

**AN ORCHARD GROWS AT THE CITY'S EDGE**  
**A COLOMBIAN FARMER AND HIS FRUIT TREES IN THE WAKE OF DISPLACEMENT**

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Dear Agrarian Studies Community: Thank you for taking the time to read this paper. It is a working draft of a chapter for my book manuscript. I look forward to your feedback toward completion of a final draft. I would also like to thank the Agrarian Studies Program for sponsoring my research.

Imagine a cacao orchard. Walk along the straight rows of cacao trees. Note that they grow under even taller legume trees. A varied selection of crops grow up in between the cacao—some provide fruit for home, others die back, remnants of earlier plantings before the cacao and its shade trees consumed the sunlight. You pause to admire the brightly colored cacao pods that draw your gaze down along the trunk, to the soil, and bend over to gather a ripe *borojó* fruit that has fallen to the ground. But the sweet fruit remains just out of reach. Once again, you find yourself standing in the hot sun among annual crops—waist-high cassava densely intercropped with yams, beans, corn and watermelon beneath scattered papaya and plantain.

The variety and arrangement of species in any agricultural parcel emerges over time, sometimes gradually, other times through violent displacements. The soil harbors layers of history. Each arrangement of crops tells a story. But most importantly, people and plants grow *together*,<sup>1</sup> casting an alliance that produces landscapes, both of hope and of destruction. Planting is a world-creating endeavor.

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<sup>1</sup> I draw from Haraway's (2008) notion of "companion species," through which she explores the ways that humans and nonhumans are mutually constituted through their encounters. "To knot companion and species together in encounter, in regard and respect, is to enter the world of becoming with, where *who and what are* is precisely what is at stake" (p. 19).

Since 1985 the armed conflict in Colombia has resulted in the forced displacement of five million people. The majority flees to urban centers, leaving behind 5.5 million hectares of land in the countryside (Comisión de Seguimiento, 2009). The landscape changes, dramatically. Forced displacement re-casts the relationships between people and plants. Weeds overtake abandoned fields and houses. Agroindustry and mineral extraction expand at the expense of small farms.<sup>2</sup> Visions for national progress and development compete with demands for reparations and restitution.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, alienated from their crops and land, farmers enter the ranks of the urban dispossessed, struggling to make ends meet as they resettle in the growing shantytowns of urban centers.

Forced displacement takes a heavy toll. It alienates farmers from their earthly attachments to make way for global capitalism. For farmers and crops living-in-relation, in this case exiled companions moving through violent landscapes, the urban fringe becomes the difficult terrain of re-attachment. Some things transplant, but many things don't. Unlikely edges emerge through farmers' efforts to reconnect with their crop companions. Farmers grow food in abandoned lots, along steep embankments, in a recycled plastic container perched upon a rooftop, or in the open spaces slotted for urban expansion. According to (Tsing, forthcoming), "Biological and social diversity huddle defensively in neglected margins" (p. 9). These neglected margins, or edges, are spaces of loss and sorrow as well as fragile possibility.

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<sup>2</sup> More than a simple consequence of violent clashes between armed groups in the countryside, forced displacement occurs most heavily in resource-rich territories, sites of capitalist speculation, and areas experiencing higher rates of land consolidation (Ibáñez Londoño, 2008; Pérez Murcia, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> The Victims' Law passed in July 2011 promises to restitute 2 million hectares over the next 10 years to victims of the internal armed conflict. The process has already proved challenging due to the assassination of peasant leaders. Furthermore, restitution could be undermined by the Santos administration's rural focus on the expansion of resource extraction, particularly mining. The "engines" for growth (plantations and mines) align with the "engines" that drive forced displacement.

In this chapter, I examine the fragile possibilities emerging from a small subsistence parcel from which its farmer, Vladimir, faced eviction.<sup>4</sup> He had arrived to Cartagena forcibly displaced from one of Colombia's rainforest frontiers where he had established himself as a landed cacao farmer. When I first met Vladimir in Cartagena, it was the dry season. His parcel appeared as a clearing with a small day shelter (*ranchito*) and a few raggedy looking plantains and papaya. With the rains, a diversity of annual crops filled his parcel. Yet two fruit trees—cacao and *borojó*—failed to materialize despite Vladimir's efforts to nurture them.



### **Vladimir's Parcel Mid-June**

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<sup>4</sup> Farmers' names and the names of small towns are pseudonyms to respect the privacy of my subjects.

I first learned about these missing fruit trees when I approached Vladimir with the idea of mapping his agricultural parcel. I was interested in parcel mapping as a way to record the variety and arrangement of crops he cultivated while fostering a discussion about their social history. However, mapping with Vladimir took a different path than I had anticipated. Vladimir drew three maps of his parcel in Cartagena, each different, each including fruit trees that were *not* present in his parcel, at least not in any ordinary sense. Rather, Vladimir's approach to mapping shrugged off rigid ideas of time and space. His maps searched for the present in the past and future. He drew a landscape composed of crops from different times and places that suggested a possibility not yet lived. Each of his maps, with varied crops and planting arrangements, depicted his effort to materialize a future that required the capacity to imagine how crops and farmers grow together.

I argue that Vladimir's political possibilities were tied to the landscapes he inhabited. This was not lost on Vladimir. He had been a farmworker, a landed farmer and a shantytown dweller. His political subjectivity shifted with the plants he tended. He had been both an agent of the state, tending commercial cacao, and a dispossessed urban dweller farming a diversity of subsistence crops on land with speculative value for industrial expansion. Fruit trees offered him the possibility to retain his *campesino* identity, even as he became a resident in one of Cartagena's largest shantytowns. Fruit trees made his claim to land legible to the state. Vladimir knew that what he planted mattered.

In what follows, I offer a narrative legend that attempts to take the viewer of Vladimir's maps along his itinerary of migration in order to understand the way he chose to represent his parcel. In particular, I follow his relationship to cacao and *borojó* through multiple landscapes. I combine excerpts from oral histories, and insights and information from visits and conversations

outside of the mapping process, with a description of the actual time Vladimir and I spent together working on each map. In addition to interpreting Vladimir's maps as finished products, I detail the process of their production in order to draw attention to Vladimir's ongoing efforts to reconstitute his relationship to his crop companions.

## **Vladimir's Maps**

### ***Map 1: Cacao in rows***

Vladimir and I sat underneath the black plastic overhang of his *ranchito*. A small fire was smoldering below a blackened pot where Vladimir made sweet coffee and lemon grass tea throughout the day. I pulled out the materials I had brought with me: a block of newspaper print, a ruler, a pen, regular and colored pencils and an eraser. I handed Vladimir the block of newspaper print, and once again, he expressed doubt about mapping his parcel. Although, he had agreed to the idea, he reiterated that he did not know how to draw. If I needed a map, why didn't I ask a cartographer?

