

Review - Tranquilandia

Written by Winifred Tate

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WINIFRED TATE, JAN 8 2016

Tranquilandia

Directed by Joel Stangle

Tranquilandia was the name of one of the Medellín Cartel's largest ever drug lab complex, built in the early 1980s in the southern jungles of Caquetá, featuring its own airstrips for direct flights and producing thousands of kilos of cocaine. Its destruction in 1984 by a Colombian police raid backed by the DEA was featured in the fourth episode of the Netflix hit drug drama *Narcos*, only one of the ongoing parade of pop-culture productions focussing on Colombia's most notorious bad guy, Pablo Escobar.

This movie is not about that Tranquilandia. This Tranquilandia was a large farm on the Colombia's Atlantic coast; the film features the testimony of small farmers forced to flee from their plots within this farm because of the escalating counterinsurgency conflict.

The names given to the family's small plots are shown on screen in several slow pans of a map crossed with dotted lines delineating the limit of each plot. But it's the names of the plots that linger in the mind *La Esperanza* (hope), *La Union*, *La Gloria*, signaling the communal aspirations of these farmers.

The stories told here offer only the most general outline of Colombia's conflict: guerrillas who make promises they can't keep and increasingly repress the peasants they claim to represent; paramilitary gunmen working with the military who brutal kill, rape, and torture in the name of counterinsurgency; peasants who now struggle to live in the bustling urban periphery; efforts to return thwarted by massive agribusiness plantations.

The survivors recount their horrific stories while performing the labors of daily life: making coffee, preparing a turtle for dinner, sitting on the threshold of their wood homes, or touring their abandoned land. In some places, the land seems unchanged since their departure, as the one man finds the scattered bones, the remains of a neighbor killed for refusing to leave. In others, the landscape has been totally transformed by massive oil palm plantations, where some of the former farmers now find work as day laborers.

The film's meditative style is evident from the first moments of the film, in which the sounds of the jungle are played over a black screen. The first shots, filmed in black and white, are of a man running soil through his fingers as he tells us, "This land means everything to me, it means life." The strength of the film is in the intimate scenes bringing the viewer as a committed witness to the testimony of these survivors.

These farmers are not alone: their stories are the stories of millions of Colombians, most of them from rural areas, who have been forced to flee their homes and land over the past three decades.

However, the film's structure, focusing on shots of daily life while survivors narrate the loss of their land, highlights the film's two major flaws. First, the film offers little historic background or information that would help viewers make sense of the stories they hear. While a narrator provides some guidance, it is exceedingly general, for example describing events as happening after the "height of the violence," but offering no dates. In a region that has experienced numerous periodic waves of extreme violence, such reticence is confusing. Similarly, the narrator states

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that, “The United States and the Colombian government began a land distribution program, giving land for oil palm production to paramilitaries willing to disarm,” but doesn’t not explain the timeframe, or which government programs are involved.

Amnesty International’s 2014 report *A Land Title Is Not Enough: Ensuring Sustainable Land Restitution in Colombia* supplies much of the missing detail. (The report appears to have been produced in conjunction with the documentary, as it features director Joel Stangle’s photographs and many of the same testimonies). This report provides a detailed description of land rights issues, including the Victims’ and Land Restitution Law (*Ley de Víctimas y Restitución de Tierras*), Law 1448 of 2011: the flagship program of the Santos government which sets out procedures for reparations and land return for victims of violence in Colombia. In a section titled, “Land Claimants Speak Out,” the Amnesty report covers the history of the Tranquilandia families. This story begins with the approximately 4,500 hectares given in collective title to the 66 families in 1996, in part as a result of the guerrilla extortion of the land’s original owner. The displacement of the families by paramilitary violence, and the complexities of the land restitution process, which exposed the claimants to new violence, and in some cases has pitted neighbor against neighbor, is also covered.

Secondly, the relentless focus on testimony of suffering offers no glimpses into the equally impressive resilience—and even joy—of these communities. The scenes of daily life are entirely given to the recounting of horrors, which undeniably have an ongoing presence in the lives of those who survived them. However, the film lost an important opportunity to illuminate how these displaced farmers live in the present, and imagine—and organize—for the future. Research by myself and others with communities that have experienced similar violence reveals the multiple ways in which survivors rebuild their social bonds, the tremendous complexities of survivor stories, and the importance of portraying their world beyond the human rights narratives of suffering.

Despite these significant limitations, *Tranquilandia* is an important film for viewers who have only been introduced to Colombian violence through such depoliticized, gringo-centric shows as *Narcos*. By featuring the suffering of these small farmers, the film hopefully will prompt viewers to go beyond the customary clichés surrounding Colombian violence.

The film also offers a useful corrective to the Colombian success story. US pundits and policymakers have heralded US aid as bringing the country “Back from the Brink”, as the Center for Strategic and International Studies titled their 2007 report on the country. “Colombia is a model for the region,” Secretary of State John Kerry stated at his 2013 Senate confirmation hearing. “It is an example to the rest of Latin America about what awaits them if we can convince people to make better decisions”. The testimony presented in *Tranquilandia* fundamentally challenges this version of history, offering instead in chilling detail the human costs of counterinsurgency success.

About the author:

Winifred Tate is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Colby College, and the author of *Drugs, Thugs and Diplomats: US Policymaking in Colombia* (Stanford University 2015) and *Counting the Dead: The Culture and Politics of Human Rights in Colombia* (University of California 2007).