

# 1

## Reyes' dream

*Is not the secret of the state, hidden because it is so obvious, to be found in space?*

(Lefebvre 2009, p.228)

The December 30th sessions of the Second Pan-American Conference, hosted by Mexico from October 1901 to January 1902, were marked by a special event. On the date in question, General Rafael Reyes (see Figure 1.1), Colombian plenipotentiary to France and one of the country's delegates to the Conference, spoke of his explorations in the Amazon region in the 1870s, during which time he and his brothers were exporting quinine to Europe and North America. The presentation was not part of the ordinary Conference schedule, and despite the repeated insistence of his colleagues to 'reveal' his discoveries, Reyes, we are told, fearing 'he might be suspected of seeking notoriety by drawing public attention to his own person', was reluctant to break his 'modest silence' (Reyes 1979, p.5). Surely this gesture was more about a gentleman's etiquette, for the General not only jealously treasured his expedition notes but did not miss a chance to entertain his colleagues in private with his stories. No doubt he had repeatedly referred to his recent encounter in New York with President Theodore Roosevelt, to whom he gave an account of his journeys and presented his ambitious navigation project of the Amazon and its main tributaries. Mr Roosevelt, the eulogistic chronicler tells us, after enthusiastically listening to Reyes' account of the immense territory 'revealed' by him and his brothers, uttered the following words: 'That region is a New World undoubtedly, destined to



**Figure 1.1** Rafael Reyes 1913.  
Source: Library of Congress.

promote the progress and welfare of humanity' (Reyes 1979, p.5). Supposedly, following this encouraging encounter, Roosevelt had personally recommended that the US representative at the Conference use his 'best influence' in order to persuade the other delegates to give special consideration to his project. As for the Colombian General, with his discoveries having been praised by Roosevelt in such terms, he now felt it was a 'moral duty' to share them with his colleagues in Congress.

It was in this context that Reyes finally addressed the members of the Conference on the 30th December. His speech certainly must have captivated the audience, as he narrated his travels as a truly epic journey, where the terrifying presence of the unknown and the terrible privations and dangers endured by the discoverer were only surpassed by the incommensurable riches he unveiled and conquered for the sake of progress and civilization.<sup>1</sup> The opening episodes, those describing the crossing and descent of the south-eastern Colombian Andes in search of the Putumayo River, cannot but resemble the dramatic Spanish expeditions in the hunt for the elusive *El Dorado*.

We started from the city of Pasto, situated on the summit of the Andes, under the equinoctial line. The immense region which extends from that city for more than 4000 miles to the Atlantic, was then *completely unknown*. We traversed a-foot the great mass of the Cordillera of the

Andes, which rises more than 12,000 feet above the level of the sea, up to the region of perpetual snow. Where this ceases there are immense plains, called paramos, upon which there grow neither trees nor flowers and where animal life completely disappears. We wandered for a whole month on those cold solitudes, guided only by the compass. They are covered with a fog as dense as that of the high latitudes of the North in winter; there were days in which we had to remain on the same spot in semi-darkness, without being able to advance a single step, the thermometer falling to 10 degrees below zero, a temperature made unbearable by the lack of shelter and shoes ... After marching for a month through that desert, in which perished, due to the intense cold, two men of the expedition, of the ten who carried provisions on their backs, we reached the limits of those solitary pampas which appeared like the product of a nature in progress of formation. We were at the Eastern watershed of the Andes. An ocean of light and verdure appeared before our eyes, in marked contrast to the shadows and solitudes which we had just traversed ... We penetrated these *unknown forests*, opening roads with the machete through brambles, briars and creepers which obstructed our passage. Arriving at the vertical slopes of the Cordillera, in places which were impassable, we had to descend by the aid of ropes (Reyes 1979, pp.14–15, emphasis added).

This was just the beginning. The 'Colombian Stanley',<sup>2</sup> as Reyes was referred to by the chronicler, continues his enthralling account by describing the sufferings and perils he and his brothers endured in their passage through the 'virgin forests', and then during their navigation of the Putumayo up to its intersection with the Amazon River. Along the Putumayo River they encountered numerous 'cannibal tribes', among them the 'powerful and warlike' Mirañas, of whom the daring General stated that he was 'the first white man whom those savages had seen' (Reyes 1979, p.16). The brothers made friends with the powerful chief 'Chua', who kindly offered them 'their dishes of human flesh' from their bitter enemies the Huitotos, and also provided them with oarsmen and canoes to continue their trip. After 15 days hunting and fishing with the Mirañas, they resumed their journey in company of the robust crew offered by Chua. It took them three months to descend the Putumayo River, a time which seemed to the brothers to be 'an eternity'. During the day they were exhausted by the extreme heat, the scarce food, and the fatigue of managing the canoe; at night, incessantly harassed by the dense clouds of mosquitoes, having to bury themselves under the burning sands of the deserted beaches along the river in order to avoid them. According to Reyes, they suffered the same fatigues as those endured by their 'savage companions'. Still, it was thanks to this circumstance, he stated, that they earned the affection and respect of the savages, 'who recognize no other superiority than that of strength' (Reyes 1979, p.17).

Their arrival at the Brazilian town of San Antonio, at the junction of the Putumayo and Amazon Rivers, marks a turning point in the narrative. The expedition had finally entered ‘civilized’ land again, six months after leaving the city of Pasto. The brothers had succeeded in their ‘patriotic’ enterprise of being the first in ‘discovering’ a river apt for the navigation of steamers, which would allow communication between the Colombian Andes and the Atlantic Ocean in Brazil. From San Antonio they caught a steamer to the city of Belém at the mouth of the Amazon, and from there they sailed for Rio de Janeiro. In Rio, as the news of their journey spread in the city, they were the object of numerous manifestations of applause and congratulation on the part of the authorities and distinguished personalities. The most prominent of them was the Emperor Dom Pedro II, whose ‘majestic and commanding stature’ and ‘highly cultivated intellect’ particularly impressed the young Reyes, who was then 25 years old. The Emperor, Reyes tells us, ‘passionate for Geography and the exploration of the immense territories of his empire’ (Reyes 1979, p.19), not only received him one afternoon in his palace, but listened with great interest to the account of his odyssey.

After two months in the capital, the celebrated explorers began their return journey to Colombia. They bought a steamer in Belém, which they navigated 1,800 miles upstream to the mouth of the Putumayo and then another 1,200 to its final stop at *La Sofía*, a river port that Reyes had named after his beloved fiancée. The climactic point of the journey, the moment that the small vessel made its triumphant entry into the waters of the Putumayo, was narrated by Reyes as a grandiose conquest:

We can say that it was one of the happiest days of our lives, when we saw, for the first time, the flag of Colombia float from the stern of the vessel waiving in the breeze. This vessel was to realize the conquest of civilization and progress for our country and to improve the horrible condition of thousands of savages who at the mere contact with the civilized man felt as if struck by the electric spark of that same civilization, as they had not only treated us hospitably but very generously (Reyes 1979, pp.19–20).

At this point, the speech takes a radical turn. The arrogant and pompous voice of the conqueror now gives way to the sober tone of the statesman, who enlightens the audience with the country’s inexhaustible resources waiting to be harvested by civilized hands: innumerable agricultural products; abundant gold, silver and emeralds; and thousands of ‘savage Indians’ that could be easily ‘attracted to civilization’, hence transformed into productive labour for the future enterprises established there. The exhaustive report, adorned with statistics and promising ventures, closes with the General’s Faustian project: a colossal navigation system connecting the South American republics of Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Colombia,

Venezuela and the Guianas through the immense waterway formed by the Amazon and its tributaries. This system was to link with another grand scheme – the Inter-Continental railway running from New York to Buenos Aires – hence allowing the aforesaid countries and ‘humanity in general’ to take advantage of ‘the 4,000,000 square miles which the Amazon region contains and which it may be said is in its entirety uncultivated and uninhabited and consequently merely vacant land’ (Reyes 1979, p.30).

He and his brothers, Reyes concluded, had significantly contributed to this enterprise. They had explored the Amazon and many of its tributaries, ‘discovered’ and established steam navigation in some of them, ‘civilized’ the ‘savage cannibals’ that ‘formerly wandered’ in the forests, and built trails linking the Putumayo lowlands to the Andes mountains. Sadly, the ‘conquests’ they had won for the ‘progress and civilization’ of their mother country and humanity, the General announced to the public, took a dire toll. During the years they spent in the rivers and jungles of the Putumayo, two of his brothers perished. Enrique succumbed to ‘malignant fever’, while Nestor was ‘devoured by the cannibals of the Putumayo’.

When Reyes had concluded his passionate speech the reporter declared, in flamboyant rhetoric, that the audience was:

galvanized with surprise by what they had listened to, with the delight of an exquisite satisfaction, by the contemplation of the very gorgeous panorama which the inspired narrator had unveiled before their sight, just as a magician exhibits before his public a series of enchanted palaces and gardens peopled by fairies and legendary genii (Reyes 1979, p.6).

A commission was appointed to verify the veracity of Reyes’ account, and following its positive verdict the delegates unanimously made an appeal for ‘collective action’. The Colombian explorer would be the object of numerous manifestations of gratitude, and his work, acclaimed as the ‘base of a new geography’, would be published in a single volume in Spanish, English, German, and French. The Assembly agreed to schedule a meeting to discuss his proposal at the next Conference (to take place in Rio de Janeiro), and issued a plaque in honour of the deceased brothers with the inscription: ‘In memory of Nestor and Enrique who died in the service of the civilization of America’ (Reyes 1979, p.11).

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Reyes, elected president of Colombia in December 1903, never attended the Rio Conference. Furthermore, it seems that the General’s project was not accepted unanimously by the delegates, and it would have raised

‘disgusts and rancours’ regarding its tacit acquiescence with US imperialist interests in the Continent (Marichal 2002, p.59). The project, however, would be resuscitated sporadically on future occasions, although to date the initiatives have largely remained on paper. Its most recent revival has been under the Initiative for Integration of Regional Infrastructure of South America (IIRSA), a massive continental initiative launched in 2000, which contemplates infrastructure development at multiple levels (transport, energy, telecommunications) aimed to enhance the physical and economic integration between the region’s countries. In the Amazon, one of IIRSA’s nine strategic areas, 64 infrastructure projects (57 of which are focused on roads and waterways) in eight different strategic corridors were originally projected, totalling an investment of nearly US\$6 billion (IIRSA 2011). Among these projects is the development of a multi-nodal transportation scheme, whose chief purpose is to connect the Atlantic and Pacific oceans through Brazil and Colombia. The scheme’s main components – the improvement of navigation along the Amazon and Putumayo Rivers and the construction of a 45 kilometre road section connecting the towns of San Francisco and Mocoa in the department of Putumayo – vividly evoke Reyes’ project.

