dogs, caymans, pigs, hens, donkeys, parrots, mojarra fish, and iguanas?

But first let me point out that these were beings that interacted intensely with humans. Each animal had a mythic and magical quality. For example, the aphrodisiac quality of iguana eggs, the sexual connotations of the cayman, the parrot that conversed all day long with doña Edit and had only recently recovered from an attack by the Evil Eye, and the dogs that rolled around on top of one another through domestic space, yelled at by humans all day long with operatic performances of impotent rage.

My sense is that the animals acted as a bridge to worlds beyond language that made language possible, and that the bridge was what sustained the metaphoric power of words such as “fairy castles gliding like swans.” Animals brought out for me the animal in language. Animals were the bodily unconscious at play with itself.

After all, what my writing on African palm was about, was a political meditation—more a cry of rage, really—that not only recruited animals to the task as strategic bit-players but saw the task as one of uniting with plants including African palm and this in such a way that language itself became “ecological.”
VI

That coupled with the observation as written under the drawing of the ship: “It’s the shock!”

And why shock? Because suddenly you realize that this inchoate lattice-work of color passing through the forest is a ship! Yet this abrupt recognition coincides with the salient fact of slowness, this ever so slow movement, sometimes so slow that it took a while for me to realize that it was actually moving, but move it did and then I would feel sad when it passed out of sight.

As the days went by, the boats became my friends, animate beings, even colleagues.

Quite often the ships I saw seemed empty, floating high, displaying, as if naked, that curious “forefinger” or phallic protuberance in the bow at the water level which has been part of ship design for the past fifty years and is meant—so I am told—to increase speed and buoyancy but looks to me impractical and ugly, very much in conflict with “nature” and the clean-cut lines of older vessels that, you have to admit, represent the Platonic form of shipness.

Modernity has conspired to radically alter ship design and along with that, the idea of a ship.

Today a “ship” is a metal box with smaller boxes called “containers” piled high on it, or a “cruise ship” stuffed with thousands of tourists scared of Legionnaires’ Disease while destroying ancient cities such as Venice; or else a “ship” is an inflatable raft carrying death-defying asylum seekers to southern Italy or off the shores of western Turkey to Lesbos.

But when a ship passed through the forest as a fairy castle, as a swan, the shipness of the ship reasserted itself and the dream of freedom and beauty in the hearts of tourists no less than refugees asserted itself, if only for an instant.
The slowness of the ships’ movement through the forest, coupled with my shock of recognition that this movement was that of a ship, precipitated my awareness of a specific kind of force within perception—of time brewing, of take, and retake, of observation and counter-observation.

“You feel the medium,” I later wrote on the drawing itself. “You feel the medium sustaining the vessel pushing through it.” This was preceded by a statement on the drawing: “It’s the seething wake that charms and overcomes you, churning white, so you sense, you feel, the medium.” In other words seeing binds to feeling; the visual is tactile, like in cinema. And what a sensuous tactility this is, this seething, churning, bubbling, incandescent, grand afterthought of progress!

So here was another thought, another realization—namely, the dependency of words on weight and buoyancy, by which I mean the resistance to that weight performed in the lightest, fairy-castle way—in uplifting buoyancy with the ship dependent on the resistance of the water which supports the ship (our fairy castle, our swan) while being displaced by it.

Doña Edit has her wake too. She churns day long through dogs milling at her feet, those cartwheeling dogs performing DNA helices while piles of washing mount skyward like the flowers of the chestnut tree and the parrot’s squawks become words thanks to the nervous fluttering of green wings churning the hot air.

The fury of the wake is testimony to the excitement and music of this.

I see now how my observations clustered around the drawing of the ship were similar to this churning wake, written as they were in a bubbly way with strange tenses and verb formations in a “sea” of words surrounding the ship.

I write “sea.” But it is it not also a forest, a forest of words?

THE END
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