

# The Future Arrives Every 45 Days: Temporal Imaginaries and the Coca Assemblage in Sierra de la Macarena, Colombia

*El futuro nace cada 45 días: imaginarios temporales y el ensamblaje de la coca en la Sierra de la Macarena, Colombia*

*O futuro chega a cada 45 dias: imaginários temporais e a ensamblagem da coca na Sierra de la Macarena, Colômbia*

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## Abstract

This article explores the relationship between plants and the emergence of future imaginaries by addressing the role of the coca plant in shaping the temporal experiences of coca growers in Sierra de la Macarena, Colombia. In contrast to perspectives that interpret this activity merely as a survival strategy or profit-driven endeavor, the article highlights how the future—both as a temporality and a political project—is reimagined through the affective, economic, and prospective affordances that the plant offers in territories historically marked by political violence and precarious conditions. To support this argument, the paper examines coca assemblages and the affective encounters they generate during times of prosperity, war, and uncertainty. In conclusion, it is suggested that “illegal” economies, instead of being understood merely as criminal issues, should be viewed as a conflict between different temporal regimes and future imaginaries.

**Keywords:** temporality, assemblages, affects, coca economy, Colombia

## Resumen

Este artículo considera la relación entre las plantas y la emergencia de imaginarios futuros, al abordar el papel de la planta de coca en las experiencias temporales de sus cultivadores en la Sierra de la Macarena, Colombia. En contraste con las perspectivas que interpretan esta actividad únicamente como un medio de subsistencia o una estrategia orientada a la maximización económica, el artículo destaca cómo el futuro —como temporalidad y como proyecto político— es reimaginado a través de las posibilidades afectivas, económicas y prospectivas que la planta ofrece en territorios históricamente marcados por la violencia política y la precarización. Para respaldar este argumento, se examinan los ensamblajes y encuentros afectivos que la coca genera durante periodos de prosperidad, guerra e incertidumbre. En conclusión, se sugiere que las economías “ilegales”, en lugar de ser entendidas únicamente como un problema criminal, deben ser vistas como un conflicto entre diferentes regímenes temporales e imaginarios futuros.

**Palabras clave:** temporalidad, ensamblajes, afectos, economía cocalera, Colombia

## Resumo

Este artigo considera a relação entre as plantas e a emergência de imaginários futuros ao abordar o papel da planta de coca nas experiências temporais de seus cultivadores na Sierra de la Macarena, Colômbia. Em oposição às perspectivas que interpretam essa atividade apenas como uma estratégia de subsistência ou de maximização econômica o artigo destaca como o futuro —enquanto temporalidade e enquanto projeto político— é reimaginado por meio das possibilidades afetivas, econômicas e prospectivas que a planta oferece em territórios historicamente marcados pela violência política e pela precarização. Para apoiar esse argumento, o artigo examina as ensamblagens e os encontros afetivos que a coca produz durante períodos de prosperidade, guerra e incerteza. Em conclusão, sugere-se que as economias “ilegais”, em vez de serem entendidas apenas como um problema criminal, devem ser vistas como um conflito entre diferentes regimes temporais e imaginários futuros.

**Palavras-chave:** temporalidade, ensamblagens, afetos, economia da coca, Colômbia

## Introduction

Pedro, a small storekeeper in Sierra de la Macarena, Colombia, watches the empty streets and shops with concern from his hammock. Just a year ago, the village center was alive with bustling businesses, loud music, and children running through the park. Now, only the wind rushing through the trees disturbs the heavy silence. The anguish on Pedro's face foretells desperate times: “Everything seems to be falling apart. Here, the future comes and goes with the coca plant,” he declares. As he intertwines his fingers, he tells me that for the past year, the coca market has

been in crisis<sup>1</sup>: “There are no buyers. Some say it’s because of the increase in fentanyl consumption in the United States; others say it’s due to the departure of the guerrilla<sup>2</sup>. Is our miracle coming to an end?” (personal conversation, June 2023).

His concern, as he would later explain to me, was not only related to the drop in prices of coca paste but, more importantly, to the shutting down of the future imaginaries that the coca plant allowed him to envision:

It might sound contradictory, but coca has sustained our hope; we grow alongside it. Thanks to it, we have not only managed to buy land or livestock, but it has also allowed us to stay in the territory and plant ourselves there. (Pedro, personal conversation, June 2023)

This growth—as Pedro mentioned—is not merely metaphorical; in these good-life fantasies related to social mobility, wealth, and comfort, the future is portrayed as an attainable desire through its entanglement with the coca plant’s temporality.

Compared to other crops—like corn, plantains, or cassava—the coca plant needs only eight months to reach maturity, and its leaves can be harvested every 45 days, even in poor soil conditions<sup>3</sup>. Coca’s fast-growing pace and environmental adaptability make it an ideal cash crop in territories historically marginalized from

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- 1 According to the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), since 2022, buyers of coca leaves and coca paste have stopped coming to rural areas, which led to the collapse of Colombia’s coca market in 2023. For instance, in Nariño—located in the southwest of the country—the price of coca leaves dropped from around US\$20 to approximately US\$7. Overall, WOLA reports that the price of coca leaves has fallen by 30% to 40% within a year, leaving over 200,000 households that rely on this activity in economic hardship (Isacson 2023).
  - 2 In the Sierra de la Macarena region, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) were the dominant non-state armed group until the 2016 peace agreement with the Colombian government. Since then, various dissident factions, such as Estado Mayor Central and Segunda Marquetalia, have emerged. According to the *Global Report on Cocaine 2023* by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the fragmentation of the criminal landscape has resulted in a more competitive, diverse, and compartmentalized “free market,” which has negatively impacted the cocaine economy (UNODOC 2023).
  - 3 In the region, there are different varieties of the coca plant: *tingo*, *caturra*, and *dulce*. According to the coca workers, each variety has its own distinct growth and production rhythms. *Tingo* and *caturra*, for instance, take between 9 and 12 months to grow and can be harvested every 3 months. *Dulce*, on the other hand, can be harvested every 45 days. These variations are the result of selective breeding processes aimed at increasing the coca plant’s resistance to poor soils and chemicals like glyphosate, while also enhancing its production efficiency.

