Our maps make us see the borders as punctuated, colored lines that demarcate countries, territories, provinces. The American geography was born out of a juxtaposition of conquest and borderlines. The so-called conquest was so sketchy, fortuitous and disorder that it can be remembered as a single event only through the maps and representations that tried to seal the gaps through which the unknown poured. Geographers from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries often disfigured their maps by tracing the Spanish and Portuguese colonies as if they were contiguous in all their points in the interior. Those maps should not be unfamiliar to us who, in the twentieth century, keep sewing bits and pieces of history and geography into the familiar molds of national, disciplinary and ethnic boundaries.

In this article I explore one of those gaps. My analysis uses the concept of “border” in a double sense, as signaled by Alvarez (1995), and criticized by Wilson and Donnan (1998): in a literal sense, as an evolving geopolitical border, and in a metaphorical sense “which focus on social boundaries on the geopolitical border and also on all behavior in general that involves contradictions, conflict and the shifting of identity” (Alvarez, 1995, p. 449). My focus starts from those literal lines of demarcation into those other shifting, less tangible borders that delimit savagery and civilization, reality and hallucination, nation-states and Tropical America.

In the first section, I approach a synthesis of the jurisdictional history of what we can call the Putumayo region, defined by the course of the Putumayo river, today’s borderline between Colombia and Peru. A no man’s land, visited by missionaries, explorers, adventurers and scientists of all sorts, ravaged by extractive interventions over the centuries and disputed on the paper by the colonial metropolies and by the national countries that grew out of them. It was the border conflict between Colombia and Peru in the 1930s that settled those disputes. This is what I explore in the second section of the
article: how this historical event on the border acts upon collective imagination helping to reshape those other borders between savagery and civilization. In the concluding section I explore the performative power of border conflict events – not necessarily the diplomatic or military events that a analytic historiography would select as relevant – in constituting borders, or, as it is argued, in making visible the real invisibility of red dotted borderlines – the constituting almost hallucinatory power of national common sense.

**Geopolitical background of the conflict**

The Putumayo region was located between the jurisdictions of the Viceroyalties of Peru and Nueva Granada during colonial times. It was part of the Corregimiento of Mocoa and of the Province of Sucumbíos, and depended in the last instance on the Audiencia of Quito, a civil and jurisdictional division of the Viceroyalty of Peru.¹ When the Viceroyalty of Nueva Granada was set up in 1740 by the Spanish Crown, the Provinces of Mainas, Quijos, and Sucumbíos (the three Amazonian provinces of the Jesuits) were included in the jurisdiction of Nueva Granada – as part of the Audiencia of Quito. Later, these provinces and others were formed into the Gobernación of Mainas (still part of the Audiencia of Quito). In 1802, the Spanish administration decided to segregate all the Mainas territories (Sucumbíos included) from Nueva Granada and annex them to the Viceroyalty of Peru (Porras, 1987; Santamaría, 1910).

This entangled jurisdictional history was the basis for a number of territorial disputes between the nations that grew out of the Spanish colonial dominions in the nineteenth century. Ecuador claimed all Mainas because it had been part of the former Audiencia of Quito; Peru asserted its rights on the basis that Mainas had been annexed to the Viceroyalty of Peru in 1802; Colombia argued that Quito had been part of the former Republic of Gran Colombia (which dissolved in 1830); and Brazil claimed *de facto* possession of vast portions of Mainas. These interconnected disputes were informed by the double-faced principle of *uti possidetis*: right of possession by law (*uti possidetis de jure*) and right of possession by occupation (*uti possidetis de facto*). Being a largely “unoccupied” region (that is, by Europeans and their descendants), it encouraged geopolitically aimed occupation enterprises, which kept shifting the national boundaries and renewing the disputes (Flores, 1921; Santamaría, 1910; Tambs, 1974).
In this scenario, the former Province of Sucumbíos (which largely coincides with the Putumayo region) was the most isolated of the provinces that formed the Gobernación of Mainas. This Gobernación was a legacy of the missionary activity of the Jesuits, although they never reached Sucumbíos (cf. Golob, 1982).

