

Colombia Journal - Megan

June/July 2006

(Names of our Colombian hosts have not been included, or have been abbreviated for their protection).

June 29/06 - Airplane to Houston

It's always different, this feeling of movement, old situations wrapping their tails around my legs. Immobilized by the fear of being stopped by others I stop myself before they get the chance. Or at least that's what I want to do. I was not lying when I said to J. the importance of not living inside their fear - but I find it difficult to live it after everything that has happened. Perhaps now I can allow myself to cross borders again - to go south to the desertland and see what there is left at the blast site of the FBI crackdown.

Now - over US-airspace, headed for Bogotá through Houston I am over the border anxiety and able to look forward to the next two weeks. I am thinking about the human rights reports I have read - about the grotesque and undeniably unjust deaths that characterize the nightmares of even the most veteran Colombian trade unionists - and I wonder about the people we will meet who are still willing to stand up against this. How is it that average people become heroes - willing to risk themselves in the face of a cause greater - able to free themselves at least temporarily from those nightmares in order to continue the resistance?

This last few months has been a period of great grieving for my activist life and comrades - I wonder what new shades might colour this picture upon my return?

I am still surprised by my involvement in this delegation - wondering at what lead to my invitation - and also feeling honoured. My friend Bob is very close in my heart as I head down into the territory where he spent much of his life in the struggle. I wish he was here to be excited with me and to reflect with upon my return.

June 29/06 - Bogotá



Arrived on schedule to met by our hosting organizers at the airport who tell us they had wanted to greet us with a party but are unable to do so because the murdered body of one of their co-workers was found just yesterday, south in Cali. A sad welcome and a reminder that on average there are ten politically motivated murders per day in this country.

Already it is apparent how repression, lawlessness and corruption change the base level of honest banter one shares with strangers. Overhearing conversations on the plane - you recognize that no one is quite

telling the truth about who they are and why they are here. A question mark hangs over the identity of who you are speaking to - a level of mistrust is necessary to ensure safety I suppose.

Checkpoints and soldiers, a city of seven million ruled by fear and crackdown - and election just passed that saw several high-profile killings not far from where we are staying. But also, friendly people who are glad to see us. This is just the first night and already there are glimpses of what is and what might be.

June 30/06 – 9 AM – Bogotá



Vertigo, nose full of blood, headache – I think I am reacting to the altitude of this city. 8000 feet – a city high up escaping the heat felt in the valleys and flats below. I just put my head outside the window to take pictures of the view around the hotel – all busy street and apartment blocks – but to one side more rising hills covered in trees and to more peaks and plateaus. Was not too noisy here last night, but now the traffic is constant. We will meet in the hotel this morning for orientation and then go out this afternoon for meetings – including one with the UN here Bogotá.

Several members of our delegation have still not arrived with many of the eastern airports out of commission due to excessive rain and flooding. We will see if anyone else did manage to arrive in the night – two people are expected tomorrow due to scheduling issues with their tickets. I am not sure how much I will write about the other delegates – suffice to say we are supposed to be twelve, including the two co-ordinators – from four different trade unions (CUPW, CUPE, PSAC and BCGEU).

9:43 PM

I have pages of notes that need the blanks filled in still as information ran quicker today than my ink. How to encapsulate the discussions – instead only feelings for people whose language I don't understand. At least not the words – but the struggles, worn faces and missing teeth, livewire eyes. Magical realism explained to me by a campesino organizer M. who just spent two years in prison for nothing more objecting to displacement – all her companeras already exiled by the time of her release. How repression turns the indigenous back to their magic as a way to cope with daily brutality. And from that a cultural tradition of literature that has impacted writing the world over.

To spend hopeless years in a prison cruelly named the Good Shepard one must have some other reserve of strength and tradition, something rooted in the land she and others can never go back to. 2-3 million people have been officially displaced by political violence in this country. 600 trade union organizations have disappeared over the past five years. Women routinely taken as sexual slaves by armed rogues who still rule most of the country. A government brokering deals with paramilitaries while continuing to criminalize the civil society movements. There is nothing in this I did not know on some level – atrocities are everywhere – but of course it is not the same to stare those oppressed in the eyes or kiss the cheek of one marked for death.

We met today with the Defensio del Pueblo – an office funded by the government to investigate and follow up on human rights abuses. But although this office exists, it is underfunded and understaffed – its workers subject to harassment and threats and even death – to which their employer largely turns a blind eye. One of our sisters here – ME – has organized much of the tour and welcomed us so graciously at every opportunity. She and I have met now three times and each time plan to sit and have a heart-to-heart through an interpreter. How frustrating! Again, I wish I knew Spanish – at least enough to understand what is being said. Instead we hold hands and kiss cheeks to make a connection in the absence of words.

She is a broad-faced woman, with a brow often furrowed she looks serious a great deal of the time – always concentrating on her words and on what comes next in taking action. ME works in the public defender's office with the indigenous and ethnic minorities division – researching abuses on those who are most under attack. She is also the president of her union – the first woman in this post. Tough and often fierce in her manner – she is still soft at the touch, yielding to beers with comrades and able to laugh with the rest of us, even on this evening when she is on her way to the funeral parlour to sit beside her co-worker murdered only 2 days ago. Her burden is her world as it is for all activists – a totality enveloping and guiding.