The significance of this project, in both its original and current version, lies not so much in its intended economic or political goals but in how it epitomizes the process of state-building in the Colombian Amazon over the last two centuries. This chapter traces this process throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As I will describe in the first section, this process is inseparable from the entrenched image of the Amazon as an empty and savage space, an image whose origins can be traced back to the early times of Spanish rule and broadly mirrors the ways in which colonial spaces and populations were assimilated and appropriated. However, and since the chapter’s main objective is to show how this particular image became a central feature within the foundational myth of the postcolonial nation-state, the analysis centres on the referred period. Moreover, the ways in which it surfaced, as will be illustrated in the second section, are inexorably linked to the post-independence quest for the geographical integration of the country, a quest that finds its major correlation in the dismal picture of the newly born republic as a mosaic of isolated, empty and autarkic regions. Within this order of things, state-building would be conceived as a teleological process through which the state would gradually but inexorably expand and absorb hostile or stateless territories and populations. At the same time, however, the civilizing mission of the state was utterly dependent on the savage image of the frontier. In other words, and as we witness in Reyes’ ‘magician’s act’ performed at the Pan-American Conference,

'state' and 'frontier' became part of the same rhetorical construction, the former's aura of authority and legitimacy built upon the 'savagery' and 'barbarism' of the latter.

It is important to emphasize that a historical analysis of this rhetorical construction and the spatial order it produced necessarily involves a wide array of characters, practices and representational forms, some of which will be considered throughout the chapter. However, the analysis will revolve primarily around the figure of Rafael Reyes. The relevance this historical character has for the arguments pursued here is based upon several aspects, although there are three main reasons worth mentioning. The first one is related to the theoretical and methodological approach of this work, which contrary to traditional views of the state as an abstract construction, focuses on the multiple material and discursive practices in which it is embedded. Secondly, as will be argued in the third section, the many facets embodied by this single character are crucial in understanding the particular discourses and practices through which the Amazon was constituted as a frontier space. Finally, as the story of the road begins to a large degree with Reyes, this chapter constitutes in many ways a preamble without which it is hardly possible to grasp not only the story itself, but the broader historical and spatial context in which it has unfolded since its beginnings up to the present day.

## Two frontiers

The vast region extending from the east of the southern Colombian Andes to the Pacific Ocean that Reyes depicted as 'completely unknown' and which roughly alluded to the Putumayo and Caquetá river basins, was far from being *terra incognita* by the time he first set foot there. At that time – the early 1870s – the territory where he and his brothers spent several years devoted to the extraction of cinchona bark had for a while been incorporated into the country's territorial jurisdiction. This territory was then part of the *Territorio del Caquetá*, an extensive province established in 1845, which covered most of the country's actual Amazon and Orinoquia regions and had as its capital the tiny settlement of Mocoa, seat of the *Prefecto* (prefect), a priest, and a few *blancos* (mestizo settlers) engaged in different extractive activities. The *Territorio del Caquetá* had been surveyed and mapped in 1857 by the Chorographic Commission led by the Italian engineer and geographer Agustín Codazzi. However, for most of the nineteenth century it remained largely neglected by the central government as it was deemed to be a peripheral region of little political and economic interest for the country. Furthermore, the dramatic description that Reyes made of his crossing of the *cordillera*

certainly constituted a common source of distress and torment, not only for the nineteenth century Colombian 'pioneers' and the few government officers stuck in remote and isolated outposts, but also for their European predecessors. During most of the three centuries of colonial rule, although the region would be widely penetrated by missionaries, *encomenderos* (grantees of Indians under the system of *encomiendas*<sup>3</sup>) and colonial officers (not to mention the early expeditions in the search of *El Dorado*), the Andes always represented a major barrier for the Spanish *colonos*.<sup>4</sup>

The Spanish foundations between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in this region were largely restricted to Mission towns, and were characterized by their ephemeral and tenuous existence. The case of Mocoa is in many ways exemplary of the colonial process of occupation of the Amazon. Considered to be the earliest Spanish settlement in the Colombian Amazon, it was originally founded around 1557 on a small valley in the Andean Amazon *pedemonte*, and named after the indigenous group inhabiting the area. Apparently, the initial settlement soon disappeared, for it was re-founded in 1563, the year that was regarded subsequently as its official founding date.<sup>5</sup> The Mocoas and other indigenous groups inhabiting the surrounding area were soon subjected to the system of *encomiendas*. For instance, as early as 1582, the Augustin friar Jerónimo de Escobar mentions that Mocoa had currently 800 indigenous people divided into ten *encomiendas*. The same friar, however, noted that the city had a 'bleak future' since communication with the rest of the provincial government was very precarious, and for this reason it was 'practically isolated'. Apparently, during that same year Mocoa was destroyed by the Andanquí Indians, to be reconstructed only decades later by the Jesuit missionaries. By the last quarter of the seventeenth century the city was again in ruins, the number of tributary Indians having been reduced to 75, and of the initial ten *encomiendas* only two remained (Llanos and Pineda 1982, pp.19–20). During the eighteenth century Mocoa continued to be the target of attacks on the part of the Indians, and for this reason was abandoned and relocated on more than one occasion. The decline of the missionary work reached its peak in 1784, the year when the Franciscans abandoned their Mission towns. According to Llanos and Pineda (1982, p.33), the overall balance of the Franciscan missionary work in the region was negative, and 'the colonization through the missionary regime had failed'.

The failure of the colonial policy of occupation of the Amazon through Catholic Missions does not mean that the Missions left no impact on the natives. The most visible was probably the demographic decline caused by smallpox and other diseases brought by Europeans and, at a more general level, the violence embedded in the colonial crusade. For instance, the



recurrent rebellions against the friars and the destruction of Mission towns have been frequently attributed to retaliations against the violent practices implemented to 'reduce' the Indians to 'civilized life' (Llanos and Pineda 1982, p.37). Still, the opportunities that the Amazon indigenous peoples had to escape or avoid contact with the *colonos* were considerably greater than for those inhabiting places under tighter control by the Spanish authorities. Certainly, not only the vastness and difficulties of access made the missionary work in the Amazon lowlands a truly titanic enterprise; those friars devoting their lives to wandering the Amazon forests chasing 'unfaithful Indians' often perished under the inclement climate or were killed in indigenous revolts. The hopeless description that Fray Jerónimo de Escobar makes of Mocoa in 1582 is telling in this regard:

This town is next to the mountains, far away from the road, so that it is a great travail to enter. Said town of Agreda [Mocoa] is not growing. Instead, it scares people away. There is no way to communicate and with the gold being extracted there, which can reach twenty-three-carat-gold worth some ten thousand pesos annually, with this they live and have a priest and a clerk, everyone having a miserable life (Escobar 1582, cited by Ramírez 1996, p.129).

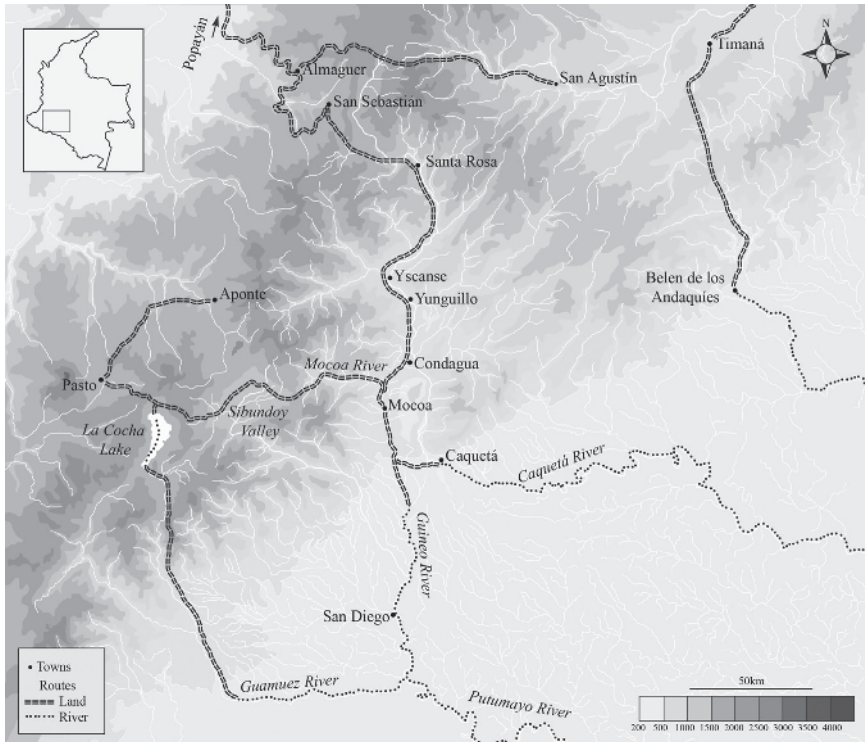
The difficulties of access, together with the resistance of the Indians, the unhealthy weather and the lack of economic support by the Crown, largely explains why the missionary action in the Amazon ended up being confined to the uppermost parts of the Putumayo and Caquetá basins (Gómez 2011). Mocoa, despite its multiple resettlements and changes in name, and unlike the more eastern colonial outposts in the Amazon lowlands, would endure after three centuries of Spanish rule. However, its physical location in the *pedemonte* – a transition zone between the Andes and Amazon regions – came to symbolize a frontier between 'civilization' and 'savagery', and the abrupt trails connecting these regions metaphorically pictured as dreadful paths isolating rather than linking the two. Few descriptions embody this image so faithfully as this literary depiction of the ancient Pasto-Mocoa trail written by the Capuchin friar Canet del Mar:

A nearly insurmountable barrier of the highest of mountains separated this vast land from Colombia. If an adventurer or a zealous missionary decided to overcome the obstacles that nature had in store, it was with great sacrifice and sometimes even endangering his own life. The road that communicated these savage lands to civilization was the most original and horrendous thing one could ever imagine; one would say that some malignant spirit had delighted in distributing precipices and abysses in order to block the entry to this solitary place, where savagery was rampant (De Pinell and Del Mar 1924, p.19).

The Dantesque experience that the missionary makes of the descent of the *cordillera* never seems to have existed among the region's native inhabitants. María Clemencia Ramírez (1996) has used the term 'fluid frontier' in order to allude to the rich cultural and economic exchange that since pre-Columbian times has existed between the different indigenous groups inhabiting the Andes highlands, the *piedemonte*, and the *selva*. Unlike the Europeans, for whom the *piedemonte* always represented a physical and imaginary barrier, the author illustrates how, for the indigenous peoples, this region has historically served as an articulation zone between the highlands and the lowlands. Mocoa, rather than the isolated town portrayed by Fray Jerónimo de Escobar, constituted a central crossroads where most of the indigenous trails converged. Apart from the mentioned path from Mocoa to the city of Pasto (described by the Capuchin friar and which constituted the 'opening act' of Reyes' presentation at the Mexico Conference), there were three other main exchange routes that together comprised a complex exchange circuit connecting the Putumayo and Caquetá lowlands and *piedemonte* with the Andean region (see Figure 1.2).