Vladimir took the paper and a regular pencil and sat down waiting for my input. I suggested that he start with the borders of his parcel. Vladimir carefully placed the ruler on the paper and drew the shape of his parcel with the wash cutting across it. Then, he stood up, went into his *ranchito* and returned with a wooden pole and a thin piece of wood with four numbers written on it in charcoal—16, 13, 36, 25. Vladimir had used the pole to measure his parcel and had asked a friend to record them on the piece of wood.<sup>5</sup> Vladimir asked me to write the length of each border on the map.

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<sup>5</sup> Vladimir did not measure his parcel because I had proposed we map his parcel. He had done so earlier, along with several other farmers, when the landowners began discussions with the peasant association regarding its members continued access to the private estate where he cultivated.

Next, Vladimir asked me to draw corn along the borders because he didn't know how to draw corn. In fact, he only knew how to draw one plant, and that was cacao. I insisted that he try drawing corn because there was no cacao in his parcel. Vladimir and I continued on in a back and forth negotiation as to who would draw what. He continued to insist that I draw corn until I agreed. I gave in and used a simple line drawing to represent corn. I handed the map back to Vladimir, and he used a simple line drawing to represent pigeon pea, placing one in between each corn plant.

Then, Vladimir used the ruler to draw a grid of vertical and horizontal lines across his entire parcel. When I asked about the grid, he explained that he organized his parcel around rows of cassava. This time, he drew first, and his drawing greatly differed from my simple line drawings. Whereas my representation of corn looked like the kind that might be found in a participatory mapping methods book,<sup>6</sup> Vladimir's representation of cassava carefully considered the shape of its leaves, and most importantly emphasized the usable portion of the plant, its starchy roots.<sup>7</sup> Vladimir first learned to cultivate cassava in his birthplace, Vilhena, a small town in southern Bolívar department. He was a landless farmer that worked as a day laborer on small, privately owned farms. When I asked him about the ways he applied what he knew about agriculture to this work, he replied,

Well, the owner gives orders. He says, "Okay, you're going to plant this cassava in a line, so I can see it, straight, to be able to weed it." He gives the orders, so one does what he orders, and that was how one had to do it. That is what one learns there.

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<sup>6</sup> My intended methodology for mapping agricultural parcels was drawn from agroecosystem analysis (Gliessman, 2006, 2007; Mendez, Lok, & Somarriba, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> I thank the students of the urban ethnography class at the University of Cartagena for this insight as I presented my earliest thoughts on these maps during my fieldwork period.

As a landless farmer working for wages he did not control his labor on the land or freely apply his agricultural skills to his work. Rather, planting cassava in rows was about following orders.

Although Vladimir regularly spoke to me of his past, he rarely spoke about Vilhena. He generally preferred to tell stories about his days as a landed cacao farmer in Camiri, Chocó. Vladimir left Vilhena for Chocó department after a ten-year struggle to win possession of a parcel in a floodplain.

The early 1970s are considered the peak of peasant agrarian reform struggles in Colombia, with the majority of activity occurring in the Atlantic Coast region (Zamosc, 1990). This region includes Vladimir's hometown located in the southeastern lowlands of Bolívar department. In addition to his work as a day laborer, he cultivated subsistence crops along the riverbanks of the Magdalena River. Orlando Fals Borda (1979) used the term “*cultura anfibia*” (amphibious culture) to describe the livelihood strategy of peasants living in the Magdalena's swamplands. They cultivated and moved cattle in the fertile floodplains during the dry season, which then, covered by water, became fishing and hunting grounds. While this seasonal rhythm has created a particular cultural ecology of life along the river, it is also a product of high levels of land concentration due to the creation of large haciendas in the 1800s. The drastically uneven distribution of land, fenced off for cattle by large landowners, restricted peasant land access to the floodplains, which fueled various struggles for agrarian reform (Fals Borda, 1979).

Vladimir won his claim, along with over 300 farmers organized as a *campesino* (peasant) association. However, the amount of land distributed to the peasants was insufficient to support the number of farmers involved in the struggle. This was not an unusual outcome. Despite demands for full expropriation from more radical sectors of the *campesino* movement, many settlements between landowners and peasants resulted in reduced parcels or lower quality land

than the peasants had been originally fighting for (Zamosc, 1990). Vladimir decided to seek other options. Through his involvement in the *campesino* movement, Vladimir learned of the Chocó's "unclaimed" lands.<sup>8</sup> Twenty-three families from Vladimir's hometown travelled to Chocó and founded Camiri. Soon after, Vladimir became part of a National Federation of Cacao Producers (Fedecacao) project for increasing cacao production by replacing cacao landraces with improved varieties.

By the time Vladimir finished drawing his rows of cassava, three hours had passed. He was tired and discouraged about fitting the rest of his crops in the map. We decided to stop and continue in a few days. I started gathering the mapping materials when Vladimir reminded me that I still had not seen him draw cacao. No matter how insistently I queried Vladimir about the diversity of his parcel in Cartagena, whether during life history interviews or on walks through his parcel, cacao overran our conversations. It was not unusual for Vladimir to point at his rows of cassava to tell me stories about his rows of cacao. I had resisted this tendency as we mapped. We were drawing his parcel in Cartagena where there was no cacao. That seemed straightforward enough, or so I thought. But when Vladimir brought up cacao for the second time, I stopped and listened.

Vladimir remembered his cacao farm with great pride. It was a time of good fortune—he was a landed farmer with a productive enterprise. On several occasions he described how beautiful the cacao farms looked with all the trees perfectly lined up. Vladimir's stories of orderly rows of improved cacao embedded in a rainforest frontier landscape bore the mark of the

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<sup>8</sup>In order to quell the peasant invasions of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the government side-stepped agrarian reform by sending peasants to colonize Colombia's frontier regions (Torres & Ruiz, 2002). Land considered to be "unclaimed" (*baldío*) by the state was often inhabited, but by populations whose livelihood practices were not legible to the state or were seen as a threat. Colonization campaigns served the double purpose of diffusing tensions from landless peasants while accomplishing the mission of inscribing the mark of "civilization" and national allegiance on marginal landscapes of the national territory.