Activists are recognizable the world over – and its remarkable how one always feels at home in the company of those who also know the calling of world-changing. The dynamics between them are recognizable anywhere – our human-ness peeling away language and culture barriers until we are left with just the raw and dysfunction played out in meetings and on demonstrations and pickets. I have the sense of our beings as distinct and also as home to each other. If only we could be the shields to each other in our respective worlds – keep at bay the world that wants to change us as much as we want to change it. This is much larger than us, much more ruthless than we could ever be.

Are we motivated by the great feeling of love that Ché once said all true revolutionaries are? If only it was that simple – a powerful force seemingly inaccessible.

July 01/06 – 9:18 PM – Bogotá

The Middle East is explosive this week with the shelling of Palestine and capture of most of its Hamas-lead government – Baghdad is on fire again and it seems as always the world is in an impossible place. A part of my grasping for sense after a full day of hearing about tortures, disappearances, and outright warfare against the peoples' movements in Colombia. How to understand the insurgency without ever speaking about it – when legitimate civil society organizations are so targeted. The process here of peace and reconciliation is repeatedly described as a sham with paramilitaries receiving government handouts of territorial control and jobs through the misnamed “worker co-operatives” arranged by government law. And although our unions have come this far to bring us to witness – it is a question still as to what we really mean by solidarity. What are we willing to give in the real sense and what will most make an impact. Anything just a tiny drop in a well of suffering.

Our delegation is a mix of opinions and political persuasions. James and Lisa are by far the two with who I identify with most – James already radicalized and familiar with Latin American struggles and Lisa a strong rank and file activist on her first international travels but obviously with an open heart.

I feel a reluctance to discuss NGO politics and the relationship of internationals to the insurgency. Of course there is not one single answer and no simple course that will bring a resolve to a situation like this. But what of Bolivia and Venezuela and the continuing threats there? How will our organizations react if the people are armed against the US and possibly Canada. Do we always take the social democratic line?

It is becoming obvious that tourists are an unusual occurrence even in this cosmopolitan city. Children stare and soldiers follow us. We are obviously not the usual sort as we are constantly with large groups of Colombians but we are careful not to let on to outsiders what our purpose here is. It doesn't feel at all dangerous, but there are these things we have to pay attention to. We are obviously foreign and probably the soldiers are right in their curiosity – for that is their job... to keep people from liberty.



The meeting this morning with the Law Collective was really excellent in terms of overall analysis. One senior lawyer and several young activist-lawyers and researchers spoke to us about several areas of their work documenting and processing human rights violations at the international level. All of them are under “precautionary measures” which is a special security program of the government for those targeted by the paramilitaries for death. Of course these measures include only immediate items such as special phones and body-armour. At the same time they are giving this “protection”, the national drug police have

listed them as FARC supporters – which makes them perpetual targets – bulletproof doors or no. Their analysis of the situation is very detailed – particularly around Plan Colombia/Plan Patriota and the political and economic partnership of Bush & Uribe in carrying it through.

This trip is not so much an exchange as a witnessing exercise on our part. We are here to understand the conditions and perhaps intervene if there are levers close to our hands. We are to absorb the information – but the question of impossibility hangs still – what should and what can we do with it? Do we just accept what is or can we actually change it? Can any of us really become a balancing force in a world so tilted on its axis? I often think I already know the answer to that which begs the question why continue? Perhaps I have not really lost faith in my world – as difficult as I find it to exist in.

July 2/06 – 11 PM - Neiva, Huila Province

Long day to Neiva and back – leaving early tomorrow morning for Cali – one more flight – can’t drive anywhere here because the roads are not safe from bandits or paramilitaries. Visited a women’s organization today that is shutting its collective space (Used as a communal kitchen and community-held zone) because of lack of funds. Lisa, James and I would like to find a way to fund them – are going to ask how much it will cost per month and make a one-year commitment if we can. Exhausted – emotional – amazing day and people. Will write tomorrow more on the way to Cali.

July 3/06 – 6:30 AM – Flight to Cali



Wanted to write more last night but the day exhausted to the point that I slept as soon as I laid down. So – yesterday – traveled to Neiva in the Huila province – a city of about 350,000 people that has a pervasive paramilitary presence. We met at the collective space at the Organizacion Femenina Popular (OFP), a women’s organization that supports all kinds of community groups and projects. Because of this they are targets of the paramilitaries and they operate from behind locked gates and walls rimmed with embedded broken glass – thin measures of security.

We met there to see the graduation of students from the human rights school sponsored by NOMADESC that has been taking place on weekends over the past twelve weeks. This is a diploma program run by a collective of organizations with the aim of teaching people how to investigate and challenge human rights abuses. The OFP has co-sponsored this program by lending its humble space for use as a classroom.

In the morning we had a presentation about the province and the city – hearing much of the same as we have from other groups about Uribe and the paramilitaries. Neiva is quite central to the country and so has been a strategic point of traffic flow and control for both the FARC/ELN and the paramilitaries. Although the FARC is present here in some key territory, the paramilitaries have really managed to spread throughout and terrorize many of the poor barrios and rural areas (displacing people in order to control the rich growing lands for poppy and coca or their traffic corridors). Despite the government's messaging, it's pretty clear that the paramilitaries are the enemy to people here – and they are pretty much left alone by the insurgency (active in this area in attacking the richer neighbourhoods).