commercial networks and with limited access to public services. In that sense, as a labor-intensive and small tenant economy, coca growing is a form of social security and a risk-spreading strategy, allowing people to save money, expand their property, and face economic price fluctuations in vulnerable agrarian contexts (Acero and Thompson 2021; Gutiérrez-Sanín 2021).

However, as social life becomes intertwined with the life cycles of the coca plant, labor, gender, and political dynamics shift, transforming this activity into more than just a means of survival or a profit-maximizing strategy. Through the economic independence provided by the plant, coca growers have been able to reinforce their hope and redefine how the future—understood both as a temporal and political project—is imagined and represented. To examine this relationship between plants and the emergence of future imaginaries, I will address the role of the coca plant and the coca economy in the everyday lives of coca growers in the Sierra de la Macarena, Colombia, drawing on my fieldwork experience in the region since 2014. Specifically, I will explore how these human and non-human<sup>4</sup> relationships shape experiences and perceptions of temporality, using the concepts of *assemblages*, *affective encounters*, and *temporal orientations*.

Inspired by the work of Jonathan Goodhand and Adam Pain (2022) on the life-worlds of the opium poppy in Afghanistan, I define *assemblages* as the interweaving of diverse elements (social, material, and affective), actors (plants, humans, institutions, processes), and forces through which new connections, encounters, and material transformations emerge in everyday life. This concept initially allows us to recognize agency as a distributed force, created, maintained, and sustained through relationships between heterogeneous entities that are in constant flux. Agency, then, does not reside solely in human “subjects” or non-human “objects,” but rather in the multiple and heterogeneous ways they come together (Latour 2005).

Following this line of thought, I also examine human-plant relationships within the coca assemblage as effective. These networks do not exist “without the passions the assemblage brings into play, without the desires that constitute it as much as it constitutes them” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 399). In this sense, affect—whether reactive or active, implicit or expressed—is a force that emerges alongside the assemblage, rather than because of it. To grasp this complexity, I draw on the

4 As Edwin Sayes (2013) explains, the term *non-human* refers to entities such as objects, animals, natural phenomena, technical artifacts, and material structures, among others. Under this broad term, scholars in Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and Science and Technology Studies (STS) highlight the role of non-humans as mediators, members of moral and political associations, and actors within various temporal and spatial orders.

concept of *affective encounters* (Archambault 2016), which are understood as experiences and interactions between human and non-human beings capable of provoking, unsettling, or inspiring changes within specific assemblages. These changes, in turn, reshape the social, environmental, and political relations of particular historical contexts. Through this perspective, assemblages can be understood as both territorialized and temporal, as a body's capacity to desire must always be situated.

Finally, to ethnographically address the future and explore how plants are involved in future-making projects, I will use the concept of *temporal orientations*. This concept refers to the various ways in which the future is envisioned in the present and how these representations shape temporal cognition and temporalization processes (Bryant and Knight 2019). It also explores how different social and political structures reshape imaginings, narratives, and styles of articulating the future (McGovern 2017), as well as how particular visions influence actors, perceived and actual agency (Edelstein, Geroulanos, and Wheatley 2020). Considering the future from this perspective highlights how particular orderings of time emerge in relation to power and politics, and how individuals navigate conflicting temporal regimes and prophecies.

Based on this analytical framework, the paper is organized as follows: The first section describes the Sierra de la Macarena and provides an overview of the emergence and expansion of the coca economy in the region, along with its political and social consequences. Next, the paper examines coca assemblages and the affective encounters they generate during times of prosperity, war, and uncertainty. Specifically, I focus on the rise of the coca boom (1970-1980), the consolidation of the war on drugs (1990-2020), and the slowdown of the coca economy (2021-2024). The final section explores the temporal orientations that the coca plant has sustained over time and how these layered, intergenerational imaginaries shape the experience of temporality. In conclusion, I suggest that “illegal” economies, rather than being understood solely as a criminal issue, should be seen as a conflict between different temporal regimes and future imaginaries.

## “La necesidad hace al diablo”<sup>5</sup>: The Arrival of the Coca Plant in the Andean-Amazon Piedmont

When I first met Hilario nearly six years ago, he was a small coca grower hesitant to participate in the Comprehensive National Crop Substitution Program (PNIS),

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5 “Needs must when the devil drives” is a saying in Spanish that refers to morally wrong actions committed because the opportunity presents itself.

established as part of the peace agreement signed between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2016. The goal of PNIS, according to the Presidential Council for Post-Conflict, is to overcome conditions of poverty and marginalization in communities affected by illicit crops by promoting voluntary substitution and creating productive opportunities in underdeveloped territories<sup>6</sup>. As Hilario explained,

If you are willing to join, you might receive cash compensation to invest in a productive plan in exchange for eradicating your coca crops. You can even start a pineapple or coffee cultivation, and after that, everything would be sunshine and rainbows [laughs].<sup>7</sup> (Personal conversation, July 2018)

Hilario's skepticism reflects a broader sentiment among some small farmers who view the program as yet another empty promise, based on their previous experiences. Ovidio, a coca grower since the boom of the 1980s, shared his perspective:

I've been living here for the past 40 years, and in that time, I've witnessed dozens of strategies trying to transform this place. But let me tell you something, the peace they preach (the Colombian government) is just another way to make war. To them, we are just criminals, or at best, environmental threats. (Personal conversation, June 2023)

Hilario's and Ovidio's suspicions are rooted in the historical configuration of the region and the ways the Colombian government has sought to make the territory and its population legible over time. As Margarita Serje (2005) notes, frontiers and peripheries have been incorporated into the state's political and geographical order through a set of metaphors that transform them into *heterotopias*, or places that exist in connection with other sites, but in such a way that they negate or

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6 The PNIS is currently being implemented in 14 departments: Antioquia, Arauca, Bolívar, Caquetá, Cauca, Córdoba, Guainía, Guaviare, Meta, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Putumayo, Valle del Cauca, and Vichada.

7 The program operates on three levels: structural, communal, and individual. At the individual level, coca farmers who commit to voluntary eradication receive cash compensation during the first year, followed by an investment in a small productive project in the second year. The total amount provided is 36 million pesos, or approximately US\$12,000. According to the Agency for Territorial Renovation (ART) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), as of July 2022, 99,097 families across 14 departments are enrolled in the program (UNODC 2023; UNODC and ART 2022).

invert the relations they mirror or reflect. Sierra de la Macarena, for instance, has been depicted in national imaginaries both as a lawless region where violence is inherent and as a promised land where fortune awaits those brave enough to confront the jungle.

These imaginaries emerged through the consolidation of state-sanctioned representations that depicted the inhabitants of the region in relation to environmental degradation, political violence, and illegal economies. To understand these representations, and how this territory has been constructed as *the other side of the nation* (Serje 2005), it is important to note that Sierra de la Macarena gained prominence in Colombian state discourse following its recognition as a Biological Heritage of Humanity in 1933 and its designation as a Biological Reserve in 1948. These legal frameworks aimed to protect areas of biological wealth and foster research, making the region a focal point for scientific and academic expeditions led by institutions such as The Shell Company (1937), the American Museum of Natural History (1941), the National University of Colombia (1949-1950), and the University of California (1950-1951), among others (Ruiz Serna 2003).

However, as partisan rivalries between the country's two traditional political parties—Liberal and Conservative—triggered social, political, economic, and religious conflicts, thousands of peasant families were forcibly displaced from their homes. This displacement led to mass migration from the Andean regions to the southern territories (Pécaut [1989] 2012). This period, known as *la Violencia* (1946-1958)<sup>8</sup>, marked the beginning of continuous settlement in the so-called *agrarian frontiers*, particularly by peasants labeled as communist or liberals, who were persecuted by the Colombian state due to their involvement in political and community organizations such as agrarian unions and self-defense peasant groups.

Under these circumstances, Sierra de la Macarena quickly became a refuge for disenfranchised and dispossessed communities, offering available land and distance from political violence. According to regional oral history, these early settlers were unaware of the legal status of the land until they faced interventions by military and environmental authorities, who labeled them as invaders. In this context, Daniel Ruiz Serna (2003) argues that the designation of Sierra de

8 As Norman Bailey (1967) points out, the exact statistical measurement of the *Violencia* is challenging due to the destruction of records. However, it is estimated that at least 200,000 Colombians, primarily peasants, were killed, and at least twenty percent of the total population was directly affected. In Tolima alone, for instance, 8,000 people fled the department, and at least 34,730 farms were abandoned.

la Macarena as a reserve—and later as a National Natural Park<sup>9</sup>—imposed an illegal status on the communities living there, legitimizing both the militarization of social life and the lack of economic and infrastructural support. These practices persisted despite government-led colonization initiatives in the 1950s and 1960s, which sought to bypass redistributive land reforms by shifting land conflicts to “empty” frontier areas (LeGrand 1986)<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, as these institutional measures failed to address peasant demands, land disputes and political violence intensified in other refuge zones<sup>11</sup>. Consequently, self-defense peasant groups evolved into liberal and communist guerrilla movements, aimed at countering violence while also serving as platforms for collective action (CNMH 2014).

In this context, the FARC was founded in 1964 and became a refuge for those who shared the experience of exodus, and a collective history shaped by affective forces such as injury, anger, and humiliation. The peasant communities primarily saw themselves as subjects of wrongs rather than bearers of rights (Bolívar 2006; Samet 2019). The FARC’s presence and armed power in these newly settled regions were rapidly recognized as a source of authority capable of ensuring a moral order, respected and obeyed by the majority, regardless of the level of agreement. This adherence was partly sustained by shared collective emotions and values such as solidarity (personal recognition of the community’s welfare), collectivization (the value of community-building efforts), work (as a measure of one’s social position), and justice (the effective and fair resolution of community conflicts)<sup>12</sup>.

9 The Sierra de la Macarena National Natural Park was officially established in 1989 by decree under the government of Virgilio Barco (1986-1990).

10 In Colombia, there have been three major attempts at agrarian reform: in 1936, 1961, and 1994. Each initiative sought to address issues of land concentration and the ambiguity surrounding land titles and property rights. However, each attempt, by challenging the interests of political and economic elites, was followed by counter-reforms or legislative adjustments. One notable example is the Chiroral Pact, an agreement signed in 1972 by politicians, large landowners, and businessmen, which aimed to weaken peasant movements and withdraw institutional support for small landholders.

11 These refuge zones were known as Independent Republics, as the peasants claimed agricultural and political autonomy and appeared to reject the sovereignty of the Colombian state. In this context, the government of Guillermo León Valencia (1962-1966) implemented Plan Lazo, an initiative inspired by U.S. counterinsurgency strategies aimed at reclaiming these territories through military intervention.

