

Catching the White Fish: gossip and cocaine on Colombia's Northern Pacific coast

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What is life like after drift-cocaine arrives in a village on Colombia's Northern Pacific coast? Drift-cocaine is a side-effect of the interdiction of drug transport boats heading towards Central and North America as part of the US-Colombian War on Drugs. Villagers refer to drift-cocaine as the White Fish. Through ethnographic engagement with Afro-descendant peoples in Chocó, this article explores the effects and relations that emerge from an ocean turned into an amphitheatre of fishing livelihoods, drug traffickers, and military operations. By taking seriously the White Fish as the way people refer to cocaine, I focus on gossip and rumour as the strategies they employ to discuss the pervasive effects of the drug trade. I trace three interrelated discussions – concerning violence, cocaine, and the White Fish – in order to argue for the usefulness of gossip and rumour in investigative ethnographies of violence.

Introducing the White Fish

My first encounter with the White Fish was in a three-wheeler taxi in a small village in Chocó, on Colombia's Northern Pacific coast, home to Afro-descendant fishing communities. I had taken a seat in the back of the taxi, which, two blocks into our journey, stopped to pick up two middle-aged local women. They both squeezed into the back seat next to me. I could tell that the driver, who seemed very formal when I first entered the taxi, already knew one of the women by the way they warmly greeted one another. We shared the one-hour ride together, and after some polite small talk, the driver began complaining about the current situation in the village. 'It's been many years since fish has been so scarce,' he muttered. To which the woman replied, 'It's been many years since fishermen have been so scarce, because fishermen are out trying White Fishing.' At the time, there seemed an incongruity to me in the statement that there was not enough fish because fishermen were out trying to catch one particular type.

To the untrained ear, the White Fish is just another sea creature. But for those who live in the coastal villages, it is a matter of serious concern as a transformation in practices and communal relationships is taking hold of communities in this part

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of rural, coastal Colombia. The White Fish is no marine being that consumes or reproduces in any biological sense. Rather, to my surprise, as one fisherman candidly told me, it denotes a substance that lies at the heart of much social, political, and economic life across many parts of South America: cocaine.

In this brief example, it is possible to see an array of social meanings and contexts in the communication of cocaine trade realities. People employ the White Fish (*El Pez Blanco*) and the associated term White Fishing (*La Pesca Blanca*) as ways to refer to the illegal economy of cocaine. In fact, this use of hidden meanings and discussions about third parties illustrates a variety of issues discussed by scholars working with *gossip* and *rumour* that appear conflated in a context of violence. First, there is the use of the White Fish as a metaphor implying cocaine, delineating shared group membership of the female and male interlocutors. I am an additional presence, a listener whom the other two parties find unfamiliar, which could explain why they resort to using a metaphor to exclude me. Second, it implies a normative preoccupation with the lack of an otherwise abundant food type. Third, possibly informed by anecdotal evidence, it communicates through a generalization the fishermen's whereabouts.

Since the 1960s, these three interrelated points – albeit not in relation specifically to White Fishing – have been much debated in anthropology, with several articles published in *Man*, the former name of this journal. Two main traditions continue to permeate current scholarship: functionalism and post-structuralism. Within the former, research reflects attempts to answer the question of why and to what end people gossip. In a seminal article, Gluckman (1963) argued that gossip has the social function of reinforcing norms and contributing to the unity of a group of people by delineating exclusionary boundaries of information. Paine (1967) gave an alternative hypothesis: individuals engage in gossiping to advance their own interest in controlling information flows. Both positions reflected the long-standing divide in research foci between the individual and the group, or between psychology and sociology. Several years after, Peter Wilson (1974), looking for the middle ground, and aiming to reinvigorate the debate, analysed gossip as a cultural phenomenon in which the individual acts in a social setting that, he argues, functions as a means to defend privacy. While these arguments, to an important extent, underpin recent interventions (e.g. Besnier 2009; Raj 2019; Scott 1990), they leave room for scholars to raise questions about the meaning and transmission of gossip, as I will show below.

In post-structuralism, scholarship reflects possible answers to the question of what gossip and rumour are. In particular, anthropologists' concern lies in the ways rumour shapes what people think they know, 'blurring the boundaries between events "witnessed" and those envisioned' (Stoler 1992: 154). Hence, Paz (2009) suggests that gossip should be studied as a genre of conversation in its own right, which can be understood to combine fictional and real elements. Similarly, Sirimarco (2017) ponders the role of gossip in producing ethnographic data as it blurs the limits between imagined and actual events. Considering gossip as a type of 'data' brings forth a host of questions for anthropological theory concerning the validity of the information collected, the social setting in which the ethnographer becomes aware of something, as well as the type of information left out from or brought into an ethnography. In the field, it is not only respondents who employ gossip to communicate; anthropologists, too, gain insights, gather information, and interact with people through gossiping. This, Van Vleet (2003) tells us, need not mean gossip is an invalid type of evidence; instead the knowledge it contains is partial. Gossip and rumour are not authoritative sources, nor should they be

taken as such. This contrasts with several anthropologists' claims that we should take informants' accounts at face value (e.g. Henare, Holbraad & Wastell 2006; Viveiros de Castro 2015). While this is not uncontroversial, the validity of gossip as 'data' should always be linked to the 'situated position' of the interlocutors (Haraway 1988), which layers the ethnographic evidence. This indeterminacy of the ethnographic evidence, I argue, can be understood to operate in three zones: one of hiddenness, referring to that which cannot be verified or accounted for by the ethnographer; one of the well known and clearly observed in the field; and one of gossip and speculation, which lies in between the other two and is so palpable in violent contexts.