When we first arrived, two younger men were cutting boards with their light machetes to build the cooking fire in the middle of the courtyard on which was balanced a large pot, precariously awaiting the meal preparation. It seemed unlikely that this arrangement would work for feeding all of us (perhaps 35 in total) – but throughout the morning presentation, women would periodically come from the preparation area with large quantities of various meats and vegetables (beef, chicken, pork, yucca, plantain, corn) and throw them in the pot – giving it all ample time to stew while we talked in the breezeless heat of the 3-walled room. By the time the presentation was finished, the lunch was almost ready and we broke for social time which was characterized by more political discussion while the courtyard was set with tables for lunch.



It was over this shared meal (the stew served with chicken broth and rice) that Martha (one of the OFP leaders) told some of us that the centre would be closing its doors today and that they could not afford to keep it but had asked for an extension for just our visit so they would have a place to receive us. They once had some funding through a government program that has now been cancelled so even though they run important community programs, they have no economic ability to keep this centre. (From here they run a garden-education program for poor communities, a communal kitchen where they teach nutrition and sell cheap meals and an education centre). We also heard some stories of the FARC's amazing escapades in the region – stealing planes, brazen kidnappings, robberies in the



richest armed neighbourhoods – that made it clear that although they are publicly **not** sympathizers, they are still impressed and somewhat supportive in this fight against capital (the older women worry about being caught in the crossfire, the younger men quote Ché). In any case – there are some of us on the tour who are going to investigate the possibility of funding the centre in Neiva for the OFP to continue their work.

After the presentations were finished, our hosts joined our bus and took us on a tour of one of the poorest barrios in the city (the driver

didn't want to go because the roads are so bad he was afraid to have his vehicle damaged). I managed to snap some photos that I hope will turn out to better explain the extent of the poverty here – where people live in little more than shelters constructed from concrete and scrap tin. Of course we were not allowed to walk around as this would draw too much attention (and I'm pretty sure only a handful of people in our group would have wanted to anyways – some of them aren't so adventurous).

From the barrio tour we were taken to the riverfront of the Magdalena for the last few hours of the week-long festival of San Pedro. Our hosts took us there in order to go to the market and look at local handicrafts – but were very nervous about having us there and so flanked the group on each side. Thieves are a problem in these public areas – even for Colombian people – but especially for those who attract as much attention as we seem to. I have never encountered this in cities before – but I supposed that so few foreigners come to the non-centres of this country, it makes us a rare event. Interestingly, the young people who do follow do not beg or push wares of any kind – another proof that tourism is next to non-existent here. Several times I turned around to a crowd of young boys close and quiet – just trying to get a glimpse or a listen to our “movie-talk” (apparently we sound just like people from the movies and this is part of our appeal).

The Myth of La Gaitana: During the Spanish conquest of Colombia there was a woman whose son was a powerful chief in the area of Neiva. As part of the quest for power and resources one of the conquistadors – a man called Vasco – had this chief killed and the body quartered, so saddening the mother that she sought revenge. She is known now as La Gaitana – the woman who killed Vasco, first dragging him around by a poker through the bottom of his chin, then gouging his eyes, then dragging his body by horse until she tired of the torture and finally beheaded him. She had to flee her town afterwards and escaped from her pursuers by jumping into the headwaters of the Magdalena River where she disappeared for good.





“The struggle is like the River Magdalena – sometimes the water is low – but other times it is so high that it overflows its banks. It continues nevertheless to keep moving.”

July 6/06 - 7:30 AM - Cali



The days have been so long I think I will have to switch my strategy to writing in the morning instead of the evenings. Yesterday we arrived in Cali by air – this is the 3rd largest city in Colombia at about 3 million people. It is much lower elevation than Bogotá and thus much hotter year round – more tropical here with palm trees and flowers growing everywhere. Although it is large – it is an attractive city – though we are told it is quite dangerous after dark (*Note: Long after our return, I did find out that Cali is indeed an extraordinarily dangerous city – at least as much as Medellin but not quite as notorious*).

We went first to meet with the union ASDECCOL who are the workers from the comptrollers office. They told us about the fight against privatization they are involved in – as Colombia is a country that has sold off or let go most of its public assets. This union works with community organizations and barrios around the city and so after our meeting with them we traveled to a barrio on the outskirts of the city and there heard from the impoverished inhabitants of their struggles and how they have been marginalized and abandoned by the municipality because they are perceived as a “red zone”. The community is built on the side of a steep mountain and the roads wind up and around before passing the police checkpoint and descending onto their roadway. On top of the poverty they already face, their community is subject to frequent mudslides in the rainy season which wash away parts of the road and destroy their homes. Further, there is no work for these people and so to make any living they are all involved in the informal economy which is an unstable source of funds on which to feed and house oneself.

We met there in the Franciscan chapel which constricts of a bamboo-post structure covered in grass mats and the meeting was attended by mainly the women from the neighbourhood. They want so desperately that we find a way to help their children get out of the barrio and have other opportunities and work – but I’m not sure there is much we can do that would not just be more charity. As always the problems lie with global capitalist structure and until that comes down these people have no hope for justice or freedom. I feel like a fraud sometimes on this trip – as if our presence promises something I don’t think we can deliver. A few crumbs here and there – but really, not one of our organizations has a real interest in reshuffling the power relations in the global society.

From Barrio 20 we went on to another neighbourhood where we met with students of the SENA who have been fighting IMF-enforced privatization and other community leaders. By this point I was so exhausted that it was hard to focus on what people were saying – but all the stories, as has been our experience so far, were interlaced with the themes of hardship, armed conflict and resistance.