The indigenous groups of the *piedemonte*, and particularly the Quechua-speaking Ingas, had been, since pre-Hispanic times, specialized tradesmen. Products of the *selva* and the *piedemonte* such as dried fish, feathers, alluvial gold, bushmeat and wood resins were traded in the highlands for salt, tools, dogs and cotton. Although this exchange continued to exist throughout the colonial period and well into the nineteenth century, it was altered and transformed in different ways with the arrival of the Spaniards.<sup>6</sup> The ancient paths were gradually integrated to the colonial and early-republican exchange networks, and the indigenous peoples widely used as *silleros* (human carriers) not only for food and other products but for the missionaries, *encomenderos*, merchants, and other 'white' travellers.<sup>7</sup> Still, this new order was subverted in different ways, for not only the traditional exchange persisted among the indigenous peoples but it also facilitated the establishment of alliances against the foreign conquerors. Moreover, the intricate system of trails and paths allowed the development of smuggling routes, a trade in which the indigenous from the *piedemonte* took an active part. Such was the case of the Pasto-Mocoa trail, whose closure was ordered in 1751 to suppress the illicit trade of clothes that the Portuguese introduced by river to the upper Putumayo, and which the Sibundoy Indians carried on their backs for about ten days from there to the city of Pasto.

Through the persistence of traditional forms of exchange, the indigenous 'fluid frontier' survived side by side with a colonial spatial order



**Figure 1.2** Indigenous exchange routes of the *piedemonte* c. XVI-XIX.

Source: Elaborated by author. Based on Ramírez (1996), Uribe (1995), Mapa de la Provincia del Putumayo siglo XVIII, AGN, Mapoteca 6, Ref.132.

in which the Andes and the Amazon appeared as two diametrically opposed worlds. This order of things would inevitably clash with the republican ideal of spatial and social integration in which the project of the nation state would be founded. Still, and paradoxically, as we shall see in the following section, it would be not in the annihilation of this order but on its own perpetuation that the power of the state was to be erected and sustained.

### 'The base of a new geography'

From the departure of the Catholic Missions in the last quarter of the seventeenth century until the creation of the *Territorio del Caquetá* in 1845, the extensive region known today as *Amazonia* (Colombian Amazon), remained practically isolated from the rest of the country.<sup>8</sup> Not only was this region considered of little political or economic

interest, but the newly born republic concentrated its meagre fiscal resources in the most densely populated areas of the interior valleys and highlands. Even the interior or central provinces were largely isolated from each other, a situation which would persist throughout the whole century and redounded in the prevalent view of nineteenth-century Colombia as an 'archipelago' of a few populated centres separated by vast 'empty' territories (Melo 1986, p.151). The Magdalena River, which runs across the country from south to north and flows into the Atlantic, constituted the principal transport axis and the main export and import route. However, even after the introduction of steam transport around mid-century, the journey from the Caribbean coast to Bogotá could take up to a month of river navigation, plus another five or six days by foot or mule to cover the steep trail from the port city of Honda – where the navigation of the Magdalena was interrupted by rapids – to the capital. The Honda-Bogotá trail, although recurrently described by travellers to illustrate the arduous conditions of transport across the country, was in much better condition than the other routes connecting the Magdalena with the central and eastern provinces. Moreover, the development of transport infrastructure throughout the nineteenth century did little to ameliorate this situation. Whilst the road network hardly improved during this period, the boom of railroad construction since the 1870s essentially consisted of short and unconnected lines aimed at reaching the Magdalena's ports. This logic is largely explained by the fact that almost all of the railroads were designed to boost external trade rather than to enhance the precarious internal transport network. In addition, many were controlled by foreign companies and served to supply the industrialized world with raw materials, thus reflecting the outward-oriented nature of infrastructure development (Bushnell 1993, pp.134–135; Horna 1982; Safford 2010).

If this landscape constituted the 'civilized' side of the Republic, what would be the scenery of the vast Amazon region? The lament of the Prefect of the *Territorio del Caquetá* in 1850 is significant in this respect:

Never will this territory escape from its ancient pitiful state, unless the difficulties are overcome and whatever possible is done to construct good ways in order to make the communication with the adjacent provinces possible (cited in Gómez 2011, p.64).

The Prefect's plea, as those from his future successors, would for several decades invariably end up filed in some dusty government archive in Bogotá. By the end of the century, the description of the Pasto-Mocoa

trail by another Prefect showed how little the transport conditions had changed since colonial times:

The journey from Pasto to this city [Mocoa] is gruelling, often bumping into horrifying places. Those of thin build travel on the back [of] Indians in a ridiculous, extravagant, and painful position: fastened with bale-rope and tied like pigs (cited in Gómez 2011, p.204).

The neglect of the Amazon region by the central government was also felt in the abandonment of the borders with neighbouring countries. Reports of an indigenous slave trade along the Caquetá and Putumayo rivers, a practice which dated back to the seventeenth century and was largely carried out by Portuguese merchants, were frequent throughout the nineteenth century (Llanos and Pineda 1982; Pineda 2003). However, the major repercussion of this neglect would be a series of long and intricate territorial disputes, mostly with Peru and Brazil, which resulted in the loss of an extensive strip of land between the Putumayo, Napo and Amazon rivers. The country's weak border policy over this century is partly attributed to the government's strategy of claiming its territorial rights on the basis of the *Uti possidetis iure* legal doctrine, or the principle through which the newly born republics would preserve the colonial limits at the time of independence.<sup>9</sup> However, not only were the boundaries between the former colonies very confusing in regions such as the Amazon, thus facilitating the *de facto* appropriation of territories in dispute, but the practical measures of successive Colombian governments to safeguard its borders were negligible throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, a situation mirroring the state's blind faith on the *Uti possidetis iure* principle (Palacio 2006, pp.133–142; Zárate 2008, p.188).

As early as the 1890s, when the extraction of rubber was just beginning to emerge in the Colombian Amazon, the consular agents in the Amazon cities of Iquitos, Manaus and Belém continually warned the government of the regular incursions into national territory by Peruvian and Brazilian *caucheros* (rubber tappers). The complaint of the Colombian Consul in Belém to the Minister of Foreign Relations in 1894 epitomizes the drama of the borders:

From the three rivers Napo, Putumayo and Caquetá large quantities of rubber and many other natural products are currently being extracted enriching other countries ... this is so because, sadly, Colombia lacks there any presence of authorities able to guarantee her territorial domains. With all due respect, I cannot comprehend the attitude of this government which looks with such unreasonable indifference to such precious national interests.<sup>10</sup>

Against this grim picture of the *desiertos orientales* (eastern deserts) – as the Amazon frontier was often referred to in the nineteenth century – it comes as little surprise that this region integrated first to the world economy through successive extractive booms such as cinchona and rubber, rather than to the Colombian state. Even nowadays the older *Mocoanos* invoke memories of the rubber boom, around the dawn of the twentieth century, when the circulating currency was the sterling pound and European biscuits and pastries were available at the local market for those who could afford them. Not long afterwards, when Rafael Reyes had resigned from the presidency of Colombia and was exiled in Europe writing a memoir about his youth for his sons, he opened the chapter on the Putumayo with the following words:

In Pasto the region that extends to the east was known only as far as Mocoa, and beyond there the populace, ignorant of geography, thought it was Portugal; they confused this country with Brazil. Those forests were populated by monsters and terrible beasts, something alike the unknown and fantastic world which must have been for humanity the seas and regions that Columbus discovered (Reyes 1986, p.109).

The revealing nature of Reyes' statement lies not so much in his judgement about the Colombians' rampant ignorance of the country's peripheral regions – which was by no means restricted to the 'populace' – but in how this ignorance was superseded by all kinds of imageries and tropes. Through these imageries and tropes, those peripheral spaces such as the *Territorio del Caquetá* would be discursively assimilated within the imaginary order of the nation long before they were to be physically integrated to the spatial order of the state. These two apparently dissociated processes, however, were inexorably connected, since the ways in which the latter was produced and normalized can only be understood by first addressing the logic behind the constitution of the former.

### *Creole pioneers*

Benedict Anderson (2006) has used the expression 'creole pioneers' in order to account for the early rise of nationalism in Latin America, a process that was marked by the emergence and proliferation of independence movements across the continent since the late-eighteenth century. According to Anderson, the two factors commonly cited to explain the development of these movements – the spread of

Enlightenment ideas together with the tightening of Spanish control over its colonies during the second half of that century, although central in understanding their origins and evolution, do not themselves explain how they became 'emotionally plausible and politically viable' (Anderson 2006, pp.51–52). A more thorough explanation, suggests the author, must be sought in the articulation of two different yet related factors. First, the fact that the Spanish administrative units, whose original shape derived from arbitrary or fortuitous circumstances, developed over time as isolated and self-contained units. This self-contained character, which to a large extent resulted from the Spanish policies of turning administrative units into separate economic zones, was reinforced by geographical factors, in several cases translated into physical barriers and immense difficulties of communication between the colonies. This situation helped explain why the independent states were initially created according to the colonial territorial jurisdictions, as reflected by the adoption of the *Uti possidetis iure* principle.

However, according to Anderson, the autarkic nature of the colonial territories alone does not account for the sort of attachments that made possible the transition from those administrative units into independent nation states. The origins of those attachments and their materialization into nationalist movements have instead to be sought in the political and economic exclusion faced by the creole (*criollo*) society.<sup>11</sup> This exclusion, partly associated with the racial stigma of being born outside the Metropolis, entailed a crucial dilemma out of which the *criollos* found a common identity against the Spanish-born Spaniards: for if 'born in the Americas, he [the creole] could not be a true Spaniard; ergo, born in Spain, the *peninsular* could not be a true American' (Anderson 2006, p.58).

Anderson's argument on the 'creole pioneers' provides a good summary of the process through which, thanks to a series of interrelated geographical, economic and social factors, the Spanish territories in America gradually evolved into independent nation states or 'imagined communities'. However, this argument does not account for the ways in which those communities were actually *imagined*, and how through this new imaginary order we find not the culmination of colonial forms of domination and control but their own perpetuation. Mary Louise Pratt has clearly elucidated this point when she notes that 'politically and ideologically, the liberal *criollo* project involved founding an independent, decolonised American society and culture, while retaining European values and white supremacy' (Pratt 1992, p.125).

This is not the place to discuss the multiple and contradictory ways in which nationalism and state-building in Colombia or Latin America in general became deeply entangled with constructions of race and

class, and how those constructions translated into myriad forms of political, social, economic and spatial exclusion.<sup>12</sup> There are, however, two aspects that I would like to stress as they are central to the argument presented here. First, we have to acknowledge the rootedness of those ideologies in the imaginary order of the nation in order to fully grasp the colonial logic in which this order was and is still embedded. Secondly, we need to look at how within this same order the idea of race became inexorably attached to space to understand the ways in which the post-independence ideal of social and spatial integration was conceived and put into practice.