The Sucumbíos or Putumayo region has been generally associated with the Mainas region (located to the south in today Peruvian and Ecuadorian territories). But Sucumbíos was in the fringes of Mainas, and the historical contact with other regions to the north (the upper Magdalena valley) and to the west (the Mocoa region, in the upper Putumayo) are important to understand the processes that preceded the rubber boom. These connections have been documented by Friede (1947, 1953), Llanos and Pineda-Camacho (1982), and Pineda-Camacho (1985).

The rubber boom

During the first half of the nineteenth century there was a considerable reduction in the activities of both Luso-Brazilians and Spanish Creoles. Toward the middle of the nineteenth century a new wave of colonization appeared with quinine gatherers from Brazil and traders from the southern highlands of Colombia. This was the beginning of a new and aggressive cycle of intervention which would incorporate the indigenous peoples of this region into the market economy through debt-peonage, imposed by terror and violence. Official reports of the middle of the nineteenth century allude to the increasing exploitation of quinine in the Putumayo and Caquetá rivers by Colombians, Ecuadorians and Brazilians.

Macintosh’s and Goodyear’s discoveries of the procedures to harden rubber in 1839 and Dunlop’s invention of the rubber tire for bicycles in 1888 increased the international demand for this material (Hemming, 1987). Colombian rubber-gatherers were installed in the Igaraparaná and Caraparaná rivers at the beginning of the 1880s. It was easier for the Colombians to get their supplies and equipment in Peruvian and Brazilian territories. Since 1886 the Peruvian Hermanos Arana began to do business with Colombian rubber-gathering companies in the Putumayo District. These relationships became more important and by the end of the century the Arana brothers had taken over almost all the Colombian exploitations. The Aranas constituted the notorious Peruvian Amazon Rubber
Company, also known as Casa Arana, which raised capital of one million pounds in the London stock market in 1907. The systematic mistreatment of the Uitoto and the other groups of the Caquetá-Putumayo under the regime of Casa Arana was one of the most violent episodes in the history of the rubber boom in all of Amazonia, causing the extermination of whole tribes (Domínguez and Gómez, 1990, 1994).

The increasing expansion of Peruvian interests in Amazonia eventually led to a reaction from Colombia, represented in military and diplomatic actions during 1932-33. It concluded in the definition of a *statu quo*, with intervention of the now defunct League of Nations, by virtue of which Colombia kept Sucumbíos, and Peru the rest of Mainas (League of Nations, 1933). The rubber boom and the border conflict between Colombia and Peru are the founding events of the new nations’ intervention in the region.

From this set of documentary facts I now shift perspective into the constructions of collective imagination. Let us place ourselves in a Putumayo little town where by the late 1980s the Colombo-Peruvian conflict is recalled by an old Indian.

**The border conflict**

Pedrito lives in Puerto Leguízamo, a small town on the Colombian side of the Putumayo river (see map 1). He is an 80-year old Uitoto Indian, a heavy drinker who lives with his 17-year old wife and two babies. Most of all, Pedrito is known in Leguízamo as a veteran of the Colombo-Peruvian border conflict of 1932-33. There remain at least four veterans of that war alive in the whole Putumayo river; Pedrito is the only one who lives in Leguízamo and the only one who is an Indian. The Navy has even built him a house and given him a fixed pension as part of his veteran benefits. But some Indians say that during the war Pedrito simply was a carrier for the troops, a *tulero*, and that he was only 12 years old and not 30, as Pedrito has come to maintain. The truth little matters for public celebrity. For Leguizameños, Pedrito is a 100-year old veteran of the war with Peru and a maestro in the art of trading stories of the war for drinks of aguardiente; and, on top of that, he is a Uitoto Indian – *un huitoto*.