Violent social spaces – of torture, killing, and so on – are characterized by conflicting ideas of what count as facts. A salient example from Colombia is Taussig's analysis of Roger Casement's report of atrocities in Putumayo's rubber extraction industry, where he argues that a culture of terror was constituted in 'the coils of rumour, gossip, story and chit-chat' (1984: 494) that implied the interplay of truth and illusion, creating 'epistemic murk' (1984: 492), and ultimately making terror a social force for domination in its own right. Similarly in Krohn-Hansen's anthropology of violence, he argues that the 'endless rumours, elusive gossip and silent pauses' help sustain what he calls a 'cosmos of doubt' in which actors construct their realities in indeterminate forms (1994: 375). Furthermore, Luna (2018), building on Taussig (1984) and working in the context of narco-violence in Mexico, shows that rumour's 'epistemic murk' adds power to fear, with effects upon people (i.e. subjugation, terror) that cross-cut through racial, class, and citizenship privileges. What is essential to understand here is that in violent contexts, such as in Chocó, rumour, with its uncertainty and partiality, pierces the veil of fundamental reality that lies just beyond the ethnographer's reach.

For an anthropologist working in a context of violence, validation comes from engaging in social life through overhearing conversations, making sense of non-verbal communication, and providing safe spaces for discussion. Researchers must then discern between and pay attention to an array of different voices. In this sense, Ballvé (2020), exploring the methodological challenges of accessing and working with violent economic situations in Colombia, proposes 'investigative ethnography' that combines journalism's documentary evidence and public record research with ethnography's immersive fieldwork. The cocaine trade is a difficult subject that substantially limits the possibilities for direct participant observation as it involves a complex, political, and violent reality. Yet, more than the macro aspects of the war on drugs, I am interested in the everyday experiences of dealing with it, akin to what Al-Mohammad (2015) calls the 'rough ground of the everyday' in the context of Iraq, in order to signal the ethics and care involved in mundane encounters within violent contexts. Since a researcher working in violent contexts is in a privileged position in terms of social difference, their role in guiding the exchanges with informants, and their ability to *leave* the field if the situation worsens, that field is politically constituted (Nelson 1996). This implies expanding what constitutes ethnographic evidence in order to include gossip and rumour accounts, which, I argue, afford the ethnographer and the participants a coded language with which to discuss complex and difficult realities without endangering oneself and others. The task, then, is to sketch out the social relations between the individuals and the group, and the dynamics and the logics according to which gossip and rumours take place.

Gossip and rumour are employed in this article as gateways to examine narratives told candidly in interviews, small talk, and everyday situations, in order to delineate the

spill-over economy of cocaine in the coastal villages around Utría National Park, Chocó. I approach gossip as a social practice through which people make sense and communicate their partial knowledge of salient relationships and events in which they are not necessarily directly involved. By employing gossip and rumour as evidence of otherwise concealed realities, I provide a complementary argument to investigative ethnographies of economies of violence, thereby showing the complementarity in violent contexts of post-structuralist and functionalist approaches to gossip and rumour.

This article draws from ethnographic fieldwork conducted for six months in three stages between 2015 and 2016 on the coastal towns and villages around Utría National Park. While the Utría area is inhabited by both Afro-descendant and indigenous Embera communities, for this article I only include materials¹ pertaining to the Afro-descendant communities, for two reasons. First, their villages are located in the coastal area, which is the scenario of the drug trade. Second, I have no indication of the involvement of the Embera in this activity. As it became evident that cocaine was rapidly becoming an important livelihood, it was included as one among the other nine interview themes of family history, tourism, transportation, infrastructure, public services, governance, the national park, the presence of governmental agencies, and their personal history in relation to the country's armed conflict. Since tourism articulates most of the local livelihoods, participants from the Afro-descendant community were selected for interview based on their ties to this sector, which included local authority employees, park officials, hotel staff, fishermen, restaurant owners, artisans, boat drivers, tour guides, and farmers. During the time of my fieldwork, the Colombian government was holding peace talks with the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrilla group in Havana, Cuba. This created a hiatus in violence across the country, facilitating my access to areas affected by armed conflict and drug trafficking. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Owing to the sensitive nature of this ongoing issue, specific locations are omitted and pseudonyms are used.

The remainder of this article is divided into four sections. In the first, I provide context and offer ethnographic examples of people talking about the political violence. In the second section, I focus on the spill-over economy of cocaine in Chocó. In the third section, I attend to stories where villagers discuss spending, accumulation, and redistribution of wealth derived from the White Fish. The fourth provides concluding remarks concerning gossip, violence, and wealth.

The peoples of Utría National Park

Utría National Park is located on the Northern Pacific coast of Colombia, close to the border with Panama. The park and its surrounding villages are flanked by the summit of the Serranía del Baudó mountain range, which isolates the area from the rest of the country, making access possible only by sea, by plane, or by walking for days through the tropical rainforest. The area is home to Afro-descendant communities who live in coastal towns and villages outside the park, as well as a minority of indigenous Embera peoples who mostly live in villages in the rainforest, some within the park. Houses, in villages and towns, are generally wooden; some are thatched and others have zinc, cement, or tile roofs. The number of residents ranges from a few hundred in the villages to a few thousand in the towns.

The indigenous and Afro-descendant communities of Chocó have shared a common and entangled history of colonization, dispossession, and violence since the arrival of

Europeans half a millennium ago in order to exploit the region's riches (see, e.g., Escobar 2008; Taussig 2004; Wade 2016). The indigenous communities are the descendants of those who resisted and survived the conquistadors' efforts to subjugate and enslave them (e.g. Colmenares 1979; OREWA 1995). The communities of African descent are the progeny of people who were forcibly brought from Western Sub-Saharan and Central Africa as slave labour for gold mines and sugarcane plantations located in the Pacific region (Granda 1971; Maya Restrepo 1998). The mines and plantations were managed from the nearby Andean cities in the departments of Popayán and Antioquia (Jimeno, Sotomayor & Valderrama 1995). During the colonial era, some slaves managed to escape to remote places in the rainforest, where they organized in small villages, some of them along the coast (Meza 2010), while others had to wait until their colonial masters were forced by the newly formed Colombian state to emancipate their slave labour in the mid-nineteenth century (Wade 2005).

