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Imperial dis/continuum: spaces of death, terror surplus, and Black geopolitics of peace in Colombia

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Abstract

The assassination of Haitian President Jovenal Moïse on July 7, 2021, revealed an intricate international enterprise, with the participation of mercenaries from at least four countries. The Colombian nationals under investigation for supposedly participating in the sinister operation were former members of the national army who fought the U.S.-backed war on drugs, and at least one of them was previously a member of a special unit investigated for crimes against humanity. How may we draw connections between the enduring violability of bodies in Colombia's long war and imperial violence elsewhere? Although this article is focused on Colombia, by placing the magnicide in relation to everyday racialized practices of security in the region, the article underscores and goes beyond activists' outcries that not only are cops, soldiers, militias, and self-deputized individuals "just" *violence workers* whose practices render the territorial and legal borders of policing as fictions, but also their increasing confluence reveals a much broader imperial strategy of outsourcing and democratizing violence to uphold global and domestic statecraft. It is argued that domestic Pax Colombiana meets Pax Americana in the ever-expanding foundational violence that increasingly drags bodies (youth killed in the U.S.-sponsored war on drugs, displacements by the Colombian armed conflict, or nameless victims of Colombian-exported mercenaries around the world) into the global plantation's spaces of death. How do Black activists envision peace midts an imperial continuum of violence?

Keywords empire, Black geopolitics, mercenary violence, terror surplus, Colombia

When the officer in charge of the investigation of Haitian President Jovenal Moïse's murder at the presidential palace, in the suburbs of Port-au-Prince, noted that the mercenaries "all wear the same boots" (Semana, 2021), he certainly did not mean to conflate the violence of police, soldiers, and paramilitaries. Many in Colombia, however, received the news with a hint of sarcasm, denouncing the violent blurring of roles and territorial domains. The magnicide, which was allegedly carried out by a group of former members of the Colombian Army, now recruited by a Venezuelan and an Ecuadorian head of a security company in Florida (Abi-Habib, 2021; Turkewitz & Kurmanaev, 2021), took place when Colombians were still mourning the killing of at least 80 individuals, by the ESMAD or Mobile Anti-Disturbance Squadron, during a 60-day-long protest that swept the country in the spring of 2021 (Temblores, 2021).

On social media, Colombians put together the two apparently disparate events of mercenarism abroad and domestic state repression. Someone asked, "Where have I heard that before?" Another social media user did not miss the chance to relate the fate of the mercenaries then in a jail in Port-au-Prince, "in isolation and without access to a lawyer," to state violence at home. "It is the same response they give to the mothers and families of those detained during and after the protests," another person replied.[1] The fact that members of the ESMAD police force were also being investigated for detaining and killing young people from marginalized urban areas and then presenting them as suspected guerrillas killed in combat, within the framework of the U.S. sponsored war on drugs (El Tiempo, 2021a), underscored the implicit critique that marginalized sectors of the country meet mercenarism as policing and policing as mercenarism. Resonating and going beyond activists' outcries, one can argue that not only do the violent practices of cops, soldiers, militias, and self-deputized individuals render the territorial and legal borders of policing as fictions, but also that, at the historic present, mercenarism is the diffuse manifestation of imperial policing. In other words, the growing symbiosis of "violence work" (Seigel, 2018,

[1] See "Todos tenían las mismas botas [They were all wearing the same boots]. *Facebook Post*. Available at https://www.facebook.com/100064804927846/posts/10159314306349593/.

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p. 18) that mercenaries index reveals a much broader imperial strategy of outsourcing and democratizing militarism to uphold global and domestic orders.

In this article, I decenter Haiti—and move away from the all-too-familiar narratives that portray the country as a "failed state" and its people as bearers of some sort of pathology (for a critique, see Mullings et al., 2010; Pierre, 2023)—to analyze, instead, the place Colombia occupies within the U.S.-led hemispheric regime of security and its accompanying military surplus, of which mercenarism is a primary expression. By placing the magnicide in relation to everyday racialized states of exception in Colombia, I hope to demystify sanitized narratives of security and set into sharp relief the racial continuum of empire's dispersed killing fields. To do so, I center on the role of racism in producing imperial geographies and imperial lives—lives liminarly positioned at the threshold of the legal and extralegal, domestic and foreign, and institutional and mundane practices of security by those performing "violence work" (Seigel, 2018, p. 26)—and expand on Junaid Rana's (2016, p. 121) formulation on "terror as excess" accumulated through the everyday racialization of threat and innocence. Taking Colombia's racialized pattern of (state) violence as a starting point, the above framework helps to develop two arguments. First, it sheds light on mercenarism as terror surplus. Perhaps counterintuitively, I argue that what enables the Colombian state to export military surplus (as in the 2021 assassination of the Haitian president, in current wars waged by Colombian mercenaries in Sudan, or in the outsourcing of private security to protect petroleum fields in the Middle East) is the country's *longue durée* of violence continuously revisited on Black and Indigenous bodies. Not unique to Colombia, such practices of containment must be understood within a global continuum of spatial expendability where racism (and antiblackness in particular) is a centripetal force that drags Black and blacked bodies into domestic and supranational spaces of death. Secondly, if mercenary violence gives coherence to the spatially diffused, militarily convergent, and racially informed global regime of security we call empire, Black geopolitics are glocal, mundane experiments of undoing imperial violence and rescuing imperial lives from such necrospaces. Such a discontinuum, I argue, is a porous, organic, interconnected (albeit not always globally articulated) everyday organizing against the militarily enforced global plantation.

