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Title

Review: Verde , by Federico Rios Escobar

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/35h0q7mr>

Journal

Afterimage, 48(4)

ISSN

0300-7472

Author

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Publication Date

2021-12-01

DOI

10.1525/aft.2021.48.4.67

Peer reviewed

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Book Review: *Verde*

Verde by Federico Rios Escobar. Raya Editorial, 2021, 324 pp./\$45.00.

Verde is an extraordinary book of photographs of the insurgents of Colombia's Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) as they experienced their last two years as a Marxist-Leninist guerrilla insurgency (2015–16) and their first two years as demobilized ex-combatants starting to build new lives for themselves (2017–18). Published by force of will and strength of social networks, notably the Instagram account of its author, photojournalist Federico Rios Escobar (@historiassencillas), the book's crowdsourced existence defies sophisticated structures of muting critical voices and suppressing critical visions. As one of the premiere freelancers in northern South America, a preferred stringer for the *New York Times*, and a brand ambassador for Sony, Rios Escobar is better positioned than most to swim against the current of image/imagination management in Colombia, though certainly not immune from receiving his share of accusatory blowback and rejection.

In an interview with *Contagio Radio*, Rios Escobar described the process of looking for a publisher for *Verde*: "I knocked on the door of many presses and all I got was the door slammed in my face—obstacles, problems based on fears about the politics of committing to a project that talked about the FARC, worries about reprisals from the government and private companies."¹ In the book's acknowledgments, Rios Escobar thanks those who rejected him for stoking his motivation. I too would like to thank them, for *Verde* is a much more interesting book than a commercial press would have produced.

Designed with Raya Editorial, an independent publisher of artisanal photobooks based in Manizales, Colombia, *Verde* is thoughtfully sequenced and exquisitely produced. Its folios are stitched and glued together bare bones, sans spine. Between the soft covers are three hundred and twenty-four pages of color images, not counting the three foldout panoramic shots.

The jacket, a thin olive-green sleeve, envelops the book not unlike the way a banana leaf enfolds tamales from the region where the FARC was founded in the early 1960s.

1. 'Verde', una apuesta para humanizar al otro en conflicto a través del lente de Federico Ríos, Contagio Radio, March 24, 2021, translation by author.



IMAGE 1. Front of the book's jacket and image from Punto de Ocaidó, Antioquia, the FARC's 34th Front, May 1, 2016.

Once unfolded, the front side of the jacket, the olive-green cover, back cover, and flaps, unwraps into a large map of Colombia on which Rios Escobar's wife had hand-marked where he traveled. This personally annotated cartography testifies to the photojournalist's intrepid journeys through an ample sample of the country's remote topography (and for those who know the geography of the Colombian conflict, also signals the risks Rios Escobar faced). The interior/second-side of the jacket, which is only visible once the holder gives in to the temptation to fold off the jacket, reveals a thumbnail key to the books' images that includes captions in Spanish and English.² Once the cover-cum-covering is laid out, the reader has a key, a map, and a sense that what awaits has been patiently gathered and thoughtfully assembled.

As mentioned, I join Rios Escobar in thanking the photo publishers who turned down his book proposal, preferring to stick with their well-worn formula of cautious complicity in the ideological order. The hegemony of the photobook publishing tradition manifests at Christmastime in Colombia when glossy photobooks, which the largest presses finance through preorders from banks, airlines, and insurance companies, are gifted to segments of their payroll and clientele as gestures of good cheer. In the early 2000s, I approached the most illustrious of these picture publishers as a young *gringo* who had been teaching

2. The captions of the images are mostly based on the captions used in *Verde*, sometimes with minor grammatical changes.



IMAGE 2. Inside of the book's jacket and image of the FARC's 34th Front in formation. Veguez, Antioquia, October 2, 2016.

photography to youth displaced by Colombia's armed conflict. After a short presentation, the publishing magnate said that the project "was for Europe" and that I should talk to the Dutch or some such socially concerned collective who cares about "these things."³

Since historic peace negotiations between the FARC and the Colombian government began in 2012 (and lead to an accord in 2016), more and more photographers have taken advantage of the expansion of discursive space to move their long-term projects toward public dissemination. Rios Escobar has the humility to acknowledge that his photographs are part of this broader trend and made possible by the FARC's relative openness to a steadier stream of journalists in the mid-2010s. In interviews he often cites his place in a community of imagemakers in Colombia (nationals and foreigners), many of whom have also transited through FARC camps. Though his peers weave images of the guerrillas into larger projects about the conflict, *Verde* is the most exhaustive visual photo-documentary treatment of this population to date, and it has an understated visual clairvoyance that offers deep glimpses into life in the FARC.

