

Thank you for having me – it is truly an honor to be with you all today.

Along the northern, Caribbean coast of Colombia it is a traditional practice to open lectures with a story. And so, I want to begin with a story.

Ten years ago, I walked the trails of a small, experimental agroecology farm on the outskirts of Sincelejo, Colombia with Ricardo Esquivia.

As the director of Sembrandopaz, a local peacebuilding organization, Ricardo had helped purchase a plot of land that had been ravaged by years of war. Sincelejo, at that time, had received the highest number of forcibly displaced people in the country.

Sembrandopaz declared the farm a zone of peace and a sanctuary for those fleeing the war. At the height of the violence, they began planting trees.

Since that time, Sembrandopaz has planted well over 3,000 native trees.

“I see a world of hunger,” Ricardo explained to me, “With climate change and the destruction of the environment, well it is not here yet, but I see a world of hunger. So, my idea was to plant trees that people can eat from, that give people life. These are all trees that before, in past generations, people cultivated and subsisted on.”

Towards the end of the walk, we came to a lookout with a small bench, the hills and valleys of the mountain range before us.

“When I look out across this valley,” Ricardo reflected, “I can imagine it with trees planted all across those hills over there. We have to rebuild what we have destroyed.”

You see, the work of the grassroots is to see, feel, and grow the tree held within the seed. To be so close to the ground that you can feel the grass grow.”

That conversation has stayed with me for many years – it forms the title and cover of my most recent book:

What lessons do grassroots social movement leaders in Colombia offer to deepen our understanding of the challenges and possibilities for feeling and nurturing life amid the political and environmental violence wrought in the Anthropocene?

To answer this question, I want to draw out some of the key lessons that emerged from two years of ethnographic research in Montes de María, Colombia which I carried out between 2014-2020. First, just a bit of context about Montes de María:

Located on Colombia's northern coast, Montes de María is considered an intercultural territory by those who live there – with rich histories of collective organizing and resistance emerging from Black, Indigenous, and Campesino struggles in response to colonization and enslavement.

Between the late 1990s through 2005, over 100 massacres took place across Montes de María – with untold numbers of selective assassinations, arbitrary detentions, and massive, forced displacement of whole communities.

As a result, Montes de María was named one of the territories prioritized for implementation of the peace accords signed between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in November 2016.

Most of the ethnographic research I conducted for the book stems from living and working in the rural high zone – the Alta Montaña – of Montes de María.

Due to its strategic – yet hidden – location, the Alta Montaña became the base for multiple armed groups including the EPL, the PRT, the ELN, the FARC as well as the paramilitaries and the Colombian Armed Forces, which has a marine base replete with a helicopter landing pad. The communities that lived in close proximity to the bases of different armed groups became stigmatized by association, which resulted in “invisible lines” that drew sharp boundaries between communities, unraveling the social fabric that had previously knit the Alta Montaña together.

At the height of the violence, a fungus called *phytophthora.cinamomi* spread throughout the Alta Montaña killing over 90% of the avocado forest. Dramatic changes in waterways, loss of shade for subsistence farming, and displacement of native species altered the social, economic, and ecological relationships central to life in the Alta Montaña.

In the words of social leader Miledys Vasquez, “The avocado was like a second violence, which left us displaced and in the situation in which we live today.”

Miledys speaks to the experience of what literary scholar Rob Nixon has called “displacement without moving” (2011, 19).

For Nixon, the overwhelming attention to dramatic single events of environmental destruction, elides the more gradual processes of what he calls “slow violence,” that disproportionately affect disenfranchised communities across the globe.

Multispecies accounts of the armed conflict, like those offered by Miledys, reorient our understanding of displacement to consider how political violence also uproots the land slowly over time.

Equally significant, however, are the ways in which the death of the avocado became a mobilizing force for estranged communities in the Alta Montaña.

In 2011, community leaders in the region began to work across the invisible lines of enmity to address the death of the avocado and work to heal the land upon which their lives depend.

After two years of sustained, community-based dialogue, 2,000 campesinos engaged in a nonviolent march and successfully negotiated an agreement with the state, to have the avocado recognized as a victim of the war.

As Jocabeth, one of the youth organizers of the march explained to me,

“The violence inflicted on our communities requires that we fight to build peace from here. The territory is where we live, where we feel good and, therefore, we must accommodate the territory so that we can live in peace. The war has also been violent to the environment, and we must reconcile with her.”