The article is organized as follows. First, I discuss how Black and Indigenous territories in Colombia have been constituted as a colonial space of death where dis/organized violence finds no ethical and/or juridical limits. Then, I analyze the deadly continuities between (neo)colonial spaces of death at home and imperial killing fields abroad to situate mercenarism as a constitutive feature of the present regime of expendability in which the lives of a global majority do not matter. Finally, I draw on some ethnographic notes to invite reflections on the alter-geopolitics of Blackness—Black geopolitics—as a possibility for interrupting imperial violence, which I name as the imperial discontinuum. The article draws from longitudinal, engaged ethnography in Cali, Colombia. I also use newspaper articles, unstructured interviews, and fieldnotes from informal conversations and from events I co-organized with grieving mothers and peace-activists in Colombia and beyond to support the propositions presented below.

Space of death

It is Saturday afternoon, and I am attending yet another demonstration in El Guayacán, a fictional name for a barrio in the embattled urban margins of Santiago de Cali, Colombia's third-largest city. The call came from a Black-women–led grassroots organization known for its neighborhood activism on issues of spatial, gender, and racial justice. This time, we walked in the streets of the barrio in the heart of Aguablanca, a conglomerate of at least 700,000 people and home of the largest internally displaced population (hereafter Black IDPs) from the war-torn and predominantly Black Pacific coast, to denounce the disappearances and killings of Black urban youth targeted by vigilantism and state forces. A person denounces "Afrojuvenicidio (Black youth genocide)" as we gather in the middle of the street for a sacred ritual around a mandala carefully crafted with soil, seeds, candles, and pictures of the deceased. Yara,[2] an Indigenous-looking young woman displaced from the Putumayo region and now living in El Guayacan, denounces the fact that she is a refugee escaping the paramilitary and guerrilla groups that at that very moment were invading her community. She established a connection between her fate and that of El Guayacan's Black residents through their common condition of constantly running away from violence. She cries out from the speaker:

> Death follows us. It follows our skin color. Everywhere is the same. I want us to understand that what is happening here is connected to the massacre of my people out there. We are all seen as cocaleros, guerrilleros y negros (coca growers, guerrilla members, and Blacks). Wherever we go, we are hunted… wherever we are. At this very moment, my community is being displaced by armed groups, and no one cares about it. I am a displaced victim of war (Fieldnote 1).

Intersected by local, regional, and global security dynamics, this mundane form of resistance—a protest led by young Black women, most of them second-generation IDPs from an armed conflict exacerbated by the U.S.-backed war on drugs, now living under the constant threat of death on the outskirts of Cali—brings together overlapping temporalities of suffering and diffused imperial geographies of policing. Locally, activists' consciousness of an enduring condition of always being hunted by death and their impossibility of escaping their expansive criminalization as "cocaleros, guerrilleros, and Black" (see Fieldnote 1) highlights the coloniality of a war where the time of conflict is suspended in a "permanent state of exception" (Rojas-Pérez, 2008, p. 58); more broadly the circularity of colonial violence indicates that the territorial limits of law is drawn on bodies permanently rendered as racially expendable regardless their geographic location (Márquez, 2012). This was indeed a central point made by Black activists during the National Truth Commission when they not only disputed its final report by pushing for an account of violence much beyond the official historiography that establishes the early 1950s as the beginning of the 60-year-long (and counting) armed conflict, but also draw connection between their fate and the victimization of Black populations worldwide.

[2] All names appearing in this article have been anonymized to ensure the safety of interlocutors. Unless specified otherwise, quotes are from public speeches and work interactions during protests.

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While a review of the prolific field of violence studies in Colombia is beyond the scope of this article, scholars usually locate its root causes in collective grievances against land and power-hungry aristocracy (Guzmán et al., 2010). Following the assassination of liberal presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948, the bipartisan violence by ruling groups descended the country into a civil war—a period known as "La Violencia"—that later would evolve into an armed conflict between insurgent guerrillas, paramilitaries, and the army (Guzmán et al., 2010; Legrand, 2003). Some have demystified the temporal mark of La Violencia, suggesting the "massacre de las bananeras"—when, in 1928, the army killed at least 1,000 United Fruit workers on strike—as the emergence of a permanent state of exception against the poor that would characterize modern Colombia (Aríza Santamaría & Bonilla, 2020; Jaramillo, 2019). Others have highlighted that the armed conflict has been "an endemic condition" of the Colombian state, which has been engulfed in wars since the beginning of the 19th century (Carvajal et al., 2017, p. 98). As for racial violence, some argue that the relative silence on the issue stemmed from its ambiguous role in the early stages of the armed conflict, which was more closely linked to power struggles over land and the contest for regional influence (Arocha, 1998; Wade, 2016). Only in the 1990s, it has been rightfully noted, was the predominantly Black geostrategic region of the Pacific coast dragged into the armed conflict as Black communities became ferociously targeted when protecting their hard-earned territorial autonomy under the legal provisions of the 1991 multicultural constitution (Oslender, 2007; Wade, 2016).

Still, even if we consider only the timeframe of the war initiated with La Violencia, and even if one agrees that race played an "ambiguous" and "diffuse" role in the initial phase of an armed conflict that has produced widespread victimization across racial lines—the National Truth Commission estimates that "ethnic groups" are roughly 10% of the 800,000 victims of homicide, 14% of those 210,000 disappeared, and 19% of the 8.7 million victims forcibly displaced by the Colombian armed conflict (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022)[3]—one is hard pressed to ignore the observation of Black activists that the transatlantic slave trade, ongoing development projects, and the armed conflict are "the threads of a single story" (PCN, 2025a). These genealogies of violence may explain the spaces of death where, as Leyner Palacios, a member of the Truth Commission, contends, "the lives of Black men and women (…) reached such a level of contempt that the actors did not waste a bullet but preferred to hack the bodies with machetes because they were not worth the 8,000 pesos (roughly 2 US dollars) that a shot could cost" (Agencia EFE, 2022).