It is not surprising that *Verde* has generated extensive reviews and author interviews in Colombia. In his growing recognition, Rios Escobar follows in the footsteps of

3. I, too, persisted and Peabody Museum Press/Harvard University Press published *Shooting Cameras for Peace / Disparando Cámaras para la Paz: Youth, Photography, and the Colombian Armed Conflict* in late 2020 and Editorial Universidad del Rosario is distributing the book in Colombia.

photojournalist Jesús Abad Colorado, a fellow *paisa* who also sought distance from the patronage of the Colombian press and has been internationally celebrated for his body of work about the war's many victims.

Rios Escobar's tome is light on text, Spanish and English side-by-side. Alejandro Gaviria Uribe, the Minister of Health and Social Protection of Colombia from 2012 to 2018, when the peace accord with the FARC was negotiated and its implementation began, a former rector of Universidad de los Andes, and left-of-center presidential hopeful, wrote the lackluster three-page introduction. Its paragraphs are punctuated by imprecisions (e.g., "the photographs are arranged chronologically") and vacuities (e.g., "Federico knows that his images say everything that needs to be said."). Yet it ends gracefully, observing that Rios Escobar's vision is "an aesthetic gaze that becomes an ethical one"—a point that I will engage with shortly. Rios Escobar only offers a one-page reflection at the end of the book and two pages of acknowledgments. A handful of text boxes dot the layout, short contextual blurbs that are too short to be illuminating and that interrupt the visual immersion that is book's strong suite—the only questionable choice in what is otherwise an impeccably designed photobook.

Although most images in *Verde* are stand-alone shots, Rios Escobar integrates mini photo-essays into the book. By doing so he gently pushes on the soft barrier between the genres of photojournalism and social documentary. These photo-essays include: (1) a set of portraits of FARC fighters standing behind the contents of their packs splayed out for the camera; (2) instant, Polaroid-style portraits of FARC fighters in fatigues with the age of their recruitment written across the footer of the picture; (3) portraits of individuals in both military and civilian clothes; and (4) a set of pictures that details stools that FARC fighters sit on.

These mini photo-essays are simple explorations of existential curiosities, at once tangential and fundamental to Rios Escobar's broader visual exploration of the FARC. For instance, the series of the contents of individual rebel's packs splayed out on a table begins to respond to basic existential questions such as: What is it like to live carrying your possessions on your shoulders through jungles and forests? What is interesting in this series of twelve images is the variation. Beyond the rolled-up clothes, toiletries, and tin pots, the contents of the packs bear traces of the fighter's responsibilities and idiosyncrasies. Alias Brenda carried a MacBook Pro as well as a postcard. Alias Felipe only lugged the basics, including a headlamp for night marches. Medicines, pictures of her child, and a radio were what alias Karen lugged around with her. Alias Karina read *Voz*, the communist press. Calculators, hair clippers, a walkie talkie, and quite a few personal grooming products lie next to rifles of all sizes. The short series does an efficient job of juxtaposing everyday banality and the permanent sense of survival and menace that are substrates of guerrilla life, demystifying the FARC in the process.

The twelve pages of Polaroid-style instant photos of guerrillas in the western Andes are the least visually interesting images in the book. Often, they were gifted by Rios Escobar as souvenirs to the guerrilla subjects in a gesture of reciprocity. The handwriting on each is of the person's name and the age at which she or he joined the insurgency. Five people entered the group at eleven years old and one at twelve years old. The numbers beg

the obvious question to viewers far from the Colombian countryside: What does it mean to come of age in the FARC? By indirectly posing the question, this series fits into the broader ethic of the book, inviting viewers to slow down and consider the human experience of life in the insurgency.