There is a certain prestige associated with having had something to do with that border conflict. The war marked the incorporation of the Putumayo basin into the rest of
Andean Colombia. The town of Puerto Leguízamo was in fact a product of the war. The Colombian Navy, which has a base there, is today the main source of jobs. It permits Leguízamo to be the last “civilized” town down the Putumayo – the last place where you can buy beer and soda before Brazil, 1,000 kms. downriver. Since the aftermath of the war Leguízamo has been a boom-and-bust town, serving as a port of transit for commodities extracted downriver and transported to ports connected to roads upriver. The war reversed the downriver flow of extracted commodities that had prevailed for centuries: traffic of Indian slaves towards Brazil in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, then quinine and rubber toward Iquitos in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Leguízamo is a sort of symbol of the Andean Creole culture in this part of the Amazon. From the air, the tiny town of 5,000 people appears surrounded by immense clearings where cows complete the cycle of soil destruction already initiated by people. Cattle and number of hectares cleared: that’s how colonos gauge the wealth of a fellow colono. But in the end these Boyacences, Santandereanos, Tolimenses, Antioqueños, who were expelled from el interior of the country by the political violence in the rural areas since the 1940s, will be expelled again by the increasing concentration of land to become employees, wood-cutters down the Putumayo, or perhaps growers of coca – the latest booming commodity. The biggest landowner, by the way, is the Colombian Navy.

Downriver from Leguízamo is Indian country, La Huitocia, the land of the Uitoto. Since 1988 all that territory became an Indian resguardo, the so-called Predio Putumayo, which grants Indians the ownership of the whole middle Putumayo basin, including the urban area of Puerto Leguízamo. The whole Predio Putumayo was the rubber concession of the Peruvian company Casa Arana up to the 1920s, right before the border conflict. The conflict expelled Casa Arana up to the north of the Putumayo. What for fifty years had been “The Devil’s Paradise” – in the words of Hardenburg, a gringo inocente who had the mishap of getting captured by those Indian-torturers, Spanish American devils of Casa Arana – came to be incorporated into the map of Colombia. After the hostilities, the Colombian Navy undertook the task of resettling back the Indians that had been settled in the Peruvian band of the river by the fleeing rubber patrons. Capuchin missionaries were then brought in to care for “the orphans” and give them Christian education.
For most settlements one finds today along the Putumayo river and its main tributaries, the Colombo-Peruvian conflict is a founding event. The old patrilocal clans were scattered and reshuffled in all that settling and resettling, and the Uitoto became riverine people, living around the Capuchin schools, the new Colombian civil authorities, or in pluri-clanic communities they managed to rally and maintain fairly independent from the civilizing agents. In all three cases, however, their incorporation into commodity extraction and consumption already had been initiated by rubber barons through the system of debt-peonage. These same relations – clientelism and debt-peonage – were later reproduced during the fur boom, in the 1950s, and the coca boom, from the 1970s on.

But, as with Pedrito in Puerto Leguízamo, hard facts seem to be less important than imagination to understand what a war can mean for the construction of national and regional identities. Likewise, in this writing I will go up and down the Putumayo river, from the ministry of war to the front, from the ground to cruise altitude, from hallucination to military history, not so much to sort out the “truth” about the war but rather to bring about new meanings by contrasting and superimposing heterogeneous fragments.

Soldier’s vision from the ground and from the air

General Uribe-Gaviria, the Colombian Minister of War during the conflict, provides us an aerial view of the “theater of operations” to start with, in his book *La verdad sobre la guerra* (The Truth About the War). Looking through the window of his military hydroplane, while flying high over the Putumayo jungle, the General contemplates the desolation of those regions, the impenetrability of a thick and aggressive jungle where the sight never reaches beyond the deceiving surface formed by millions of trees, with their upper branches always the same, in a monotony only interrupted once in a while by the turbid rivers running slowly, making continuous and forced bends, like those traced by a slithering snake . . . the black palm groves or the small ponds of waters in permanent decomposition, because in them animals and plants get rotten so that other creatures may live (Uribe-Gaviria, 1935, vol. I, p. 92, my translation).