If antiblack racism has set the bar for making unthinkable violence possible, as Lener suggests, one can go a step further and, with Fanon (1963), argue that primitive accumulation of violence is the ground zero for the ever-expanding and coextensive *zones of nonbeing* where terror is always-already justified. While in the next section, I explore the local, regional, and global interplay of these dynamics, in this segment, I want to briefly elaborate on how these spaces of death are culturally, racially, and geographically imagined to justify the work of domination in Colombia and beyond. Analyzing Roger Casement's report on the "culture of terror" in the Putumayo region between Colombia and Peru, Michael Taussig (1984, 1987) argues that the rubber industry was ruled by an accrual of violence that at first challenged any economic logic. What would make the colonizers waste their vital Indigenous labor in the killing fields of the rubber industry? They ruled based on a "paranoid mythology" that crafted Indigenous people as a permanent threat that invited terror as protection. By placing the natives outside the geo-ontology of humanity (seen as "savages and cannibals"), Taussig suggests, colonizers produced a space of death—an epistemic murk—in which certainty would be uncannily acquired through surplus violence (1987, p. 128).

Expanding his claims beyond the Indigenous people of Putumayo, one can say that some territories are always already conceived as "space of death," where surplus life meets surplus terror. This ever-present racio-spatial construct of "zones of being" and "zones of nonbeing" (Fanon, 1963, p. 8) is rendered visible in the ways Colombians praise themselves for their country being "un país de regiones" (meaning a country with many regional differences), sometimes to highlight cultural diversity but mostly to draw a line between the predominantly White Andean region seen as modern and industrious and the predominantly Black Pacific coast and Indigenous hinterland, perceived as backward frontier spaces deemed "uncharted lands, wild territories, and nobody's lands" (Serje, 2011, p. 9). Thus, by mobilizing a geographic imaginary of differences, Colombian elites could contain Black and Indigenous groups to specific zones of extraction and suffering while promoting the myth of racial exceptionalism (Appelbaum, 2003; Vigoya, 2013). As Sara Koopman forcefully argues, however, these tropical imaginaries are deeply militarized. "Barbarities are committed in these spaces imagined as barbaric. Armed actors use imaginaries of race and place to render their acts of violence invisible in places labeled as violent" (2023, p. 469).

While enduring colonial violence against Indigenous people is undisputable—and the Putumayo case is all but one example of its currency (Ruette-Orihuela, 2023)—this group's surely always incomplete and continuously violated sovereign claims as guardians and original owners of the nation (see Bocarejo, 2009 for a critique of the multicultural state instrumentalization of identities among ethnic communities) stand in stark contrast to the contempt shown toward Black Colombians' struggle to be recognized, at the very least, as victims (Arocha, 1998; Cárdenas, 2018). It is this liminal position that makes Blackness a particular, albeit not exclusive, condition within the nation empire: one of expendability and necessity. As a symbol of expendability, Blackness not only eludes the recognition of suffering but also becomes paradigmatic imperial life "trafficked" in *violence workers* mundane transactions. As a necessity, it serves as a basic catalyst for spaces of life by providing ontological, economic, and affective security to the empire state and its ruling subjects (Vargas, 2018; Wilderson, 2010).

If Yara is correct in her statement that "death follows us; it follows our skin color" (Fieldnote 1) (and that "Black" is a fungible for guerrilleros and cocaleros), it may be that antiblackness is a centripetal force that more than producing an "epistemic murk" in security practices, brings together geographical

[3] In a country with mestizaje as a foundational myth that disqualifies claims of racial violence as irrelevant, the statistics on racial identification are at best inaccurate. Indeed, Black activists have denounced the 2018 national census as "statistical genocide" for reducing by 30% the Afro-Colombian population (from 4.3 to 2.9 million) in relation to previous counts when they made up around 10% of the nation's demographics (CNOA, 2019).

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(national/supranational), juridical (legal/extralegal), and temporal (wartime/peacetime) dynamics of militarism as/in terror surplus. Domestic Pax Colombiana (foundational violence) enables the country to uphold its place in the racial global order where mercenary (state) violence is increasingly becoming the lingua franca of empire. Domestically and globally, it enforces liminal (bodily and geographic) spaces of death where violence meets no legal or territorial restraint.

Security entanglements

The scholarship on the U.S.-led global order has increasingly shifted away from the top-down framework of geopower toward its diffused mechanisms of coercive invitation. In that sense, while military intervention continues to be part and parcel of the U.S. grand strategy to defend national interests abroad (Thomson, 2018), there are also less discernible imperial practices embedded in peace-building operations, labor migration policies, and humanitarian occupations such as those seen in Haiti, Afghanistan, and Colombia (Attewell, 2023; Dube & Naidu, 2015; Pierre, 2023). For instance, Haitian scholar Jemima Pierre has shown how the United States outsources imperial violence by trading off access to military technology with African and neighboring Caribbean states in exchange for their participation in the "long occupation of Haiti" (Pierre, 2023, p. 215). Others have highlighted how wars energized by imperialism enforce racial capitalism by regulating mobility and disciplining surplus labor on a global scale. For instance, U.S. interventions abroad have enabled regimes of exploitation, extraction, and apartheid not only in the so-called global south (Besteman, 2019) but at home as well. In this capacity, Emma Crane has shown how immigrants from Guatemala, most of whom are survivors of the Mayan Genocide, are incorporated in the domestic martial economy as "war surplus" through "the arrangements of labor, landscape, and property that war-making produces in the United States" (Crane, 2023, p. 213). American imperial globality, Escobar suggests, is less about conquest than about securing the globe "through wars and massive displacement" (2004, p. 18) to establish managerial governments for capitalist zones of extraction and accumulation.

