

Book Review

Lizarazo, Tania. *Postconflict Utopias: Everyday Survival in Chocó, Colombia*. Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press. 2024. 255 pages.

Leandro E. Iglesias
University of New Brunswick

Postconflict *Utopias*, Tania Lizarazo's new book, seeks to disrupt hegemonic narratives that construct the Chocó, a department (equivalent to a state or province) in northwestern Colombia, as an impoverished Afro-descendant frontier. Black women activists who have experienced armed violence and subsequent mass displacement are at the centre of her story.

Since the 2000s, the Chocó has seen an increase in political assassinations of activists, political leaders, and union leaders. The socio-political alienation that the region has experienced since colonial times made this violence possible. National discourses around the concept of *mestizaje*—an ideology based on the mixing of Euro-descendant, Afro-descendant, and Indigenous groups to create a mixed and homogeneous population—have been crucial in shaping a distinctive Colombian identity, both before and after independence. This process relegated Indigenous and Black communities to the margins of the country: the Caribbean, the Amazon, and the Pacific.

While central highland cities like Bogotá and Medellín, with their mestizo population, concentrated social, economic, and political power, the racial imaginary excluded the Chocó, which straddles the northern Pacific and Caribbean coasts. In the Chocó, the project of *blanqueamiento*—the attempt to whiten its own society—facilitated decades of devastating natural resource extraction by foreign and national capital.

Post-conflict Utopias go beyond simply imagined or desired futures like *blanqueamiento* and show how the process of building utopias requires collaborative and speculative thinking, accompanied by a communal commitment to nurture and materialize these utopian realities through repeated performative action, or what Lizarazo calls rehearsals. In a region

where armed violence, economic exploitation of natural resources, mass displacements, and political alienation are ongoing realities, the continuation and rehearsal of utopian realities is a necessity. Every day, the women in this book rehearse a future in which Black communities are no longer disenfranchised and threatened.

Lizarazo helps construct a post-conflict future by centring narratives that are relegated to the geographical and discursive peripheries, demonstrating her own commitment to rehearsal and presence. Here, presence takes on a particular meaning that includes both showing up to enact utopian realities and fostering *feminismo-en-lugar*, a place-based feminist ethics of care. This ethics of care involves taking part in the events where utopias are rehearsed, strengthening community engagement, and building regional, national, and international networks of care and solidarity.

A method of participatory digital storytelling helps address the inevitable power hierarchies present in research by involving the storytellers in the research process. This ensures their voices and stories are not lost in academic translation, allowing her collaborators to have a say in how their stories are presented to the world. This methodological choice results in a project that emphasizes community building, survival, solidarity, and the role of women in imagining a post-conflict world, rather than trauma. In doing so, Lizarazo highlights the commitment of her collaborators—*Vamos Mujeres* (Let's Go Women), COCOMACIA (Consejo Comunitario Mayor de La Asociación Campesina Integral del Atrato), *Comisionadas de Género* (Gender Commissioners), and Women in Black—to ensuring that victims speak rather than being spoken about.

In a context marked by ideological alienation, *Postconflict Utopias* highlights collaborative memory-making—creating archives owned by Black communities in the Pacific to reclaim the space denied them within national and hegemonic discourses. Thus, memories and archives have a key position in rehearsing change by providing stable ideological foundations for a post-conflict future. They become part of a place in the making.

The book begins by discussing *Vamos Mujeres*, a group of Black women engaged in providing workshops in communities along the Atrato River, which flows from the Andes to the Caribbean. Through a detailed account of the group's work to move beyond victimhood, Lizarazo explores how the materialization of a post-conflict future is possible through the embodied, performative actions of the women who take part in the workshops.

She shows how presence is paramount to rehearsal in Chapter One. Amidst violence, participation in envisioning and rehearsing a future becomes a political act when survival and continuation are not guaranteed. Through transmitting embodied and tacit knowledge, the chapter shows how workshops serve as a communal commitment to rehearse a future.