The living mess General Uribe contemplates from his airplane seat is the same environment in which the everyday experience of the soldiers at the front takes place. For
Sergeant Jorge Tobón-Restrepo, more than decomposing animals and plants the jungle also decomposes and blurs national boundaries. Thirty years after the facts he remembers the moment when he saw the Putumayo river – the dividing line with “the enemy” – for the first time:

On the other shore the jungle, green and identical to the one we had seen everywhere. But that was Peru! “One of the Troop” [the author] watched fixedly as if he’d been alerted, “Enemy on sight!”; and he wanted to see something different from the Colombian soil on which he stood, but he saw nothing. Everything was the same. And he wondered whether the soldiers on the other side were the same too, as the land of all was the same.

– What’s a citizen of the world, Captain Restrepo?
But Restrepo was galloping fast and wouldn’t hear him (Tobón-Restrepo, 1965, pp. 33-34, my translation).

The whole point of Tobón-Restrepo’s book is to show the miseries of the soldiers serving in a far frontier, sick, poorly supplied and prey to a corrupt officialdom. He quarrels with the Bogotanos who, he says, discriminate against Antioqueños (like Tobón-Restrepo) and Costeños. Although Tobón-Restrepo has qualifications to be an officer, he is only granted sub-officer grade because “his last name sounded too Antioqueño”:

[The thing] is that at that time Bogotá, the absorbing city, . . . that wants to centralize even patriotism, . . . wanted its acolytes to be the ones commanding the men from the provinces, and because of that made these corporals and sergeants while those of its own [Bogotanos] only wanted to be “Señores Oficiales” (ibid., p. 19, my translation).

Although Tobón-Restrepo postures as an illustrated man from the provinces criticizing an unjust system from the bottom up, his impressions from the ground agree remarkably with General Uribe-Gaviria’s putrid visions from the sky. What the General thinks about natural processes, Sergeant Tobón-Restrepo sees in society, and he passes it on to us in rapid and succinct sentences:

The Indians of those places, sick and lazy, never work (ibid., p. 132, my translation).
And after dwelling on describing the “filthy stuff” they eat and telling us how Indians basically spend their time sleeping and fornicating in their hammocks – in a fashion that recalls the decomposing lakes and slithering snakes of General Uribe – the Sergeant concludes:

The human material of the Putumayo is so degenerate that it’d be better if nature annihilated it (ibid., my translation).

Indian’s vision

In contrast to the soldier’s vision of the Indian as degenerate, the Indian’s vision of the soldier is redeeming. This image is clear in the culminating passage of a story that Florencio, an old Ingano Indian from Putumayo, told to Michael Taussig when asked about “his most memorable yagé vision”:  

Then, finally, emerges a battalion of the army. How wonderful! How it enchants me to see that! I’m not sure how the rich dress, no? But the soldiers of the battalion are much superior in their dress to anybody! They wear pants, and boots to the knee of pure gold, all in gold, everything. They are armed, and they form up. And I try to raise myself . . . so that I too can sing with them, and dance with them, me too. Then, the shaman . . . with the painting, he already knows that I am trying to get up to go there, to sing and to dance with them just as we are seeing. And then, he who gives the yagé [i.e. the shaman], he already knows, and he is quiet, knowing, no? Thus, those who know how to heal are given account. Seeing this, they are able to cure, no? And they pass this painting to the sick person. And he gets better! And I said to the shaman who was curing me, I said to him, “Seeing this, you know how to heal?” “Yes,” he told me, “thus seeing, one can cure, no?” (Taussig, 1987, p. 323, his emphasis).