The shared, yet distinct, history of colonization of both Embera and Afro-descendant communities permeates their contemporary life. For example, under the Colombian Constitution of 1991, both peoples are granted communal lands and the right to prior and informed consent, among others. However, only indigenous peoples enjoy a separate legal jurisdiction and autonomous law. Awarded under a separate provision, which later became Law 70/1993, the rights of Afro-descendant peoples allow communal management of lands and resources. These territories are managed by an elected board of the Concejo Comunitario (Communal Council) that advocates for the defence of ancestral traditions and legal rights (CCGLR 2007). However, the decisions of the board are not legally binding, resting solely on the community's will to enforce them.

In the area around Utría, both Afro-descendant and Embera communities exercise their constitutional rights today. However, these have also come with their own struggles. During the creation of the park in 1987, while the Embera were allowed to remain, the Afro-descendant community was evicted (Acosta García & Farrell 2019). Many people settled in nearby villages. Additionally, a few families from Antioquia moved into the area lured by the prospects of tourism and commerce. Today, unresolved tensions continue between the communities and the park administration regarding the management of local natural resources as local communities depend to various extents on activities that can be seen to be in conflict with the park's conservation objectives, such as fishing, agriculture, forestry, and hunting (Acosta García, Farrell, Heikkinen & Sarkki 2017). Nevertheless, there has also been some degree of synergy between the administration and the Afro-descendant community. For example, it is through the activism of the Concejos Comunitarios, fishermen, and the park administration that since 2013 the government agency for fisheries, AUNAP (Autoridad Nacional de Acuicultura y Pesca – National Authority for Aquaculture and Fishing), has forbidden industrial fishing from the areas used by Afro-descendant communities. AUNAP's regulation covers 240 km of shoreline from the border with Panama to the park within a 4 km buffer zone (AUNAP 2013).² Despite these combined efforts, however, fishing is far from being a profitable livelihood and many resort to alternating between different activities. Ángel, a young man whom I interviewed while he was getting ready to set sail, explains these difficulties:

This is how we survive, when there is no fishing we do tourism, when there is no tourism many guys do agriculture ... We survive one way or another. There are months when fishing is very good and

others when we throw three thousand hooks, and from those three thousand we catch ten fish ... When there is fishing, there is a month, for example, when fish pull [the hooks], others when they don't. But this has changed through the [climatic] phenomena that have happened. El Niño comes and lashes us here, [and] then the many waters warm up and cool down and so on. Back then, fish used to have their seasons and their months when one would find them. Now this has changed.

While mostly self-sufficient in food production, the local economy of the Afro-descendant villages relies to a great extent for cash on production networks associated with tourism such as hotels, restaurants, guides, agriculture, and fishing. People alternate between these activities according to economic opportunities. Fishing is by far the main activity, with the size of the catch dependent on climatic conditions. It is conducted all year round and available to virtually everyone. In some villages, fishermen are organized in associations that through the help of NGOs sell their catch to high-end restaurants in the cities. Nevertheless, the general economic situation is far from easy and the use of the word 'survive' in Ángel's speech is not accidental. In the Utría area, the situation regarding state services and infrastructure is precarious: there is minimal sanitation infrastructure and very limited healthcare, a predicament that is not unrelated to structural and historical discrimination against these communities (Acosta García & Farrell 2019).

The arrival of political violence

For decades, Utría National Park and its surroundings have been promoted as a prime destination for ecotourism and whale watching (DNP 2008). The local tourism industry is organized in ASOECO (Asociación de Hoteleros Ecoturísticos de Nuquí y Bahía Solano – Association of Ecotourism Hotel Owners of Nuquí and Bahía Solano), which covers all tourism-related production networks in the area, such as tour guides, hotels, restaurants, transport, agriculture, and fishing, among others. This association began in 1995 and expanded rapidly with international co-operation funds that sought to make ecotourism a sustainable livelihood in the area.

The coastal villages surrounding Utría did not witness armed conflict until 2002, when kidnappings began, reflecting disputes between state and non-state armed actors. Then, a group of eighty tourists from Cali came for sports fishing. Jorge, one of the local fishermen who was taking a group of tourists on his boat to see Utría's inlet, recalls the incident vividly:

We were just about to disembark, and the guerrillas were behind some bushes. They jumped on us. Three on each side to catch the boats so we wouldn't leave. They said: 'This is a kidnapping'. I had never met a guerrilla in my life. I asked: 'What do you mean by a kidnapping? These people are just carrying COP100,000 [ca. US\$30] pesos to pay for the trip, and I have the gas, and my boat. We are just passing by' ... They held us all until six. They took everything, the propellers from the motors, and they poured gas on my boat to light it up. I said: 'No, please don't. If you burn it, I have no means to pay for it. It's a rental. I'll go to jail'. So they heard me and they stopped. They took twenty-six tourists and then came the downfall. Three years without a single tourist coming. Five years after, they would come sporadically. It was really dead.

The ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – National Liberation Army) guerrilla group kidnapped the park director together with these twenty-six tourists, holding them for six months (*El Tiempo* 2003). The kidnapping was widely covered in the press at the time (e.g. McGirk 2002). Francesco, a park official, told me how five years later, as tourism was starting to gain momentum through the participation of local representatives of ASOECO in national and international tourism fairs, there was

another kidnapping of students and their professors. Shortly after, the first paramilitary group arrived. These are right-wing armed groups, financed both by large landowners and by drug trafficking activities, acting in opposition to the guerrilla groups and often working in collusion with the army. When asked about the community's response, Francisco recalled:

When the armed groups started settling, people complained. They would say, 'Hey look, there is a group here', and the army would come to see what was going on, or they would fight them and they would leave. Here they [a paramilitary group] wanted to settle. They didn't last for a year, just six months, because the people would start kicking them out. Many local people became paramilitary, and with the laws they caught them, put them on trial and in jail. Today there are several of them [former paramilitaries] in jail because of that. So, they [the paramilitary] saw that the people from the town were serious and they started leaving. [The remaining ones] were brought to the authorities. [People would say]: 'Look, this one is *paraco* [paramilitary]', and the police would catch them, torture them, beat them up with batons, and they would end up leaving.

Some participants tell this story with a sense of pride. This type of arrangement where local communities are able to deal with local disputes in which both guerrilla and paramilitary groups tried to settle is not uncommon in Colombia (Cancimance López 2017; Mouly, Garrido & Idler 2016). The difference here lies in the role of the Concejo Comunitario board members, who often negotiated directly with armed actors, asking them to leave, as well as working with the police and the military in order to provide what Goldstein (2005) refers to as 'self-help security'. Despite the success of the board in keeping armed groups at bay, a new cycle of violence soon emerged.

Spill-over economies of cocaine

Colombia has been the world's top producer of cocaine for over twenty years and therefore a main player in the war on drugs (UNODC 2016). The majority of the country's armed conflict, including cocaine production and trafficking, has taken place in rural areas. Ballvé (2013: 239), working in Chocó's Caribbean gulf of Urabá, argues that these territories are actively produced – by peasants, narco-paramilitaries, landowners, insurgents, or the government – as both an object of political contestation and a trigger for peasants' reclamation of lands. Chocó's complex social dynamics became evident from the moment when I began planning my trip. A short message to my family in Bogotá telling them of my plans to conduct research in this area quickly escalated into messages and phone calls expressing their worries, including a mention of the past kidnappings. This extended to the point where I was even asked if I needed a letter from the army addressed to the university explaining why I should not, or even could not, conduct my research in this area. Adding to this tension, in November 2014, FARC kidnapped an army general near Quibdó, the department's capital. This kidnapping was the first of its kind in sixty years of armed conflict and was presented on the news as a major setback for the peace negotiations with FARC that were ongoing at the time (*El Tiempo* 2014). Despite this complex landscape, during the beginning of my fieldwork I found a surprisingly peaceful situation in the villages surrounding Utría National Park: people leaving their doors and windows open every day; everyone greeting each other; buoyant commerce; and bored policemen playing on their mobile phones, when they were not flirting with local women. Not the type of situation one would expect in an area with armed conflict and a drug trade as it is reported in the news and in scholarly literature (Cancimance López 2017; Huezco 2019).

If, in general, local people seemed worried about occasional petty theft rather than, as I expected, drug-related violence, in what ways was this situation possible?

The cocaine that reaches coastal Chocó arrives on speedboats from the country's southern departments of Putumayo and Nariño (Cancimance López 2017; Huerdo 2019; Jansson 2006; Lyons 2016; Tate 2015), where coca is farmed, processed into cocaine, and packed and sealed in plastic in the form of bricks. In 2005, cocaine production peaked for the first time at approximately 800 tonnes per year (SIMCI-UNODC 2013). Then drug traffickers from the Andes bought properties in the Utría area, superficially as holiday homes, but with the ulterior motive of money laundering. Some of the properties include beachfront houses. As most of the land is collectively owned, there are just a handful of such properties. Details about them are not hard to come by, as most residents know which ones were purchased when and by whom. Typically, people talk about them with an air of disregard, because towards the end of the noughties these properties were confiscated by the authorities. This explains why they are virtually abandoned and why there is no perceived danger in talking about them.

After the 2005 peak, cocaine production declined until 2013, when it once again started increasing, up to approximately 1,400 tonnes in 2017 (SIMCI-UNODC 2018). Participants trace the arrival of the White Fish back to 2008, coinciding with a stark increase in coca production in the Southern Pacific area (SIMCI-UNODC 2013). Francisco, the park official, provides further insight:

After the groups of paramilitaries and guerrillas left ... then came from Buenaventura and Lopez de Micay all those speedboats loaded with cocaine towards Central America. When they were intercepted on the high seas or bombarded, drugs would end up in the sea. Many people would find them and it became many people's livelihood.

Lopez de Micay is a small town, and Buenaventura is Colombia's largest port on the Pacific. Both are located over 200 km south from Utría and serve as ports for drug trafficking networks (Huerdo 2019). In Chocó, as Miguel, a community leader and member of the board of the Concejo Comunitario explains, the White Fish implies a special relation between cocaine and fishermen. It arrives by chance, when the authorities pursue and occasionally sink the speedboats of drug traffickers. During pursuit, sometimes traffickers drop off packs of cocaine into the open sea, hoping they can recover them later. From these drifting packs of cocaine, fishermen sometimes catch the White Fish with their traditional fishing gear, just like they find any other fish on the sea.³ Some of them set sail actively looking for it, others happen upon it by chance. Fishermen interpret the winds and the currents they are so familiar with, albeit not always with success. People refer to these fishermen wittily as 'fishermen of hopes',⁴ alluding to the high expectations and low probability of actually finding the White Fish instead of pursuing an actual fish catch. Miguel, explains the situation:

Practically, regarding White Fishing, the people, the youth, the fishermen ... there is a specific time during the year. The government shoots down the boats that carry drugs, and when this happens, the people go either to walk down the beach or to fish. They find two packs, two kilos, and then they come and sell it and become rich. That is what is happening all along the Pacific coast ... Because after they shoot the boats down it goes like crazy, it sprays everywhere, and the waters send it here and there, or the winds do. Well, it's the scourge of this area ... if you are lucky you will find it.

