

Unearthing Undercover

Intimations relating *campesinos*, the more-than-human and the politically disappeared in my art practice

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■ This visual essay and this video were created in tandem, as art-as-research processes referencing each other. The sequences weave the temporalities and entangled geographies that underlie my investigative work in unearthing undercover. Daza-Paris (2022)

Where am I?

9.6° north of the equator in the hamlet of Cocorote, Lara State, Venezuela.

In the window of time that we have, just an hour before venomous snakes begin to hunt, Señor Solano—an elder *campesino* from Cocorote—kindly agrees to lead me along the narrow path down to the river.¹ Just in case, he brings his machete, and Señor Lameda, also an elder, joins us. The bushes

at the edge of the path create dark yet enchanting spirals, and with anxious sensations, I enter another time—one much like that January day at dusk in 1966 when three men took this path, crossed the river and reached the hills on the other side. Moving through this valley undercover, with nature doing its part, kept them out of the sight of the US-trained counter-revolutionary soldiers. One of these men is my father.

¹ In Latin America, the term *campesino* usually refers to peoples of Indigenous origin and/or African descent who live on parcels of land, often working for a landlord.



■ From Cocorote, a sliver of the white fabric can be faintly seen in the enlarged frame. This is the marking of the participatory action at the mountain near the ambush. The images are captured from video footage. *Daza-Paris (2022)*



Who takes part?

I can sense my father's agitated breathing, sustained through the years by the plants on this path. Did they know I would come here, aiming to understand what happened to him, to his disappeared body? I linger briefly. Did I feel a wisp of his breath reach me? I breathe. My eyes gently try to touch what I cannot see.

The river calls. I continue descending towards it, cautious on the uneven ground, yet with urgency.

Treading this trail with the *campesinos* all these years later as my father's sole survivor, it is as if, somehow, I am now also 'undercover'. I give in to the rush of my blood, the tremors of my skin and to imagining the precariousness my father lived hours before the ambush. The more-than-human draws me back into the moment. I become immersed; the flickering leaves that graze my skin, the welcoming ground underneath me, the clouds appearing between the hills, the hidden snakes and singing crickets all tell me something revelatory and essential, beyond words.

Being unseen and unknown does not mean being unfelt. Before nightfall, this attunement affords an infinite moment of encounter.

What takes place?

We come back from the river on a different path. From there, we can see before us the hills where, almost fifty years ago, an ambush operation occurred in the early morning after the river crossing. The *campesinos* tell me how helicopters and military trucks stormed the area and surrounded the hill amid machine-gun fire. That day my father was disappeared. As we stand there, Señor Solano shares with me that the people in the hamlet have asked that I return. He says, 'We want to search with you on the mountain for his bones.' This search, he continues, 'would also be a remembrance of the struggles this land has witnessed—as far back as colonial times'.

Unexpectedly, I have been offered an immeasurable gift.



■ The village seen from the ambush site on the hill is shown enlarged. Photos Livia Daza-Paris

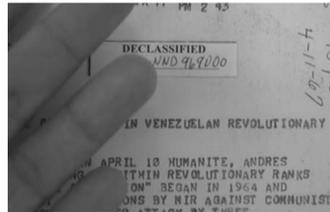
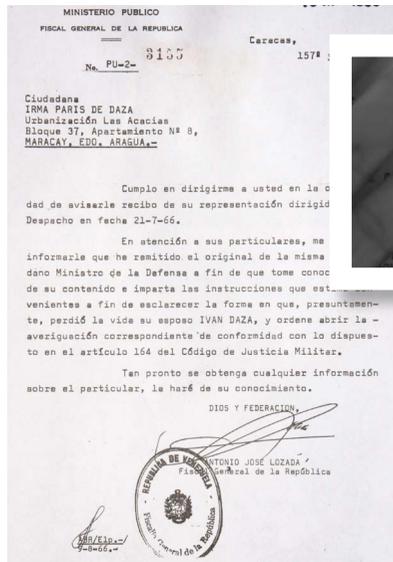
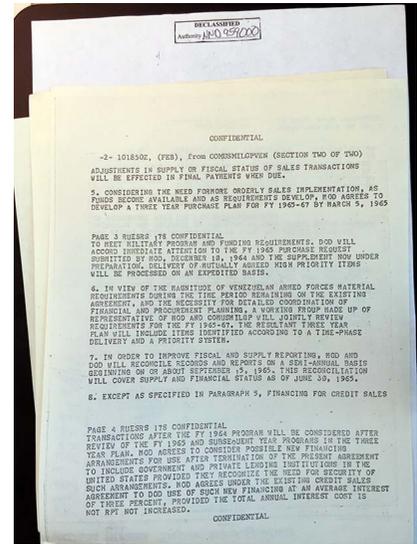
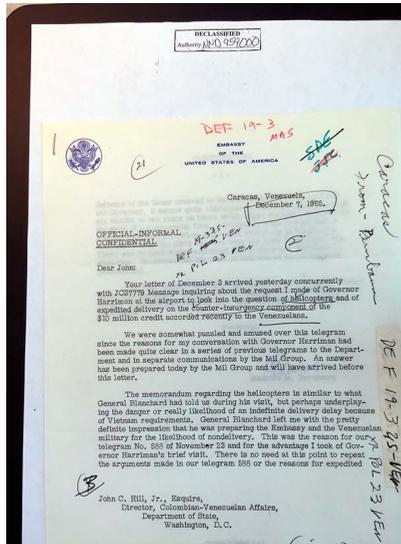
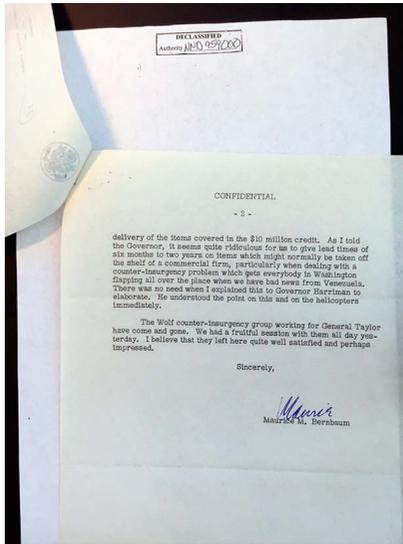