Within this paradigm of geopower, marked by new imperial rivalries over zones of influence, Pax Americana is perhaps better articulated through what Muller describes as a "co-constitutive entanglement" in which subaltern geopolitical actors also shape dynamics of security by producing localized imperial orders (Müller, 2015, p. 711). For instance, the U.S. exporting of the "war on drugs" and "war on gangs" to Latin America has been welcomed by regional political elites seeking to build legitimacy through iron-fist policies, as in the case of El Salvador's war on marginalized youth framed as a war on terror (Meléndez-Sánchez & Vergara, 2024). Meanwhile, the United States uses foreign territories as markets for its military industry and as laboratories for expanding technologies of policing and confinement at home (Schrader, 2019; Seigel, 2018). As scholars have argued before, this entanglement does not decenter the United States from its long history of "farming out imperial violence" (Grandin, 2006, p. 88) through proxies. As Andrew Thomson (2018, p. 3) has also shown, the strategy of "outsourcing imperialism have been increasingly central to US efforts to create and maintain a US-led liberalized global order throughout the post-WWII era." Globally, the United States has symbiotically acted with local actors "in the conduct of coercive modes of statecraft" (Thomson, 2018, p. 3). For instance, in what became known as Plan Lazo, U.S. General William P. Yarborough assisted Colombia in creating "shadow paramilitary groups" and "anti-communist mercenaries" against local banditry and to "eradicate the guerrillas," based on its experience in guerrilla warfare in the Philippines (Briscoe, 2006, p. 41). These forms of assistance later proved useful as "applied knowledge" and "tactics" to be then deployed in Vietnam (Grandin, 2006, p. 98). Perhaps the most prominent manifestation of the U.S.'s central role in organizing imperial violence is the well-studied infamous School of the Americas, established in 1946 as an Army training facility in Panama. Under SOA (School of Americas)'s war on insurgency disguised as a war on drugs, Latin American forces committed human rights atrocities against peasants and Black and Indigenous communities (Gill, 2004, p. 181; see also Thomson, 2018) while clearing the way for U.S.-enforced neoliberal capitalism in the region. The SOA "brought together dispersed and sometimes antagonistic security forces—Colombia was the country with the most graduates from SOA—and molded them into proxy armies under US tutelage" (Gill, 2004, p. 61).

All these scholarly critiques and historical background foreground a definition of imperial globality as the U.S.-led international order grounded on the hierarchical production and ordering of racialized spaces of extraction, capture, and death (Jung, 2011, p. 9) of which Colombia is a primary example. Without disregarding the violence perpetrated by other rising imperial powers, from its constitutive mechanisms of frontier expansion (Indigenous genocide) and capital accumulation (Black slavery), American globality has evolved into an expansive "technology of capture" and a "paradigm of dominance" engineered through apartheid and normalized violence (Rodríguez, 2023, p. 197). As Dylan Rodriguez has it, empire is a project of global statecraft, articulated by/in the "centripetal force of global white supremacy, that gives coherence to state and state-proctored, legal, and extralegal violence" (2011, p. 51). Soldiers of empire enforce racial-spatial orders—both globally and locally—safeguarding transnational continuities across domestic spaces of death. And since global antiblackness is the foundation for such a spatial ordering (Bledsoe & Wright, 2019), it is reasonable to say that imperial violence is antiblack terror surplus, which, in its turn, is the primitive and centripetal accumulation of violence that, reaching a saturation point, spills onto other racialized bodies and spaces (Vargas, 2018, p. 52). Still, while Haiti's troubling place in the geopolitics of empire (as an experiment of freedom and its attending imaginaries of fear that has elicited a hemispheric architecture of security) has been the subject of much theoretical appreciation (Dougé-Prosper, 2021; Pierre, 2023; Queiroz, 2022), Colombia's place in these racialized imperial geographies may need some further elaboration.

"They all wear the same boots"

In a press conference shortly after the murder of President Moïse, then Colombian Vice President Marta Lucia R. de Rincón expressed consternation over the magnicide and concern for the lives of the former Colombian soldiers who were believed to have been misled into participating in a stabilizing mission in Haiti. She also expressed her trust in the Colombian Army. "I know very well the soul of the Colombian soldiers. I know that our soldiers are

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trained to protect the lives of citizens. (…) The Colombian military is never, under any circumstances, mercenaries who are going to go ex officio to commit any crime anywhere" (Rincón, 2021). While Rincón's initiative to distance the military from mercenaries was to be expected from a high-ranking government official, and although I do not wish to downplay distinctions by lumping together the private, the privatized, and the public in military violence (for critical distinction, see Mabee, 2009, pp. 140–142), "mercenarism" is not foreign to processes of state-building. In fact, as Charles Tilly has cogently demonstrated for European state formations, war-making, extraction, and accumulation—predation, coercion and protection—has long been a signature of the state, built on a "symbiotic relation" between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" violence, organized and disorganized military forces (Tilly, 1985, p. 179).