Colombia is a very beautiful country and the people here are hospitable, welcoming, effusively friendly and gracious. I was telling some contacts at dinner last night that it is difficult to reconcile – on the one hand so beautiful and welcoming – on the other so dangerous and governed by fear. People here wish us a visit without incident as if



that would be lucky for us – they worry about getting us out of the barrios before dark – they warn us always about watching ourselves in this or that place. Constant reminders that all is not as the surface presents itself – a sad thing in such a beautiful place.



Some Statistics:

- Over the past 25 years, over a half a million people have been murdered in Colombia for political reasons
 - On average every day 10 people are killed for political reasons, 2 people are disappeared, and one massacre takes place.
 - More than 20,000 popular leaders have been extra-judicially executed in the past ten years.
 - Over 600 trade union organizations have disappeared in the past five years.
- The official number of people displaced from their land due to political conflict is 2-3 million. This number is probably double when taking into account those not assisted by the state.
 - 63 per cent of Colombians live in poverty.
 - The restitution rate for those who have been victims of human rights violations is 0.01 per cent.

11 PM

Another long day with unions and community organizations – such a deal that we are here to witness that the schedule for meetings is relentless – particularly as there is a lot of driving in hot weather and on bad roads. I am not sure how much I can write about today as we need to be early in the morning again.



After meeting with NOMADESC and SINTRAEMCALI this morning (and hearing many more stories for which I have detailed notes) we drove four hours to the town of Suarez where people are fighting for reparations on a dam site that was flooded 20 years ago.

It feels a little like a traveling circus when we come into these small places – the children come to look at us, the few teenagers who have a little English want to practice what they know, the community leaders share their stories of poverty and war. But of course there is also great

hospitality and every place we are fed and shown around.

I wish I had some hope for justice – some belief that the world will straighten itself out of this horror so many people find themselves in. I find myself thinking about Bob a lot on this trip – wishing he was alive to share with when I return home. At least he always believed in the change – right up until he died. I want his courage and his enthusiasm – it feels too much to bear the world at times.

July 6/04 – Midnight – Medellín

Am not finding the time at all the write in the past couple of days – meant to catch up on the flight to Medellín this morning but I ended up sitting with one of the rare English-speaking Colombians and we spent the hour teasing each other and exchanging phrases in our languages instead. I want to write about La Resguarda Maria where we went yesterday but I'm not sure I can capture that now I am in this completely different environment.

Medellín is one crazy crowded city with an energy like nowhere I've ever been before – contained inside a ring of mountains and teeming with people – it obviously goes all night and the streets are never empty. They still say this is the city of Escobar – and thus controlled by paramilitaries and Uribe supporters. Tomorrow we will meet with unions and then go to one of the poor barrios.

Just ended the evening on a balcony high above the city with James, Ken and ME – world politics, beer and cigarettes overlooking one of the most dangerous cities in the world.

July 7/06 – 9 AM - Medellín

It's the start of the day and my patience is already thin with trying to speak Spanish, deal with the tour organizers. Not a good sign – but probably also not unexpected given the lack of sleep and zero downtime so far on this trip. We have now been in Colombia 8 days and been somewhere different everyday.



Today is Friday and I am writing not about Medellín but about our trip on Wednesday when we traveled to the community of La Maria south of Cali – a reservation (resguarda) of indigenous people who were recently attacked by the state SWAT team. The people we met with came from a few different communities close by though I'm not sure if they represented different indigenous peoples or just different reservations. I think there were at least three distinct first nations – the Nasa, the Crik and the Paez – though this was not really explained. (Note: The CRIK is not a First Nation, but an indigenous organization made

up of many communities).

These peoples are situation in the hills in Southern Cauca province, a rolling landscape that provides for a lush growing region of coffee, plantains, rice and coca. The people here live very simply and still very traditionally – with a single kitchen for the whole community, basic farming and a continuation of dance and music traditions that stretch back into their human history. Their chieftanship (if it can be called that) is shared by a couple and changes frequently. Of course this type of more communal organization is seen to be a threat by the Uribe government – and indigenous people generally are accused of having ties to the guerilla insurgency (even though this is very far from the truth particularly in the indigenous areas where the FARC has attacked).

On May 17th/06 there was an encuentro of indigenous people that took place in La Maria – a summit of over 18,000 people gathering to strategize for their rights and the protection of their mother earth which is being destroyed by a combination of fumigations under Plan Patriota and agribusiness. This summit was to take place from the 15th to the 17th and culminate in an action that included blocking both lanes of the Pan-American highway. This blockage resulted in the heavily armoured police moving into the community forcibly clear the road – but of course they far exceeded this course of action and laid siege to the community itself. For 48 hours, the police occupied the community, dropping tear gas bombs from above, setting fire to the homes and

community facilities, destroying the property of the inhabitants and buzzing the village with Black Hawks.

By the end of the siege, one leader from a nearby village had been killed, many people were severely injured, and the village itself was damaged in ways the community can not afford to repair. Additionally the campesinos living near the highway were also attacked and burned out even though they were not part of the encuentro – these campesinos have demanded that the Nasa people compensate them for the damages wrought by the soldiers. All of this combined has created a very desperate situation in the community, despite the fact they are surrounded by some of the best growing land one could hope for. Like everywhere else, the government is working to eradicate the indigenous people and their resistance rather than acknowledge their traditional rights. *(The photograph here is of spent tear-gas canisters left over from the siege).*



After a presentation which involved a discussion of the situation, a sharing of the indigenously-produced soft drink “Coca Sek”, and some traditional dances – the women served us a lunch of soup, rice and vegetables (this was one of the only meals we have had that involved only a small piece of meat, thankfully). After which we had a tour of the community to see the damage caused by the police before departing to Popayan which was even further south.