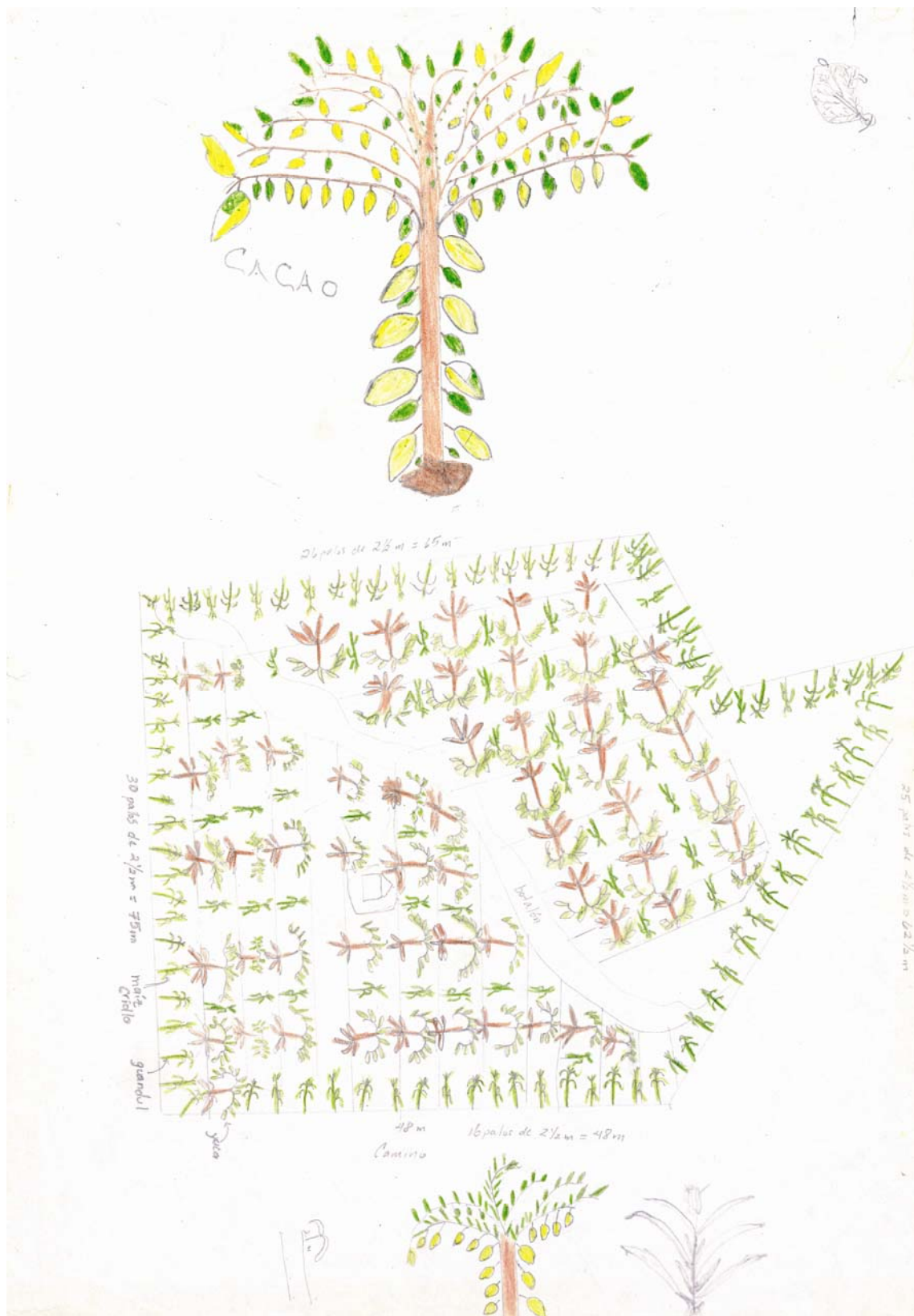
state's civilizing mission. His cacao fields emerged within a landscape-making project that unfolded in the region in the 1970s. The Chocó is one of Colombia's frontier regions that has been perpetually produced as such since colonial times. It was and is a region considered to be in need of development, and lacking the necessary infrastructure (material and cultural) to properly exploit its rich store of natural resources and fully incorporate its inhabitants into the national body (Escobar, 1997). With mounting pressure for land redistribution and a focus on modernizing agricultural production, using landless peasants to colonize the frontier with agricultural projects was a popular solution. Fedecacao with the support of the Colombian Ministry of Agriculture, the Colombian Agricultural Research Institute (ICA) and agricultural extension provided by the Colombian Agrarian Reform Institute (INCORA) among others, planned to make Colombia self-sufficient in cacao and re-initiate export that had stopped in the early twentieth century (Rojas-Ardilla, 1997). Fedecacao, along with these government entities, trained farmers in cacao cultivation and sold seedlings of improved cacao and other necessary inputs. INCORA provided farmers with title, establishing their security of tenure and enabling their collateral for loans to purchase inputs. The work of transforming the landscape depended on the labor of Green Revolution-trained peasants and the ecology of improved crop varieties.

The arrival of *colonos* (settlers) and improved cacao to a "free" landscape open for the taking is a frontier trope that has been widely challenged. The Chocó rainforest of the 1970s had grown accustomed to the boom and bust cycles of colonial and capitalist exploitation (Leal, 2004; Williams, 2004). Its traditional inhabitants, indigenous groups and Afro-Colombians, had survived the uneven territorialization of their land and bodies, continually adapting livelihood strategies that variously combined hunting, gathering, fishing, swidden cultivation, homegardens and mining. Vladimir, like many *colonos* to Chocó, arrived from a region that had been heavily

impacted by the processes of colonization (*latifundios*) and modernization (Green Revolution of the 1960s). He emerged from this history as a *mestizo*-identifying peasant, and an exploited wage laborer, yet modern agent of the state. Vladimir had a lot of pride in being a *colono*. He saw himself as bringing progress to a national backwater. He had internalized the values of straight lines. When he founded a town with other *colonos* from his hometown and local Afro-Colombians, he took it upon himself to straighten its roads.

Vladimir's careful drawing of cacao reflected the attention it required for its production. Improved cacao was a product of market design. Improved varieties produced larger pods in greater numbers increasing yield substantially, yet were more susceptible to disease. The delicate ecology of improved cacao grown under the logic of commercial production removed it from traditional agricultural management schemes.

As Vladimir drew the cacao tree at the top of the map, he described the skill of shaping its growth through pruning so that it would fruit all the way to the bottom of the trunk. He described the labor of clearing land and the impact of disease on the harvest. Vladimir represented different diseases by leaving white and unripe patches on two of the cacao pods. He explained the onset of disease, how to identify and control it and when it was too late. His enterprise even survived after he was abandoned by Fedecacao when an uncontrollable disease spread throughout the region. He chuckled when he told me that he lost the support of their agricultural engineers and credit because it also meant he no longer had to repay his debt and he had already learned what he needed to know. Although his yields decreased, with aggressive management of the disease, he still produced a good harvest. According to Vladimir, the beauty of his cacao farm left visitors wonderstruck and drew buyers with fat wallets deep into the rainforest in search of his product.