If we follow Tilly's reasoning and consider the question of "legitimacy" beyond state-centric definitions, focusing instead on the historical dynamics and politico-economic arrangements that authorize both the distinction and the convergence between state and private forms of violence (Aning, 2001; Mabee, 2009; McFate, 2019), one could agree that mercenary violence, conceived in broad terms, was crucial to the formation of the Colombian state and to holding the nation together following the interstitial wars of independence in the nineteenth century; mercenaries were essential in the colonial founding of towns and cities, as they sold their loyalty and switched sides in the ruthless race for power and wealth among the conquistadors (Aprile-Gniset, 1991). The 20th-century wars between interparty groups that formed bands to seize control of the state and the ongoing conflict between guerrilla groups, paramilitaries, and the army are also intertwined with private wars over state bureaucracy and natural resources (Ballvé, 2020; Civico, 2016; López & Sevillano, 2008; Velasco et al., 2018). Even on the urban front, records show that state officials and paramilitary members have worked in tandem to carry out limpiezas sociales (social cleansing) against marginalized youth perceived as a security threat (Guzmán & and Guizado 1990; Rozema, 2007). Thus, although modern mercenarism may fall outside (or in the gray-zone of) state-controlled violence, it produces a "state effect" (Ballvé, 2020) that in Colombia can be discernible in a sinister record of human rights atrocities by professional soldiers, self-deputized vigilantes, guerrillas, and paramilitarism that resonates with the rather dystopian and familiar statement that "Colombia is a very fertile country because it is sown with [human] flesh" (Vásquez, 2017, p. 58).

Still, although private armies can be traced back to Colombia's colonial history, it was under U.S.-pushed Plan Colombia, launched in 2000, that local mercenarism gained global valence. Scholar Jose Antonio Figueroa has highlighted that an intended consequence of the U.S.-backed war on drugs was the spiral of violence it created with increasing public spendings in security and the further expansion of repression to justify military surplus in a country with staggering levels of social inequalities (Figueroa, 2021, p. 81). To meet U.S. conditionalities, the Colombian government had to steadily increase its defense budget while creating a new military market for private security companies from the global north. As the United States poured military resources into its war on insurgent as war on drug—and the Pentagon boosted military exports to Colombia as foreign aid (Figueroa, 2021)—the relationship between the two countries in security matters made the Colombian Army one of the largest in Latin America. It was with this military expansion that "new" mercenaries emerged as paramilitary units under the blessing of Colombian and American officials. Local farmers and power brokers hired private arms to carry out "limpiezas sociales" (social cleansing), which meant killing those deemed guerrilla members, racialized youth, and social activists said to be aligned with the left; they also provided private security to protect oil fields and banana plantations from guerrilla groups or unionized labor forces (Ballvé, 2020; Civico, 2016). Under mercenary protection, U.S. biotech companies such as Dyncop and Monsanto expanded their operations through exclusive contracts to fumigate crops with aerial spraying of glyphosate made in the global north (Figueroa, 2021, p. 84).

Being a "key U.S. partner in promoting democracy and economic prosperity" (Department of State, 2023) in the region—current threats of decertification as an ally in the war on drugs notwithstanding—has enabled Colombia to grow an extraordinary security apparatus that is now outsourced to produce global statecraft. A special investigation by local newspapers El Tiempo and Noticias Uno revealed that long before the assassination of Haiti's president, Colombian mercenaries were involved in the U.S. war in Iraq and Afghanistan and in securing petroleum fields in Yemen and the United Arab Emirates as early as 2004 under security firms such as Thor, ID System, and Blackwater (El Tiempo, 2011; Uno Noticias, 2021). Most recently, the UN has also revealed that at least 10,000 former soldiers are currently working with private military and security companies in Sudan, Ukraine, Russia, Brazil, and Mexico (DW, 2026).

Perhaps the symbiosis of private and state militarism becomes more obvious when one focuses less on who carries out "violence work" (Seigel, 2018) than on the outcomes it produces. Pretty much like Yara, to whom "death follows us wherever we go" (Fieldnote 1), Black activist Luz Daris pointed out "the similarities of territories and bodies" targeted by violence. Addressing my question on how to articulate apparently disparate dynamics of militarism in Colombia and the assault on Haiti, she contended that "it is the racialization of these territories, here and there [in Colombia and in Haiti], that makes our people targets of abuse. You first make these territories seem evil, and then they are subjected to these assaults. In the end, the bodies are the same" (Interview 1). Unintendedly, her comment reiterated the widely circulated criticism on social media in Colombia—following the remarks by Fidélito Dieudonné, the officer in charge of the investigation in Haiti, noting that "they all wear the same boots" (Semana, 2021)—that there was not much difference between mercenary violence abroad and police repression at home. Like Luz Daris, social media users saw the sameness as indicative of a common modus operandi in domestic spaces of death. Someone joked, "Where have I heard that before?" Another person added, "I feel that the word 'boots' has such a special connotation in Colombia." Someone else interjected that "his great legacy is the boots,"[4] a clear reference to the presidency of Alvaro Uribe (2002–2008) when, under his U.S.-backed security strategy, the Colombian Army and state-supported paramilitary forces regained control of guerrilla territories while also producing widely documented atrocities against peasants, Indigenous, and Black communities (Arboleda, 2019; CINEP, 2016; Henao, 2024; Vasquez, 2010).

[4] See, Todos tenían las mismas botas [They were all wearing the same boots]….note 1.

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ESMAD: Colombian rangers

Although it is not my intention to downplay the differences between police, army, paramilitary, mercenary, and private security, thus "making it more difficult to imagine accountability and reveal imperial machinations"—as observed by a reviewer (personal communication, 2026)—the fact that the mercenaries' assault on Haiti made headlines at the same time as the crackdown (by state and self-deputized individuals) on activists participating in mass demonstrations against the government continued unabated further highlighted activists' belief that in Colombia, the poor meet policing as mercenarism. During the 2 months of protests, there were 5,048 cases of police violence, including 80 homicides and 47 acts of sexual violence against women, trans, and gender-diverse people, mostly perpetrated by the Colombian Mobile Anti-Riot Squad, known as ESMAD (Temblores, 2021). In Cali, the epicenter of protests, the city and national governments deployed maximum military force to repress demonstrations, particularly in the predominantly Black lowlands of the eastside and the predominantly Indigenous descendent hillside community of Siloé where at least 44 people were murdered, and hundreds of civilians were wounded by soldiers, police officers, and urban paramilitaries working in coordination with state agents (CODHES, 2021; Temblores, 2021).