12 Mario Aguilera (2014) categorizes contemporary guerrilla justice into three phases: exemplary justice (1964-1976), retaliatory justice (1976-1985), and justice for the conquest of local power (1985-2003). Each phase differs in its relationship with the communities, its methods of punishment, and its interaction with other systems of justice, such as community-based or state-sanctioned mechanisms.

Melba, a social leader in her mid-sixties and former cocalero peasant, recalled:

As time went on, thousands of people arrived in Macarena. To avoid conflict over land, the *guerros* (FARC) determined how it would be distributed and established the procedures for buying and selling it. Everything was regulated, and although living in the community was difficult, survival was only possible by staying together. (Personal conversation, June 2023)

As her words suggest, maintaining harmony during this early period was essential, as the people relied on subsistence economies in which practices like reciprocity, work-sharing, and communal land were vital (Scott 1977). However, with the emergence of extraction economies—such as timber and fishing in the 1950s and 1960s, marijuana cultivation in the 1970s, and the coca economy in the 1980s—the region’s demographic composition, along with its social and economic dynamics, changed.

These extractive economies, for instance, attracted waves of colonization from urban areas, driven by the commodity booms in the region, as they offered higher returns than legal and regulated markets. By the mid-1980s, this process had intensified, with coca cultivation and the cocaine economy becoming the primary sources of revenue and employment. This led to the emergence of what could be described as a *Braudelian geography*: a fragmented yet interconnected territory shaped by the expansion of illegal commodity production and its relationships with legal trading routes and enclaves (Goodhand and Pain 2022). One of the consequences of this process was the increasing commodification of social life, reflected in the growing monetarization of exchange systems, the gradual replacement of reciprocal labor with wage labor, and the consolidation of a semi-proletarianized rural workforce (Goodhand, Ballvé, and Meehan 2024)<sup>13</sup>.

Furthermore, as coca-growing areas expanded throughout the 1980s and early 1990s across the country, and illicit economies were deemed the “war’s fuel” by U.S.-sponsored counternarcotics programs, the Colombian state and its institutions began implementing numerous military and counterinsurgency strategies in the region. These strategies included Comprehensive War (1990-1994), the Anti-Drug War (1994-1998), Plan Colombia (1999-2015), the Defense and Democratic

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13 It is important to note that while this process has transformed relationships, the peasant communities in Macarena are still associated with moral economies today. This combination of market and non-market relations is one of the reasons why market crop substitution programs fail, as noted by Goodhand, Ballvé, and Meehan (2024). These programs are unable to replicate “the socially embedded dimensions of illicit economies.”

Security Policy (2002-2010), the Patriot Plan (2003-2006), the National Territorial Consolidation Plan (2007-2016), and Operation Artemisa (2019-2022), among others.

These prevailing modes of violence and militarism—justified by the perceived unruly nature of the territory—led to coca cultivators becoming the link between the war on subversion and the war on drugs, effectively criminalizing an already marginalized group (Ramírez 1996). By refusing to recognize potential subjects outside the frame of illegality, the relationship between peasant communities and the Colombian state was characterized by a pervasive sense of distrust and neglect. However, this did not necessarily imply total opposition to the state’s presence but rather a rejection of a particular form of it:

When we say we oppose the state, it’s the one that sprays our lands with glyphosate while accusing us of being enemies of peace. We are not against a state that recognizes us as citizens, that provides education, health, or a future for our children. (Melba, personal conversation, June 2023)

As Melba’s words emphasize, the communities actively seek engagement with state institutions, demanding greater attention, resource distribution, and inclusion in decision-making processes. Their claims challenge the state’s rhetoric of criminalization, highlighting their exclusion from the moral and legal community to which they—and other non-human entities like the coca plant—are subjected.

To understand how these processes, spatialized through frontiers and heterotopias, are central to consolidating a homogeneous vision of the future and a hegemonic way of acting, envisioning, and imagining politically, I will explore in the next section the assemblages the coca plant is part of and the affective encounters it produces within a context of precarity and political violence.

## **“Y, de repente, la esperanza apareció en la selva”<sup>14</sup>: Coca Assemblages and Affective Encounters**

“I am what she [the coca plant] has allowed me to be,” says Eliana, a 37-year-old single mother dedicated to coca cultivation and cattle ranching. As she proudly looks at the house she built on her own, she recounts her journey:

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14 “And suddenly, hope appeared in the jungle” is a phrase that refers to the ways in which the coca economy transformed the territory and, in turn, how its inhabitants imagined the future.

It all started when I was 15 years old. At first, I just accompanied my mom and helped her cook for the coca harvesters (*raspachines*), but I was more interested in the cultivation. One might think it's something simple, but it's more complicated than it seems. It's not just about learning the business; it's about understanding the plant and everything that comes with it. (Personal conversation, May 2023)

Eliana's words emphasize not only the logistics of the coca economy—production, processing, trading, intermediaries—but also how coca workers learn to be affected by the plant over time. This relationship enables them to envision alternative futures in contexts of violence and precarity. Contrary to the widespread notion that frames the relationship between peasants and coca solely in economic terms, their sustained interaction should be understood as a mutual constitution, in which the coca plant influences them, and they, in turn, influence it (Nally and Kearns 2020).

To explore these entanglements, I examine the relationships between the coca plant and coca growers in Macarena through the concepts of *assemblage* and *institutionalized calamity*. Assemblages can be thought of as socio-material relations among diverse elements that work together over time. Tania Li (2014), for instance, investigates land as an assembled resource for global investment by exploring the roles of statistical techniques, materialities, discourses, and inscription devices—such as fences, title deeds, and landmarks—alongside the roles of villagers, scientists, government officials, and investors. This approach allows us to distinguish different perspectives on what land is, what it can or should do, and its intrinsically social character. If technologies are added or if discourses about land shift, the assemblage transforms, leading to new ontological relations as well as different land uses and values.