Popayan is also called la ciudad blanco because of the white-washed colonial buildings which comprise the centre of town. It is said that although this town has no industry, there is lots of money here – an unsubtle nod to the active drug trade in the region. In this town we met with some more representatives of the indigenous struggle and the CUT (the Colombian Trade Union Central) – and were also shown videos of the May 17th attack. Of course, it was well past dark by the time we left Popayan and we had a two-hour drive to get back to the city of Cali.



Here, I should probably note that the night before this visit, five police officers had been killed by the FARC in a raid not far from where we were. Interestingly, I did not notice an increased police presence on the highways as a result, but I suppose that is because there is already such an ubiquitous presence. The next morning when we told our contacts in Cali what we had done (travel south of Cali on the PanAmerican at night) they were shocked at the fact we had taken such a risk. They told us that there was great danger from the FARC in this area and had we been stopped there was a good chance that even if they had let us go (for being leftists – though the FARC has killed US-Leftists in the past just for being from the US) they surely would have shot our Colombian counterparts. ME told us a story the other night of the FARC killing three native-american activists who came to protest the oil industry simply because of their citizenry. Our Cali-contacts further told us that traveling from Suarez at night was similarly dangerous – though that section is controlled by paramilitaries, not the FARC – they would also kill our Colombian fellow travelers.

There is a complex perspective here between the different civil society and leftist forces and the FARC in this country. On the one hand the FARC carries out actions on behalf of the poor and their presence makes Colombia less attractive to the transnationals – on the other, they are unpredictable and have made many strategic mistakes which make them difficult to support. Certainly, indigenous communities in the poppy and coca growing regions are particularly harassed and all poor communities are in danger of being caught in the crossfire as the insurgency and the government battle out control of the country. I think that to take a purely pro or anti position here is not possible given the paramilitaries and government repression – rather it is to understand why and under what conditions. What is interesting is that mostly the organizations do not denounce the FARC but they do distance themselves from it (to be associated in any way with the FARC is to invite the government to enact the full anti-terrorist measures so this is a very important distinction). The only explicitly anti-FARC messages I have heard so far are from the indigenous leaders in La Maria.

I was just reminded that after today, we only have three full days left in Colombia – which is hard to believe – first that we have only been here for 8 days (it seems much longer for all the experience we have crammed into that period), and second, that the tour is almost over. I have been invited by Maria Eva to return to Colombia for two months during which time we could travel around the whole country and I could improve my Spanish. Despite the danger – I am very tempted by this invitation as it would be the truest way to see a country like this (that is not easy to travel in). Perhaps I could put in brown contact lenses and keep my hair dark to fly under the radar a bit more – try to pass myself off as a light-skinned Latina as long as I can speak the language. What I would like to do when I return is take some Spanish lessons intensively with the plan to return within a year. I know it is always the way when one visits a country – the desire to return that is quickly forgotten – but in this instance I hope I can keep up my courage to return – both to learn Spanish but also to properly photograph some of the countryside. In particular I am fascinated by the incredible biodiversity and the regional differences in the urban areas, and I would definitely have to bring a proper camera along on such a trip.

It's strange because although the fear is evident throughout this society – fear of the government, the paramilitaries, the insurgency, common bandits – I have rarely felt unsafe during our time here. Perhaps this is because I am with a group or that I trust our Colombian counterparts to make sure we are not doing anything really foolish (though I have since wondered about that given some of our travels. I wonder if I can keep this courage to return on my own.



Yesterday we traveled to Medellín and I can not describe what entering this place feels like except to say that it is unlike anywhere else I have ever been and has an energy that is infectious. All the initial desire I had to return to this country has only increased upon coming here. Two and a half days here in nowhere near enough.

The hotel we are staying in here is one of the best hotels in the city which sounds impressive until one sees the rooms and realizes it is situated right on the edge of the red light district (of which I'm not complaining – the ragged heart of any city). Again it is apparent in this old-school hotel that tourism from outside the region is not common here – art deco fixtures that haven't been updated since the 1940s and stopped working sometime in the 60s stand as a testament to a time when this city rocked Latin America as Paris or Monaco did Europe in their day.

This is a city of noises, more than anywhere – traffic, people, music, metro – 24 hours per day. Five million people are packed into the bowl of this ring of mountains – crumbling shanties climbing up the steep sides. This city is not large, but it is dense with the extremes of humanity – of course there are many poor – but because this is Uribe's province as well as a paramilitary stronghold – there is also great wealth evident within the city. As ME tells me, this place is one of great beauty and culture but also one of incredible violence – it certainly feels more extreme than any place I have been before.



Last night we met with the Escuela Nacional Sindical which is located here – an impressive office and training centre funded by international labour and towing a pretty conservative line on the relationship between Uribe and the paramilitaries. It seems that they world over, the same divides are hallmarks of our movements – no matter how dire the situation. I think the trick is just to appreciate each for what they are without becoming too hopeless about it all.

As I record all of this I am in a meeting of public sector workers who are reporting the same union catastrophe we have heard elsewhere in the country. One of the women here has suggested that the international labour community could best support the union and human rights struggle here by organizing an international conference in Colombia – which is probably the best suggestion we have so far heard on this tour. That would definitely get international attention focused on Uribe more than almost anything else we could do.