Digital storytelling is a valuable decolonial tool and a collaborative way to build trusting relationships with local communities as an outsider. Because of the participatory nature of the research process, Lizarazo's collaboration with *Comisionadas de Género*—a group that advocates for women to take a more active role in rebuilding communities in Chocó—helped ease the effects of research fatigue she encountered at the beginning of her fieldwork. This method, which situates the research process within a pre-existing network of reciprocity that takes the form of shared time, resources, stories, and personal connections, is the subject of the second chapter. In this sense, the research process mimics everyday life and reinforces a commitment to the ethics of care that permeates the *Comisionadas*. By centring the narrative on the central role of the *Comisionadas* in their communities, these stories offer alternatives to hegemonic narratives of Colombian *mestizaje* that continue to marginalize Black communities.

Local museums, such as *Muntú Bantú* and *La Muestra Bíblica*, with their visual archives, centre Black experiences and produce collective memories that lay the groundwork for a post-conflict future. These archives show the ways Blackness is absent in Colombian historiography and reach across political borders, linking Colombian struggles to transnational ones by including important figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Luis Antonio Robles, and Toussaint Louverture, alongside Colombian figures, such as Candelario Obeso and Diego Luis Córdoba. The third chapter shows how these local museums and archives resist attempts to whiten the Colombian national image by celebrating a plurality of Colombian identities and linking Colombian Blackness to a wide range of Black identities and histories. These spaces then provide the physical infrastructure to transform trauma into memory, creating another physical node in a transnational network of solidarity and collaboration.

Digital projects that use online platforms—in this case, a website called *Memorias del Río Atrato* (Memories of the Atrato River) and an Instagram account called *Fotógrafas del Pacífico* (Woman Photographers of the Pacific)—create a decentralized space that documents Black memories. These digital archives, which are the subject of Chapter Four, are community-driven and hosted online.

For example, the *Fotógrafas del Pacífico* use hashtags to allow creators to link their Instagram posts to a broader Afro-centric network of knowledge production. These platforms allow Black narratives and experiences to transcend physical boundaries by creating a decentred knowledge production process.

Utopian rehearsal, an ethics of care, and a commitment to presence and participation contribute to forming solidarity networks that extend beyond the Chocó and are the focus of Chapter Five. Here, presence becomes central to solidarity because it conveys the embodied knowledge essential to an ethics of care. Presence becomes mobilized into caretaking at various feminist events, showing how intricate regional-to-international networks of solidarity are essential to the survival of feminist movements in both the Global South and the Global North. Reclaimed as feminist rather than feminine, caretaking transcends barriers of language, class, identity, sexuality, and nationality. These networks create spaces to perform memory and rehearse caretaking, and feminist communities become engines of political change.

In the last chapter, the book returns to small-scale interactions rather than large social movements and international interconnectedness. By refocusing the narrative on the work of *Comisionadas de Género* along the Atrato, Lizarazo shows a commitment to community survival. These everyday utopias consist of daily and otherwise mundane actions that form the basis of the ethics of care, as they are a conscious and repeated decision to prioritize the community and its survival. The *Comisionadas* and workshop participants still oversee much of the domestic work associated with women in households in the Chocó. The commitment to participate and rehearse utopian futures implies a constant negotiation between their domestic duties and their struggles to deconstruct—or at least rethink—gender roles that make it difficult for women to politically mobilize. Thus, these daily and mundane decisions to carry out tasks related to ensuring the workshops continue along the Atrato represent an arguably greater commitment than participating in large national or international events.

Postconflict Utopias is also an example of how research can live alongside violence. As the book recounts, research can become vulnerable to violence as armed groups threaten researchers and participants. By engaging with spaces that exist alongside, rather than in direct opposition to, violence, researchers can hope to conduct studies that do not add to the levels of violence already present in the daily lives of participants. By adopting a collaborative framework and engaging with the political struggles of Black communities in the Chocó, this

book shows how researchers from the Global North can help position the Global South as a site of knowledge production and consumption, disrupting the centre-periphery relationship that continues to impoverish the region today. This book has the potential to guide future researchers toward a commitment to be present and engaged, and to conduct research that contributes to healing processes.

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