The marching soldiers will lead Florencio to a house in a city “of immense beauty with no garbage – no garbage at all, nothing, nothing,” (ibid.) a house full of books – “nothing but books, that were spewing forth gold, no?” (ibid., p. 324) – covered with crosses, where he is going to be given blessing and a staff by three men sitting at a table. In Florencio’s vision, the marching troops become the crucial step toward fully acquiring the power to heal (blessing, staff), and the knowledge to do so (books, crosses).
It is hard to imagine Colombian soldiers dressing in the fashion of Florencio’s vision. This is how Sergeant Tobón-Restrepo remembers a group of soldiers just arrived to the front:

They got off the trucks and formed up in thorough order.
Everybody came to see them. They didn’t look like soldiers except for their discipline. In a different group they’d have been taken for beggars, with clothes dirty and torn which spoke of the miseries of the trip (Tobón-Restrepo, 1965, p. 77, my translation).

And he also remembers:

And the reserve officers arrived. Handsome and elegant, clean and wearing gloves.
They contrasted ridiculously with the rainy environment and the muddy trails of Caucayá [today Puerto Leguízamo]. They walked in the tip of their toes not to soil their boots, and talked honeyedly to the Colonel so he’d send them by plane to their respective destinations in the frontier (ibid., p. 81, my translation).

The soldiers he mentions are Costeños (blacks from the Caribbean coast), and the nicely dressed officers are Bogotanos.

The Peruvian soldiers wore a yellow gala uniform that would fit better within Florencio’s vision, although Sergeant Tobón is far from being as enchanted with them as Florencio was with the vision’s soldiers:

Next day in the morning the Peruvian soldiers arrived.

They wore yellow breeches and shirt, ribbon tubes, black shoes, and a hat, also yellow.

Some were tall but slim. All pale and perfect examples of the degenerate specimen that comes out of the interbreeding of Indians and mestizos.

When passing in front of the Colombian Sergeant [the Peruvian commander] told him:
– The peace was signed.
The Sergeant was sitting. Disparagingly he put his hand on his hat and didn’t answer.
– Cholo⁵ son-of-a-bitch, there will be peace between us when Peru no longer exist, he meditated (ibid., p. 166, my translation).

Cándido Leguízamo

Let’s go back to Puerto Leguízamo, where Pedrito has also managed to find a sort of redeeming value for the war. (Some say that Pedrito has become a buffoon of the Navy, holding Indian dances in a rundown maloca that Navy officers asked him to build near town so that their wives, children and other visitors can have a handy place to witness authentic “Indian customs.”) Puerto Leguízamo took its name from Soldier Cándido Leguízamo, the Colombian hero and martyr of this conflict. I will juxtapose three version of Cándido Leguízamo’s death, ranging from dithyramb to irony – somehow reflecting the contradictory images and memories associated with the identities of Creole Andeans in the Amazon, and Indians living on the fringes of civilization.

In the first version of that story, General Uribe-Gaviria does not spare words to enthrone Leguízamo and transubstantiate his corpse into a sacrificial offering on the Fatherland’s altar:

Cándido Leguízamo, who admirably personifies the Colombian people, showed all the virile fiber, the boldness, the abnegation and, in sum, all the virtues a soldier of the best could and should have. His bronze – which should not take long to be erected – will be the best homage that the people of Colombia will perpetually pay to his memory and to that of all his comrades in arms, hardships and sacrifices, unselfishly lavished on the altar of the Fatherland, of our beloved Colombian fatherland (Uribe-Gaviria, 1935, vol. II, p. 25, my translation).