One of the best illustrations of how this *criollo* imaginary order was conceived is the early assessment of the country's geographical knowledge made by the independence martyr Francisco José de Caldas. In an article published in 1808 in the *Semanario del Nuevo Reino de Granada* – the main scientific journal at the time – Caldas, also considered to be the father of Colombian geography, made an urgent appeal for the need to overcome the absolute ignorance regarding the country's geography. The self-taught geographer and astronomer summarized this state of affairs in the following words:

Let's take our gaze to the north, let's take it to the south, let's register the most populous parts or the deserts of this Colony: everywhere we find nothing but the stamp of sloth and ignorance. Our rivers and mountains are unknown to us; we ignore the extension of the country in which we were born, and our geography is still in its cradle (Caldas 1966, p.208).

In the same writing, Caldas elaborated a basic classification of the country's population, which he broadly divided into 'savages' and 'civilized'. By the former he specifically meant the 'wandering' and 'barbarian' indigenous tribes inhabiting the vast peripheral forests, savannahs and deserts. The latter, comprising those living under the 'laws of society', were subdivided into three differentiated 'races': the 'civilized Indians'; the 'Africans' introduced as slaves after the discovery of the New World; and the 'European conquerors'. This last category included a further classification, as Caldas emphasized that by 'Europeans' he meant 'not only those who were born in that part of the world, but also their sons, who preserving the purity of their origin, have never mixed with the other castes' (Caldas 1966, p.188). This group explicitly referred to the *criollos*, the caste to which Caldas proudly belonged, and of which he stated they represented 'the nobility of the Continent'.

Caldas' hierarchical ordering of the country's inhabitants was not restricted to their racial origins, and to a large extent reproduced the prevailing environmental determinism that dominated Western thinking and



underpinned nineteenth-century scientific racism. Caldas had elsewhere written about the influence of climate on the country's races, taking into consideration a wide range of variables such as atmospheric pressure, temperature, electric charge, wind, rain and altitude (Caldas 1966, pp.79–120). However, and despite the racial variances and moral virtues and vices stemming from these variables, a geographical division of the country in two broad (inhabited) zones prevailed throughout the text: the temperate regions (predominantly the populated areas of the Andean mountains), whose mild climate was directly associated with the 'industrious' and 'intelligent' character of their inhabitants; and the hot and humid regions of the *selvas* and coasts, the 'natural' habitat of the 'savages' and whose 'scorching' heat and excessive humidity condemned humans to a perpetual state of 'barbarity', 'laziness' and 'backwardness'.

This dichotomous order, whose origins hark back to colonial times and became pervasive within nineteenth century elites' construction of the nation (Arias 2005, pp.69–82), assumed over time different expressions such as 'highlands' versus 'lowlands' or *tierras frías* and *templadas* (cold and temperate lands) versus *tierras calientes* (hot lands). However, the fundamental significance of this order is not its perpetuation itself, but how it acquired a hegemonic character through which space became *racialized* or –conversely – race became *spatialized*. This hegemonic character, as noted by Wade (1989), lies not in the fact that it was uncontested, but in how its principles came to appear as self-evident truths, truths whose appearance of reality cannot be detached from the power relations in which they are sustained. It is in this sense that one can easily appreciate the role played by the *criollo* elite – among which Caldas figured as one of the most prominent characters – as a class of *organic intellectuals* in the Gramscian sense, or a class whose function is 'conceived as absolute and pre-eminent, and their historical existence and dignity abstractly rationalized' (Gramsci 1971, p.117).

Caldas utterly embodied this intellectual function, as he captured the pre-eminent role of science and particularly geography within the *criollo* state project.<sup>13</sup> He condensed the essence of this role in his widely quoted statement that 'geography is the fundamental basis of all political speculation' (Caldas 1966, p.183). The transcendence of this statement has to be appreciated not only in the epistemological and philosophical principles underlying geographical discourse, but chiefly in its *practical* implications and effects. For, if Caldas' hierarchical ordering of the country essentially opposed the 'civilized' environment of the *cordillera* to the untamed world of the *selvas* and savannahs, it also entailed a crucial paradox: not only the latter encompassed most of the country's territory but – and most significantly – they were imagined as an infinite container of natural resources waiting to be unveiled and harvested for the

sake of ‘progress’ and ‘civilization’. Who were meant to carry forward this nationalistic enterprise? Naturally not the hordes of ‘savages’ wandering in the jungles, whose state of ‘barbarism’ was only surpassed by their ‘laziness’ and total lack of entrepreneurship. Since the white races of the country – represented mostly by the *criollos* – comprised just a minority of its population, this task would ideally be accomplished with the aid of European immigration. Throughout the nineteenth century the central government unsuccessfully attempted, on various occasions, to encourage foreign immigration through laws that offered land grants and other incentives to potential *colonos*.<sup>14</sup>

The explanations of why the attempts invariably failed are varied and range from climate to politics and from geography to economics. However, it is important to mention that the reasons were not only confined to local factors such as the government financial constraints; ‘global’ causes such as nineteenth-century Europeans’ fears regarding acclimatization in tropical areas also explain an important part of the picture (Uribe 2015). The point I would like to highlight is how through these initiatives and, overall, through the *criollo* elite’s faith in the white race’s ‘enlightening’ powers, the country’s vast ‘peripheral’ regions were proclaimed as ‘vacant’ or ‘empty’ lands waiting to be possessed. Caldas’ desperate call for a meticulous and thorough survey of the country has to be understood precisely in this sense, for the question was not only about the vital need to overcome the deplorable state in which the geographical knowledge of the country was plunged in as how, and for whom, this knowledge was to be constructed.

Caldas’ dream would take decades to be realized, but it was finally achieved during the 1850s through the Chorographic Commission, a state-sponsored project that is considered the single most important geographical event of the century in Colombia. The Chorographic Commission, of which Caldas is regarded as the precursor as well as being responsible for conceiving its purposes and ‘ideological foundations’ (Sánchez 1998, p.69), consisted of a detailed survey and a geographical chart of each of the country’s provinces. The contract signed between the government and the head of the Commission, the Italian military engineer and geographer Agustín Codazzi, clearly expressed the purpose of this colossal project: ‘[the descriptions and maps] must have the adequate extension, clarity, and precision, so that the country can be known and studied in all its dimensions, particularly in relation to topography, statistics and natural wealth’ (cited in Sánchez 1998, p.239). Thus, the surveys and charts should gather an immense quantity of data that included inventories of vacant lands, natural resources and agricultural production; relations of existing trails and paths with distances and times of travel; location and commerce statistics

of towns and villages; topographical descriptions of rivers, mountains, valleys and forests; and accounts of climate and populations. Not surprisingly, the issue of transport, a nightmare for travellers since colonial times, occupied a special place within the Commission's objectives. As noted by Sánchez (1998, p.238), the fact that Codazzi was appointed as 'roads engineer' instead of 'geographical engineer' largely mirrored the consideration given to this subject by the national government.

The precarious situation of the country's transport network, which the Chorographic Commission was expected to improve through the identification and projection of new routes, paradoxically constituted a considerable obstacle for the Commission itself, causing several delays in the works and torments to its members. Not unexpectedly, of the numerous expeditions carried out by Codazzi between 1850 and 1859 – the year of his death – none caused the Italian geographer so much suffering as the forsaken *Territorio del Caquetá*. In his letter to the Secretary of State notifying the conclusion of the expedition to Caquetá, the restless engineer wrote:

I have happily left behind the Andaquíes [Caquetá] after having sketched the map of that extensive and unhealthy desert ... I can assure the government that none of my expeditions has cost me so much money, nor have I suffered that many torments, neither have I seen myself, as I have on this occasion, so often exposed to die (Codazzi 1996, p.237).

The *Caquetá* expedition, carried out between January and April 1857, was confined –mostly due to the difficulties of access – to the upper Putumayo and Caquetá basins, and for this reason Codazzi based his report mainly on a series of written sources.<sup>15</sup> The opening lines of his description of the territory strikingly mirror the *criollo* vision of the peripheral 'deserts' and 'selvas': 'None of the ancient provinces in which the Nueva Granada<sup>16</sup> was divided' – wrote Codazzi – 'can compare in dimension to the extensive Territorio del Caquetá; and yet, this territory is the most *deserted* and the *least inhabited* and known of the Republic' (Codazzi 1996, p.151, emphasis added). The rhetoric of the civilized world of the *cordillera* versus the savage and yet boundless natural wealth of the *selvas* is continually reproduced throughout the text, as can be seen from this fragment that is worth quoting in full:

There is no space on the ground which is not covered like a carpet by a diversity of plants. In the midst of such magnificent vegetation in which man has not had the least part, he almost finds himself like an imperceptible being in the middle of that vast land where everything is enormous: hills, plains, rivers and jungles. Upon seeing the gigantic

development of the organic forces, of that overwhelming wealth, he realises that a numerous population is required to dominate such portentous vegetation. Time, a long time, is needed for man to be able to exploit the immense wealth that the land offers in an incalculable profusion (Codazzi 1996, p.197).

The indigenous population, which Codazzi calculated as being 50,000 – most of them ‘savages’ – was to him clearly insufficient to exploit the ‘overwhelming’ wealth of the *Territorio del Caquetá*, and more so when he estimated that the whole territory – which comprised roughly half of the country’s territory – could easily ‘contain’ a population of 23 million (see Figure 1.3). Moreover, like Caldas, he was highly pessimistic of the natives’ agency and endeavour. This was especially the case of the eastern parts of the territory, those which the colonial state was never able to control – let alone ‘civilize’ – and which, Codazzi judged, were still as ‘backward’ as the world Columbus encountered. ‘The savages’, he declared:

Will make no progress until the *criollos* get into close contact with them: otherwise they will never escape the state of barbarism in which they are born, live, and die, without knowing anything other than the satisfaction of their most vital needs to live brutally, almost like the beasts of the forest (Codazzi 1996, p.194).

Yet, although Codazzi saw the climate as the main obstacle for national and foreign white races’ chances to take advantage of the abounding natural resources of *Caquetá*, he showed an unfettered faith in the transformative power of capitalist development. Thus, as with the ‘new geography’ Reyes outlined decades later at the Pan-American Conference, the region Codazzi projected was one dominated by transoceanic steamship navigation, water channels, railways and roads. In this utopian infrastructural landscape, predicted Codazzi, the ‘pestilent’ climates of the *selvas* would be thoroughly modified as soon as a ‘numerous population’ had ‘cut down the old trees of the forest, drained the marshlands and swamps and channelled the rivers’ (Codazzi 1996, p.201).