Building on this understanding, it is crucial to recognize the historical context of an assemblage. In Macarena, the coca assemblage exists within a framework of *institutionalized calamity*, defined by Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín (2021) as the result of state policies and actions that produce negative events shaping people's lives. This is reflected in the confluence of the war on drugs and the war on subversion, as well as in the experience of precarization: a process induced and reproduced by governmental and economic institutions aimed at acclimatizing populations over time to insecurity and hopelessness (Butler 2015). By connecting these large-scale political actions with the bodily needs for economic, social, and political support, we can better understand how the coca plant and its affordances shape the imagination of the future while also producing alternative ways of relating to

non-human beings. To support this argument, I will explore the coca assemblage in three distinct historical moments: during the rise of the coca boom (1970-1980), the consolidation of the war on drugs (1990-2020), and the slowdown of the coca economy (2022-2024).

During the *rise of the coca boom* (1970-1980), rapid migration, economic growth, and new modes of wealth accumulation emerged. In response to these circumstances, FARC intervened in the burgeoning coca economy to prevent potential “social decay.” As regulators, they sought to prevent the exploitation of rural workers by establishing a minimum price for coca leaves and paste, controlling production levels, and offering security and representation in dealings with intermediaries and traffickers (Peñaranda, Otero, and Uribe 2021). In return, they imposed a tax on coca paste, known as *gramaje*. This centralized regulation protected peasants from the contingencies of the coca market by reducing risks and providing greater predictability. Ovidio recalls:

Coca remained stable despite the circumstances. The price never dropped to the point of saying, “this doesn’t work.” People thought we were stubborn for continuing this. But would you leave your future aside when you could make it a reality? (Personal conversation, December 2016)

In this context, the plant’s temporality—its rapid growth and environmental adaptability—continuously engaged with various desires, agencies, and beings, creating an assemblage from which a diverse array of affordances emerged (Li 2014). This refers to different uses and values to sustain human life within a framework of *institutionalized calamity*. For instance, coca cultivation provided the social and financial resources necessary to resist the forces of de-peasantization, sustained by the lack of legal titles, inadequate protection from state institutions, and conservation laws (Goodhand, Ballvé, and Meehan 2024).

The coca economy coupled with the rapid growth of the plant, shaped new economic flows and landscapes, particularly regarding land tenure and labor distribution (Gutiérrez Sanín 2019). Melba expresses this transformation:

With coca money, we were able to save for the first time and see the fruits of our labor. We transformed the jungle (*monte*) to reflect our image and likeness. No longer did we feel at the end of the world; we created a home. (Personal conversation, June 2022)

Her words highlight the potential to make property visible, emphasizing the domestication of nature and landscapes. As Carol Rose (1994) argues, the act of seeing itself creates ideas of finite and bounded things upon which individuals can exercise a set of rights. Through landmarks, fences, and self-building practices, property not only becomes visible but also establishes ownership. This relationship between individuals and things—mediated by visual and narrative metaphors—creates a sense of mastery and control over nature and embodies ideas of autonomy and self-sovereignty through ownership rights and their exercise in the political domain.

However, the coca assemblage and the affordances it enables are constantly changing, involving various entities, temporalities, and affects over time, including shifting discourses on war and peace that reshape socio-historical geographies. While the former assemblage was characterized by improvements in material conditions, during the *consolidation of the war on drugs* (1990-2020), it became rooted in the policies and actions of the Colombian state and the global escalation of U.S.-sponsored counternarcotic programs<sup>15</sup>, which, in the wake of 9/11, became intertwined with the discourse of the “War on Terror.” During this period, coca assemblages began to involve other entities through institutional discourses of illegality, including chemical agents such as Paraquat, Garlon 4, Imazapyr, Tebuthiuron, and Glyphosate.

These chemicals played a significant role in illicit crop eradication programs and contributed to the criminalization of non-human beings. In this regard, Melba recounts: “I feel connected to the coca plant because it reflects my own history: the constant planting and replanting, enduring harsh conditions to grow, and clearing a path through the jungle whenever we find ourselves cornered” (personal conversation, June 2023). Her choice of words is intentional, linking the vegetal and human worlds through metaphors that highlight how both have been subjected to forms of oppression, precarity, and displacement. Thus, the coca plant serves as an archive of external conditions; its presence or absence allows coca growers to

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15 In Colombia, aerial fumigation began in the mid-1980s and intensified during Ernesto Samper’s presidency (1994-1998). This period marked a significant escalation in fumigation efforts following the U.S. government’s decertification of Colombia due to accusations that Samper received campaign donations from the Cali Cartel. To reverse this decertification and regain eligibility for U.S. aid and preferential trade benefits, Samper expanded fumigation strategies in the southern regions of the country. Additionally, since 2004, forced manual eradication has been implemented in coca-growing territories. This approach typically takes the form of military operations involving anti-narcotics police and armed forces.

recount sociopolitical changes in the territory and reveal interconnected forms of violence (Kirksey and Chao 2022).

This scenario was also marked by the emergence of gendered affects towards the coca plant. In the early phases, coca cultivation was primarily labor carried out by young men excluded from the formal labor economy, while women were often relegated to domestic tasks. Yanira, a 70-year-old small shop owner, recalls:

As women, we were mainly responsible for cooking for the workers, who, during peak season, could number up to 50. When we offered to help in the fields, the one in charge used to say we didn't work as hard as the men and that, when we tried, we only made things worse. (Personal conversation, July 2018)

For a time, women's active participation in the harvest was socially sanctioned. However, as the illegal market expanded, so did the fluidity of gender roles and the sexual division of labor.