6 PM

Back from the day and have thirty minutes before we meet for a reception at the home of one of our companeros. We were taken this afternoon to one of the poorest communities in the hills overlooking Medellín – La Cruz – a barrio of displaced people from the countryside who have built shanties into the steep cliff face in the thousands. Without a doubt the poorest community I have ever walked through – tin and brick and scrap board – hundreds of children, some with faces white from illness or malnourishment scrambling on steep hillsides to play. I am glad I did not take my camera even though the view of Medellín was incredible from up there – definitely a place where photographs seem cruel.

The road up is steep and very narrow – the houses poorer as they ascend. When the rains come, houses are washed from the mountainside, the roads pitted from run-off of rain and sewage which runs open in the ditches. There are both legal and illegal settlements up there and the government forces periodically enact surprise destruction raids in the illegal sections – knocking down the houses, pulling up small garden plots, and killing the chickens – further murdering the lives and small hopes of those already forced to the margins. There is much violence in these barrios – a place which is frightful even to its inhabitants after sunset.

There is nothing for the people who live here – and yet somehow they survive – victimized by violence and an unfeeling system that would rather they die than eke out any existence. This can only be seen as the worst of Colombia's atrocities – the displacement of millions caught between the insurgency, the paramilitaries and the government. And despite it all – there are flowers and gardens – an enduring symbol of how strongly the people feel their pride in the face of overwhelming hardship.

Anything one could say about any of it seems too cliché – to rail against the system too banal. If only I could break open my heart here on these pages and let it scream about blood and mud and hunger and sickness – soldiers and police and the undercurrent of always being watched in the sickest manifestations of power. I can't even ask why because I know why – the answer is always the same and it is always wrong.

If I wrote and wrote about this country forever, it would never be enough – the stories here would never be told in their most just sense – the people would still not be freed or even fed. And even so, the little girls of La Cruz escort us up the road, holding hands and singing schoolyard songs. They have not yet realized the total horror except in their hunger – only when they know the wealth that lies below them – then the injustice will either break them into the bare maintenance of life, or turn them into insurgents. I can only imagine now what the camps of Palestine are like, the internments of the 2nd World War, the Trail of Tears. Here in one place is the whole history of human violence and brutality. And to know that this is every day and everywhere.... As I said before – the clichés are not enough to make any sense of it in the heart. Perhaps we are the irredeemables – the heartless who cannot even see outside of ourselves to demand change and the simple act of honour. I cannot find an articulation except to scramble for a shred of a dream – that perhaps it will all change with a cataclysm that will kill the rich of their avarice and anger. Why the insurgency? Why not seems the better question here.



July 8/06 – 7:30 AM – Medellín

I have never been so struck by the desire to get down on my knees and pray as I am this morning. Travel away always intensifies my fear for the world – but in Colombia that feeling is so much greater. This country is the future if we don't change our course – but how can what's in motion be stopped? Bush's America, Guantanamo justice.

It is too dramatic to think we could all be subject to this repression – and of course we are “civil” in my society when we bring out the big guns of the police state. They don't murder, they don't torture – but is it really that far away if we don't hold on to what's left of freedom? (and even conjuring freedom makes my mouth bitter with cynicism – how childish a concept).

July 9/06 – 2:15 PM - Bogotá

There are approximately 900 people in Colombia under “precautionary measures” – political actors so threatened that they require support from the government to be protected. This means those covered under dire need may be eligible to receive funding for bodyguards, bulletproof glass in their vehicles, body armour and special communications support. Of course these measures only work for the tiniest fraction of political leaders and only a marginal number of those who are under threat can even receive them – but nevertheless, many of our trade union and human rights contacts in the urban areas do use these services if made available to them. This morning, an article in the newspaper stated that the DAS now believes only 1/4 of the people who currently have protective measures granted to them actually need them.... Meaning that many of those we have met with could have them removed, putting them back into direct threat again.

As they all acknowledge, the measures mean nothing in the face of a government who sets up union leaders and shares information with the paramilitaries – but at least it is the illusion of assistance, lip-service by the state that will now be removed as Uribe continues to legitimize the paramilitaries through granting impunity. The difference between the government's approach to the extreme left and right here is abundantly clear.

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We leave the day after tomorrow – through Houston to Vancouver – and I am exhausted from spending so much time with other people – mostly just tired from feeling the need to be on all the time. I have to find some way to synthesize the past two weeks – though looking at my notes, journal and photos – it seems I have over-documented in some cases and under-documented in others.

I realize that in most of my entries I have reflected far more of what I saw and heard and not so much of what I felt. Somehow I don't honestly write or even acknowledge myself in this process. Every day in this country I have thought of Bob with the sadness of knowing I cannot share with him on my return. Every day I have also thought of my imprisoned and fugitive comrades and seen them reflected in the struggles down here – struggles for work, for respect, for mother earth, for liberty – and yet it is impossible to explain fully to our Colombian counterparts how much I can relate things I have seen to what they experience. It seems they are unwilling to believe that it really is the same to varying degrees everywhere. Capitalism is designed to kill us all – some much more miserably than others.

I think I have caught this country in my throat, a burr that will not move either way – and I wonder if I have the courage to return here without the protection of delegation status. Although I have felt little fear on this whole journey, I can't ignore the facts of murder, rape and kidnappings that crater this country as surely as any bomb blast ever could. On top of that is the oddity factor of North American tourists in most of the country. Even in Asia, I did not encounter the level of curiosity I have been exposed to here.

