

**Luca Zanetti, *Colombia: al borde del paraíso*,
with an introduction by Alfredo Molano Bravo and texts
by Anamaría Bedoya Builes**

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The culmination of nearly twenty years work, Swiss-born photographer Luca Zanetti's *Colombia, al borde del paraíso* offers a series of short, informative photo stories from the vast and varied country lying beyond Colombia's narrow, but now well-trodden tourist trails. Viewed separately, these stories provide rare insight into the quotidian struggles for survival experienced by Afro-descent and indigenous inhabitants of the dense, humid Chocó; into the erosion of landscapes and communities by narco-capital and the carving up of lands in wars over resources; into the political futility and tragically high human cost of various 'wars on drugs'; into the day-to-day uncertainties experienced by guerrillas camped up in the mountains, and by the poor who risk their lives tunnelling underground for emeralds; and into the painful migrations generated by capital's redrawing of the nation's internal borders. Taken together, they offer a portrait of the resilience and dignity with which Colombians living in the social and geographical peripheries of the nation confront the multiple challenges of living a normal life.

Something of the variety of stories and subject matters gathered here inevitably militates, at least on first blush, against the development of a singular unifying 'look' in the images themselves. This variety is itself heightened by Zanetti's ability to move, and with seeming effortlessness, between portraiture and landscape, between aerial and architectural photography, as well as between split-second 'decisive moment'-style photojournalism and more studied forms of ethnographic montage. And yet, as Zanetti clarifies in the personal reflection that frames the collection, his abiding concern here is not with the elaboration of a personal style, but with capturing stories in a country that "produces more stories in one week than [his own nation] produces in a year". The challenge, then, is the challenge of doing justice to this multiplication of stories while also allowing this multiplication to work, in book format, in such a way as to allow the reader to piece together the parts into a coherent whole. It is here that the book's combination of different media – the result of extensive collaboration with the (sadly deceased) chronicler and journalist, Alfredo Molano Bravo, and (more

extensively) with journalist Anamaría Bedoya Builes – must be underscored as a strength.

In Zanetti's collaboration with Bedoya, we get a salutary reminder, first, that photos never tell the whole story, and secondly, that without the photographer's immersion into these stories, something of their human and emotional weight would be lost. Anamaría Bedoya's detailed but succinct texts – written in the spirit of Molano's own voluminous corpus – thus enrich Zanetti's images with a moving and informative combination of oral history, journalistic fact-finding, and poetic reflection. They do so without 'translating' the content of such images, and in a way that allows the images to speak beyond their enlistment as 'mere' evidentiary or documentary material. In the first section, for example, she outlines the colonial history behind the labours of Afro-descent male 'paseros' pictured lugging people and goods on their backs through the jungles surrounding Pie de Pató. She also details the conflicts raging just over the horizon of the tangled mangrove-thickets where we're shown an elderly Tumaqueña on her backbreaking daily wade through mud in search of clams ('pianguas'). These texts help us to 'see' around the edges of Zanetti's images, and to sense how those edges coincide with the titular 'border-zones' – real and metaphorical – where an abundant 'paradise' teeters precariously at the brink of abyssal accumulated injury.

In the later sections, these real and metaphorical 'border-zones' come together in arresting ways, and to evidence careful reflection on the photographer's part on the representational challenges posed by the task of photographing a nation in so many senses 'on the edge'. This is not, of course, the first work to picture Colombia 'on the edge of paradise' – Jorge Isaacs' *María* (1867), most memorably, located 'paradise' (the name of the estate belonging to the protagonist's slave-holding family) between natural abundance and political disintegration, between radical isolation from the world and exposure to modernity's globalising processes. A hundred and fifty years later, as Zanetti's photos show, the estates may have changed hands but it's the working people, not the estate owners, who bear the brunt of capital's disjunctive,

dislocating effects. As with *María*, the images capture the isolation of history's 'losers' – isolation powerfully captured in the discomfiting blankness returned by the gaze of many of Zanetti's subjects. Yet in their subtle attention to detail – the branded t-shirts, caps, and jeans, the ubiquitous Casio watches (one worn as a talisman by a Nukak man posing in a refugee camp outside San José del Guaviare), the ingenious contraptions devised to smuggle drugs into 'la United', and the African hippos taking a dip in the infamous *capo's* former country park – they also point to the shaping of this history by forces originating far beyond the nation's borders. These details will disarm any reader, as will Zanetti's perhaps more conventional engagement with the grubby human underbelly of the global traffic in Colombia's more notorious exports.

Perhaps the most striking take-away from Zanetti's collaborative work, though – one underscored both by Molano's sweeping introduction and by Bedoya's detailed supplementary articles – is the evidence it offers of the persistence, nay, *worsening* of conflicts over resources since the signing of peace with the FARC in 2016, and particularly so in regions like the Chocó, like the *llanos orientales*, like the southwest, and like Amazonia, where the peace proposals were met with great hopes and expectations. For here, as these stories reveal, peace with the FARC has paved the way for the free exercise of an altogether more deadly para-state war-machine hell-bent on divvying up paradise into farmsteads for a select few. Paradise for some, a descent into hell for so many more – a tension that Zanetti's eye registers with unobtrusive compassion.