Map 1: Cacao in rows

The following is an excerpt from a life history interview with Vladimir. Along with the gridlines in this map, his narrative reflects the work and meaning of transforming what Vladimir understood to be “wild” jungle, into a cacao farm. Here, planting in rows is not about following orders, but enacting the proper values of a landowner. Rows of improved cacao inscribe the landscape with legible markers of property and progress.

**V:** We founded a little town. They [National Federation of Cacao Producers] arrived right away. They didn't waste anytime because they wanted a program in Chocó. They offered us credit and everything to plant cacao. ... We didn't even have any land, just like I am now. We were still landless. They told us, go find land so we can give you credit to plant cacao. Immediately, we got to it and we looked for land all over the place. We had to find a place, all together, to receive the credit for cacao. So, we looked for land over there, we didn't like it. We looked for land over here, we didn't like it either. If we didn't like it, we looked somewhere else. “Nope, here no, here no, let's look somewhere else.” Until we finally found it, forty minutes from the river. So then, they gave us the credit to take down the forest, to plant, to buy seed. They opened a credit line for us at the Agrarian Bank (*Caja Agraria*). We would go there to get the money to work, and from this the cacao fields emerged. ... It was only a few of us, I tell you, only eight people. The others didn't want the commitment. But we did, uuy, we took down fifty-five hectares of jungle over there by machete. By machete because there weren't even chainsaws yet. Trees that we had to use four or five axes on. Do you know what an axe is? Uhh, trees like this, with a base like this. Humongous!

**R:** And was this the first time you had cleared jungle of that size and planted cacao?

**V:** First time, first time, and I was very excited about it. Oh, and with the price of cacao, it was good money, and one worked without economic constraints, without any pressure, with ease. ... Over there [Chocó] agriculture is very productive. ... People came in by the river, and they would buy all the cacao and transport it out. But they bought a lot! They bought tons, people with money. It was all rich people that came to buy because that is a good business.

Well, and that farm of ours had a reputation. Uhh, I tell you, think of it, all the people of Chocó up to the capital, all of the area from Antioquia to Vigía del Fuerte, all of those people would go there to the farm. ... To see it, how the cacao was so pretty and well-lined up. Because we learned that too, to form lines in jungle—that is tremendous! To make a straight line where there is all thick jungle trees, and make the line so that the cacao all lines up. Like this, a tree like that, one measures the distance, the thickness it has to see if that tree

will fall in the middle of that tree, and from that emerges the line, straight. And one can see those rows, you look at them this way, that way, you look at them any which way, which ever way and it looks pretty, in jungle. So, all of that technique, we know it.

...Man, we built up a good reputation. ...we always kept the farm clean. ...Yes, the farms were always clean. One enjoyed walking through a farm. "So and so's farm, I'm going to walk through it because it looks pretty all over." And the other farms too. They were left wonderstruck. And so, people got excited about it. They took that good reputation with them. People also came because of the reputation. And it was always like that until the time came to leave, to leave everything. We lost everything that we had, and here we are. Well, thank god, we are with life and health still, as long as the Lord permits.

This period of Vladimir's life lasted for over twenty years. It ended abruptly when the paramilitary entered the region killing peasants and ordering others to leave. Unfortunately, a new landscape-making project surfaced in the 1990s that did not include Vladimir. Rather, it included his removal from the landscape, Vladimir suspected, to make space for coca plantations. As I watched him draw from memory, I began to understand that although cassava had replaced cacao as his primary crop, his incessant describing and referencing of cacao narrated it into his current parcel. Cacao's absence, as reflected by his drawing, loomed large.

### ***Map 2: Tierra de borojó***

When I arrived at Vladimir's house to finish the parcel map, he was sitting on his front porch at a small wooden table drawing a new map. He had suggested that we finish mapping at his house where he could sit and be more comfortable drawing. I sat down beside Vladimir and began to take note of his work. He had abandoned the first map in favor of starting over. The structure of the parcel remained—the border of corn and pigeon pea, the straight rows of cassava, and his *ranchito* next to the wash. Yet, he had drawn a different species in between each of the cassava plants. I took a closer look, perplexed, and began asking Vladimir about the plants as I read their



labels penciled in by his daughter. In this map, there is an overwhelming presence of fruit trees—*caimito*, mango, tamarind, soursop, *anón*, breadfruit, coconut, avocado, orange, guava, mandarin, *gaumo*, peach palm and *borojó* appear.<sup>9</sup> However, the absence of fruit trees rather than their presence is a notable feature when visiting Vladimir's parcel.

On my next visit to Vladimir's parcel he pointed out his fruit trees in order to abate my confusion about the second map. "Here I have lots of trees planted," he told me. "Look here, small but a lot. Mango, lemon, all kinds. That's *caimito*. There is another one, and there are other little trees planted over there. So this is highly cultivated, they're just small."

Indeed, as Vladimir emphatically explained, they were small rather than a dominating feature of the landscape. Although Vladimir had been farming this parcel located on a private estate for four years, he had only recently begun experimenting with fruit trees. The owners of the estate had allowed the farmers to cultivate annual crops for their own consumption but prohibited tree-planting to avoid possession claims. Trees, along with other kinds of long-term infrastructure, can be used as legal evidence by farmers to challenge property claims by absent owners. For this reason, following the landowners' orders, a land administrator regularly walked the land with a machete destroying any trees planted without permission. However, the relationship between the farmers and the landowners became contentious after the owners attempted to remove the farmers from their parcels. At this time, the land administrator fled due to his own questionable management of the land during the landowners' long absences.

Liberated from the administrator's tree-logging machete, and with a heightened concern for

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<sup>9</sup> The following is a complete list of species represented in his maps: *achiote*, *anón*, avocado, *borojó*, breadfruit, cacao, *caimito*, *cereza*, cilantro, *ciruela*, coconut, collard, corn, cucumber, eggplant, *espinaca*, green beans, *guama*, guava, lime, *lulo*, *mamón*, mandarin, mango, cassava, *marañón*, melon, millet, *níspero*, *noni*, orange, oregano, papaya, peach palm, pepper, pigeon pea, pineapple, plantain, *sapote*, soursop, squash, sugarcane, tamarind, tomato, watermelon, wheat, and yam.

inscribing the landscape with their labor, several farmers decided to plant trees in their parcels to strengthen their possession claim.

Intrigued, I knelt over a *semillero* (a small area of amended soil for starting seeds). Searching for the many species represented in his map, I asked Vladimir to identify the seedlings. Instead, he directed my attention to another *semillero* that as far as I could tell had nothing in it. Vladimir had planted several *borojó* seeds the month before and was waiting to see if they would germinate.