The first coca seeds I received were a gift from another woman. It was her way of telling me I could start a new life, far from the abuse at home. And that's exactly what happened. The coca plant became my *accomplice*: it supported me, provided me with a house and livestock, and, most importantly, gave me a sense of self. (Eliana, personal conversation, May 2023)

Eliana's description of the coca plant as an "accomplice" suggests more than just economic support; it implies a partner in defying moral and social norms, enabling women like her to access the agricultural market under conditions previously denied to them. As a result, ideals like autonomy and freedom became more attainable as women gained the ability to access productive resources and property.

This gendered relationship with coca is also evident in the experiences of male coca growers. Gonzalo, a *raspachín* (coca harvester), argues that cultivating coca allowed him to *become a man*. In the region, the coca economy serves as a rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood. Since coca leaves are picked by hand, harvesting is often one of the first jobs available to young men, teaching them work ethic and the hierarchical structures of labor in these spaces. Coca cultivation also facilitates intergenerational knowledge transmission, as the chemical processing of coca into paste requires varying levels of expertise, typically overseen by older individuals. Additionally, this environment shapes young men's understanding of sexual life and socially accepted forms of masculinity.

Yanira's and Gonzalo's engagements with the coca plant were shaped not only by its utility but also by a sense of friendship and care. In the face of aerial fumigation, coca growers developed strategies to protect their crops from glyphosate, such as soaking the leaves in molasses. These actions reflected long-term relationships with the plant, which was perceived as a companion imbued with meaning and emotion. The coca plant became intertwined with significant moments in a person's life, whether it was escaping an abusive household, gaining independence, or transitioning from rural to urban life.

Moreover, the coca plant was not solely tied to individual aspirations but also fostered collective experiences. One example of this collective impact can be seen in how the coca economy supported community projects: "Yes," says Hilario,

the coca money allowed us to buy cattle, motorbikes, and even electricity generators. We experienced wealth for a time, and we enjoyed it. But that was not all. With the revenues, we also built schools, roads, and even bridges, though they were destroyed time and again amid the war. (Personal conversation, July 2018)

Hilario's words highlight how infrastructure projects represented the possibility of interconnectedness, transforming borderlands into hubs of economic growth. These developments reflect the perpetually deferred promise of development (Appel, Anand, and Gupta 2018), while evoking a sense of hope and imagination about escaping spatial confinement.

Recently, the coca assemblage has been reshaped by *the slowdown of the coca economy* (2021-2024), which exists in a context of neither war nor peace. As mentioned earlier, FARC once acted as an armed syndicate in cocalero territories, providing predictability for coca growers against market fluctuations. After their demobilization in 2016, dissident factions such as Estado Mayor Central (EMC) and Segunda Marquetalia (SM) emerged, each mirroring FARC's organizational structure and practices of control. A primary goal of these dissident groups has been to dominate cocaine trafficking, which requires territorial control. However, unlike FARC, these groups lack a unified chain of command, functioning mainly as fragmented factions where local leaders impose their own rules. This has disrupted former supply chains.

Before, FARC would assign a collection point, and each village designated individuals responsible for delivering cocaine pastes and bringing back the money. Now, nothing is that simple. The dissident groups do not allow free movement, and it's

unclear who to deal with. There is constant fear and, above all, uncertainty. (Ovidio, personal conversation, June 2023)

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC 2023) reports that this loss of territorial control has hindered foreign buyers' ability to negotiate cocaine sourcing in Colombia, leading to the proliferation of criminal actors, the fragmentation of trafficking chains, and increased cocaine-related violence. Moreover, the militarization of the ecological crisis in the region has introduced new forms of political violence against local populations. As Juan Corredor and Fernando López (2023) argue, the war on deforestation cannot be understood in isolation from Colombia's earlier conflicts, such as the wars against communism, drugs, and terrorism. These conflicts have shaped how the armed conflict in Colombia is framed within global discourses of danger and threat. Consequently, the internal enemy has evolved over time, shifting from the communist enemy to the *narco-cultivator*, then to the *narco-terrorist*, and finally to the *deforester* (Corredor and López 2023, 5). Within this logic, protecting biodiversity from human violence becomes the priority, leading to new legal frameworks and discourses on human and non-human interactions.

One example of this reconfiguration is *Operación Artemisa*, a military initiative launched in 2019 by former President Iván Duque to combat deforestation by prosecuting those who incite illegal logging. To support this initiative, the government referred to several key legal developments: the Supreme Court of Justice's recognition of the Amazon River as a subject of rights, the acknowledgment by the Special Jurisdiction for Peace and the Truth Commission of the environment as a victim of the armed conflict, and the establishment of deforestation as a new environmental crime under Law 2111 of 2021.

In this shifting landscape of state practices, the coca plant—and the economy it supports—is increasingly framed as the principal cause of deforestation in the region. By linking the war on drugs to environmental conservation efforts, this approach casts the peasantry as a predatory and criminal force, disregarding the deep affective relationships that local communities have with the land and the histories embedded in the territory. As a result, the hopes, desires, and possibilities previously sustained by the coca economy are altered, as new actors, practices, and discourses transform the relationship between the state and communities, as well as between these communities and their environment.

In the following section, I will explore how these ruptures and transformations within coca assemblages impact the temporal orientations of coca growers, particularly concerning their intergenerational experience of time and temporality.

