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The Diary as Witness: an Anthropologist Writes What He Must

By MICHAEL TAUSSIG

In May 2001, I spent two weeks in a Colombian town that had been taken over by paramilitary forces imposing law and order through selective killings -- what Colombians call a *limpieza*. I thought it would be useful to keep a diary of those two weeks, bearing in mind that I had first visited this town as an anthropologist in 1969 and had returned almost every year since then. Why did I choose a diary form, and what did I learn about the craft of anthropology? Indeed, what did I learn about how to tell a story that could convey the turbulence of a situation in which might makes right?

There have always been paramilitary groups in Colombia's troubled history, but the most recent resurgence dates to the mid-1980s, when such forces were formed to protect wealthy landowners from kidnapping and left-wing guerrillas. As a form of invisible government extending far beyond the frequently cited 11,000 to 13,000 armed combatants, paramilitary troops take up the slack in Colombia's pathetically weak judicial system.

Although they are as much an anarchic medley of psychopaths and good old boys as they are highly organized killers, the paramilitary groups control several major cities behind the scenes. Like the government, they tax individuals and businesses, except that the taxes levied by the "paras" are willingly paid by people who are fed up with corruption and street crime. Financed as well by the drug trade, paramilitary units are pretty much left free to roam not only by Colombian authorities but also by the U.S. government, both of which never miss a trick when it comes to indicting the drug trafficking of the 22,000-strong left-wing guerrillas whom the paras, with religious zeal, have sworn to wipe off the map. As a result of the paras' spectacular cruelty against the peasantry, whom they accuse of supporting the guerrillas, more than two million of Colombia's 43 million people have fled to the cities in terror.

Increasingly, the paras are taking over policing functions in the towns, especially if those towns fit into some larger geopolitical strategy of control over drugs or some other precious commodity. It should be noted that most people killed in Colombia are killed by neither guerrillas nor paras, but by young men in the poor parts of towns and cities. The solution provided by the paramilitary groups -- and one generally acceptable, so it seems, to many citizens as well as to the current government -- is that of *exterminate the brutes!* This *limpieza*, or "cleansing," is by now, in Colombia and elsewhere in Latin America, so common and tolerated that it has become akin to a natural phenomenon like rain or the inevitability of death itself.

I walked into this situation three months after the paramilitary forces had arrived in the town -- a place of some 50,000 landless people, staggering unemployment, and wild kids with no future. Lured by substantial tax breaks, automated factories have recently located there. Now, I can see that it is no coincidence that with the factories have come the paramilitary troops, so as to provide, for a price, much-needed security from street violence and from extortion by the guerrillas. By the time I got there, in May, the paras had killed, in public view, close to 100 young people.

Probably many anthropologists keep a diary -- witness the famous one kept by Bronislaw Malinowski -- but the diaries' connection to the

writers' published work remains obscure. I believe that such a lack of awareness is unfortunate. A diary can offer precious, if elusive, testimony to truths otherwise impossible to render. I would like to claim that the diary I kept was to serve as a reservoir of facts for future documentation, as in a police, human-rights, or legal investigation. But it was more than that, and necessarily so, because the definition of "fact" in such a documentation is bluntly insensitive to atmosphere, which is essential to terror.

Like a talisman, my diary anchored my life. It was also a bottomless well in which I threw random thoughts and furtive fears, as if not to preserve but to lose them down there in the darkness. Yet if I lost the diary, I would lose myself, for it became that other self, more real than its author. Why? Because the diary seems more real than the flimsy thing we call experience. It says: *I have been here. I exist. This happened.* A mark in time.

The danger made this marking of time all the more poignant. You never knew when the mark might stop, midstroke. Sometimes I felt perfectly safe. Other times I did not. My friends would say I had nothing to fear because (a) I was so well known in the town; and (b) the killers were interested only in *delincuentes*, a term covering a multitude of sinners from pickpockets to mass murderers. But few outsiders would have stepped into a situation like that, and it was widely known that foreign human-rights workers as well as Colombians were at risk from the paras. Nor was it reassuring that my hosts would run hot and cold, one day saying there was nothing to worry about, and the next day being in a fit of consternation.