***Borojó semillero***

*Borojó* (*Borojoa patinoi*) is a very particular fruit tree, endemic to the Chocó rainforest where rainfall is about four times greater than in Cartagena.<sup>10</sup> It is a favorite fruit known for its

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<sup>10</sup>The Chocó biogeographic region that stretches along Colombia's Pacific Coast is known for its extreme levels of rainfall that can reach 11 m per year (Ricker, Jessen, & Daly, 1997), with an average annual rainfall of 4588.2 mm



aphrodisiac and nutritional qualities. Traditionally, *borojó* is harvested from the wild, often its growth encouraged. It is also transplanted and cultivated in diverse fruit tree gardens. It is an extremely localized species that resists domestication, at least in the sense required for large-scale commercialization. *Borojó* does not grow well outside of its native forest and will not mature if picked green. It must be harvested from the ground promptly when the ripe dark brown fruit naturally falls from the tree. Furthermore, due to its soft texture, it must be transported and sold in a plastic film, raising concerns that its dark brown and mushy appearance may be unattractive to consumers unfamiliar with the fruit. While its potential as a “superfood” and crop for international export has been noted, it remains limited to a small national market ("*El Borojó Manual*,"; Ricker et al., 1997).

Although *borojó* has become available throughout the country, in the 1970s when Vladimir made his way to Chocó department, he was unfamiliar with this fruit. At Vladimir’s cacao farm, geared toward commercial production, he incorporated *borojó* as a prized subsistence tree for home consumption. It became a regular part of Vladimir’s diet, and was a good companion for cacao, also thriving in the shade provided by a taller canopy tree.

Vladimir learned about *borojó* from the local forest dwellers—Afro-Colombians and indigenous groups. Yet, he did not boast about this source of seed and knowledge, rather focusing on the progress planting rows of improved cacao brought to the region. According to Vladimir, the indigenous communities cultivated food crops yet in a messy fashion. Vladimir described the snakes he encountered when clearing weeds from an indigenous community’s plantain fields in exchange for plantain seed. Vladimir also explained that Afro-Colombians were not interested in agriculture, and preferred to sell their labor instead of cultivate. Although

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(180.64 in) recorded for the Municipality of Bojaya ("*Municipio de Bojaya, Nuestro Municipio*," 2012). In contrast, Cartagena, located along Colombia’s Caribbean Coast, is dry tropics with an average annual rainfall of 1021 mm (40.2 in) (*Climatología de los Principales Puertos del Caribe Colombiano: Cartagena de Indias, D.T. y C.*, 2009).

Vladimir disregarded traditional forms of land management practices, reifying dominant perceptions of their inadequacy, it may be these very practices that he adapted for growing subsistence crops.<sup>11</sup> The agroecological practices of floodplain farming in southern Bolívar department were not directly applicable to the tropical rainforest he encountered in Chocó department. Furthermore, local Afro-Colombians lived alongside *colonos* in Camiri. One of his Afro-Colombian neighbors, who also made her way to Cartagena due to forced displacement, laughed as she remembered how furious her mother had been with Vladimir when he destroyed some of her garden plants to straighten out the town's roads.

Vladimir became a *colono* in this region that from this time onward came under the increasing eye of the state as a site for exploration and exploitation. Relatively isolated from the violence of the 1950s and 1980s, by the 1990s it became one of the most violent regions with the incursion of paramilitary groups intent on capturing property in the face of constitutional measures that had secured collective land rights for Afro-Colombian and indigenous groups. Powerful ethnic social movements continue to struggle against the war-produced landscapes of agroindustrial plantations (oil palm, coca) and other large-scale development projects that violently displace local communities (Escobar, 2003; Ng'weno, 2003).

In the moist, rich soils that Vladimir forcibly abandoned, crops grew larger and faster than in Cartagena. A *borojó* tree emerged anywhere seed had fallen. In contrast, Vladimir had spent months trying to get *borojó* to germinate in Cartagena. His most recent experiment involved a mixture of burnt soil (*tierra quemada*) and sawdust. His attempts to grow *borojó*

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<sup>11</sup>Dominant ideas regarding ethnicity, adequate land use and property, reflected through Vladimir's perceptions of the land use management practices of local forest dwellers, would be challenged and overturned by the 1991 constitution, which granted collective land rights to indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities based on different landscape markers for property.

required that he refashion the agroecology of his parcel, continually creating new soil mixtures for the *borojó* seeds.

After several tries, he finally managed to germinate *borojó*, but the seedlings were short-lived. The more he watered them, the drier they became. Something about the water or the soil in Cartagena, Vladimir told me, was too hot. The seedlings simply burned up.

### **Map 3: *Finca hecha***

I arrived to Vladimir's house for my next visit. Once again, Vladimir had abandoned the map he had been working on and showed me a third map that was complete. This map echoes the second map, yet shows no borders. Rather, the rows of plants are drawn to the edge of the paper. His *ranchito*, the wash and the crops are larger and more centered on the page.

Vladimir commonly referred to his parcel as a mere *huerta*, or garden. When I expressed admiration of his parcel, or asked questions about his cultivation techniques, it was common that he would shift the conversation to the days when he had a “real” farm. The borders of his current parcel reflect a parcel that is embarrassingly small—less than half a hectare when he had managed several hectares of titled land in the past. In this map, the size of his parcel is obscured, and rather reveals the future he intends for his parcel. When I continued to ask Vladimir about the rich diversity of fruit trees he had included in his map, Vladimir explained that he had drawn his parcel five years into the future completely transformed. In fact, Vladimir let me know that the focus of my mapping idea—his parcel in Cartagena *as it was*—was misconstrued. For this reason he took the liberties of drawing his parcel as a “real” farm with fruit trees. This map represented a *finca hecha*, as he called it, to signify a farm already made. He stressed to me that a “real” *finca* requires fruit trees.



In the Chocó rainforest, making a *finca* involved taking down *monte* (wild forest) and planting annual crops with trees. Over time, the trees shaded out the annuals, leaving a good farm of fruit trees that produced continually with minimal care. Meanwhile, a new area was cleared for planting annuals, starting the process again. In Cartagena, land is too scarce to plan on clearing another area for planting cassava. Yet, he pointed out that in Chocó one could make a living with a mature plot of *borojó*, mango, orange and cacao trees the same size as his parcel in Cartagena.