The northern part of Chocó by the border of Panama serves as a strategic corridor connecting the Pacific and Caribbean basins. Guerrillas, paramilitary groups, and drug gangs have disputed regional control for years (Villarraga Sarmiento 2014).

Organized criminal structures transport and smuggle the cocaine from Southern producing regions towards Central and North America (Rincón-Ruiz & Kallis 2013; R. Wilson & Zambrano 1994). These structures are said to have inherited the business from now extinct paramilitary groups (Lyons 2016). According to a report from the Ombudsman's office, in the coastal area the only armed actor currently present is the AGC (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia – 'Gaitanist' Self-defence Forces of Colombia) paramilitary group, which 'holds collusion and non-aggression agreements with the army in territories of Chocó's Pacific municipalities ... [as] this territory is a strategic point to control export of narcotics and import of supplies' (Defensoria del Pueblo 2017: 4). For the villages and towns around Utría, the Serranía del Baudó mountain range acts as a natural barrier that hinders mobility of traffickers in the area. Most of the armed groups and drug traffickers therefore tend to avoid inland transit and the Embera communities living in the mountainous rainforest report the presence of neither group in their lands.

On the other hand, fishermen, sailors, and coastal residents learn to navigate through the drug trafficking context by making legible the constantly changing dynamics of the trading routes. For example, Rubén is a farmer who lives with his family on an idyllic beach on a river delta. The area is only accessible by boat. He has a small cabin that he rents out to tourists. When there is no tourism, he alternates between fishing and agriculture. On one occasion when his younger daughter became ill, they went to the closest town. As Rubén recounted to me:

We went out and left the beach alone and people took advantage [of the opportunity], and stashed in that mangrove [something] ... I don't know if when they stashed it, someone grassed on someone else because the army came right away, just after we had returned. We didn't know ... When I arrived [at the beach], the army's boat was leaving the river and turning towards the beach. I said hello. We spoke and everything was ok. There was a corporal whom I had taken a passenger boat with before ... I saw him and said hi and everything was ok. They [traffickers] had put like six oil drums with gasoline there in that hill where we rarely walk ... So they brought down those six drums ... And we are so innocent that those people came and took their stuff and we never found out when this happened.

Rubén said he felt lucky he was unaware of the presence of the fuel that could be used by traffickers for their speedboats, or at least he claimed to be. He was glad that his previous acquaintance with the corporal kept the situation on good terms. Although from his account ignorance seems bliss, feigning it can also be a survival strategy to be able to continue his life in tranquillity. His account also reveals that drug traffickers and the army alike produce the beaches as spaces they can take control of, rendering Rubén as a passive object in that representation. Moreover, it shows some of the everyday strategies that people employ to survive, commenting and speculating about what they know (Paine 1967), as well as invoking ignorance and feigned ignorance to fend off armed actors, state-sanctioned or otherwise (Gluckman 1963; 1968). For others like Ramiro, a non-local hotel entrepreneur, the situation is unproblematic:

There are no guerrillas here, there is nothing here. What we have here is a drug trafficking route. There are some shady characters who move some illegal merchandise from town to town, and these guys are trouble, they go around armed, they are bullies. But, if you don't mess with them, you don't notice that this exists. There are just a few. It's not like one would say that this is full with armed narcotics, no. They come and when there is a shipment, the boss orders them to move [to each] village. They monitor the situation and move their merchandise north ... They only care about their drugs. They are not interested in any tourist, so it is not a problem.

The situation is not generalized across the region, and some people – such as Ramiro, who manages to avoid the drug traffickers – do not find it problematic so long as such routes remain hidden and do not interfere with their business. Nevertheless, the active presence of the military indicates a delicate balance. Several times, I found groups of soldiers camping in the rainforest around the villages. Moreover, one early morning a village where I was staying had soldiers in every single corner. When asked about their presence, the soldiers said they were on a military operation against drug traffickers.

Despite the active presence of the military, for some unlucky people, the White Fish also carries connotations of violence. The general state of calm broke one morning when I ran into Maria – a cheerful woman in her forties who has a small shop on the outskirts of one of the villages. After greeting me formally, she began crying. She told me what had happened to her and her brother one night earlier in the week, and asked that I include her story in my recordings:

First it was the presence of the paramilitaries ... this year, they tied up Juan at the beach. They beat him up. It was the paramilitaries, I think, they threatened us not to tell the authorities ... they took everything we had ... everything for our business, drinks, groceries, they broke things ... They said they were looking for something there that another group had stored and they asked us if we knew anything. But tell me, what would we know? We were just caught in the middle.

For Maria and Juan, this was a one-time occurrence, and in general, stories of drug-related violence in this region are still uncommon – or at least remain unspoken. In this case, my presence was seen by Maria as an opportunity to raise her voice and discuss the situation safely (Scott 1990). Although Maria claimed to know that some of the people who assaulted them lived in the village, they decided not to tell the authorities or to leave the village as they feared the possible collusion between the authorities and the traffickers, which could make them the subject of the latter's retaliation. Nevertheless, the performance of the narco-paramilitaries was enough to keep Maria and Juan awake at night for many months and to change the way they understand the space around them and behave in relation to it. Months after, the siblings told me that they feared that some other armed actor might set up a storage space close to their property or that they might receive undesired visits again. Their perception of a space depends on the way their knowledge is shaped, as well as on ignorance, feigned or not, of the traffickers' activities. That knowledge is communicated through gossip and rumour (Paz 2009), and through direct observation and experience. From these accounts, the territory along the coast can be described as being transformed by the White Fish into an amphitheatre of the navy, the communities, and the drug traffickers, where gossip and rumour allow the coastal residents to comment on, speculate about, and navigate through the economy of violence.