Codazzi’s description of the *Territorio del Caquetá* can hardly be reduced to a mere reproduction of nineteenth-century racial and environmental determinist doctrines, and there is no question that his account of the territory, which along with a detailed geographical survey consisted of several maps and drawings as well as rich ethnographic and botanical descriptions, has immense historiographical value. However, we have to locate this singular event in the broader discursive apparatus – philosophical, scientific and political – through which the *criollo* imaginary order of the nation emerged and gradually



**Figure 1.3** Chart of the Nueva Granada, divided into provinces, 1832 to 1856, *Uti possidetis* of 1810. Territorio del Caquetá shown at the bottom of the map. Source: Codazzi, Paz and Pérez 1889.

acquired a hegemonic character. Foucault's idea of discourse as a 'field' where subjects are unevenly located or 'a space of differentiated subject-positions and subject-functions' (Foucault 1991, p.58) is enlightening in this respect, for what we see in the colossal project of the Chorographic Commission is not only the production of knowledge about the country, but its normalization into an already established discursive field.

I want to place emphasis on this process of normalization, since it is precisely here that we encounter one of the central axioms on which the foundational myth of the modern state is grounded. This myth, which harks back at least to the idea of the social contract that we find in Hobbes' *Leviathan*, stems from the philosophical fiction of the 'state of nature' as the legitimization of a supreme sovereign endowed with the power to impose security and peace among its subjects. Under the state of nature, Hobbes tells us, there is 'no Society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short' (Hobbes 1937, pp.64–65). Reading

Hobbes' *Laws of Nature* one cannot but think of the *criollos*' chaotic vision of the country's jungles as a vast space infested with savages, whose existence is hardly differentiated from the 'beasts of the forest'. Once this vision was embedded into the landscape through the erection of a hierarchical and racialized spatial order, the state *appears* as a sovereign force whose legitimate existence is sustained on its civilizing character. State-making, accordingly, is seen as a teleological process through which hostile territories and populations are gradually integrated into the civilized order of the state. Yet, this idea finds a major paradox on the same principle on which it is founded. For, if the illusion of legitimacy in which the power of the state ultimately rests lies on the binary opposition between 'civilization' and 'savagery', does not this opposition need to be perpetuated so the illusion can be maintained? This actually constitutes an essential paradox that we encounter in the *criollo* project of the state: a project aimed at the social and spatial integration of the nation, and yet a project whose legitimacy is sustained on the perpetuation of the civilization/savagery rhetoric on which it is founded.

It is also in this context that the idea of the frontier as a metaphor designating those spaces lying beyond civilization emerges as a central element within the foundational myth of the state. As state and frontier come to embody the binary opposition between civilization and savagery, the paradox is thus maintained: the frontier seems to be inescapably destined to vanish as the state expands, and yet it cannot totally cease to exist, for without the frontier the myth in which the power of the state is founded would also vanish. Thus, although the frontier comes to appear as the antithesis to the civilized order of the state, its *status* of frontier inevitably becomes not a barrier to this order but its very condition of possibility. The frontier, however, will not come to encompass a space located outside the order of the state, but one that lies at the very core of this order. In other words, as previously noted, the frontier was to be constituted and demarcated as a space of exception in the Agambenian sense – that is, a space resulting from the 'extreme form of relation by which something is included solely through its exclusion' (Agamben 1998, p.18). This relation is precisely what we find in the *Territorio del Caquetá*: a territory whose incorporation to the spatial and political order of the state has historically depended on its exclusion from the imaginary order of the nation. In Codazzi's judgement about this territory as a 'vacant space' waiting to be occupied and possessed, it is possible to foresee some of the practical implications underlying this form of relationship. However, as will be shown in the following section, it is through another character, Rafael Reyes, that both the myth and the immanent violence sustaining this relationship will surface.

## The secret of the state

One of the main problems in building a theory of the state, as noted by Timothy Mitchell, is that the state constitutes an 'object of analysis that appears to exist simultaneously as material force and ideological construct. It seems both real and illusory' (Mitchell 2006, p.169). According to the author, most analyses tend to dismiss one dimension in favour of the other: either they take for granted the binary dualism through which the state seems to exist as an autonomous realm completely detached from society, thus assuming the state as an 'abstract' construction; or they reject this dualism as mere ideological fetishism, hence adopting a perspective that privileges the study of the multiple material relations and practices embedded in the state. Although Mitchell agrees with the latter perspective in the sense that any attempt to theorize the state cannot take for granted this dualism, he argues that it is not enough simply to criticize it. Such perspective, he adds, not only ignores that it is in this dual form that the state often appears in practice, but that the agency of the state largely depends on the production of this dualism. The task of critique, accordingly, is then not simply to reject the dualism but to explain *how* the effect through which state and society appear in this dual or binary form has been produced.

The relevance that a figure like Rafael Reyes has in understanding how the Amazon region was discursively and physically constituted as a frontier space has to be considered in this sense. Like Caldas or Codazzi, Reyes personified the *criollo* hegemonic vision of the frontier as the antithesis of civilization. However, Reyes' role was not exclusively circumscribed to the sphere of scientific discourse or political rhetoric. Through the different facets he embodied throughout his life – entrepreneur, explorer, army officer, diplomat, statesman – it is also possible to shed light on the material (spatial, infrastructural, political) practices of state-building. I will focus specifically on two of these facets, since it is through them that the relationship between the Amazon frontier and the Colombian state can be better grasped: the *entrepreneur* and *explorer*, referring to the years he and his brothers spent in the Putumayo engaged in the cinchona and rubber trade; and the *statesman*, covering roughly the period during which he was president of Colombia (1904–1909).

Finally, it is important to stress that the point here is not to assume Reyes as a single individual who supplanted the state or seized its roles, but as the expression of certain views and practices that are both constitutive and reflective of the relationship between state and frontier. In other words, as with Marx's capitalist, rather than an individual we are dealing with certain types of 'personifications' of particular relationships (Marx 1949, p.xix).

More specifically, I want to situate and encourage the reader to see Reyes in the broader context of the spatial history of state and frontier as a maker of history in the threefold dimension drawn by Trouillot: as an *agent* or individual part of a certain class or hierarchical structure; as an *actor*, whose role and actions are circumscribed to a specific spatio-temporal context; and as a *subject* or voice aware of his power in the production of certain historical narratives (Trouillot 1995, pp.22–24).

### *The pioneer*

The project Reyes conceived during his early explorations in the Putumayo and which he made ‘public’ at the Pan-American Conference in 1901, would stay with him until the end of his life. After having resigned the presidency in 1909, the tireless General, now in his early 60s, devoted a few years to travelling across Europe, the United States and the South American republics, where he continued to promote his continental integration project and crusaded in favour of the Pan-American union. An account of these travels was published in Spanish and English in 1914 and reproduced in instalments in the *New York Times* (1914). The US newspaper, although recommending his work due to the ‘official prestige of his author’ and the ‘intrinsic interest of the narrative’, regretted the fact that the author did not describe in detail the story of his adventures in the ‘thrilling no man’s land’ of Putumayo. Certainly, the chapter on the Putumayo basically consisted of an abridged version of the paper he presented in Mexico years before. However, Reyes added here a short introduction where, in a paragraph that evokes the opening episode of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* – where Marlow recalls his childhood obsession with the blank spaces on the world map – he tells the reader about his early fascination for the ‘unknown’ Amazon forest. ‘From my very childhood’, he writes:

I felt myself attracted by the mystery of those immense forests. I used to cherish plans for exploring them, and of opening across them a communication with the Atlantic, thus giving new channels for commerce and for the glory of my fatherland (Reyes 1914, pp.41–42).

Reyes never published a detailed account of the time he spent in the ‘mysterious’ Putumayo. However, he narrated this story in a series of notebooks and letters to his sons that he wrote during the early 1910s, which were published posthumously as his *Memoirs* (Reyes 1986). There, he tells how he ended up there, a story that seems to have more



to do with chance than with premeditated resolution. As young as 17, Reyes begins, he had concluded that his native land – the small town of Santa Rosa de Viterbo, located in the then sovereign state of Boyacá – was ‘too narrow a theatre’ for his ‘great ambitions’ (Reyes 1986, p.32), and therefore considered travelling to Panama or California, a common destination at the time for fortune seekers. He was about to leave when his mother got a letter from his elder half-brother Elías in which he asked her to send Rafael and Enrique to assist him in an import business he had established in the city of Popayán (then the capital of the state of Cauca, to which the extensive *Territorio del Caquetá* belonged). As the latter decided to stay in order to take care of the family – Reyes’ father had died several years previously – the young and ambitious Rafael, without hesitation, embarked on foot and by mule on the long and arduous journey to Popayán.

Not long after he had joined his brother Elías, Reyes saw a promising business opportunity in the exportation of cinchona tree bark, out of which quinine was extracted, a substance known for its anti-malarial properties that was at the time in high demand in Europe and the United States. Since the cinchona trees grew in abundance in the southern Andean foothills and they remained largely unexploited, Reyes undertook a series of expeditions to buy the bark from the few ‘whites’ living there and also to explore new extraction areas. It was during one of those expeditions – across the slopes of the *cordillera* to the east of Popayán – that Reyes mentioned that he saw for the first time the immense Amazon lowlands. Watching from the top of a tree, a scene that vividly evokes a famous scene of Werner Herzog’s movie *Fitzcarraldo*, he could not but marvel at the ‘endless and immense green ocean’. Recalling his bewilderment with the grandeur of the Amazon, a theatre that at last seemed to be big enough for his ‘great ambitions’, he writes:

Those virgin and *unknown* forests, those immense spaces, fascinated and attracted me to explore them, to traverse them and get to the sea, and to open roads for the progress and welfare of my country; those forests were *absolutely unknown* to the inhabitants of the *cordillera*, and the idea to penetrate them terrified me since the popular imagination populated them with wild beasts and monsters, besides the numerous savage cannibals found there (Reyes 1986, p.81, emphasis added).

This proclamation, that Reyes invariably uses whenever he introduces his expeditions, and which is revealing of the fusing of patriotism and self-ambition so typical of his character, fully reflects the *criollo* vision of the frontier. Yet, as it has already been noted, in Reyes we witness not

only the vision but also the state practices through which the frontier was constituted. The commercial activities – mainly around the extraction and export of cinchona bark – he and his brothers undertook in the Putumayo during the 1870s constitute a remarkable example of both the vision and the practice. Reyes' best-known biography, for instance, not only states that the Reyes brothers' company (*Elías Reyes y Hermanos*) was the first large-scale commercial initiative founded in Colombia, but also eulogizes that:

We don't know of any [company] which, under private initiative, *without official support* and with no political ambitions of any kind, had mobilised such quantity of men and money towards a *licit, and at the same time progressive and patriotic goal* (Lemaitre 1981, p.89, emphasis added).