### **Mapping an emerging landscape**

It is not easy to capture a landscape on paper, especially given that Vladimir's life history was intertwined with the plants I expected him to draw. Vladimir spent most of his days at this parcel clearing weeds, cultivating soil, sowing seeds, watering and transplanting seedlings, harvesting and relaxing. The variety and arrangement of species emerged through years of accumulated experiences, memories and knowledge that he translated and reconfigured in new social and ecological contexts. His daily practice not only reflected an intimate relationship with the landscape he nurtured, but also represented a daily negotiation between the uncertainties of insecure tenure and the possible futures he imagined. I asked that he reduce all of this to a few symbols.

When Vladimir and I began the process of mapping his agricultural parcel I had tried to retain our focus on the crops in front of us. I interrupted to ask about cassava, he responded briefly, half-heartedly, and continued with stories about how he planted cacao. At first I resisted, pressing for direct responses to what I viewed as straightforward questions. Immersed in concerns for my own research agenda, Vladimir had to insist twice before including cacao in his

first parcel map. When Vladimir drew the cacao tree, mapping with Vladimir took an unexpected turn. Vladimir's memories and aspirations, in addition to the annual crops he tended daily, began to guide his drawings.

As we continued, he became enthused with the process. Vladimir avoided any further negotiation with my expectations. He mapped in between our planned sessions and asked for little input. When I arrived at Vladimir's house to find him working on the second map, the trees I may have steered him away from drawing were already there. I could readily recognize certain features of Vladimir's maps—the shape and relative length of his parcel's borders, the placement of his *ranchito* and the wash, the straight rows of cassava organizing an array of other species. But to focus solely on his parcel in Cartagena *as it was* would be to simply miss the point. It was his inclusion of mature fruit trees that was most revealing.

Vladimir drew his parcel in Cartagena, not at a particular moment in time and space (i.e. snapshot), but through an attention to the dynamic and ongoing socio-ecological histories that directly shaped his management practices. His maps charted out a maturation process that drew elements from the past in an effort to materialize a different future. Vladimir's parcel and his maps were dense sites of socio-ecological encounter. His parcel tied together mobile people and plants marking the landscape with their histories of migration. In Vladimir's case, the character of this mobility—its departures, routes of travel and sites of resettlement—was shaped by the politics of violent displacement and dispossession. Vladimir lost touch with his tree crop companions as he made his way to Cartagena. Regardless, Vladimir cultivated his parcel in Cartagena with his trees in mind. Present as seedlings or not there at all, the role of fruit trees, especially cacao and *borojó*, was central to understanding Vladimir's cultivation practices.

Vladimir's fruit trees lingered in their absence. His memories of fruit trees, and the meanings he attached to them, resided in rows of cassava, soil carefully mixed for seedlings, and seeds too stubborn to germinate. These memories invoked other times and places. Engseng Ho (2006) refers to diasporas as "the society of the absent" (p. 19). "To be in one place is to be absent everywhere else. Moving between places, mobility leaves in its wake a trail of absences" (p. 18). The absent, he argues, incite representations and recollections that maintain their presence—not through material proximity, but affective proximity.

Through mapping Vladimir accessed a narrative about himself as a landed farmer managing fifty-five hectares of a commercial tree crop. He detailed his agricultural capabilities and enjoyed my interest in his practices. Most of all, he told me stories about his life as a *campesino*, not as a *desplazado* (displaced person). This history might be overlooked given Vladimir's current situation—farming a small piece of borrowed land, which if he lost, would place him with the majority of displaced farmers over sixty who arrived to a city with few options for rebuilding their livelihoods. Vladimir was very insistent that I understand that his parcel in Cartagena was a mere shadow of his capabilities, marred by the violence that forced him to leave his success behind. He made their absence present to me by drawing, narrating, and gesturing fruit trees into his parcel until I could imagine standing in the shade of soon-to-be-towering fruit trees.

It took three maps of Vladimir's parcel in Cartagena to arrive at his *finca hecha*, the imaginary orchard with which I began this chapter. However, whereas I had to imagine the orchard that Vladimir drew and described for me, Vladimir knew these plants in the flesh. He had shared life with them. They were not so much imaginary for him, but absent, elsewhere. In Vladimir's mind, his fruit trees continued to produce along the river beyond Camiri. He lamented

that his cacao trees struggled with disease, untended, and that ripe *borojó* fruit dropped to the ground, left to rot.

While Vladimir's daily cultivation practices maintained an affective proximity with a place and time he loved best, I argue that his focus on reconstituting his relationship to cacao and *borojó* was about something more. If we treat his maps as maps of mobility, of people and plants in motion, growing together, where the past, present, and future interrupt each other, then a landscape-in-the-making emerges. Vladimir's maps, especially his final map of a *finca hecha*, were a blue print for a political possibility. In the limited area under his immediate control Vladimir was busy creating habitat among widespread hostility where transplanting these fruit trees might become possible. He hoped to re-establish his relationship to what he viewed as necessary companions in the flesh.

### **The orchard in the grid**

In this section I take a closer look at Vladimir's maps as blue prints of political possibility. What kinds of peasant-crop relations do his maps chart out? What do they tell us about the relationships that forced displacement extinguishes and the possible landscaping projects that might re-ignite them? I start by examining the gridlines that organize Vladimir's maps. Vladimir's emphasis on the importance of straight lines of a single crop, organized into a grid on his maps, offer some of the most striking images in Vladimir's mapmaking and storytelling. They function as a register of property. Spatial grids are a form of disciplinary power that determines who and what belongs where (Blomley, 2003). Vladimir's grid carries with it a troubled history of multiple displacements, organized forgettings and violent contestations over land control.



Although Vladimir's maps were shaped by a contemporary context of land struggle--first the *campesino* uprisings and agrarian reforms of the 1960s and 1970s and later the forced displacements of the 1990s—they reveal contested landscape-making projects that emerged during the colonial period. For European colonists, human intervention in natural landscapes was a sign of civilization and progress. Cultivation was a founding act, a practice for possessing unclaimed land and bringing it in to the state's property regime (Casid, 2005). The forms of human intervention recognized as a founding act were those legible to European sensibilities. American forms of land use, such as swidden cultivation and diverse forest gardens, went unrecognized, obscured by the wild forest of the European imagination. The wild forest became unclaimed land (*tierra baldío*) available for conquest (Serje, 2005).

Straight lines as a symbol of productivity and control became central to the technology of plantation agriculture. Rows and rows of a commercial crop facilitated maximum productivity, made possible through the application of coerced labor. Through the territorialization of land and bodies, people and their plants entered into an ordering regime of oppositional hierarchies—owners and slave, domesticated and wild. The plantation produced imperial power and the subjects to sustain it, manufacturing racial and gendered divisions. Imperial desires for extraction and subjugation relied on these divisions, circumscribing the political possibilities of colonial subjects based on the landscapes they inhabited and their roles in sustaining them (Casid, 2005; Tsing, forthcoming).