The surplus of racial violence (first spatially contained to Black "spaces of death" and now spilled into the streets of urban Colombia) prompted even the president of the U.S. Congress Commission for Foreign Affairs, Gregory Meeks, to condemn the "excessive use of force" as "inexcusable" and to threaten to halt military collaborations with foreign forces involved in human rights violations (Verdad Abierta, 2021a). Still, the very creation of the ESMAD reveals an intimate history of imperial statecraft. The Riot Police and the National Police trace their origins to the military police force created during the dictatorship of President General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (1953–1957) to combat guerrilla groups and suppress social protests, a force that, for its part, borrowed techniques from the U.S. Rangers. With Plan Colombia came, the United States push to modernize the Colombian police force to assist the army in "counteracting public disorder" amid an increasingly urban armed conflict (Aríza Santamaría & Bonilla, 2020, pp. 23–24). It is said that the U.S. military–industrial complex is also one of the main suppliers of ESMAD's lethal machinery. ESMAD's main private partner is Combined System Inc., a company based in Jamestown, Pennsylvania, which supplies rubber bullets, beanbag rounds, plastic bullets, and smoke munitions to the Colombian police (Coronell, 2019). During the 2021 protests, the hallmark of ESMAD's crackdown was the targeting of demonstrators in the eyes, causing irreversible injuries from the use of Penn Arms, one of the primary nonlethal devices used to disperse protests around the world (El Tiempo, 2021b; Temblores, 2023).

What makes ESMAD particularly relevant to this article is how its modus operandi also challenges the "mythology of territoriality" (Seigel, 2018), which holds that policing and military violence belong to separate spatial domains. Under the responsibility of the Ministry of Defense, ESMAD is deployed as riot police and supports the army in its war on drugs. At least one of the mercenaries allegedly involved in the operation that led to the assassination of President Moïse was previously a member of this special force, which has also been investigated for alleged cases of "falsos positivos (or false positives)," a practice of randomly rounding up and killing its victims and then later presenting them as presumed guerrilla members who died in combat (El Tiempo, 2021a; HRW, 2015; Vestri, 2015). Considered "as one of the worst episodes of mass atrocity in the Western Hemisphere in recent decades" (HRW, 2015), the falsos positivos scandal came to light during Alvaro Uribe's term when, pressured to deliver results against the guerrilla, the army killed at least 6,400 civilians to falsely present them as enemy combatants (Bellani, 2019; CINEP, 2016; JEP, 2023; Vestri, 2015). Here again the entanglement of domestic repression and U.S.-led regional dynamics of security is starkly evinced: the "first general of Plan Colombia" in charge of implementing the military strategy to defeat the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionárias de Colombia (FARC) guerrilla was a graduate from the School of the Americas who has been accused by the Special Truth Commission of "war crimes" and "crimes against humanity" for his alleged involvement in at least 100 cases of "falsos positivos" (JEP, 2023; Pardo, 2021). Likewise, based on their public profile, some of the soldiers supposedly involved in the gruesome operation in Port-au-Prince served in the Colombian Army at the peak of its "successful" joint war with the United States against the guerrilla "threat" to local and regional security (El Tiempo, 2021c).

Junaid Rana defines the "terror industrial complex" as the physical and structural violence normalized through the production of racialized threats (Rana, 2016, p. 114). Whether fighting global terrorism, political insurgency, drug trafficking, or street crime, governance is based on an affective infrastructure of otherness to promote "terror as security" (2016, p. 121). As the dead bodies of Black and marginalized youth turned into falsos positivos (produced by soldiers trained by the School of the Americas and now providing *violence work* to other geographies of empire) testify, enmity is a technology of racialization that performs an essential political labor for domestic and global ordering. In medical terminology, the term "false positive" refers to a test result that incorrectly indicates the presence of a medical condition. In the case of Colombia's war on drugs, as with Haiti's long occupation (Mullings et al., 2010) or even in racialized urban America (Rana, 2016), false positives (i.e., the production of enemies) and false negatives (i.e., the production of fantasies of peace and security) are political devices that belong to the racial infrastructure of global statecraft. Thus, as a device, it serves the dual purpose of mystifying and reaffirming global order led by a "paranoid empire" always dependent on a "spectral enemy" for its "limitless wars against its limitless threat" (McClintock, 2009, p. 113).

The primary enforcer of Plan Colombia, former President Uribe, has rejoiced that "with the United States, we have had an alliance for democracy and against the enemy of each situation, now against terrorism. This treaty should help us eliminate the terror of violent people" (Betancur, 2006, op. cit. Temblores, 2019, p. 23). Leaving open the political maneuver of enmity "for each situation" was precisely the approach adopted by his protégé Iván Duque during the 2021 protests when, like his political mentor Uribe, Duque labeled demonstrators as urban terrorists. An activist who participated in one of the barricades made this point crystal clear: the government treats marginalized youth as an "internal enemy, not as a citizen with civil rights" (Verdad Abierta, 2021b). The youth contended that behind the stigmatization of protesters as terrorists is the government's attempt to "create a judicial false positive as they have always done" (Verdad Abierta, 2021b). This tactic of

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producing urban enemies is an all-too-familiar approach evinced in the records of state and state-sanctioned aggression against Black and Indigenous communities of Cali. In the 1980s, a military operation against guerrilla groups killed 17 residents of the hillside community of Siloé (Temblores, 2019). Currently, as before, deaths by vigilantism, mainly in the Black eastside, underscore what activists have denounced as "politica de muerte (politics of death)" (Fieldnote 2) to convey their disproportionate victimization by urban security policies.