I want to get a few more things out here – but I think they will not be in any proper order at this point because everyday has blurred into every other.



First of all to return to Medellín – so badly desiring the capture this place between these pages and also know the impossibility of it. It is noisy and dangerous, polluted, and crowded with throngs of people mostly going in circles – the dispossessed caught in the bowl that is the base of this city. Where Pablo Escobar once ruled is the legacy of paramilitaries and the divide between the people like a dirty river that washes nothing away. In Botero's painting of the assassination of Escobar, he is shown as a giant, his feet straddled across three rooftops, being assaulted by a dozen bullets. Even the leftists who hate him and his mercenary forces can't help but remind us continually of where he lived and what he owned – a figure of some awe despite his ruthlessness – but then again, Colombia's history is full of figures as cruel and as ostentatious – perhaps this is absorbed as the way things are. Sometimes the Colombians want us to be impressed by the country's badass history, and sometimes they want us to be sad for it. In either case, it is

wounded and mythical simultaneously (and yes, the work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez is most definitely drawn from this same well of history).

A quick illustration of security: On the night we returned to the hotel from a party at Nora's house, I took a cab with two other women from the delegation. Before we left the house, I noticed that Gerardo reached into the car and took something from the driver's glovebox. Of course it only dawned on me later that what he was taking was a card carried by the driver to identify him and his cab should anything happen to us on the way home.

There are many stories like this on our trip – the Colombian's acutely aware that we take our safety for granted – always watching to make sure we don't do anything stupid or let our guards down. In this way I believe they also look after each other, though we are much more controlled than their lives could possibly be, making daily safety and obstacle course of police dogs and attacks and death threats.

The morbid in me wonders how many of the people we meet will be killed, how many of the women have been tortured, how often the children are afflicted by hunger and ringworm. It seems too cheap to look for hope in these desolate landscapes – and by that I mean the cheap platitudes with which North Americans comfort themselves when confronted with the darkest corners of the world. There is no life for the girls of the barrios except to grow into a youthful maternity, or a sex trade hungry for fresh blood every turning day. And the boys would only be too lucky to get work as labourers – but will more likely end up begging or hawking oranges or cold drinks on the crowded roadways. There is definitely the air of everything for sale here in the desperation and madness of extreme privation.

The faces of the street children are black, as are their limbs – their clothes. These human figures move like the blackened imps of nightmares – wily and without a moral other than to get fed – one can only imagine an early death at the hands of violence that reach out from every crack in the pavement. We are the white wealth continually reminded of this with every stare from the doorways. A sex trade worker grabs the arm of my friend James and simply says – *you are lucky to be white* – by which is means to be rich and to be free from the daily torture of this existence.

Looking at the green mountains that ring Medellín, the condors which fly high above the city, one can almost imagine what came before the buildings and roadways – the lushness of this place unfettered by the tentacles of the shanty towns which crawl upwards forever into the hillsides. This land is beautiful and dramatic – an obvious provider to those who originally lived in the crooks of the mountains and at the bends of the rivers.... But like all of civilization's chained lands, she has become a prison to most of her inhabitants. We are both the jailor and the jailed in this context – the Taoist paradox – for which we are raised in illusion so that we cannot see it.

If I was to leave only this part of my writing behind, I wonder what it would say about me? I realize that when I return home I will type this journal into the laptop and send the whole piece to Darren – that perhaps I am writing to him all along and not even realizing it until now. So then I would say to him this:

I have thought of you often here, especially our trip to Cuba four years ago – and how much our lives have changed since then. That was the end of our partnership but fortunately not our friendship – and if you were here with me now you would see that all of our struggles have had meaning and are relevant not only to our world, but to the sound and humane future of our planet.

This country, as I have said before, is the future of a violent and sociopathic history. It would be foolish to think that somehow we could escape this except through struggle. I know you understand exactly what I mean because you always have got at least that part of me – my politics, my analysis – but more important, my heartbreaking love for what I care about. What we have done in our lives is acted on what we love, and when we go out in the world, the need for immediacy in that is obvious.

We are not wrong to want to make change – this desire is simply love manifested in struggle.

But this is not the end for this journal, of course, for I have one more day and a 12-hour journey to get home – and there are still images (the butterflies, the soldiers) that need to sort their way out of me and onto these pages.

Some vocabulary:

asesinados – assassinated

torturados – tortured

globalicemos – global

investigacion – investigation

muerte – death

informate – information

impunidad – impunity

collective - collective

derechos humanos – human rights

Photo: Women on our tour and Colombian feminists in Bogota.

**July 11/06 – Flight to Houston**

Colombia is a country steeped in the subtext of the secretive and the elusive needs of its people – this was the first and most enduring impression throughout my stay. Neither citizen nor traveler is particularly open to sharing the details in almost any situation, and every interaction is laden with the unsaid. US/North American travelers here generally regard each other with suspicion as there are no “regular” tourists here – the presence of an English speaker generally indicates either a leftist do-gooder or a right wing mercenary of some sort. A situation as surely loaded as any gun – one is constantly recognizing the history of this place shot through each encounter.

From the first greeting at the airport in Bogotá until our last breakfast at the hotel in the company of American mercenaries – I was reminded repeatedly of our reasons for coming to this place despite the many warnings against it. It is certainly not so dangerous as it was five years ago – though the Colombians still feel it is dangerous enough to take precautions in almost every activity. Whether an activist, an indigenous land-dweller, or someone simply pushed to the margins – the tenuous daily existence is security threat alone without the added pressure of internal armed conflict and a ruthless government.