As with any social science, including history, anthropologists explain the unknown in terms of the known. There is resistance to leaving weirdness weird, and no recognition of the stuff that won't fit. For that would threaten the basis of the academic claim to mastery underlying our professorial -- no less than professional -- claims to authority. *That* would be terror! As Nietzsche said, "Fear drives you to reduce something strange to something familiar so you no longer marvel at it. Then the familiar itself becomes more difficult to see as strange." So-called postmodern ethnography, such as my own, begins with the recognition of that fear, as can be seen in the issues raised by the ethnographies of Kathleen Stewart, Stephen Muecke, and Michael Jackson, as well as in the theoretical discussions provided by James Clifford and George E. Marcus in *Writing Culture* and by Marcus and Michael M.J. Fischer in *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. High Modernism in the work of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Bertolt Brecht taught those lessons long ago. Wedded to 19th-century realism, the social sciences provide a curiously conservative cul-de-sac, immune to experimentation and to the impact that history exerts on self-awareness (as well as on style).

I doubt that I could have written a conventional academic narrative about the town because, frankly, the paradigms are simply not there. In contrast, the diary form can be swift and decisive in claiming to be little more than a record of a slice in time, nothing more than a strategic sample of reality made all the more real by fragmentation and subjectivity.

The first thing I noted when I reached town was a dizzying sense of confusion. None of my friends seemed to have much of a clue as to what was happening other than that death was stalking the town right in the open at high noon, no longer in the shadows or out in the sugar-cane fields, where bodies used to be quietly dumped. The account of paras chasing an ambulance carrying a young man they had wounded, forcing it off the road, opening the door, and killing him, was especially frightening. There was no sacred place of refuge, just as when paramilitary troops cornered a teenager in his mother's kitchen and killed him as he scrambled for cover among her battered pots and pans.

The paras did not wear uniforms. They were generally white, while most of the people in the town were dark-skinned. They patrolled the town two to a motorbike, with the pillion rider conspicuously armed with an

automatic weapon. They were reported to have a list of the people they had to kill. Running away from them, one young man was stopped as they consulted their list, which contained photographs as well as national-ID numbers. It was that long, he later told me, stretching out his arm to its full extent, eyes wide.

By now you would think that the list has become a lot shorter. But I'm not so sure. The paras are still there, two and half years after their arrival, and are still assassinating one to two kids a week.

Everybody had a different name for the killers. To some they were simply *pistoleros*, or gunslingers; to others they were part of the AUC, the largest national paramilitary organization; while to others they were simply "those people," or, even more chilling, "the cleansers." Nobody had a clear idea of why they were there, how they had gotten there, who was paying them, or what their relationship was to the police, the regular army, and the judiciary. The damndest thing was that even though they acted openly, cutting people down in public spaces, in broad daylight, they were invisible, perhaps because none of us wanted to look too hard.

For me, my diary opened up a space for reconsidering cause and effect in history, and it did that, strangely enough, by conflating subjective and objective experience, a conflation I take to be the raw material of fear used as a political weapon. Confronted by dead-end narratives, such as those trying to make sense of the ubiquitous violence, I noted early on that "we can construct a chronology of events, but what connects them?" Hayden White, a scholar who bridges history and literature, has pointed to this issue in his wonderful studies of the place of tropes and metaphors in the writing of history. In his view of a "poetics of history," there is no single historical narrative, and each author makes moral and aesthetic choices in making connections between events.

"Isn't it possible to get caught up in events," I asked myself, "and react without knowing why? Later on you look back and find a reason, if you want to, but that rarely does justice to the way you got caught in the first place. To write a diary is to scuttle between these two phases, action and reflection, without quite reaching either. A diary is unstable. It unseats its own judgments because it lives on time's traveling edge, lingering where meanings congeal in case they dissipate."

Things often occurred to me as flashbacks long after they happened. Formed by the steady passing of the days, by time itself, diary notes are, however, anything but consecutive. I kept going back days later to earlier entries, writing over and next to them in the margins at an angle to the main text with afterthoughts and drawings that now seemed like the real thoughts that had swum into focus with an image.

The scrapbooks of William Burroughs were wonderfully relevant. Devoted to dream worlds as much as to time travel, to the examination of fear, bullying, bigotry, and the conventions that guided so-called normal life in the United States, Burroughs created in the early 1960s fabulous diaries composed of cut-out images, slabs of his own writing, and swirls of color. To my mind, those have similarities with what I was doing as I kept my anthropologist's diary. Burroughs, too, looked for points of intersection between images and text, as a way to decode the unconscious dimensions of culture. As an anthropologist, I was trying to create a picture of social control that went beyond analysis so as to become a work of culture itself.

That is why I found the diary form congenial to getting out the word about the paras, and getting it out in such a way that the phenomena in question were not so much explained (away) but sat there in their rawness, as mediated truth. There is, after all, no truth other than mediated truth, and, given half a chance, the mediation can maybe -- just maybe -- stand up to deadly force.

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