What is made?

I was anticipating only three *campesinos* to come with me, but to my surprise, many more of all generations came along that Sunday morning. The adults carried machetes to open a path through the mountain's thick underbrush. I brought my video camera and a bolt of white fabric. We made for the area where the ambush had happened. No one had gone up there since the morning of the ambush, they told me. We climbed.

Within a few hours, we were close to the site. We stood, surprised to see Cocorote so very noticeable in the distance. Even though we were by the site of a terrible event, we were overtaken by a certain exuberance that was perhaps all the

greater because of the meaningful performativity we were about to engage in. What came next was a spontaneous, participatory action as the *campesinos* effortlessly organized themselves and purposefully put up the hundred-metre-long fabric. How did they secure it? They considered the wind's direction and sloped terrain, weaved the material through the bushes, attached it with knots made from small rips in the fabric that they cut with their machetes and then weighted the ends of the bolt with stones. The translucent white fabric could be seen from their homes in Cocorote. As Arnaldo, an inventive *campesino* in his early 30s, said: 'It is floating like bubbles from the river's surface!'



At the Archives.
 Testimony C-2 National
 Archives, Washington, DC.
 Stills from video, Daza-
 Paris (2017)

What came next?

Sometime a few years later, 38.9° north of the equator, CollegePark, Maryland, US.

This collage includes a letter from the Venezuelan Ministry of Justice, a vague and stonewalling response to my mother's enquiry about her missing husband (my father). The other documents attest to the extent of US covert interventions in 1960s revolutionary Venezuela, corroborating campesino testimony given to me in Cocorote about their

direct experiences. They record US diplomatic/intelligence correspondence about political activities and negotiations on sales of military hardware to the Venezuelan government. These documents are not in public circulation: I found them after extensive searching at the US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in Maryland. I dealt with intimidating surveillance to access them, including repeated checkpoints for IDs, picture taking and signed declarations. An eerie atmosphere surrounded this encounter, as if undercover secrecy—whose?—was present at that very moment.

NARA only permits photographing of documents. And yet, I was compelled to improvise an intervention; I juxtaposed my hand with the documents and moved discreetly to capture parts of my body within the archive space. In retrospect, these disobedient

performative gestures, even if modest, marked a declaration: the daughter of a politically disappeared Venezuelan has unearthed and witnessed a hidden history in these documents.

Commentary

As I attempt to grasp what emerged from these experiences in Cocorote,² I consider our particular context of relationalities and how the *campesino* experiential ways of knowing guided the process. I turn to Indigenous scholar Shawn Wilson's assertion that research is ceremony. He explains, 'The research ceremony is grounded in the community and with the relationships that are being built comes the recognition that I am an integral part of the community too' (Wilson 2008: 123).

Potawatomi botanist Robin Kimmerer explains that Indigenous ways of knowing consider values of reciprocity, care and responsibility towards all relations, including the more-than-human (2003: 100). These principles have since been supported in the emerging theories and science that respond to the onto-epistemological turn. I have come to process the arc of these encounters, in part, through the focus of my community organizing studies on Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and through my movement background in the Skinner Releasing Technique (Skinner *et al.* 1979), with its inklings towards entanglements of self and world. This foundation led me to an approach in my practice as research that intuits the 'many worlds', as elaborated by Peruvian anthropologist de la Cadena (2018), that are palpable in the lived experience narrated here.

I suggest that these worlds are part of what T. J. Demos calls 'ecology-as-intrasectionality' (2019), where the political and the ecological are in indissoluble relationality. Boundaries merge between my world and the worlds in this valley. Worlds of the disappeared, worlds of *campesino* lives, plants, rivers, bones, breath and land... and within these worlds, generativity and emancipatory hope.³

² Cocorote is located in the foothills of the Cordillera de Mérida at the northern tip of the Andes in Lara State, Venezuela. It is interesting to note that this hamlet rarely appears on conventional maps and not at all on online maps. Lara State was an important region for revolutionary activities because of the strong *campesino* participation; Cocorote had especially committed support. Being situated at a crossroad made it a critical undercover meeting point.

³ I propose that this work resonates with Bloch's notion of 'anticipatory illumination' inspired by his Marxist analysis of hope that looks at the act of art creation as stakeholder for (re)imagining the future and rekindling the political imagination (1988: 41). Borrowing words from Krista Tippett, hope here 'isn't about optimism; it's not about wishful thinking. It's about insisting that we can be agents of change' (Tippett 2021).

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