In the Alta Montaña, violence and peace are experienced and understood as more than human. For social leaders like Jocabeth and Miledys, the land is relationally experienced as living, feeling, and sentient.– a central actor in the work of peace and reconciliation.

Unfortunately, western environmental frameworks that externalize humans from the wider ecological life worlds of which they are part, deny recognition of the socioecological relations disrupted and destroyed as a result of violent conflict.

The daily work to build peace in grassroots communities across Montes de María are, in turn, rendered invisible.

This has consequences for how the state has approached implementation of the peace accords.

As I have observed the implementation process over the last 9 years, I have continuously witnessed the reproduction – not the transformation – of everyday intervention practices that limit rather than expand participatory processes for peacebuilding.

In response to these limitations, social movement leaders frequently critiqued state and international interventions for operating with “too much prisa - too much hurry.” Their explicit invocation of the »the times” to expose the varied forms of violence that continue to persist in postaccord Colombia– and make claims to peace in specific temporal registers raised significant questions for me:

What does their call to “slow down” mean in a context where the primary experience has been one of deferred state action – defined by the lack of implementation?

To be clear, when social leaders underscore the need to build peace slowly? “without hurry or haste,” they are not advocating for the continuation of sluggish bureaucratic practices that have led to a lack of material implementation of the accords. Nor are they suggesting that the state is fulfilling their obligations quickly. They most certainly are not denying the sense of urgency that accompanies the threats that they face on a near daily basis. Since the signing of the accords, more than 1,000 social leaders and human rights defenders have been assassinated in Colombia.

What, then, does the call to build “slow peace” entail?

I argue that slow peace offers a relational framework for peacebuilding as a multigenerational, multispecies, and permanent, collective process to cultivate a more just and livable world.

I want to outline three, key lessons from campesino practices and theories of “slow peace”

First, the practices of slow peace emerge from a multigenerational temporal framework that links ancestral memories to desired futures for dignified life through place-based peacebuilding.

A multigenerational framework expands analysis of violent conflict to draw attention to the historical processes that have structured systemic inequality, environmental extraction, and war. By recognizing how environmental and political violence are linked together, social leaders advocate for more integral approaches to peace “from below.” This has enabled social leaders to organize intergenerational movements focused on environmental care.

Expanding the lens for analysis of violence – and peace – also allows social movement leaders to reclaim a sense of collective agency within a national peace process that has been dominated by elite actors.

As social leaders frequently remind themselves: The times of states are not the times of the forests and the waterways that breathe life into their collective movements for peace, which began long before -and will continue long after – the signing of an accord.

Second, and relatedly, slow peace regenerates and sustains multispecies relations of mutual care.

As Geovaldis, a social leader and environmental defender at the forefront of the struggle against the expansion of the palm oil industry in the region, reflected,

“I keep watch over these resources so that this beautiful campesino economy that we have will be preserved and will survive over time because, for us, the campo (countryside) is our

life... There is not more to say than my life is the campo and I will die for the campo... because it is in my blood.”

Geovaldis’ statement is not abstract. He has faced an increasing number of death threats as a result of his advocacy to defend the territory from extractive violence. According to Global Witness, Colombia is one of the most dangerous places in the world to be an environmental defender today.

In the face of these threats, Geovaldis’ sense of agency derives from his deep relational ties to place and his participation in a wider coalition.

Which brings me to the third lesson:

Slow peace invests in ongoing, social movement organizing rather than short-term technocratic projects.

The daily and patient struggle to cultivate slow peace derives from—and deepens—what I call “an ethics of attention”. There is a profound urgency in the call to slow down, take notice, and tend territorial relations of care amid ongoing violence. Life is at stake.

The daily and collective practice of holding, guarding, and nurturing life in the wake of violence generates a grounded sense of hope.

More recently, Ricardo has called on peacebuilders to become Vigías of hope. Guardians of Hope. The Spanish word, vigía, comes from the Latin word, vigil. According to Oxford dictionaries, a vigil is:

“when you stay alert to guard something. A vigil can also be solemn, as when a candlelight vigil is held for victims of a tragedy. Vigil comes from the Latin word for awake and all its meanings include the idea of watchfulness.”

To build peace then is to be continuously wakeful to the possibilities of hope found in the weave of everyday life. Or in Ricardo’s words,

“We have to become vigías de la esperanza; Guardians of hope. We need to be able to see small, practical things, that show us that this is possible... Its like that phrase “if it exists, its possible.” And I think this is the key. For me its found in the small things... Maybe I will never see it, but I believe we will achieve it. This is hope and we embody it.”

Thank you.