The second version is by Colombian journalist Antolín Diaz,⁶ who reports on Leguízamo’s death in his book Lo que nadie sabe de la guerra (What Nobody Knows About the War):

“Surprise of Pubenza” – Leguízamo, Hero and Martyr. Our brothers in love and freedom willed, by noble oblation of sacrifice, to bequeath by their sufferings a magnificent jewel of honor to those of us who, after the hecatomb, survived without our palms and soles having been sunk into martyrdom, without our temples having been crowned with thorns. In the uproar of machine guns, Cándido Leguízamo was one of the first to fall in
glorious defeat. He belonged to Lt. Carlos Ayerbe Arboleda when “El Encanto” had only 18 men (Diaz, in Pereira-Vela, 1959, pp. 24-25, my translation).

The final version comes from Sergeant Tobón-Restrepo’s account, in which Leguízamo appears to have been killed by Colombian fire. It was not exactly the Fatherland but a bunch of plantains he got killed for.

This scarcity of provisions was the origin of the wounds that caused the death of Leguízamo in “Pubenza” . . .

In front of “Pubenza” there exists a chacra or garden, abandoned by a Peruvian because of the conflict.

Within the fallow that inundated it, a plantain tree emerged in the distance, loaded with a sickly and discolored raceme.

Leguízamo and two comrades went to get those plantains, but instead he found the Peruvians and faced them. At the sound of gunshots the Colombian soldiers of the “Pubenza” garrison started machine-gun fire from the other shore, making the Peruvians flee but unfortunately shooting several projectiles into the body of the martyr Leguízamo (Tobón-Restrepo, 1965, p. 115, my translation).

* * *

My version of the Colombo-Peruvian war is a rather heterodox one when compared with the more official versions contained in the documents of the League of Nations (1933), in General Uribe-Gaviria’s (1935) book, in Peruvian Tte. Crl. Zárate-Lezcano’s (1965) book Historia militar del conflicto con Colombia 1932, or in Luis Cano’s (1936) editorials in the Colombian newspaper El Espectador, just to mention a selection of the available sources. I have put all these sources aside not because they are not interesting documents but just simply because they would take us out of the Putumayo region into new sorts of problems.

Of these official sources, it is General Uribe-Gaviria’s book which gets closer to the ground, which he gets to contemplate from his hydroplane window. General Uribe-Gaviria and Sergeant Tobón-Restrepo, although in opposed positions within the military pyramid, provide us with concurring images of the jungle and the Indians as disorderly, deceiving, degenerate, chaotic. These same images, I believe, are deeply seated in the
imagination of the Creole culture that settles in places like Puerto Leguízamo, bordering the savages’ country.

For Creoles, the corpse of Leguízamo – “who admirably personifies the Colombian people” – is the only redeeming image of that war, either as a magnificent offering on the Fatherland’s altar or, better yet, as an unfortunate accident when gathering stuff for dinner. If not in bronze, as General Uribe would have liked, Leguízamo got immortalized in the name of that tiny town where Pedrito holds a de facto claim to Leguízamo’s glory.

Florencio’s vision of the marching army in golden uniforms leads to his acquisition of the power to heal: “thus seeing one can cure, no?” The orderly procession of symbols of civilization – uniforms, streets, books, crosses, gold, staff, table – lays in the foundation of Florencio’s identity as Indian healer. In turn, the Amazonian Creoles (“los racionales”) imagine themselves as opposed to the chaos of the jungle and the savagery of the Indian.

Making visible the invisible

A border conflict is an event that stresses the borders represented as red dotted lines – invisible but present. Just like Sergeant Tobón-Restrepo standing by the Putumayo river watches the other shore, Peru!, and sees while not seeing that line that so crucially and invisibly divides the two countries – and he wonders whether the soldiers on the other side were the same, as the land of all was the same.