Black geopolitics as imperial discontinuum

Writing against the normative concept of geopolitics, scholar Sara Koopman argues for an alter-geopolitics that acknowledges the agency of individuals in building local communities in intimate connections with global politics. She expands on subaltern and feminist geopolitics' emphasis on the body as a site of politics (Dowler & Sharp, 2001) to argue for an approach that highlights "connections across all sorts of distances" and interconnected scales. Alter-geopolitics focuses on collective efforts ("it is done by groups…large or small, organized or messy, stable or ephemeral") to keep communities safe. It mobilizes community around nonviolent means to bring "people together across difference not just to stay alive and be safe, but to live well, to live with dignity and justice" (Koopman, 2011, pp. 280–281).

In my ethnographic context, alter-geopolitics revolve around a sense of place that, while denouncing spatial violence, also foregrounds Black people's spatial agency (McKittrick, 2011). For example, my interlocutors have used social cartography to denounce their target as cannon fodder in a war that is not theirs. At one of those exercises I attended, members of the community created a map of the armed conflict with a fat White man wearing a business suit, sunglasses, and smoking. He was placed in the center of the map. Bloodlines connected him to poisoned rivers, fleeing families, burning forests, and dismembered bodies. The aim was to situate their condition within a continuum of militarism (from private and state domains and from domestic and supranational dimensions) that has produced racial, gendered, and ecological suffering.

Not unique to Colombia, Black activists have long positioned themselves as geopolitical subjects. For instance, the Black Panther Party understood too well that because the "martial and racial projects of occupation and policing are co-implicated, even as they impose distinct logics of violence and disposability," they needed to "subvert and transcend the nation-state" as the territory of struggle (Manchanda & Rossdale, 2021, p. 487). Thus, they forged supranational alliances with the global south while also galvanizing international support for their struggle in "the internal colony" at home (Bloom & Martin, 2016, p. 61). Also in the 1960s, Black activists in Brazil led transatlantic alliances to support the independence of African nations from their common colonizer—Portugal. They mobilized exiled Portuguese citizens living in Brazil, established connections with anticolonial movements in Lisbon, and pressed the Brazilian government to recognize the breakaway colonies. They contended that, as the country with the largest Black population outside Africa, Brazil and the continent shared a common root and common destiny (see Lima, 2023). Additionally, while Brazil promoted the myth of racial exceptionalism abroad, activist intellectuals such as Lelia Gonzalez sought not only to denounce their second-class status as Brazilians but also to challenge the celebration of Latinidad by proposing Amefrica, instead of Americas, as the geopolitical reference for Black struggle for self-determination (Gonzalez, 1988).

As Agustin Lao has shown elsewhere, these long traditions of Black internationalism, of which Black Colombians figure prominently, can be systematized in at least four waves: beginning with the Haitian Revolution of 1784–1804 that inspired slave revolts throughout the continent; the Pan Africanism movement championed by the Pan African Congresses of the early decades of the 20th century; the civil rights and anticolonial movements of the 1960s–1970s; and finally, the global alliances against U.S. imperialism and its support for the apartheid regime in South Africa (Lao-Montes, 2009, pp. 215–216). Recently, renewed peace efforts by Black Colombian activists have centered around denouncing the global "spectrum of Black genocide" and the demand for global reparations against colonial debt (Cárdenas, 2024, p. 67). They have also stood in solidarity for self-determination in the Sahel region (Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso), arguing that the "territorial dispossession, structural racism, the militarization of our spaces," and (neo)colonial assaults on the African continent "are part of a global structure of racial, economic, and political oppression" (PCN, 2025b).

Although these transnational efforts for consequential peace, which are not exhaustive, clearly qualify as "geopolitics from below," I want to push for a consideration also of the less discernible ways geopolitics is practiced and contested by individuals and communities under siege. This may include Black youth's mundane refusal to be false positives by seeking protection in gang membership; activists' strategic negotiation with armed actors to navigate the contentious terrain of war (Merriman, 2020); communities' self-defense strategies such as the Guardia Indigena and Guardia Cimarrona (nonarmed self-defense guard corps; Weitzner, 2021); or grassroots activism to defend the territory against corporate capitalism (Rojas et al., 2015). A mundane moment I would name as the everyday life of Black geopolitics came from a little corner of my ethnographic context:

> We were attending yet another demonstration against the killings of Black youth in the barrio. Janet, a Black female activist in her late 50s, and I got distracted and distanced from the march as we updated each other on our lives. I had not seen her since my last trip to Cali. The demonstration was turning the corner toward the local grassroots headquarters, and we hurried so as not to miss the ritual at the mandala. On our way, two motorcycle officers stopped to frisk a Black and a white/mestizo youth whom we saw throwing their weed joint into the woods as the officers approached. Janet did not think twice and started filming the cops' actions as we approached them. They asked her to stop, but Janet insisted. "Ok, film, film to show us doing our job, showing these two guys with marijuana," the officer says ironically. Janet corrected them about the legal personal dose of marijuana that Colombian law grants to users. The officers got infuriated. "Are you trying to teach us how to do our job? Give me your ID." Fearing that Janet might be in danger, I made a gesture to take my cell phone out of my pocket to record what was happening, but Janet motioned for me to get out of the way.