Gossip and rumours of White Fishing

In the villages, people say that mostly young fishermen are actively looking for the White Fish in the sea. There are also rumours that many people have become involved in organizing shipments to Central America, including teachers and local officials looking to make quick profits. The government classifies Chocó as the poorest region in the country with 59 per cent of the population living in poverty (monthly incomes below US\$66 per person) and 34.7 per cent in extreme poverty (monthly incomes below US\$33 per person) (DANE 2018). Hence, opportunities for improving quality of life,

such as those granted by the White Fish, can seldom be disregarded. As Pablo, a local fisherman, explains:

The White Fish is a national and global issue, and Colombia and everyone needs to understand that in Colombia 80 per cent of the people have no access to [a job in] a company and that people have no access to create small or medium-size enterprises. People have no knowledge or skill, and in this country the economy is coca, for the whole of Colombia. Everyone needs to understand that, and the whole world needs to know.

While the lack of opportunities is very problematic, for any newcomer there is an overall impression of prosperity in the villages that stands in stark contrast to both governmental statistics and the lack of job opportunities depicted by Pablo. In the area, I frequently encountered new buildings, new cars, restaurants where food was sold out, and people who always found reasons to celebrate with giant loudspeakers. In most villages, people readily displayed their electronic gadgets, which included computers, televisions, sound systems, and smartphones. Some new cars and a few pick-up trucks drove along the dirt roads. Everyone appeared to be benefiting from the contingent prosperous times. Alberto, a man in his fifties who works as a taxi driver and mechanic, explained to me with some disdain the local dynamics:

Coca is brought by sea. When it falls into the sea [boats having been chased by the navy], fishermen bring it, and [people] who have friends outside [the villages] buy it and bring the money back as refrigerators, washing machines, appliances ... I'm talking about a billion or two billion pesos [ca. US\$300,000–600,000] ... [A trafficker may ask] How many packs do you have? [Someone may answer] I have three packs. Each pack has 25 kilos and is worth COP2.5 million [ca. US\$800] per kilo. So, they say: I have one for you hidden in that place, it is worth COP500 million [ca. US\$150,000]. [The traffickers answer] We will give you COP250 million [ca. US\$75,000] at your home and the rest in the place where we pick it up, and so they go.

The income from the White Fish is substantial, and for some people it appears to be more appealing than other lines of work. As in any other livelihood in these villages, White Fishing is combined with other activities and seeds new economies. When asked about the 'friends' that Alberto refers to obliquely, he explained they are *paisa*⁵ drug-traffickers from the nearby city of Medellín whom some people have contact with. As he explained, the rumour is that the *paisas* who live in the villages and control most of the commerce know people from Antioquia who are traffickers.

In one of the villages, it is impossible to miss a group of four shops located on the main street; the two-storey buildings look new and are constructed adjacent to each other. One informant explained to me that there were rumours that the *paisa* owner of these shops had invested his White Fishing earnings in expanding and improving his businesses and bringing new products to sell in town (cf. Zhu 2018). The rumours could be understood as a use of Othering (Paine 1967) to undermine the perceived success of the *paisas* in conducting business, as well as reflecting the thorny colonial past, in which Chocó's mines and slave labour were managed from Antioquia (Jimeno *et al.* 1995). Moreover, it is challenging to discern the incomes generated from White Fish from those resulting from other types of economic activities, as they may benefit indirectly from increased expenditure resulting from the general prosperity.

While strolling around the village, I made a comment to José, a local farmer, about the number of new buildings and houses, some under construction. I pointed out that, to my eyes, the owners seemed to be well-off. Many houses had new cars parked in front. José stopped in his tracks. He looked around, checking to see if there were any other people in the street. It was empty. After a short pause, we resumed walking and

talking. José whispered to me, explaining that many of the houses under construction were the result of the White Fish. The new cars and white concrete houses with tinted windows jogged my memory. Even though here the situation was far more modest, I clearly recalled the architectural particularities found in other places in Colombia, characterized by displays of abundance that mix icons of prestige, a sensibility that Rincón (2009) calls 'narco.aesthetics'. This is the case in the Andean cities of Medellín and Cali, where luxurious and flamboyant neighbourhoods were built by the drug cartels in the 1980s and 1990s (Britto 2015). In this sense, the new houses in coastal villages contrast with the traditional colourful wooden stilt houses standing next to them.

People tell stories that sound closer to fiction about the amounts of cash and the lavish spending⁶ of the lucky people who have discovered the White Fish, thus illuminating the ongoing transformation. For instance, a neighbour of Alberto received a large payment for some packs he came across when he was returning from retrieving his fishing gear late in the afternoon. As it was a substantial amount of cash, Alberto's neighbour buried it in one of the beaches near the town. A few months later, he returned and dug out his treasure of banknotes, only to find it rotten and destroyed by moisture, Chocó being one of the rainiest places on the planet. Alberto laughed loudly when he told me this story. Now when he sees his neighbour, he teases him by calling him the poorest rich man in the village. Other rumour stories recall how locals who came across the White Fish spent their money on large quantities of expensive liquor, to the point where, as Alberto put it, 'some people showered with whisky', bought new cars, appliances, and even rented aeroplanes to go partying in Cali, Quibdó, and Medellín.

During my time in the villages, I also expected at some point to run into a stranded pack on the beach. On some occasions, I found myself curiously looking at the sea below the horizon for anything floating that could resemble a pack or packs, as I was told one could sometimes see them drifting. Needless to say, I never saw or found anything extraordinary, only regular driftwood and plastic bottles. Taussig, working also in Chocó, tells us that cocaine and gold are fetishes that seem to 'come across more like people than things, spiritual entities that are neither. As fetishes, gold and cocaine play subtle tricks upon human understanding' (2004: xviii). It is not surprising, then, that I was also 'tricked' into perceiving the White Fish as an agent that could eventually arrive at the beach or that could somehow manifest itself.

