

From a rural place

Edgardo Civallero

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[In Colombia, as in many other parts of South America, the flat highlands between the Andean mountains are called *páramos*. And everything from or belonging to a *páramo* is called *paramuno* — an adjective of place. I'm writing from such a place, the *páramo de Chingaza*, a National Park near Bogotá. Even if it's close to a city, the area is absolutely rural and peasant. What in Spanish is called *la ruralidad*. "The rural" or "a rural place".

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It's dawning outside. Actually, I should say that it's "clearing up": it's been days since I've seen the sun in this drizzly and foggy *paramuno* world. The mountain is cold today, opaque, humid, and invites to warm up the morning *tinto* —that's what a black coffee

is called in Colombia— and drink it while spying on the world from behind the window, well wrapped in my *ruana* [Colombian sheep-woolen poncho] and close to the stove.

A flock of *tinguas* [aquatic birds] flies by below the immense flock of clouds that covers the entire horizon in sight. They seem to be heading unhurriedly toward the not-so-distant Bogotá, those clouds. Surely, they quenched their thirst in the wetlands of Chingaza, right up there, a stone's throw away, and spent the night cradled among the old *frailejones* that still keep their roots hooked to those hills.

There in front, crossing the ravine —always hidden by a tangle of *chusque* reeds—, shriek the pair of *yátaros* [Andean toucans] that every morning go up to eat on the hill, in the patch of cloudy forest that survives between potato crops and meadows for dairy cows. Those local peasants who know and remember (and still want to speak about it) say that *yátaro*'s beaks are magical, good for those who are lovesick, and that, when they shriek, they are actually saying "diostedé" ("May God give to you"). In the forest they visit —a small universe of mosses, spider webs pearled with rain droplets, and whitish lichens hanging in shreds— they devour berries or peck at wild *curubas* [banana passion fruits], and hide among the foliage of a handful of *gaques* that still insist on surviving. Tall trees, those *gaques*, with strong trunks, and with their

branches all covered with *suches* [lichens] and some *quiches* [bromeliads] — *quiches* that accumulate water among their rigid leaves. The old storytellers say that such water is good for heart ailments. Those of the real heart, not those cured by toucans' beaks.

I open the window and yell at the fat gray cat that is stalking a white-stockinged *quincha* [hummingbird] desperately looking for a couple of sips of nectar in the two flowers that remain on the *borrachero* tree that covers the front of the yellow, peasant house where I live. A house with a *palo de monte* [eucalyptus] and *guadua* [bamboo] roof, four dogs at the door, a bunch of spiders squatting in the corners, and the fat gray cat, who hates me for not allowing him to eat hummingbirds for breakfast. A house in a world with a generally gray roof and an eternally green floor, where half of the things have names in Muisca language and have traditions that explain their "why" and their "what for", and where the rhythms —increasingly broken and forgotten— are more *adagio* than *andante*.

A house in a rural place.

I hate labels. And the countryside, the mountains, the coast, the jungle —that is, the non-urban, the *rural*— have received so many that I wouldn't know where to begin to name them. They are very noticeable, and very annoying, especially when one lives here. In the countryside. In the mountains. In the *páramo*, with his fat cat licking his left paw and looking sideways at the blackbird that came down to peck at the earth soaked by last night's downpour.

I did not always live in the countryside. I was born in Buenos Aires. When I was ten years old, and because of migration, I found myself living on the other side of the ocean, in a sleepy little town in the southeastern dusty plains of Gran Canaria, in the Canary Islands (Spain). A village surrounded by greenhouse crops, two kilometers away from a sea furrowed by fishermen, and five kilometers away from mountains where the Gran Canarian peasant life had not changed much in the last two centuries. It was there that I got to know what some have called *the rural*. The "countryside's life". And along with it I discovered the flavor of local cultures and identities, and the value of language and orality to preserve them, and the need for all of them to understand (and fall in love with) a particular territory.

Then I went back to Argentina. To the northern mountains of Córdoba province. My story repeated itself, with the addition of discovering the aboriginal peoples of my native land. I ended up living in a city, again, but I could not leave the countryside, and I spent the following years wandering through peasant and indigenous communities all over the continent. By then I was already a librarian, and my interest in cultures, oralities and territories had become more intense than ever. What role could or should libraries and archives play in those spaces, in those communities? What role had they played in the past? Had they not been tools of acculturation, of dispossession, of colonialism?

Sometime later, I migrated again, back to Spain. To a village of old shepherds and farmers located in the *sierra pobre* of Madrid — the "poor" section of the southern slopes of the Guadarrama range. There I learned to sow, to search for food in the forest and the mountains, to know the rhythms marked by the skies... All from the hand of a handful of elders who were aware that their knowledge, gathered generation after generation, was going to go away with them. It was there where I discovered that cultivating the land (and facing plagues, droughts, hail, frost...) is one of the hardest tasks I have ever attempted; that taking care of a flock of sheep is far from adorable; that ensuring a livelihood depending only on what the environment

offers is a real nightmare. It was then that I understood that the world around us — that which some call "nature", and which they look at as something distant and alien— never shows mercy to anyone or anything, and that all those societies that have managed to stay alive over the centuries in those spaces (and that have kept the rest of us alive with their work) deserve my admiration and respect.