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> Janet confronted them: "Shame on you; instead of harassing youth here, in the middle of a demonstration against violence, you should be after the big guys. You leave us alone and look for something more important to do; you're not welcome here." He shouted at Janet, ordering her to film the joint on the ground. Janet shouted back and filmed them instead. "Vete! [Get out!] I know you are the ones using the uniform to kill. You have these youth tired of paying you bribes all the time." The older officer told the younger, "Oh man, you see, this thing doesn't work here [perhaps referring to the ostensive policing plan targeting the eastside]. We are only trying to do our job. For God's sake, this place can't be fixed." Janet shouts at them: "Abusadores [Abusers]. Not here! Not in our territory!" The youth thanked Janet for not letting the police take them to the station. She warned them in Colombian slang: "¡No de papaya!" meaning to be careful not to become an easy target (Fieldnote 3).

Like Jane, Black women have been at the forefront of building peace communities in Colombia. They also forge international connections through their struggles based on their fate as women, Blacks, and mothers. For instance, Janet and I attended (and I co-organized with local activists) a meeting in September 2018 in Cali with mothers from Brazil and the United States and their Colombian counterparts. These activities included a colloquium at a local university and a forum held at the community grassroots headquarters on the eastside. Activists placed a banner crossing the street with the mottos "Who feels for the dead?" and the poignant line "The pain of mothers transcends frontiers," along with photos of youth killed by police forces across the Americas. While violence did not stop then—the mothers shortened the meeting to visit the funeral of a murdered young man who was being mourned on the next street over and whose mother was scheduled to attend the meeting—they evoked their embodied experience to build concrete solidarity "in the face of a reality that does not distinguish borders" (Fieldnote 4).

During the 2-day event, Debora Silva, an activist and mother of a child killed by Brazilian police, reiterated the call she had made months earlier when she visited the mothers who had lost their children in Cali "to globalize the struggle," since "the murderers here and there are of the same ilk; the bullets are the same…." She also emphasized a politics of care based on a maternal love because "those who don't know how to care, kill!" That is why, she insisted, "our womb is a territory of struggle." Against the masculinist project of militarism, the mothers demanded the demilitarization of the Americas, informed by a "shared grief" produced by *violence workers*. As they synthesized in a manifesto read during the event, "We fight from the wombs; our pain knows no borders." To these organizers, violence and resistance were as much a matter of scale as of circularity (Fieldnote 4).

Feminist and alter-geopolitics are a radical and welcoming invitation to challenge the patriarchal, top-down, disembodied Politics (with a capital P) by placing the body and the flesh at the center of the heteropatriarchal space of geopolitics (Dasgupta, 2019; Koopman, 2011). Expanding on that, I want to argue for centering Black Geopolitics as the embodied praxis of imperial discontinuities. Hieroglyphs of an imperial continuum: the funeral of a Black young man killed in a gang territorial contest infused by the U.S.-backed war on drugs; the protest by an Indigenous woman forcibly displaced by paramilitaries from her land and now living among Black IDPs on the urban margins; a clothesline with photos of young people killed by the police in the "favelas" of Brazil and in the "ghettos" of the United States. While the claim that these localized encounters with *violence workers* are geopolitical may be met with skepticism, the ordinary production of domestic spaces of death and, bluntly stated, the transnational circularity of military labor (through mercenaries, regular soldiers, cops, or self-deputized individuals) and military gear (boots, bullets, tear gas, glyphosate, and so on) may at least spark intellectual curiosity about the deadly interplays of local, regional, and global practices of (in)security that my interlocutors at the community center cartographically denounce as emanating from the White man's gravity center. If their condition cannot be understood outside global militarized violence, why should their everyday refusal to be victims? One would have to at least concede that being deemed a quintessential threat, Black people struggle for the right to live calls for refusal of terror-as-security, and if current configurations of empire come into being through entanglements of security against a spectral enemy, reaffirming commitment to peace requires disrupting empire's racial infrastructure of enmity with alternative, Black-centered infrastructures of life.

Conclusion

Imperialism, Jemima Pierre argues, is a counter-revolution against Black freedom. The "longest colonial experiment" for such an enduring war on Black people, she forcefully contends, is Haiti. Attending to her call to "recognize Haiti's critical place as a testing ground for U.S. imperialism" (2023, p. 250), this article invites reflection on how enduring colonial violence, by soldiers, militias, war lords, mercenaries, and cops—indexed in the remarks "they all wear the same boots" (Semana, 2021)—become so extensive and expansive that anyone, even a sitting president, can be dragged into empire's killing fields. Black geopolitics is another name for a radical tradition that Haiti symbolizes in its stubborn struggle for freedom for Blacks and for all, which aims at destabilizing the circuitry (and expendability) of imperial lives. Against global forces of militarism, everyday Black geopolitics takes place in multiscale practices carried out by Black activists organizing against state violence, city dwellers "just" refusing security on their own terms, or by individuals like the displaced young Indigenous woman from Putumayo, whose remarks Janet and I did catch up with after the altercation with the officers. Her cry, denouncing the terror of paramilitarism against her community in the Colombian Amazon, and now her shared status among the predominantly Black IDPs of Cali's outskirts, give us a way to consider how the centripetal force of ongoing colonial violence may be countered by Black-led collective refusals of terror-as-security. This means that as more and more people of all skin hues (such as Indigenous-looking Yara, the White/mestizo youth rescued by Janet, and the victims of mercenaries waging imperial wars abroad) are dragged into the empire's deathscapes, terror as security is contested by a Black(ed) global majority unequivocally commited to dignified living and consequential peace. Undoing violence was precisely what the sacred mandala with the photos of youths murdered as false positives was meant to symbolize. Around it we danced, read poetry, and celebrated life, discontinuing, even if ephemerally, the empire's ever-expanding spaces of death. In Janet's words, "Not here! Not in our territory!"

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Declaration of AI usage

This article was not created, produced, or written using artificial intelligence or large language models.

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