Although this statement might appear exaggerated, it sharply captures the discourse with which Reyes himself infused all his commercial projects and achievements. Moreover, the significance that the Reyes brothers' company has in the history of the Colombian Amazon is widely recognized.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, as previously indicated, even though this territory was far from being unknown at the time Reyes had his great epiphany at the top of a tree, it is a fact that prior to he and his brothers starting their extraction activities, the presence of Colombians in the region – excluding the 'savage tribes' – was insignificant. This situation changed significantly in the following decades as a result of the cinchona and especially the rubber boom, the Reyes brothers clearly counting among the pioneers of that infamous episode in the history of the Amazon.<sup>18</sup> It is not accurate, however, that the brothers did not have any official support, as they obtained from the government a large land concession in the upper Putumayo and Caquetá basins, an area abounding in cinchona forests (Domínguez 2005, p.87). However, rather than being an unintended omission, the biographer's imprecision reflects the widespread view of the Amazon as a vacant frontier waiting to be grabbed.

From a commercial standpoint, the brothers' venture could be considered to be a truly remarkable story of endeavour and achievement. In 1875, as the cinchona forests to the east of Popayán began to be exhausted, they focused their activities in the *piedemonte*, and Mocoa became the Company's operational base. The brothers did well in the following years, and the company staff increased significantly as friends and other family members joined, including Rafael's brothers Enrique and Néstor. Yet, it was the ambitious and visionary Rafael who conceived the ingenious idea that would come to symbolize the major achievement and commercial success of the Company. This

idea, which basically contemplated the development of steamship navigation along the Putumayo River, was the one that led him to undertake his epic journey from Pasto to Rio de Janeiro. The logic was simple: the Putumayo River – navigable for most of its course – would give the Company access to the Atlantic through the Amazon, thus avoiding the Pacific route, not only longer – especially to Europe – but considerably more difficult, as the cinchona bark had to be transported several days by land through the steep and craggy trails of the *cordillera*.

Reyes' plan would be completed by the construction of a bridle road from Mocoa – not far from the embarkation point at the site of Guineo – to Pasto, hence establishing a transoceanic route linking the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Therefore, in a letter published in Pasto after he arrived from his trip to Brazil, he announced the success of his journey and also urged the convenience of the road. The French traveller Edouard André, who arrived in Pasto soon after the letter was published, mentions that the *pastusos*, following Reyes advice, asked the federal government for funds to build the road. However, notes André, 'revolution broke out and the clap of thunder vanished the illusion' (André 1984, p.773).<sup>19</sup>

Despite the failure of this early initiative to build the Pasto-Mocoa road, Reyes achieved a major goal during his journey, as he got permission from the Brazilian government to ship both Colombian and Brazilian goods using the Putumayo and Amazon rivers. Although Reyes would celebrate this navigation agreement with Brazil as a great nationalistic triumph and praised himself for 'having discovered an important waterway for our country' (Reyes 1986, p.161), he would later be accused of blatant self-interest. Purportedly, the Brazilian government permission was given exclusively to the Reyes brothers' Company, and stipulated that shipping was to be only for Brazilian crafts (Salamanca 1994, p.375). Although we have no record of Reyes ever having replied to such claims, it is more than likely that he would have refuted it by vehemently asserting – as he usually did – the patriotic and nationalistic character of all his individual and commercial achievements. This, on the other hand, was in perfect accordance with Reyes' character, who deemed himself a great 'civilizer' and crusader for progress and relentlessly claimed, amongst other things, to have put an end to the Brazilian indigenous slave trade in the Putumayo; 'civilizing' the 'cannibal Indians' he made contact with; and being the first Colombian to exert national sovereignty along the borders with Peru and Brazil.<sup>20</sup>

The significance of Reyes' self-proclaimed achievements lies, however, not so much in how patriotic or even true they were, as in how they

revealed the rhetoric through which state and frontier became two dichotomous and yet mutually constructed spaces, the former's aura of authority and supremacy built upon the savagery and barbarism of the latter. It was through this very rhetoric, as previously argued, that the frontier would be assimilated to the imaginary order of the nation. Although it has already been described how this 'imaginary order' was crafted and acquired a hegemonic character, there is hardly a better graphic illustration of this order than the map of the Reyes' brothers explorations in South America (see Figure 1.4).

This map was elaborated by Reyes on the occasion of the Pan-American Conference, and published together with his paper. The civilization/savagery antinomy is here skilfully portrayed through the various features represented on the map, which together comprise a bifurcated landscape drawn on a blank sketch map of the Continent. On the one hand, we see the cross-dotted lines signalling the various explorations carried out by the Reyes brothers during the 1870s, explorations that were for the most part confined to fluvial navigation of some of the Amazon's tributaries. These lines, which mostly serve the purpose of demonstrating the navigability of these rivers, are connected to a series of square-dotted lines, indicating the projected roads – such as the Pasto-Mocoa road – connecting his colossal navigation scheme with the planned Inter-Continental railroad (indicated by the thicker bold line running north-south). This infrastructural landscape symbolizes *the future* as conceived by Reyes, a future supported by the vastness and richness of the Amazon region, and of which Reyes declared at the Conference – picking up President Roosevelt words – '[comprises] a new world that offers itself for the progress and well-being of humanity' (Reyes 1979, p.36). On the other hand, we have backward or untamed landscape symbolized by the spaces along the railways across the Andes and those in between the Amazon tributaries. The former, filled with small rings, indicates areas rich in mineral resources such as gold, silver, copper, iron and coal; the latter, a *chaotic* collage crowded with shrubs, arrows and skulls, represents the simultaneous presence of wild cocoa and rubber, 'savages' and 'cannibals', respectively. Against this composite image embodying the past, present and future of the frontier, the Reyes brothers (not shown) stand proudly at the top of the map, personifying the white man's burden of civilization and progress.

The power of Reyes' map, a power whose immanent logic cannot be detached from the colonial production of knowledge, rests not so much on the 'reality' it exposes, but on the effect through which the cartographer's *fiction* acquires an *illusion of reality*. And so we are told in the prologue to Reyes' presentation at the Mexico Conference regarding the 'accuracy' of his map:

There exist maps in abundance containing facts which have appeared in books and articles and *which are more or less real*, but how often it happened that *much is due to imagination*, such as rivers, mountains, valleys *which do not exist in reality* ... Everything contained in this valuable work has been verified by the explorer himself. Should any traveller be detained on those burning sands where the brothers Reyes dug their hollow beds under the ground find himself misled by some freak of reflection, he may rely upon the map of the Columbian [sic] traveller ... and, like Le Verrier when investigating his planet in the mysterious expanse of space [sic], may say 'I do not see it, but affirm that it exists there'. A similar *effect* is produced by this excellent map which is the result of the geographical labours of our respected and dear countryman (Reyes 1979, p.9).

But how is this illusion of reality accomplished? The 'secret' is easily revealed if we look closely at the map. There, and beneath Reyes' collage of cannibals, railroads and rubber, there is not so much chaos but



**Figure 1.4** 'Map showing the explorations made by the Reyes' brothers in South America and the projected Intercontinental Railroad' (detail).  
Source: Reyes 1902.

a clearly delineated spatial and temporal order through which the untamed space of the frontier is rendered legible by a series of simple and yet visually effective binary conventions. It is in the production of this order that the mastery of the cartographer is fully exposed, an order that, as argued by Brian Harley, can only be consummated by the multiple cartographic 'silences' – cultural, toponymic, historical – through which the 'objects outside the surveyor's classification of "reality" are excluded' (Harley 2001, p.98).

I want to emphasize the symbolic violence embedded in such silences – so profuse in Reyes' map – for it is through the enactment of this violence at the level of representation that the *physical* violence we encounter at the level of practice is both assimilated and concealed. This circular logic of enactment and concealment is what Taussig – in deciphering the rationale behind the regime of terror that unfolded around the Putumayo rubber economy – denominates the mimesis between the violence projected onto the Indians and the violence perpetrated by the *colono*: a mimesis that 'occurs by a colonial mirroring of otherness that reflects back onto the colonists the barbarity of their own social relations, but as imputed to the savagery they yearn to colonize' (Taussig 1991, p.134).

There are several episodes in Reyes' *Memoirs* where this mimetic violence comes to light. However, I will just refer to two of them, as they mirror best the indissoluble relationship between the symbolic and physical violence through which the Amazon frontier was integrated to the order of the state. The first episode took place in 1874 during Reyes' first expedition to the Putumayo, an excursion he undertook with the primary aim of spotting cinchona tree forests in the Andean foothills. After leaving Pasto and crossing the *páramo* of Bordoncillo, which separates the city from the Sibundoy Valley, he spent a few days among the Sibundoy Indians – which he described as 'semi-savages' – procuring carriers to take him across the steep trail from there to Mocoa. According to Reyes, the Sibundoy 'supreme chief', Pedro Chindoy, promised to get him the carriers in a period of five days. However, the time passed and Chindoy not only had not kept his word but had asked him to wait for another four days with the excuse that there was a party taking place in town. Although Reyes refused to accept the chief's petition, in the end he had no choice but to wait.

Finally, when the agreed day arrived, the desperate young explorer went to look for Chindoy, whom he found surrounded by 80 Indians. Then, to his surprise, the Indian chief announced to him that he had 'no real intention' of giving him carriers, and that he had better head back to Pasto before he would be forced to do so. At this point, and foreseeing the potential threat faced by him and his two 'white' companions, Reyes

declared 'I realised that if I didn't make myself respected by this Indian my expedition was lost' (Reyes 1986, p.112). Thus, he narrated how he was 'forced' to pull out his revolver and make a warning shot which left the Indians 'terrified', and taking advantage of the situation he 'knocked' the chief down and with the help of his friends put him in the stocks they found in the room. Reyes' 'manoeuvre' took immediate effect as the 'frightened' Chindoy, begging him 'not to kill him', offered him ten of his best men for the following day and meanwhile entertained him with his 'best delicacies': eggs, chicken and pork meat. The triumphant Reyes, however, hardly able to get over the surprise of having frightened more than 80 Indians with only his revolver, explains the incident as due to the 'cowardice' and 'pusillanimity' of the Sibundoy Indians.

The second episode took place several months later when the brothers were already exporting the cinchona bark to Europe and the United States via the Putumayo and Amazon Rivers. During the first steam navigation in the Putumayo, Reyes mentioned that he visited and befriended the Cosacunty Indians, a tribe he found in the middle course of the Putumayo and which according to him was made up of 'around 500 beautiful and robust individuals' (Reyes 1986, p.115). Reyes felt a special affection for this indigenous community, and after spending a few days among them and having bartered some tools and chickens in exchange for wood for his steamer, he left for Belém with the promise of stopping over on his way back. 'I saw them disappear from one of the river bends' – tells the explorer in a nostalgic tone – 'and I lost myself in the immense solitude of those forests with the hope of seeing them again within the agreed time' (Reyes 1986, p.116).

Three months later and faithful to his word, Reyes arrived at the foot of the small hill where the Cosacunty lived. After having sounded the boat's whistle several times with no response from the Indians, he finally decided to climb the hill and take a look for himself. Then, as he narrates:

When we were at about one hundred meters distance from the Indians' huts, I felt an unbearable smell of putrefaction and sensed something horrible had happened to that tribe ... When I had reached the top of the hill, the smell was so nauseous that I couldn't even breathe. No signs of life were seen from the huts. Accompanied by the two sailors, we rush to the chief Otuchaba's hut, whose bamboo door was ajar. I pushed it and the scene I had in front of my eyes was so horrifying that even today, after so many years, just the act of describing it terrifies me. Lying on the ground there were more than thirty corpses of elderly people, men, women and children, in a total state of decomposition. Some of them kept their eyes, throwing flames of pain and suffering (Reyes 1986, p.116).