Stories of the White Fish appear to involve mostly 'lucky' individuals, in contrast to the coca farmers in Southern Colombia, where entire villages and towns are caught in the crossfire of the state's war on drugs (Lyons 2016; Tate 2015). Luck is not only a determinant for the 'fishermen of hopes' in finding drifting packs of cocaine, but also for any lucky villager who might find a pack washed up on the beach. I came to understand this through Pedro, a local official. In one of the villages, people gather every night to talk on their phones at a particular spot on the beach. Though there is no light here, this is where they are able to get mobile phone reception. Every night, Pedro fends off swarms of mosquitos in order to talk on his mobile phone. As many people often do, one night he walked down to the beach. A friend of his also came to talk on the phone. When the newcomer looked down near to where Pedro was standing, he saw a pack of cocaine stranded on the beach. He went on holiday with his girlfriend soon after, financed by his good luck.

Despite the allure of these stories, not everyone considers the emergent economy of cocaine as an appropriate way to make a living and they use rumour and gossip to

express their uneasiness with it. Some see the White Fish as transforming traditional livelihoods and eroding local institutions: for example, in the rumours pertaining to teachers and public officials financing cocaine shipments to Central America. Others worry about the long-term effects on community-building activities. For example, Maribel splits her time between farming a plot in the villagers' communal lands together with her two daughters and working at the small restaurant she runs, targeted at tourists, which she stocks with both her own produce and fish she buys from local fishermen. Speaking in a quiet voice, she expresses her preoccupation with the deeper effects that the cocaine economy is having on people's motivation to participate in communal practices:

Many people left the fields, stopped fishing, and then [one day] when [the White Fish] is over, when these days there is nothing left [at sea], it's like they want to return to work, but not really. But there is nothing like tilling the earth every day. This way you are more in contact with your neighbour and with one another. But when you find COP100 million [ca. US\$30,000], you don't go to the fields or go fishing.

Her words depict, with a normative undertone, a situation where the promise of becoming rich is a bigger motivation to spend one's time at sea than working in fishing or agriculture, which provide a secure income and reinforce a particular type of traditional farming-labour institution. Typically, in Afro-descendant communities in this region, neighbours work collectively on each other's plots of land farming yucca, plantain, and rice. Labour is compensated through *mano cambiada* (hand-exchange), consisting of regular rotations from farm to farm in which food amenities during the day's work are provided by the host (CCGLR 2007). The same co-operative relations exist among fishermen: for example, by sharing the catch or helping one another to pull out the fishing lines. Thus, Maribel's speech can be interpreted as reprimanding the breaking of the labour norms (Gluckman 1963). The implication is that improving one's standard of living through White Fishing conflicts with labouring intensively in a way that reinforces communal solidarity. Maribel's words can also be understood in terms of the logic of accumulation and spending that the White Fish entails, where only a few individuals are benefiting from the windfalls. In any case, it is difficult to discern whether the increased circulating capital is improving local livelihoods and is being somewhat redistributed or if people are investing their profits elsewhere. Indeed, there are rumours that some people have bought houses and apartments in the cities.

Martín, a former member of the Concejo Comunitario, lamented the implications of the contradiction between capital accumulation and traditional institutions. The White Fish has affected the interrelations among community members, undermining not only traditional social relations, but also the efficacy of the board of the Concejo Comunitario and its important role of advocating for and defending legal rights. Echoing Maria's fears, he explained that there are rumours that local authorities are being bribed by traffickers:

With the coming of the White Fish, everybody becomes the law. I get some pesos and then I've seen to myself. Like we say, no one can raise their voice to me. Then the law appears, which is the real law. [People involved may say:] 'Look here, take this [money] and keep quiet and leave me alone.' So, let's say, it's a phenomenon that distorts the whole of the positive image that we've wanted to have of the community.

At present, the very legitimacy and efficacy of the Concejos Comunitarios are in question. People involved with the White Fish perceive them as threats to their newly

acquired power. Luckily, there have been no incidents yet. Despite the past success in fending off guerrilla and paramilitary groups by local institutions and authorities, currently bribery and fear circumscribe the ability of the Concejos Comunitarios to deal with the emergence of the spill-over economy of cocaine trade (Noonan 1987).

Concluding remarks: Violence, gossip, and cocaine

The war on drugs has had significant, albeit unexpected, implications for the livelihoods of the villagers and fishermen who live by Utria National Park. In this article, I have employed gossip and rumour as gateways to examine and reconstruct the concealed reality of the spill-over economy of cocaine. This economy and its associated effect are contingent on the actions of the military, geographical isolation, lack of state support, and a complex history of violence, poverty, and discrimination. Rumour and gossip shed light on the extent of the spill-over economy of cocaine, intrinsically linked to fishing livelihoods and hence referred to as the White Fish. I have come to know about its meaning and relations through overhearing conversations, talking with participants, and asking about it during interviews. Nevertheless, during my fieldwork I neither saw a single pack of cocaine, nor participated in sailing to find it. This should not question the validity of the information gathered through gossip and rumour, as the felt effects of the White Fish are very real. The case of paramilitaries acting upon a rumour and visiting Maria is a clear example of the effects both of the economy of cocaine and of rumours. On the other hand, there is a bridge between her reality and mine, making our encounter ethically loaded (Nelson 1996). Indeed, part of my motivation to write this article has been to provide an analytical response to an issue that has otherwise remained concealed.