The invisible reality of political borders is something that has to be learned, and border conflicts are excellent workshops, so to speak, powerful stages to enact the realities of the unreal of the borderline – borderlines so thin and complete, geometrical polygon fully stretching without thickness. A lesson of elementary school: a straight line is a one-dimensional continuum of points with no thickness. But the fantastic – almost hallucinatory – training of geometrical common sense goes a step further to bring up the notion of a fully closed polygon, without a single gap. One notices that what presses against the borderline is the no less unreal reality of “the country”: Colombia – Peru. The invisible reality of the line is what makes perceptible the two steps removed invisibility of the grandest of real fictions: our beloved Nation. It seems that one has to get to the border
to get a sense of its material immateriality. Far from the borders, in the center of the polygon, the nation is lived through those rituals of imagined (sensu Anderson, 1983) commonalities. But it is precisely where the commoner experiences the end of the common bond (inescapable as its polygonal reality leaves no single gap) that the vaguely, just lived through, commonality becomes quite invisibly real. “The dividing line with the Enemy” – it is the enhancing power of the border conflict what closes and secures that polygon, where before had been negligently left astray. For centuries of Iberian nominal possession, Uitoto, Quechua-speakers, Jesuits, quina traders – just as peccaries and birds – crossed back and forth the Putumayo stream, not being very certain (or not caring at all) of national certainties.

Peccaries and missionaries would just be worried, for example, about the most suitable place to cross – Indians would certainly just go through, following older treads. But it is “the war” what helps to construct the line: Halt! Upon crossing there is danger; now there is a change, although one, most surely, will not perceive anything at all.

Sergeant Tobon-Restrepo watches the same high forest, just the same land, over the placid waters, but the line now – as he is a soldier – is firmly set, clearly felt, perceived. He is a Colombian, he will despise Peruvian cholos even more than Bogotanos. Candido Leguízamo, another soldier, also watches over the Putumayo stream, some 400 kilometers downriver, and it is now his hunger what definitely blurs the real unreality of the line that his uniform scarcely upholds. He crosses, just like a peccary, in search of the really real (no matter how squalid and discolored) raceme of plantains.

The blood of Leguízamo does indeed drew very neatly that red dotted line that still wanted to remain open to the whims of peccaries and Indians, and of hungry soldiers in the forlorn “frontier”. Leguízamo in his death learned that he was at the border of Colombia, not in the middle of the Putumayo stream. To stress its certainty, General Uribe makes it a natural consequence that his bronze should not take long to be erected. If not in bronze, Leguízamo stayed in that tiny town where Pedrito – a Uitoto, an Auca, the savagest of savages – got willingly tamed into the ceremonies of military liturgy – with its inebriating power of uniforms, parades and gunships.
This inebriating power that Pedrito relives in memories washed in aguardiente and celebrates in rundown malocas for the tourists, Florencio, the Ingano old man, has turned into healing power. The savagery of the Putumayo jungle that General Uribe contemplates from the window of his military hydroplane – that savagery, that rebellious postures against the master tropes of sociological narrative would like to contrapose to the strictures of power and constraint – suddenly collides with the most achieved pinta of the fantastic geometrical polygon: an Army marching in golden uniforms. Almost in the form of a hexagonal crystal rock – that anthropologist Gerardo Reichel Dolmatoff would describe as the form of the cosmos for the border-less, nation-less true Amerindian Desana shamans of Vaupes – Florencio returns to us the most anti-savage of images as the source of his really true Amerindian power to heal.

Almost a fake conflict, the border conflict of 1932-33 was a pedagogical event, if I am allowed to say so – a constructive force that makes visible the invisible and endows it with the hallucinatory power of polygonal common sense.

That such borderlines have to be learnt, in a process analogous to shamanic initiation (the power to see the invisible) was made apparent to me – studious young man who loved to watch the map of Colombia: each departamento a colored polygon and the clear-cut borders separating Colombia from the whitish nothingness of Peru, Brazil, Venezuela – by an Indian man from another river – uncultivated of border experiences – upon watching on a map the limits of their newly constituted Resguardo – a large tract of land “granted” to them from the governmental offices in Bogota. (My use of underlines and quotes deserves an explanation, because it is the lack of any border conflict what empties the meaning of the underlined words: their – was it not already theirs? Only an encroaching Other would make the land visibly theirs – and constituted – the poor reality of this unreal “constitution” is precisely the point I want to get at. And the quoted “granted” is doubly unreal by the combined effect of the underlined two.) The skilled eye of the forest wandering hunter had no trouble in recognizing the bends and courses of the rivers and the shapes of the land mapped onto the bi-dimensionally scaled, remotely sensed, paper representation of the familiar land. What caught his eye was indeed the all too unfamiliar
red dotted line demarcating the newly constituted Resguardo. “And what is that?” All too simple, this is what the Government of Colombia “granted” to your people.