Naturalized associations between people, plants and moral character that emerged during the colonial period still haunt modern understandings of property rights. They re-surfaced in the agrarian reform program that envisioned transforming Chocó's "wild" forest into commercial cacao fields with the labor of *mestizo colonos*. Agrarian reform laws recognized the labor of

cultivation as creating land rights, and based possessors' labor on notions of adequate productivity. Not always centered on redistribution, these laws also sought to maximize economic exploitation of the country's soil and the incorporation of frontier regions.<sup>12</sup> Vladimir's well-weeded, straight rows of improved cacao created a landscape formation that fulfilled recognizable criteria for establishing property rights. His cacao field reflected the organization of farmer-citizens and improved varieties for maximum productivity. Acting as a *colono* for the state afforded Vladimir the opportunity to transcend his status as "free" labor. His political subjectivity as a landed farmer existed through his relationship to the state as a beneficiary of its agrarian reform program. This included certain privileges—access to titled land, credit and technical support—and required, in return, the performance of ownership through cultivating in straight rows and maintaining fields clear of weeds.

Vladimir proudly described the knowledge and labor required for this transformation. He stressed the aesthetically pleasing quality of his fields, and the monetary success and reputation he had built. Vladimir measured his success by holding legal title to land, sizable acreage for a small farmer, and genuine profit-making participation in the market. Furthermore, Vladimir's success at cacao farming afforded him the possibility to support his family in a dignified manner and retain a certain level of autonomy in his daily life. The symbolic and practical importance of cacao in Vladimir's life helped explain his continual focus on this time in his life. By transforming "wild" forest into "adequate" use, he had attained the promise of progress.

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<sup>12</sup> Law 200 of 1936 established that property should have a social function beyond the individual benefit of personal gain. With the intention of promoting economic exploitation of the country's soil, this law established possessors' rights based on the productive use (namely agricultural) of idle public lands, and the state's right to expropriate private property left idle (Arboleda Ramírez, 2008; Díaz-Callejas, 2002). Subsequent laws have extended or curtailed these rights by modifying specific parameters such as what constitutes productive use of land or setting limits to expropriation based on property size, etc. (Díaz-Callejas, 2002). The notion that labor creates land rights has antecedents in Colombia in the cultivation clause of 1882 (LeGrand, 1986), as well as the notion of "*morada y labor* (live and work)" during the colonial period (Díaz-Callejas, 2002).

*Borojó*, unlike improved cacao, did not stand in for progress. While *borojó* grew alongside Vladimir's improved cacao, it signified a different set of socio-ecological relations for Vladimir. Vladimir included *borojó* in his orchard of absent fruit trees, organized like a swidden plot, depicted in his second and third maps. It is a tiny symbol drawn among many fruit trees set inside the grid, distinguishable by the green color and round shape of its fruit, as well as the lightly penciled label that makes one's eyes squint. It does not have the specificity or size that sets his drawings of cacao apart in the first map. Along with the other ornately branched and colorfully fruited trees, it provides a certain lushness within the grid of straight lines. *Borojó*, along with the variety of fruit trees, fit well in his subsistence parcel in Cartagena geared toward home consumption.

However, after incessant attempts to nurture his *borojó* seeds to germination, the seedlings did not survive. Vladimir explained that in Chocó *borojó* grew anywhere a seed had fallen. *Borojó* represented a land of plenty for Vladimir that he described as the best and most productive soils he had ever cultivated. *Borojó* reflected the fondness he had developed for Chocó whose soil, along with state support, he credited for enabling his success there. Yet, his stories barely suggest how he and twenty-three families, new to the region and its ecology, met their basic needs before the cacao project started. The grid seems to cordon off the broader context through which Vladimir first learned about *borojó*.

The grid in Vladimir's maps provides a framework for the adequate application of knowledge, labor and hygiene, so that the unruly mess of tropical nature can be incorporated into civilized landscapes in an orderly manner. The grid creates a boundary between the monocrops of capitalist development and the diversity of marginal subsistence, between the expanding plantations of improved varieties and controlled zones where genetic material, labor and

knowledge can be properly classified and contained—seed banks, botanical gardens, national parks, ethnic territories, shantytowns (Raffles, 2002; Tsing, 2005). The grid incorporates people and plants through displacements. Inside the grid of improved cacao trees, Vladimir attributes *borojó*'s growth to the exuberant quality of the soil in Chocó, not the knowledge and labor of the local people who traditionally cultivate it. In fact, he blames the soil and water for its failure to transplant in Cartagena. For Vladimir to recognize the role of alternate landscapes and subjects would challenge the narrative of progress and his role in it as a settler. Nevertheless, it is precisely the traffic between civilization and wilderness that sustained Vladimir's experience of progress. The state's project to modernize the countryside through agroindustrial development produced improved cacao, *borojó* and Vladimir as particular kinds of subjects through their encounter at the frontier.

While Vladimir's fondness for cacao and *borojó* reproduced modern narratives of progress, his maps and stories are also ambiguous in this respect. Vladimir provided the labor of the founding act, cutting down wild forest with an axe, yet remained disposable, repeatedly dispossessed. He was easily abandoned by the state when disease overtook his cacao fields, and again, when he was violently displaced from the region. Vladimir's life experiences taught him that the promises of progress linked to titled land and planting in straight rows were reversible. What can we learn from modern representations of progress, but from the vantage point of loss?

Modernity as a master narrative is often the easiest thread to pick up (Pratt, 2008). Vladimir's gridlines engage with the state's terms, and are partially designed for the state's reception. Planting rows of crops along a grid forms part of an archive of practices learned by Vladimir through his encounters with the state. Yet, Vladimir's relationship to the grid is more complicated by his subjugated position as disposable labor. Vladimir has been both incorporated

and expelled by the spatial grid of the state's landscaping projects. How might his ambiguous experience modify or infiltrate his representations?

The spatial grid of the plantation or agroindustry transforms landscapes through alienation so that the fondness associated with cultivating plants is replaced by coercion and exploitation (Tsing, forthcoming). For Vladimir the grid signified a landscape formation worthy of property, but less so in the sense of maximizing productivity. Property granted Vladimir some autonomy in the way he related to his plants. He had internalized the marvel of straight lines, but also tailored his cacao fields with subsistence crops. He remained a farmer (not a plantation owner or farm worker), developing a fondness for his crops, continuing to tend diseased cacao and repeatedly nurturing *borojó* seeds that wouldn't germinate. They had become his companions, and it was this affect and fondness that guided his efforts to re-connect with cacao and *borojó* in Cartagena.

Referring to the land struggle Vladimir faced in Cartagena, he described the stakes of planting.