Rumour and gossip about the White Fish reveal at least four aspects regarding the reality lived by local communities. First, we learn that the articulation of the White Fish is specific to a context in which it is not possible to talk openly – people talk quietly, secretly, candidly, and wittily – creating to some extent group membership through the control of information (Paine 1967) and by having its own system as a genre of conversation (Paz 2009), thus showing complementarity between functionalist and post-structuralist positions. Second, the uttering of White Fish generates new meanings both for the fish and for the cocaine, similar to what Wagner (2014) calls obviolation to refer to the cumulative way meanings are transformed into new ones. ‘White’ alludes to the colour of cocaine, disregarding the colour of the packaging, which is usually black; and ‘Fish’ here is no longer an animal and the act of ‘fishing’ is no longer the pulling of an animal out of the water. Third, we see that traditional livelihoods such as fishing, farming, and tourism are not meeting the local expectations of paid labour, and instead are being crowded out by White Fishing. These accounts, in line with Gluckman’s (1968) idea that gossip reinforces social norms in a group, come with the normative undertone that White Fishing is not considered to be a valid way of living. And fourth, it is clear that a historical legacy of marginalization continues to limit the access to opportunities for jobs and creating enterprises. In turn, the White Fish grants a possibility of making a living by transforming and generating new practices and relations, yet this is viewed as undesirable from the perspective of social movements and community-building processes. What is essential to understand here is that rumour and gossip in contexts of violence and exclusion familiar to contemporary anthropologists productively relieve the tension between functionalist and post-structuralist approaches, thereby affording us insight into otherwise concealed realities.

In Chocó, villagers' accounts show that the unpredictability of the White Fish is not limited to the act of finding it, but also extends to the way earnings derived from it are spent, accumulated, and redistributed (Hutchinson 1992; Vigh 2017). In this setting, the White Fish grants glimpses into several distinct aspects of how the meanings and uses of money are transformed. Money is not only generated through labour, since 'earning' it can require little more than a lucky walk down the beach. The White Fish is generated as a consequence of sea currents, the transnational cocaine trade, and the actions of the military in the region. Money at times seems to become abundant and is often discussed in terms of consumption in holidays, parties, appliances, and in investment in property and construction with a situated aesthetic referent in the larger context of the drug trade in Colombia. Here there is a distinction between appropriate ways of producing money based on its effects upon social relations that are built on traditional livelihoods (Gluckman 1968). The distinction is less clear when it comes to ways of using White Fish profits and how they trickle down to the local economy.

Gossip and rumour are social practices performed by participants and by anthropologists alike that allow us to comment upon situations of everyday life, thereby shaping our understanding of certain situations, such as the White Fish. By approaching the cocaine trade through gossip, I have been able to study ethnographically an object where the possibility of a researcher's substantive involvement (at least in the sense of 'participation' in participant observation) is limited and requires a considered analytical response. I have drawn attention to the issues concerning the side-effects of the drug trade through an investigative ethnography of violence, joining the growing chorus of researchers, activists, and politicians arguing against the failed policies of the war on drugs. In Chocó, if there is no White Fish, fishermen still go to sea. If there are no stranded packs of cocaine on the beach, people still walk the shoreline. Yet the expansion of drug trafficking routes and networks has already transformed local livelihoods – a transformation, I sincerely hope, that comes without more violence. This is, for better or worse, what it is like to live with the unseen face of the international drug trade on Colombia's Northern Pacific coast.

NOTES

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¹ Materials include thirty-two two-hour interviews in Spanish with thirty-three people, as well as field notes and other communications. Materials were analysed systematically using NVIVO software.

² In 2017, the buffer area was further expanded to 11.27 km (AUNAP 2017).

³ Similarly, in Nicaragua and Honduras, it has been documented that fishermen refer to the cocaine trade as the White Lobster (see, e.g., Cupples 2012; Jackson 2015).

⁴ Original: '*pescadores de ilusiones*'. In Spanish, the meaning of *ilusión* can be interpreted in a humorous way, as it combines hopeful anticipation with delusion.

⁵ *Paisa* is a colloquial way to refer to 'white' and 'mestizo' people from the department of Antioquia and its capital city, Medellín. For a review on *paisa* identity and its intersection with Afro-descendant identity, see, e.g., Taussig (2004: 100); Wade (1993: 65–78).

⁶ Similar spending practices have been described during commodity booms of, for example, vanilla and sapphire in Madagascar (Walsh 2003; Zhu 2018), diamonds on the Congo-Angola border (de Boeck 1998), and oil in Chad (Behrends & Hoinathy 2017).

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Coup de filet sur le Poisson Blanc : on-dit et cocaïne au nord de la côte pacifique colombienne

Résumé

Que se passe-t-il lorsqu'un paquet de cocaïne s'échoue à proximité d'un village du nord de la côte pacifique colombienne ? Cette cocaïne à la dérive est une des conséquences de la lutte contre le trafic maritime de drogue à destination de l'Amérique centrale et de l'Amérique du Nord, dans le cadre de la « War on Drugs » américano-colombienne. Les villageois appellent cette drogue échouée le Poisson Blanc. Rencontre à caractère ethnographique avec des populations afrodescendantes dans le département du Chocó, cet article explore les effets et les relations qui émergent d'un océan transformé en amphithéâtre de pêcheurs, de narcotrafiquants et d'opérations militaires. Prenant au sérieux l'expression « Poisson Blanc » qu'emploient les habitants pour désigner la cocaïne, l'auteur accorde une attention particulière aux on-dit et à la rumeur comme stratégies permettant d'évoquer l'omniprésence des effets du narcotrafic. Il suit trois discussions liées (à propos de la violence, de la cocaïne et du Poisson Blanc) afin de défendre l'utilité des on-dit et de la rumeur dans les ethnographies d'investigation portant sur la violence.

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