## “No hay mal que dure cien años”<sup>16</sup>: Imaginaries of the Future in Times of Crisis

“There’s no misfortune that lasts a hundred years,” says Ovidio, as he frantically plants coca, despite the recession that has affected the coca economy since 2021. Analysts attribute this decline to rising conflict in cultivation areas, saturation of drug trafficking routes, rapid expansion of coca cultivation, and supply chains struggling to keep pace (Duque and Maldonado 2023; McDermott and Dudley 2024).

This crisis extends beyond coca growers, affecting the broader peasantry. Those reliant on the coca economy for income, including local commercial establishments, now face food insecurity, displacement, and economic distress. Yet, Ovidio remains hopeful. Over the past 40 years, he insists, “coca has never abandoned us. It’s going through a rough patch, but it will come back stronger” (personal conversation, June 2023). His belief reflects the expectation that the coca economy will recover, and that—like the plant itself—he and his community will emerge stronger from this difficult period. To understand Ovidio’s perspective, we must consider how coca has not only transformed the material conditions of cultivators but also shaped their visions of the future.

As Iván Vargas argues, time is co-constructed as different beings shape temporalities together: “Neither the plant nor the human follows individual, linear paths to their current forms; instead, they become-together” (2017, 271). To illustrate this idea, I focus on the concept of *temporal orientations*, which examines how our present is shaped by our visions of the future (Bryant and Knight 2019). Viewing time this way highlights the non-linear aspects of temporality, where different orientations—such as hope, anticipation, and expectation—overlap and coexist.

During the *rise of the coca economy* (1970-1980), three distinct temporal regimes shaped life: revolutionary time, market time, and coca’s own temporality. FARC’s revolutionary time sought to redeem the past, aiming to prevent a history of exclusion and oppression from repeating itself. It also aimed to regulate the emerging market and provide stability for coca growers. This revolutionary time intersected with *market time*, which was defined by the pursuit of profit and growth, and *coca’s temporality*, marked by harvests cycles every 45 days that materialized these future fantasies. Together, these temporal regimes painted the

16 “There’s no misfortune that lasts a hundred years” is a popular saying that refers to the idea that no matter how bad a situation is, it will not last forever.

future as an infinite horizon of possibility, fueled by the expanding expectations generated by the coca economy.

As a result, the future orientations of this time were largely defined by *hope*, an effect that propelled people rapidly into a different situation from what has been before. Various forms of social mobility were made possible through the consolidation of land ownership regimes and access to global markets. Under these circumstances, the rapid accumulation of wealth and improvements in material conditions seemed unstoppable. “La Macarena changed overnight. Money appeared everywhere; people bought farms, improved their homes, and started businesses. It was like a fever dream” (Ovidio, personal conversation, June 2023).

Hope, as a future orientation, manifested as progress and change, as a force capable of transforming potential into reality (Bryant and Knight 2019). However, disappointment was its inevitable counterpart. The quick access to wealth also led to rising alcohol consumption, violence, and wastefulness. “Many squandered their money on alcohol or gambling. Some families were torn apart, and friendships were ruined by ambition. As the saying goes, *not everything that glitters is gold*” (Yanira, personal conversation, July 2018). Disappointment emerged as the realization that the present was filled with unrealized potential, a gap between the possibilities people envisioned and what materialized. This recognition of an unpredictable future—one that does not unfold according to plan—breaks away from linear conceptions of time and embraces the indeterminacy of experience and temporality. As Bryant and Knight (2019) argue, both hope and disappointment are less about certainty and more about the potential for change.

In contrast, during the consolidation of the war on drugs (1990-2020), the temporal regimes of the past shifted, reflecting a political reorganization spurred by military campaigns of counterinsurgency, counternarcotics, and counterterrorism. Dan Edelstein, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Natasha Wheatley (2020) emphasize that power and time are closely intertwined; every sovereignty project aims to shape historical narratives, temporal imaginaries, and political forces. Over these three decades, the state’s military policies imposed a temporal regime designed to undermine revolutionary time by establishing new regimes of futurity. This shift is evident in how the forces shaping people’s visions of the future transitioned primarily toward *anticipation* and *fear*. Violence, with its ability to contract what were once open horizons, reshaped how people imagined the future.

One of the main drivers of these emotions was the human and non-human toll of aerial fumigation and the counterinsurgency strategies employed in the region. The use of chemicals led to chronic health problems, such as gastrointestinal

issues, brain fog, and persistent headaches (Adams 2023). These effects extended to non-human beings as well, contaminating soil and water supplies, and weakening the environment's natural defenses against pollution, drought, and crop diseases. Simultaneously, counterinsurgency and counterterrorism strategies fractured community solidarities by expanding the notion of the enemy. This created a scenario in which FARC implemented a type of defensive justice, targeting anyone perceived to threaten the survival of the armed apparatus. War became not just punitive but also preventive: "I remember seeing Mom cry each morning, terrified of what might happen: losing our crops, being detained, or being killed by the army or the guerrillas. Fear wouldn't let her live" (Eliana, personal conversation, May 2023).

As a result, the present and near future lost value, as the promises once held by the coca plant started to fade under the weight of discourses on legality and pacification. The Colombian state leveraged these discourses to determine who deserved underdevelopment, political impotence, or secondary citizenship (Peels 2015). At this point, *anticipation* emerged as a key temporal orientation, as it is an imagination centered on taking precautions and preparing for imminent risks by pulling the future into the present (Bryant and Knight 2019). Anticipation involves laying the groundwork for a potential future, projecting a shadow in which "time has the effect of appearing to foreshorten, forestall, stop, or start the future and thereby temporality" (Bryant 2020, 18). In this context, *fear* becomes an anticipatory effect, casting the future in terms of threat. Even when violence, death, or imprisonment do not materialize, their potential continues to loom (Massumi 2010).