I would feel happy if this parcel was ours. I tell you, if God truly permits us to win, I would jump on one foot (laughs) because then I would improve it. ... I would put more technique into my cultivation because I would know that this was already property. I would plant what produces best. I would plant trees. I would even plant cacao here. Yes, because one doesn't know yet if this could be ours, or they could respond with more force and the struggle continues, or we could lose. We don't know. ... To me, it seems that with the way the struggle is, we could win. And since the [peasant] association has recommended that we plant, we should plant and we should cultivate, because there are too many spaces that still have weeds (*monte*). And well, you know that those people [landowners] grab onto nothing. They go to an area that isn't planted and say, "Aha! And what is it that you all are demanding, demanding land with *this* here."

Vladimir cleared and planted his parcel in Cartagena with the understanding that he was farming on borrowed land. A brother from his evangelical church, whom had acquired usufruct

rights to a parcel from the land administrator of the private estate, ceded a portion of it to Vladimir. Vladimir acknowledged that his cassava rows could be straighter. He knew “adequate” ways of planting that would bolster his possession claim. It had not seemed worth the effort. The grid produced by rows of cassava in Vladimir’s first map almost functions as a relic. However, after the landowners threatened to evict, and the peasant association responded defiantly, Vladimir began to “put more technique” into his cultivation. Vladimir began introducing fruit trees. His second map depicts how he would incorporate his fruit tree saplings, inside the grid, in alternating rows with his cassava. Meanwhile, with the land struggle underway, the weeds in his neighbors’ parcels became troubling. They were markers of immorality—low productivity, lazy farmers, false claims.

In Cartagena, there was no certainty in his tenure. For this reason, Vladimir did not include cacao among the many trees in his second and third maps. Whether the other species were easily visible in his parcel or not, he had tried to grow them. Yet, he never tried to start cacao. It was not a question of availability. Vladimir had traveled to his hometown in Bolívar department to find that his family and friends had started planting cacao. He told me about the new cacao program there, and how he had given farmers advice based on his own experiences. He did not bring back any seeds. When I asked Vladimir why he had not tried to start cacao, he responded that he was waiting for the land conflict to be resolved—cacao was a tree for titled land. It required a long-term investment (i.e. growing shade, time until first harvest). Furthermore, for Vladimir cacao was tied into a set of relationships that required title, credit, and markets. None of this was possible as long as the land conflict remained unresolved. Instead, Vladimir focused on cultivating subsistence fruit trees.

While some farmers questioned the benefits of continuing to invest in their parcels given a possible eviction, Vladimir kept planting. His political possibilities for controlling land had shifted with his crop companions before. Vladimir preferred to be a landless peasant farming on a small piece of insecure land rather than a shantytown dweller that was too old to compete with young men for a day's wage. If Vladimir were evicted and stripped of his crop companions, he figured he would move on with nothing to hold him in place.

What I want is to work, even if it's a fourth of a hectare. That is what has allowed me to be calm here [Cartagena]. I am happy with what I have here. It is always close by. I come and go each day. So, in that sense, I am calm here, because if it wasn't for the work I would have gone somewhere else. Who knows where I would be because I miss this very much. I was raised in this, and in this is where I am, and here in this I will die, in agriculture. It's just that I like the countryside very much.

Vladimir had cast his lot with agriculture. For this reason, Vladimir was engaged in a landscape-making project of his own—one without landowners and without weeds. Rather, he envisioned a landscape where he won possession to a subsistence parcel with a variety of fruit trees for home consumption, and perhaps even gained access to markets and had the opportunity to build a modest enterprise selling fruit from his commercial orchard. Vladimir's third and final map, his *finca hecha*, comes closest to depicting the commercial orchard that Vladimir described. This map differs from his second map. His *ranchito* appears sturdier, perhaps conditioned for overnight stays. His crops are drawn larger, allowing the colors to stand out. No open space remains. His cassava no longer organizes his fruit trees into alternating rows. Instead, both a cassava plant and a fruit tree tend to occupy each square of the grid. As the trees continue to mature, they will shade out the cassava, replacing the cassava as the dominant feature of his parcel.

His map depicts the emergent relationships that Vladimir was nurturing by planting in ways that produced shade and suggested tenure. He was encouraging a landscape where it might be possible to reconstitute his relationship with his absent companions, cacao and *borojó*. Their arrival to Cartagena would bring a landscape of plenty and progress, where Vladimir attained some level of autonomy and a dignified livelihood practice. Perhaps, the lack of parcel borders on his final map suggested the broader possibilities where Vladimir might re-ground and materialize his aspirations, not limited by tree-logging machetes or fears of eviction.

His alliance with fruit trees opened up room to maneuver. Fruit trees could transform contested terrain into private property. He drew on his relationship to trees to position himself as a political actor, a *campesino*, with a legitimate claim to land. The stakes of the land struggle were equally high for both. If Vladimir were evicted, his fruit tree saplings would be turned under. Their possibilities for life traveled together.

## **Conclusion**

Forced displacement clears a landscape of meanings, stories and modes of relating between people, plants and land. It is a landscaping project that alienates farmers from their crops and all of the conditions through which they nurtured them. The landscape is re-mapped, emptied, erasing traces of previous interconnected lives. This chapter has followed the story of one farmer, expelled from the countryside, to understand his efforts at recuperating his relationship to his crop companions in the unlikely terrain of the urban fringe.

I have argued that Vladimir's political subjectivity emerged with the plants he nurtured. The crops associated with Vladimir's stories and maps change, as does his subject position. He followed orders, planting rows of cassava as a farmworker. He cleared jungle and managed a



commercial cacao crop as a landed farmer and beneficiary of an agrarian reform program. Finally, he planted a mix of subsistence crops as a dispossessed shantytown dweller farming on borrowed land. By examining these landscape formations more closely, fruit trees emerged as crucial companions for Vladimir. Fruit trees connected him with the potential of making a legitimate claim on property and maintaining a *campesino* subjectivity in his encounters with the state. Furthermore, trees, such as cacao and *borojó*, connected him to a sense of dignity he experienced as a landed farmer and allowed him to recuperate a life-long vocation caring for crops.

Vladimir's maps chart a possibility for life at Cartagena's urban fringe that will take time to mature with his trees. His *finca hecha* is a proposal for a dignified livelihood at the city's edge. It is a fragile possibility achingly situated in an urban and industrial landscape. It re-maps possibilities for urban development and the place of rural and displaced people in it. Vladimir's orchard may only be an ephemeral edge, but if we take time to explore its trajectory, it points towards future landscapes marked by creative attachments, rather than the abandoned hectares and agroindustrial monocrops of war.

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