But more than historic conflict and a booming coca industry the paramilitaries are also integrated into the daily business of the transnats sucking the country of its oil, water and cheap labour. While Colombia’s internal conflict goes back decades, it has not grown wiser with age – but has grabbed hold of the heart of the country with ever-expanding roots. Uribe’s introduction of the Peace and Justice law last year with the ostensible goal of demobilizing the paramilitaries has instead legitimized their existence as “co-operatives” and given them an entrenchment in the privatization shredding the country. From this vantage, the legitimized paramilitaries have even greater access to the trade unionists and activists they attack under the guise of being FARC supporters. And of course, not all paramilitaries have agreed to demobilize – particularly those in the employ of the cartels which still run much of the country. The whole question of whether any paramilitaries are really demobilizing at all is one that is still unknown – as it appears to be more a case of changing tactics than anything else. Assassinations are down, but threats and other violence are up.. which indicates only a shift in what the government is willing to sanction, not a change of heart or political ruthlessness.

So perhaps here, near the end of this journal, a brief description of what I understand of the paramilitaries rise and entrenchment – a summary of all I have heard in the last two weeks. Of course, all the problems go back to conquest, but the modern chapter can be seen as a right-wing response to a left-wing response to an autocratic government. Which is to say that the FARC, the leftist guerillas, sprang up to fight for liberation from capitalism and an end to the disparity between the country’s classes – and the paramilitaries emerged to fight the FARC. The country had really only been disengaged from civil war between the Liberals and the Conservatives for about 20 years by the early sixties, and Maoist-inspired guerilla organizations were threaded throughout Latin America – with Cuba posing a dangerous success.

And so the US government got involved using their Monroe Doctrine dogma and funded contra forces throughout the Americas, training them in the most ruthless techniques of kidnapping, torture, murder and terror in order to destroy these fledgling insurgencies. Colombia was no different except in that the internal conflict gained a level of credibility seen almost nowhere else. Through the sixties and seventies these “self-defense organizations” (so-called) armed by both the US and Colombian governments killed tens of thousands of people in the name of fighting the FARC. The government did absolutely nothing to stop the terrorizing of innocent communities, the recruitment of children and the use of women as sexual slaves and war trophies – and during this initial phase absolutely refused to acknowledge the human rights abuses occurring throughout the country.

In the eighties, international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International started to document the ever-rising violence – fueled now also by a booming trade in coca and poppies that put lawless Colombia on the map as a country run by cartels. International pressure forced the hand of the Colombian government and the early-nineties US-lead drug war saw the murder of Pablo Escobar, a half-hearted attempt at dismantling the cartels and parliamentary measures outlawing armed paramilitaries. Of course, in the same years, a new law which allowed for armed community defense organizations was also ushered in which allowed for business as usual (these new organizations were allowed to exist but not carry out actions, however they were not disarmed). Since 1980, over a half a million people have been killed in politically motivated violence, an average of 10 people per day, and millions more have been displaced.

In 2005, the Uribe government passed the “Peace and Justice” law in a much-publicized attempt to bring an end to the internal conflict in Colombia. This legislation offered paramilitaries low prison sentences (no more than 8 years even for the leaders) and reintegration support such as an 18-month living allowance and funds to set up “workers co-operatives” in exchange for turning in arms and disavowing armed conflict. The ridiculous aspect of this process – besides the fact it offers no reparations to the victims of the paramilitaries – is the notion of the Uribe government even entering into a “peace” process with organizations that have never fought the government. Right-wing paramilitaries in Colombia have generally supported the state and are seen to be in direct collusion with the national army and local police forces. There is lots of evidence (some of which we were presented with on this trip) that the national intelligence service routinely shares information on trade unions and human rights activists with paramilitaries who then carry out extrajudicial executions to save the state forces the hassle.

Additionally, as the Uribe government privatizes one state function after another (health care, municipal services, postal delivery) – he is giving these contracts to newly created “worker’s co-operatives” which are little more than private agencies run by former paramilitary leaders. It amounts to a wholesale legitimization of these organizations, many of whom are carrying out the same illicit activities as they have been all along.

Case in point is the situation at Ad-Postal – the country’s postal service which is being privatized piece by piece. Last year, the Ad-Postal airport services were contracted out to an ex-paramilitary leader’s co-operative – basically putting airport postal services into the hands of the drug trade. The president of the postal workers union STPC saw that some of his members were being pressured to do illegal activities by those connected to the airport co-operative and so made a direct complaint to one of the Directors of the company. Within days he began receiving death threats in the form of mailed bullets, letters sent to his home, graffiti outside his work – so intensive that he eventually fled to another part of the country where he remains in hiding and with bodyguards. In the meantime, two of the airport postal workers have been arrested on charges of trying to export drugs from the country via the postal service and now other postal union members have become targets in the sights of the paramilitaries. A very dangerous situation for anyone who speaks out against it – but one that highlights the fallacy of the peace and justice law which goes hand in hand with Uribe’s ruthless privatization plans.

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And so this is the circle back again – the subtext pervasive – the violence, the history.... What do we make of experience like this and how can I share it appropriately? Is it hopeless to want to change the world even when so apparent it needs some changing?



In La Maria – looking towards Ecuador.