Finally, during the slowdown of the coca economy (2021-2024), temporal regimes defined by crisis and uncertainty emerged, giving rise to experiences of time centered on expectation. Unlike anticipation, expectation is deeply rooted in the past, clinging to the optimism that once characterized what were seen as "better times." It arises when what is considered *normal* disappears from the horizon of action. In this context, normalcy is tied to the coca plant's ability to bring about the future, whether through economic means or by reaffirming a sense of identity, independence, and self-respect. Gabriela Valdivia's (2012) concept of the affective aftermath of the coca economy helps illuminate this dynamic, referring to how coca continues to shape agrarian politics—both diachronically and synchronically—even amid crises.

The memories of prosperity generated by the coca economy during the 1970s and 1980s evoke a type of nostalgia that haunts the present, not just for those who live through it, but also for younger generations. Through the region's oral

histories, a myth has formed in which the coca plant symbolizes enduring abundance and transformation:

I haven't yet experienced the glorious days of coca [laughs]. But I still believe in the plant. Maybe my faith comes from my father: he used to tell me stories of fortune, happiness, and extravagance, where coca turned everything it touched into gold. (Gonzalo, personal conversation, May 2023)

This haunting capacity of the coca plant intertwines present-day realities with collective memories, blurring the lines between past and present. As a result, the past and present “are connected and in a constant, dialectical relationship that blurs temporal orders of ‘back then’ and ‘here now’” (Valdivia 2012, 618). One manifestation of this haunting is the increase in coca bush cultivation over the last four years, despite the ongoing economic downturn. According to UNODC data, the area under cultivation rose from 143,000 hectares in 2020 to 204,000 hectares in 2021, 230,000 hectares in 2022, and 246,000 hectares in 2023.

This expansion is often framed as a law enforcement or development issue, suggesting that eradication efforts combined with new economic activities to integrate the peasantry into the free market could offer a solution. However, the persistence of the coca economy must also be understood through its affective affordances, as it functions as a psychological and discursive referent in agrarian politics and substitution programs. Peasants not only compare past and present livelihood options but also consider how these options align with their aspirations and how they might negotiate alternatives with the national government. The coca plant remains central to how they envision futures that could materialize their hopes and desires.

Substitution programs, however, tend to operate within a linear and progressive conceptualization of time, assuming that each temporal phase—past, present, and future—is distinct and self-contained. Yet, time is not sequential (following one event after another), but enduring, meaning the past, present, and future continually overlap, engage, and transform one another. As Ovidio explains, “Living alongside coca is living among longings, fears, and certainties, but above all with the hope that the future will reach us sooner or later” (personal conversation, May 2023). This insight illustrates how the coca plant mobilizes various temporal regimes, showing how villagers in La Macarena simultaneously inhabit multiple, paradoxical temporalities. It also underscores the non-human agency of the coca planta in shaping these temporal orientations both diachronically and synchronically.

## Conclusions

In this article, I explored how the coca plant has shaped temporality in Sierra de la Macarena by examining the assemblages it is part of. I analyzed the human and non-human elements involved, the socio-material relations they produce over time, and the effects that emerge in assembling and disassembling these complex networks. Through an assemblage framework, I emphasized the agency of the coca plant, expressed not only in its lifecycles but also in its ability to influence subjectivities, governance structures, economic flows, and landscapes, particularly in peripheral regions. Its rapid growth rate—allowing for harvesting every 45 days—reconfigures land tenure, labor distribution, and produces moral and political associations that challenge institutional discourses surrounding its illegality.

By considering the role of affect and desire in the relationship between villagers and the coca plant, I examined three distinct temporal orientations: hope during the coca boom (1970-1980), anticipation during the war on drugs (1990-2020), and expectation during the slowdown of the coca economy (2021-2024). Hope, as a temporal orientation, bridged potentiality and actuality, enabling a generation to imagine alternative futures. It initially manifested in wealth and social change but later gave way to disappointment as violence escalated. Anticipation emerged in response to the threat of an uncertain future during the war on drugs. Violence, targeting both human and non-human entities, led villagers to adopt strategies of survival, such as adapting coca cultivation methods to mitigate the effects of glyphosate fumigation. These anticipatory actions brought the future into the present, shaped by a sense of danger and precaution.

In contrast, expectation is rooted in the past, drawing on memories of wealth, independence, and autonomy fostered by the coca economy. These memories continue to shape current perceptions and emotional responses, helping to explain why coca cultivation has increased despite economic decline. The belief in the coca plant's potential to restore prosperity persists, supported by affective bonds and intergenerational stories. Here, coca is more than a commodity; it is a companion and accomplice.

By exploring how the coca plant and its economy influence experiences and perceptions of time, we can better understand the competitive and conflictual temporal formations that coexist within specific historical moments. This analysis allows us to recognize that beyond the criminalization of this economic activity, what is at stake is a dispute over how the future should be envisioned, who has the right to access it, and which temporal imaginaries deserve to be preserved.

Recognizing these dynamics points us toward the concept of futures in the plural, acknowledging the diverse temporal experiences of individuals and communities, and the tensions that arise when projecting different visions of the future.

Finally, my intent is not to generalize or homogenize the experiences of peasant communities, but rather to challenge perspectives that reduce their attachment to the coca plant to criminality, backwardness, or stubbornness. These views often cast coca farmers as either powerless victims or opportunistic profit-seekers. In contrast, I sought to highlight the affective, economic, and future affordances that the coca plant offers—even if temporarily—enabling a livable life, despite the uneven distribution of that livability.

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