Years after my arrival in that corner of the mountains, an internal migratory current began to arrive there: the *neo-rurals*, young urbanites, generally from Madrid, who wanted to make a living in the countryside. Most of them arrived believing they knew it all: the local peasants were a picturesque feature of those mountains, but what was needed were entrepreneurs like them, who knew how to "get the most out of nature" without remaining anchored in the knowledge of five centuries ago. Those individuals turned a tomato plant into a *trending topic*, shared their "awakenings" in their video-blogs, created a lot of unnecessary and irrelevant micro-businesses (taking advantage, by the way, of the state aid that sought to revitalize rural areas) and, after discovering that the "nature" they wanted to dominate had no mercy on them either (and that their New Age approach was not good at all), they ended up leaving the way they had come. They left behind what ended up being called "the empty Spain": the Spanish countryside, depopulated and alone. Without even those grandparents who taught me

how much or how little I know about clods of earth, migratory birds, irrigation ditches, asparagus, rains, and sheep... And about gray cats lying on their bellies, bored of not being able to chase bugs freely.

After several twists and turns, I decided to settle in Colombia. Today I spend my time between the great Bogota maelstrom and this little yellow and *paramuna* house, where I am relearning the old art of listening to the mountain, and the wind, and the clouds, and the *curuba*-eating *yátaros*. And I say that I must "relearn" because each territory has its own rhythm, its language, its culture, its history, its identity, and its traditions. If you want to know, understand, and make your own the place where you live, you must pay attention to these details, dedicate time and curiosity to them.

Every corner of this world of ours has those elements. Elements that define them, that make them what they are. Big cities as well, although, apparently, it is much more attractive to approach what has come to be called *the rural*. The non-urban. That semi-exotic margin that continues to provoke so much curiosity but that, paradoxically, few care to really know.

I said before that I can't stand labels, and *rural* is at the top of the list of the ones I hate the most. Basically, because it is opposed to *urban*, it is positioned as the "periphery" of that "center" that is the city, and it is usually synonymous with "backwardness". Or being associated with romanticized ideas of a false "return to nature", or of primitive and ancestral things. Or be linked to uninformed, hollow, and worn-out stereotypes.

These spaces, this wasteland that I now inhabit and recognize, have traditionally been ignored, denigrated, and ridiculed. Or treated with unnecessary deference. And always left aside, marginalized. Being relegated to that margin, however, does not mean that these territories have lost their voices, or their values, or their ideas. As a librarian myself, I know that it is in the margins where the main text is dynamically, unabashedly, critically and rebelliously commented upon: that handful of immobile ideas, fixed forever on straight printed lines, that try to implant the official versions of facts and things. In the white spaces surrounding them, glosses, comments, and "other stories" flourish. The same happens in the "peripheries". Those margins are trenches of resistance, and their inhabitants continue to speak, to know who they are and where they are. And while they have sometimes given up their positions or even been disbanded, they are often zealous protectors of their stories and their identities.

It has been the inhabitants of those margins —who are determined to remember, although they may do it unwillingly— who have taught me that the bird I always knew as *mainumbí*, *picaflor* or *quenti* is also called *quincha*. Just like that, in Muisca. Or that the beak of the *yátaro* —another likely Muisca word— has medicinal properties, and that its owner eats this or that fruit, and that it does so in times of cold or heat, or when the wind blows from that hill or towards that ravine, or when the fog behaves in this or that way. It is thanks to them and their ways of speaking that this foreigner is slowly and patiently managing to understand this territory that is now his own, and this local, particular, unique culture. And all its memories, its recollections, its chores, which have nothing romantic about them, even if they are beautiful and evocative.

Thanks to those who walk these roads at the side of the world, these *rural places*, I can name each of the things I see from here, from behind the window, still wrapped in this *ruana* of mine, thick, white and with the smell of sheep. I can say each one of them: *tingua*, *chusque*, *yátaro*, *curuba*, *gaque*, *suche*, *quiche*, *quincha*... To say them is to recognize them, to give them life with my voice and my thoughts. It is also to keep alive a very long tradition of tellers who understood that, in order to move through a territory, it was necessary to know it and pronounce it.

For, in short, that is what language exists for.

Outside, it begins to drizzle. The rumble of thunder comes from the north, from Tocancipá, Zipaquirá and Sesquilé, those places of ancient names and heritages. The storm will come: there are swallows flying low, and crane flies knock against the glass of the window, wanting to enter. The one that also knocks, with the same intention, is the gray cat. I let him come in and spoil him with a little piece of cheese; after all, I haven't let him hunt its morning meal. The *yátaros* screech again in the distance, and a mountain turpial whistles its "tu-tí, tu-tí, tu-tí" near the road, complaining, I am sure, of the intense cold that is coming down, and of the everlasting humidity, and of this gray light that permeates everything.

I put on my boots, stuff myself into a thick, worn pullover, and go out to protect the plants in the vegetable garden from the coming downpour. It's time to start the day here, *in this rural place*.