In the midst of this scene, which Reyes himself describes as ‘Dantesque’ and to his stupefaction realized that it was reproduced in every hut of the village, he found the only survivors: a dying woman with a baby on her breast, who told Reyes the cause of the tragedy was an epidemic that spread among the whole tribe soon after he left. Reyes, meanwhile, concluded that the epidemic was a ‘sort of tuberculosis which I have noticed the white man brings to the savages of the Amazon’ and that ‘this is the way these savages suffer miseries and die’ (Reyes 1986, p.116).

Reyes’ statement seems ironic not only as he repeatedly claimed to be the first ‘white man’ the ‘savages’ and ‘cannibals’ of the Putumayo had ever seen, but since it is quite likely that it was he and his crew who had spread the virus among the Cosacunty Indians. And yet, there is nothing really ironic about it. What this episode – together with that of the Sibundoy Indians – exposed, instead, is precisely the effect through which the violence rooted in the assimilation of the frontier to the state is naturalized by the myth opposing the former’s state of nature to the latter’s civilizing mission.

### *The statesman*

As with every boom period, the heyday of the quinine trade and with it the glory days of the Reyes brothers’ Company eventually came to an end. By 1884, and as a consequence of the growing production in Dutch plantations in Java and Ceylon, the international prices fell to the point that the brothers had to liquidate the Company due to bankruptcy. However, Reyes’ final days in the Putumayo were marked by another venture that ended as a calamitous failure. Around 1880, when the quinine prices were already declining, the brothers decided to set up in the rubber business. They brought hundreds of labourers from different parts of the country and established a station in the middle course of the Putumayo River. Yet, they had barely initiated the works when an epidemic of yellow fever spread among the workers, killing in a matter of weeks about three-quarters of them. Reyes recalls this episode as a ruthless battle with a ‘savage nature that defended against man’s domination’, and again had to make use of his revolver to persuade the frightened survivors desperately seeking to desert. This time, however, his gun proved useless against nature and the battle was eventually lost, the brothers having to abandon the place. It was also during this period that his brother Néstor, who left the station to explore other potential places for rubber, perished among the ‘cannibal Huitotos’. Enrique, his other brother, died a few years later from yellow fever while extracting rubber in the Yuruá and Yavarí Rivers.



Reyes' closing words to this episode cannot hide his despair: 'from the rubber discovered by us we got nothing but disgrace and capital losses; this is the fate of the conquerors' (Reyes 1986, p.177).

\* \* \*

The story of how the defeated entrepreneur, who left the Putumayo in 1884, became president two decades later, is long and intricate. This story, however, is to a large extent related to a successful military career he initiated soon after leaving behind his role as an explorer and businessman. Reyes' military victories, especially during the civil wars of 1885 and 1895, which he fought on the side of the Conservatives, gained him enormous popularity and also made him a prominent figure within this party.<sup>21</sup> Historians, moreover, tend to stress that his non-partisan character represented a major influence for his election in July 1904, particularly since the country had just emerged from the War of a Thousand Days, the most extended and devastating civil conflict since independence. Reyes' government, which he ended up exercising in an authoritative manner under the flag – borrowed from his much-admired Porfirio Díaz – of 'less politics and more administration', is generally regarded as modernist and reformist, and Reyes himself as a *man of practice* rather than a politician.<sup>22</sup> Among the reforms he pursued – which included the professionalization of the military, territorial re-organization aimed at counteracting the regional elites' power, and fiscal restructuring to enhance the government revenues – the modernization of the banking system and the improvement of the country's transport network occupied a relevant place. These two reforms, which were particularly directed towards creating an environment favourable to foreign investment, plainly mirror the vision the General so vigorously cultivated during his early days in the Putumayo: a vision grounded in the consummated faith in progress and in the civilizing power of infrastructure. And so he proclaimed, in a much-quoted passage from one of his speeches that:

In times past it was the Cross or the Koran, the sword or book that accomplished the conquests of civilization; today it is the powerful locomotive, flying over the shining rail, breathing like a volcano, that awakens people to progress, well-being and liberty ... and to those who do not conform to that process it crushes beneath its wheels (cited in Bergquist 1986, p.221).

Reyes government's intentions and policies towards the frontier territories, as stated in his inaugural presidential speech delivered at the National Congress on August 7th 1904, fully embodied this vision. In a

passage that implicitly refers to his own patriotic enterprises during the 1870s, he made the following allusion to the Amazon region:

*Our eastern territory, whose inconceivable wealth has been unveiled by a few sons of Colombia who have ventured themselves into those primary forests, or even paid with their own blood our sovereignty in those vast regions, awaits for the efficacy of the country's patriotism, so that, through the determined will of the entire Nation, the treasures which are currently exploited there by foreigners, in detriment of our rights, are opened for the country (Sánchez 1908, p.vii, emphasis added).*

And so Reyes began his government by taking practical measures regarding this vast and neglected territory. In January 1905, he established the Intendancy of Putumayo with Mocoa as its capital, and during that same year the central government covered 75% of its expenses (Stanfield 1998). He actively supported the recently established Capuchin Mission, subsidizing its activities through the Ministry of Public Instruction. The Pasto-Mocoa road, a project he could not accomplish during his days as a businessman, also formed part of his concerns. In 1906, and under the justification that the road was of great importance not only in terms of economic development but of national sovereignty, he authorized, through the newly created Ministry of Public Works, engineering studies with the clear purpose of exploring and projecting potential routes.<sup>23</sup>

This early impetus, however, soon vanished. In March 1906, just one year after it was created, the Intendancy of Putumayo was suppressed and its territory left under the jurisdiction of the Department of Nariño. The road works were suspended by the government in early 1908, allegedly due to a lack of funds, and they would not be resumed until late 1909, by which time Reyes had left the presidency.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, and in what seems a paradox, the role played in the region by the indefatigable General during the nearly five years that he remained in power was to be remembered, at best, as controversial and ambiguous. The grounds on which this perception is founded are to a large extent related to two episodes in which Reyes was directly involved.

This first episode is related to an extensive land concession granted by Reyes' government to a Colombian company for rubber extraction in the middle Putumayo, which ended up favouring the interests of the infamous Peruvian Rubber Company, the *Casa Arana*.<sup>25</sup> The history of the concession dates back to 1900, when Reyes was abroad as Plenipotentiary Minister to France. During that year, his nephew Florentino Calderón, who had worked in the Reyes brothers' Company in the 1870s, made an initial attempt to obtain the necessary concession

from the government. The contract, drawn up by Florentino and presented to his brother Carlos Calderón, then Minister of Finance, stipulated, among other things, the cession for a period of 30 years of a vast strip of land between the Putumayo and Caquetá Rivers. In exchange, the contractor committed to support the Catholic Missions, to establish steamship navigation in the Caquetá and Putumayo and maintain the trail from Pasto to Mocoa, and to 'facilitate' the assimilation of the indigenous communities to 'civilized life'. In order to provide a legal basis for the contract, the Minister hastened to establish a Decree which specified that the central government could lease, for a period of up to 30 years, 'vacant lands' of extensions greater than 5,000 hectares. The main argument supporting the law, summarized in its first article, stated that 'the deserted regions of the Republic, home to the non-civilized indigenous population, have remained to date unproductive to the Nation' (Decree 645, 9th February 1900, reproduced in Cajiao 1900).

Lastly, and in order to avoid charges of nepotism, the Calderón brothers had asked a third person, Leopoldo Cajiao, to appear in the contract as concessionaire. However, to their surprise, at the last minute Cajiao refused to sign the contract alleging that the concession was highly detrimental to the 'interests of the Nation'. Cajiao not only accused the Calderóns of taking advantage of the country's current 'state of exception' – which had been decreed due to the ongoing civil war – to evade the legal requisite of submitting the contract to a public tender; he also argued that, once obtained, the brothers had the intention of transferring the concession to a French firm using as an intermediary a Colombian trading house based in Paris.

The scandal that followed Cajiao's charges eventually frustrated the Calderóns' initiative. But Florentino did not give up. In a brief book he published in 1902 entitled *Nuestros desiertos del Caquetá y Amazonas* [*Our Deserts of Caquetá and Amazonas*], he denounced Cajiao's accusations as an 'extraordinary defamation' and defended the concession as a 'truly patriotic' enterprise not only intended to 'civilize' the 'savages' of the Putumayo, but to exercise territorial sovereignty over the territories in dispute with Peru (Calderón 1902). With these arguments, rubber prices soaring, and his uncle now elected president, he made a second attempt. Through the firm Cano, Cuello & Co., a rubber company that was established in the Putumayo in 1903, he finally obtained from Reyes' government the much-coveted concession. The Cano, Cuello & Co. concession, signed in January 1905, granted the company ownership, for a period of 25 years, of a large territory – calculated to be 100,000 square kilometres – between the Putumayo and Caquetá rivers (Salamanca 1994, p.113). The conditions of the contract were to a large extent similar to the previous one, and included the grant of property

rights at the expiration date of concession over the lands where the Company had buildings and plantations.

The Cano, Cuello & Co. concession turned into a national scandal. The scandal revolved around the fact that the concession territory, which the Company initially intended to cede to a US conglomerate – the *Amazon Colombian Rubber & Trading Company* – with the needed capital to exploit it, ended up in the hands of the Casa Arana. The scandal would have probably been kept quiet if it were not for the fact that this same territory formed a part of a dispute with Peru, a situation which, together with the recent loss of Panama, awakened nationalistic sentiments. This time the charges, moreover, directly involved Reyes, and came mostly from two of his main political detractors. Santiago Rozo, Consul at Manaus, issued in April 1910 a formal complaint to the country's General Attorney, in which he accused Fidel Cuello, Enrique Cortés and Rafael Reyes of 'Traición a la Patria' [betrayal of the nation]. Specifically, he accused the first two, general manager of Cano, Cuello & Co. and Minister to the United States during Reyes' government respectively, for having illegally negotiated the concession with the Casa Arana, and thus facilitating the *de facto* appropriation of the disputed territory. As for Reyes, Rozo denounced him as accomplice, particularly for having authorized the signature of the concession 'knowing beforehand' its detrimental effects for the country.<sup>26</sup>

Demetrio Salamanca, one of Reyes' former employees in the Putumayo and later Consul at Belém, went further than Rozo. He argued that the two *modus vivendi* signed between Colombia and Peru in 1905 and 1906, which recognized the *status quo* of the territory in dispute and served as a temporary measure while both countries reached a definitive agreement, favoured the violent eviction of Colombian *caucheros* by employees of the Casa Arana. As the 1906 agreement contemplated the immediate withdrawal of civil and military authorities along the zone in dispute, Salamanca explicitly suggested that this measure would also have facilitated the sale of the concession to Arana. He even went on to argue that the press censorship established by Reyes in 1906 was closely related to the Putumayo concession, thus declaring that:

The dictator Reyes, accomplice and accessory of the crimes perpetuated in the Putumayo ... had a wicked interest in keeping Colombians ignorant of the current situation in the Putumayo, and for that reason silenced the press and persecuted those patriots who defended the territorial integrity and the honour of Colombia (Salamanca 1994, p.119).