A few weeks later the not-lazy-at-all man, upon having decided to check by himself the reality of the unreal returned to me with a wholly disappointed face: “You are a lier!”

What happened? “The government granted nothing to us, I went to check and I found no red dotted line at all.”

No common sense at all, wars and border conflicts do make common sense of the invisible red dotted lines. Like those imaginary lines that made to coincide the Spanish and Portuguese dominions in sixteenth century maps went unnoticed to peccaries and Indians, the gaps where the unknown poured were made to seal with dead bodies – hopefully transfigured in bronze or, no less important, in names of towns or aguardiente stories. Or still inconceivably so in healing visions of yagé that instead of returning the familiar savage naturalness of peccaries or anacondas, mirror the crystal rock Amerindian magic in the form of an Army in golden uniforms – marching.

The Colombo-Peruvian border conflict of 1932-33 was one of the last events that closed the gaps of Tropical America. Once the borders are sealed, we can think of them as lines that “do not divide but also unite” – diplomatic, trading spaces of flowing commonalities. Certainly the borders unite – unite into the fantastic common sense of hallucinatory polygonal unreality. Closed the gap, the unknown recedes into unmapped, unknowable territories.

Notes

1Viceroyalties (Virreinatos) were the largest administrative units of Spanish government in America. Audiencias were advisory and judicial boards composed of Crown lawyers, which also had administrative functions; each viceroyalty was divided in several Audiencia jurisdictions. Gobernaciones were political units within an Audiencia, and Corregimientos were political units within a Gobernación. Provinces (Provincias), on the other hand, were religious jurisdictions which could be coterminous or not with political jurisdictions (Golob, 1982).
Ann Golob's (1982) research on the missionary activity of the Jesuits in the region of Mainas (between the seventeenth century and the time of their expulsion from the Spanish territories in the eighteenth century) shows how it generated a situation of war which reshaped relations between human groups, altered the demography of the region, and had repercussions on regions outside Mainas itself. She also remarks that lack of historical information has made anthropologists believe that cultures found in that region in the twentieth century are “pristine savages,” or “traditional societies.” As an example of this, she cites Michael Harner's monograph on the Jivaro.

The “rubber” extracted from the Caquetá-Putumayo was the one known as *siringa fraca* or *jebe débil*: “rubber of *Hevea* that tends to lose more weight than the true *siringa* and, for that reason, has less value in the market. Furthermore, its extraction is more difficult” (Domínguez and Gómez, 1990, p. 93). The true *siringa*, which drew the best prices in the market, is extracted from *Hevea brasiliensis* and its variety *acreana*. *Jebe débil* is extracted from *Hevea guianensis*, its variety *lutea*, and from *Hevea benthamiana*, which grow in the Caquetá-Putumayo region. These *siringas* are different from *caucho* (black rubber), the lowest priced rubber, which is extracted from several species of *Castilloa* and require felling the trees to extract the latex (see Domínguez and Gómez, 1990, for a complete discussion of the kinds of “rubber” extracted from Amazonia, their distribution, and the different methods of their extraction.)

*Yagé* is a hallucinogenic vine (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) used by several Indian groups in the upper Amazon.

*Cholo*: person of mixed blood. In Colombia, this term designates generally the people from Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia.

Antolín Diaz was a leftist journalist, critical writer, and member of the Communist party in the 1930s.
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