

Maria Clemencia Ramirez, *Between the Guerrillas and the State: The Cocalero Movement, Citizenship, and Identity in the Colombian Amazon*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

What does it mean to be invisible in your own home? What if you could become visible, but it came at the expense of the only way you can support yourself?

These are the questions Maria Clemencia Ramirez elaborates on in her book, *Between the Guerrillas and the State: The Cocalero Movement, Citizenship, and Identity in the Colombian Amazon*. Ramirez describes the plight of the campesinos (peasant farmers) in Putumayo, Colombia, who began illegally growing coca in order to make a living, and then started a grassroots social movement in order to gain recognition, and aid, from the Colombian government: “It was precisely the illegality of coca that enabled the campesinos to put the region’s social and economic crisis onto the national and international agenda, finally overcoming the government’s apparent lack of interest in their plight” (3). Through this paradox and the description of the movement, Ramirez weaves migration, identity, politics, and drugs into a compelling study of a group of disenfranchised farmers demanding recognition and rights from a government that vacillates between ignoring and punishing them.

Ramirez traces the cocalero movement through all of its stages, beginning with a description of how the Colombian Amazon, which includes Putumayo and Baja Bota, became a haven for those for whom the Colombian government had nowhere else. The first chapter traces the paths of colonization, as non-natives moved into the area mainly to extract wealth—first through petroleum, and then through the coca plant. Next, Ramirez shares the story of coca: how it is produced, its rise in Colombia and the neighboring nations, and then how the region tried to stamp it out through anti-drug policies. In this early part of the book Ramirez begins to probe the tension between the government characterizing the people of Putumayo as violent actors due to their interactions with coca and the government exerting political pressure, influence, and sometimes violence on the area in response to the coca – an almost chicken or the egg dilemma from which the reader comes away thinking that perhaps the government was the most violent member of the conflict. In the third chapter, Ramirez describes earlier civic movements in the area, casting light upon the ways in which the civic protests were characterized by the government and press. These characterizations, which emphasized violence and unruly behavior, fed into “the image of an uncivilized region where drug traffickers and guerillas f[ound] fertile ground for their lawless activities” and therefore negated the civic part of the protest and “utterly los[t] from view the people who were repeatedly asking the federal government to make their presence felt, seeking dialogue and concertacion (cooperative effort)” (93-94). The duality of the campesinos– and the opposing concepts of how they are viewed versus how they want to be viewed—is a recurring theme throughout the book, allowing the campesinos to seem more sympathetic but also, conversely, highlighting the seeming futility of their struggle.

Chapter four begins to describe the cocalero movement, which “derives its identity not from its opposition to the state but from the social and political exclusion of its members by that state” (111). After the early civic movements, the cocaleros “contested their stigmatization as illegal actors and temporary migrants in search or easy money” (110). The cocaleros, through their movement, “defined and presented themselves as Colombian citizens, internal migrants (colonos) seeking to work and improve their standard of living, who were at the same time residents of Putumayo” (111). Chapter five details the negotiations between the cocalero leaders and highlights the dichotomy between the campesino’s concrete objectives and the government’s tenuous recognition. Ramirez describes the negotiations as complex, portraying the government and the

campesinos on opposite sides of the table not only in schools of thought but in pure life experiences. While the government vehemently opposed coca, they failed to grasp how the campesinos had viewed it, and used it, as their only means of economic stability. These opposite viewpoints led to tense negotiations, even walkouts, but the story ends on an uplifting note as the people and the government seem to come to an understanding together. Chapter six describes local state formation and Putumayo's struggle with wresting autonomy away from FARC, paramilitaries, and narco-traffickers. Chapter seven follows what occurred after the negotiations, how the movement leaders continued to work on the development plan for their state and the various victories they managed—such as avoiding criminalization and receiving international allies. Chapter eight reveals how the U.S.'s war on drugs and the Colombian government have tightened their stronghold over the area, as aerial fumigation was intensified in the area. Further, after forces were sent into Putumayo, the cocalero movement leaders were unable to effect any real change in the state or contribute to the development in any helpful way. Ultimately, the book ends with an unhappy conclusion. Despite all the many valiant efforts described, and all of the small victories that the cocaleros were able to achieve, at the conclusion of the book everything looks the same as it had been described at the outset. In fact, the only change Ramirez gives the reader is that “policy formation is even more centralized and the central government continues to favor a more military and less social response to campesino activities” (238).

Despite the unhappy ending, Ramirez manages to make Putumayo jump off the page for the reader making the town and the people come alive through her prose. Aided by maps and charts, showing everything from the topography of the region to the numbers of deaths in the area, as well as journalistic photos capturing the protests, Ramirez is able to give her reader a complete picture of life in Putumayo. Ramirez provides such a clear picture of the region and their issues because she lived in the region and returned often, offering updates of the movement as they occurred in the early 2000s. Early in the introduction, Ramirez describes how she learned to stay away from certain people and areas in order to avoid being considered a police informant, as well as how to deal with militia when forced into confrontations with them. Her first-hand perspective offers insight from someone who knows these people, felt their abandonment, followed their journey, and shared in both their successes and their failures. Despite her proximity to her subject, Ramirez manages to showcase both sides of the argument—describing the citizens fear of the cocaleros during the protests, or describing how the FARC members did not prevent the campesinos from trying to effect change at first. However, Ramirez portrays the campesinos as sympathetic beings, meaning the reader, more often than not, finds herself rooting for the cocaleros, cheering with their victories and feeling the pain of their losses.

Ramirez explores the plight of the cocaleros on an intimate level, using her experiences in the region and interactions with the people to give a level of authenticity to the story that books of this nature can often lack. The book offers an inside perspective on the effects coca (and the various people who supported or tried to bring an end to coca production) has had on the area. Looking at the broader picture, Ramirez brings attention to “the importance of borderlines and margins as peripheries where inhabitants find themselves between inclusion and exclusion, legality and illegality, order and disorder, ruled and unruled” (7). Ramirez posits that “[t]hese ambiguous spaces pose threats and demands and contest the relationship of their inhabitants to the central state, although they are legally intrinsic to the state and its constitution” (7). This broad theme pervades the book, remaining behind each assertion Ramirez makes about the conflicts between the citizens and the state, and leaves the reader with lasting questions after the lackluster conclusion of the government's inaction.

Ramirez's book was published in 2011, and while it provides an impactful ethnography of the cocalero movement, it left me with myriad questions as to what is happening in Putumayo today. I hope that Ramirez will return to add further chapters to the book, continuing following the cocalero journey. Ramirez does such justice to the cocalero story, I believe that this book offers a compassionate history of the Colombian Amazon worthwhile to anyone wanting to learn more about the War on Drugs and its effects on the Colombian people, or hoping to learn more about the inner dynamics of Colombia.

Alyx Eva
Vanderbilt University Law School, Class of 2019