Both Rozo and Salamanca's claims contain numerous rumours and versions taken from other people involved in the concession, referring to

juicy bribes, blackmail and fraud. Through them, the case itself becomes an intricate game of mutual accusations when the perpetrators themselves turn into victims and victims into perpetrators, thus blurring the line between fiction and fact. Reyes himself, who never set foot in the Putumayo after his tragic rubber venture, refuted the criticisms and accusations by invoking once more the patriotic crusades he accomplished during his youth, and the many sacrifices he and his brothers endured among the 'savages' and unhealthy forests (Reyes 1912, 1913). Eventually, the concession scandal subsided and Reyes, along with the other accused, escaped unpunished, an outcome typical of the country's countless episodes of political corruption. After having resigned the presidency in June 1909 – due mostly to the increasing opposition to his dictatorial regime and unpopular measures regarding the negotiations with the United States in relation to Panama – he sailed into exile in Europe on board a United Fruit Company boat. Whilst there, and just as another scandal of much bigger proportions unfolded around the atrocities involved in the midst of the rubber boom, the General devoted his time to spreading word of his heroic adventures and promising discoveries in the 'New World' of the Putumayo.

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The relevance of the Cano, Cuello & Co. concession scandal to the argument put forward here lies not in how fabricated or real the claims were or to what extent justice was done, but in how these claims (revolving around charges such as betrayal of the 'honour of the nation', the lack of 'patriotic virtue' or simply bribery and corruption) silenced or concealed the violence through which the frontier was constituted. The apparently ambiguous and controversial Reyes government's attitude towards the Putumayo must be appraised precisely in that sense: not as resulting from inconsistent behaviour on the part of the ambitious and egocentric president, but as reflective of the discursive and material practices through which this territory was incorporated to the order of the state. Let me finish by briefly referring to the other episode for which Reyes' government would be remembered and which elucidates this point.

In early 1906, after being victim of a failed *coup d'état* and attempted murder, Reyes decided to exile the main conspirators in the Putumayo. For this purpose, he established by executive decree the Penal colony of Mocoa in April of that year, so the town where he and his brothers initiated their 'patriotic' quinine business back in 1870s, ended up serving as a site of confinement for his political adversaries. Although most of the conspirators would soon be released, Reyes' decision would leave

an indelible imprint on the region's history. Guillermo Guerrero, an engineer from Mocoa who deeply admires Reyes' visionary interoceanic project and argues that the presence of the state in the Amazon began with him, could not hide his bewilderment and indignation about his decision to make Mocoa a penal colony. This is the angry reply he gave me the first time I asked him about this event:

I haven't been able to read that decree just because it gets on my nerves, although this is my own emotional problem ... Execrating Mocoa, demonising Mocoa as a penal colony. So one thinks, how dumb the people from the Colombian Andes. They never had a vision of the Amazon. They always saw the Amazon, let's say, as shit. Where is the Amazon? It's *in* the shit.

Guillermo's resentment must surely be shared among many people inhabiting frontier regions across Colombia. For, although Reyes can be considered a pioneer in conceiving these territories as 'natural' places to exile criminals and political prisoners – he also established other penal colonies in the Llanos region (Rausch 1999, pp.302–304) – this constituted a common state policy throughout the twentieth century. Moreover, and despite the fact that many of the initiatives of creating penal colonies during this period remained on paper, it has been noted that they contributed to create an image of regions such as the Llanos or the Amazon as 'space[s] of exile' (Gómez 2011). Still, and against Guillermo's perception, one could say that the people from the Andes did actually have a *vision*. This vision, whose origins date back to colonial times and which we find perfected in the nineteenth century by *criollo* figures such as Caldas, Codazzi and Reyes, is essential in understanding the myth on which the modern state was founded and sustained.

As I argued, the apparently contradictory nature of this myth lies in that, although state and frontier *appear* as two fundamentally irreconcilable orders, the latter's state of nature becomes not an *obstacle* but a condition of possibility in which the former's power is rooted and perpetuated. Thus, and underneath the illusory effect by which the frontier appears in a relationship of externality to the order of the state, we find not its isolation or exclusion from that order but the logics and practices through which it is included in it.

It is only by considering this relationship of inclusive exclusion in which state and frontier have been historically entangled, that I argue it is possible to understand many of the plans and projects, utopian or not, that have shaped or transformed the Amazon's physical and social landscape. It is also from this background, as I seek to show in the next

two chapters, that we can come to see the story of the road not as an isolated event but as a reflection of the spatial and historical process of state and frontier-making in this region.

## Notes

- 1 The specific expedition Reyes referred to in the talk was the long journey he made by himself from the city of Pasto (Colombia) to Rio de Janeiro during the years of 1874 and 1875 while he was searching for an export route for quinine and rubber. However, his presentation at the Pan-American Conference is largely a composite account of the numerous trips he made in the Putumayo in the company of his brothers between 1870 and 1884. This is indicated by the fact that the narrative is presented in third person (suggesting the presence of his brothers), and also since it incorporates events that took place on other expeditions. A complete account of the years Reyes spent in the Putumayo is contained in a series of letters he wrote to his sons during the early 1910s, published posthumously as his Memoirs (see Reyes 1986).
- 2 Reyes was a contemporary of Stanley, a figure whom he admired together with David Livingstone. He actually made reference to them in his chronicle (Reyes 1979, p.14), comparing the Welsh-American and Scottish explorers' expeditions in Africa to his South American version. This parallel is worth mentioning since the figure and writings of Reyes can be better understood in the context of the relationship between nineteenth-century geographical exploration and imperialism. For a reading of Reyes in this particular respect see Martínez (2013). For a broader discussion of this subject in the context of European imperialism see, amongst others: Bell, Butlin and Heffernan (1995); Driver (2001); and Godlewska and Smith (1994).
- 3 The *encomienda* was, in broad terms, a system of tribute extraction under the form of labour established by the Spanish crown in America. In the case of Mocoa, the establishment of *encomiendas* was directly associated with the development of gold mining in its surroundings throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Ramírez 1996, pp.80–81).
- 4 This situation was to a large extent shared among the Spanish territories across the Andes from Colombia to Bolivia (see Belaúnde 1994).
- 5 For an account of the different foundations of Mocoa throughout the colonial period see Mora (1997, pp. 44–46).
- 6 The history of pre-Hispanic, colonial and early republican exchange routes between the Colombian Andes and the Amazon constitutes a relatively well documented topic. See, for example, Gómez (1996); Gómez and Domínguez (1995); Ramírez (1996); Ramírez and Alzate (1995); and Uribe (1986, 1995).
- 7 As noted by Ramírez (1996, p.109), although the overload of human carriers was condemned by law as early as 1542, the custom of travelling on the back of the indigenous peoples continued to be a common practice until well into the twentieth century. For a discussion on the practice of *silleros* in the broader context of colonialism see Taussig (1991, pp.287–335).

- 8 The area of the Colombian Amazon, which amounts to 413.473 km<sup>2</sup> distributed between seven departments, corresponds roughly to one-third of the country's total area.
- 9 Although the *Uti possidetis iure* principle would be the subject of subsequent disputes, its adoption following the end of the Spanish rule had the main purpose of preventing fratricidal struggles amongst the independent states.
- 10 'Informe del cónsul de Belém enviado al Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores'. Belém del Pará, 12th June 1894. AGN, Archivo diplomático y consular-MRE, Box 127, Folder 277, fols.7–8.
- 11 The term *creole* (from the Spanish *criollo*), alludes to the name which was originally given to all the descendants of Spaniards born in America.
- 12 On the issue of race, state-building and nationalism in Latin America see: Larson (2004); Stepan (1991); and Wade (1997). Some bibliographical references on this subject for Colombia include Arias (2005); König (1984); Safford (1991); and Wade (1993).
- 13 The role of geographical discourse in the creole elite's project of nation state has been discussed by Arias (2005), Múnera (2005), and Nieto (2008), among others.
- 14 As soon as 1823, a state law demanded local governors to support the settlement of foreigners in the 'most advantageous lands'. Years later, in 1847, the government sanctioned an Immigration Law which contemplated extensive benefits, and stated that the executive power could dispose of around two million hectares of 'unoccupied lands' with the purpose of granting them to foreign immigrants. For a general description of attitudes and government efforts towards foreign immigration in Colombia throughout the nineteenth century see Martínez (1997).
- 15 These sources correspond to the accounts elaborated by José María Quintero (Prefect of Mocoa), the Presbyter Manuel María Albis and Pedro Mosquera, *Corregidor* (mayor) of Mesaya.
- 16 Throughout the nineteenth century Colombia went through several names and territorial restructuring. From 1830 to 1856, it adopted the name of Nueva Granada.
- 17 For a historical account of the quinine boom and the role played by the Reyes brothers' Company in this context, see: Domínguez (2005); Gómez and Domínguez (1995); and Zárata (2001).
- 18 The Putumayo rubber boom constitutes a subject that has been extensively studied. Some relevant works on this subject are: Domínguez (2005, pp.79–200); Gómez, Lesmes and Rocha (1995); Pineda (1987); and Taussig (1991); Stanfield (1998).
- 19 André is alluding here to the 1876 civil war, one among several conflicts that confronted Liberals and Conservatives throughout the nineteenth century.
- 20 These claims are found in numerous occasions in Reyes' writings (see, for example, Reyes, 'Carta al Ministro de Colombia en Washington', Bogotá, julio 25 de 1905, BLAA, Libros raros y manuscritos, MSS391; Reyes 1986, p.135, 142–143; Reyes 1920, pp. 580–589).



- 21 A detailed account of Reyes' military career can be found in his biography by Eduardo Lemaitre (1981, pp. 15–52, 122–163).
- 22 For a discussion and description of Reyes' government policies and reforms see: Bergquist (1986); Bushnell (1993, pp. 151–161); Mesa (1986); Sánchez (1908); and Vélez (1989).
- 23 AGN, Ministerio de Obras Públicas (Ministry of Public Works, henceforth MOP), vol. 1407, fols.8–10, 39–40.
- 24 AGN, MOP, vol. 1407, fol.154.
- 25 See Gómez (1993) and Salamanca (1994) for a detailed account of this concession.
- 26 The complete text of Rozo's formal complaint is reproduced in Gómez (1993, pp.21–23).