In the middle of *Verde* we see six pages of shots of the folding stools that guerrillas use to rest on. Most are personalized with a name and colorful stitching on their fabric seats, personalized touches that include cartoon figures, hand-sewn animals, or embroidered doodles. Others are the patches of military units, perhaps signaling that they were taken in combat. The stools evoke the cute, the cuddly, and the deadly—the juxtaposition a motif that runs throughout the book.

Finally, eight pages of portraits of guerrillas posing in fatigues with their rifles at the ready are contraposed with those same guerrillas in civilian clothes. This sequence comes toward the end of the book in the period of the group's disarmament in 2017. Like the other mini photo-essays, this one raises basic questions: To what extent can the military and civilian be so abruptly separated?

These photo-essayistic sets strike quiet, contemplative tones and in this sense are consistent with the majority of the images in *Verde*. The book is comprised entirely of horizontal images that tend to splay across the fold and bleed to the edge of the page, yet the blood of the conflict is largely kept out of the frame. Yes, one of the first images is blood-splattered leaves, and there is a scene of an injured government soldier being helicoptered out of a war zone, but the focus of *Verde* is on the humanity of guerrilla fighters as individuals as opposed to their inhumanity as participants in a war that had been degenerating for decades.



IMAGE 3. Vanessa taking off her fatigues for the last time. She did not wear them ever again. Vidrí, Antioquia, March 25, 2017.

In a 2016 interview in the *New York Times*, Rios Escobar said that he works to “portray the intimate and make photos that are not very aggressive.”⁴ This takes me back to Gaviria’s appraisal that Rios Escobar’s gaze is ultimately an ethical one. The ethical impulse is clearly to humanize the guerrillas, which is the underlying strength of *Verde*. By shying away from “aggressive” photos—a default representation of the FARC in Colombia—Rios Escobar managed to get closer and closer. He appears to have been drawn to private moments: a coed group of guerrillas playing (flirting?) while bathing together in a river, a woman fighter tending her bed at night, a young couple spooning, a couple dancing in the middle of a celebration, another couple that appears to be preparing to make love. These images of love and tenderness are the most upsetting to the established order. For if the default representation of the FARC for decades has been as an internal enemy, a collective of inhuman monsters per national security doctrine, how can they love?

The ethical impulse to humanize the FARC is why *Verde*’s publication by a major press in Colombia was always off the table and the coffee tables where such books rest. Partisans on the right might quip that the book fails to depict the suffering the group has caused, whitewashing the rebels’ image. From the narrow perspective of one publication, such criticism would not be without its merits, but given the broader media ecology in which it operates, *Verde* is an important corrective to an elite-dominated view of the world that has failed to recognize the humanity not only of FARC fighters but also the working class (urban and rural) and Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities. That disregard was on full display in the national strike protests in the spring and summer of 2021 when the Colombian Armed Forces, which have spared no expense to present themselves as humanitarian saviors, as I have shown elsewhere,⁵ cracked down with deadly brutality on protestors, especially Afro-Colombian and Indigenous protestors in the western Andes.

Those protests were a visceral reminder that Colombia has much more pressing concerns than the FARC and its legacy, primarily the structural inequalities that led to the insurgency in the first place. In this sense, the publication of *Verde* might seem poorly timed, a deep dive into life in the FARC at the exact moment when society is eager to move on from the reductive logic of “all against the FARC” so expertly crafted by former President Álvaro Uribe Vélez in the early 2000s. But, to the contrary, the book is right on time to sound an urgent call to help clear that discursive haze and move toward a nonviolent, inclusive democracy, a project always deferred by the crises of the country’s ever churning war machine.

The final two sequences of the book are telling. The penultimate documents the BioAnorí expedition in which ten former FARC guerrillas led fifty biologists through its former territory. In two weeks they discovered fourteen new species of plants,

4. Paula Duran, “El fotógrafo que retrata el lado humano de la guerra en Colombia,” *New York Times*, November 15, 2016, English translation by author.

5. See Alexander L. Fattal, *Guerrilla Marketing: Counterinsurgency and Capitalism in Colombia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).



IMAGE 4. *Machaeropterus regulus* (eastern striped manakin) and *Ceratopipra erythrocephala* (golden-headed manakin) held by Paulo Pulgarín and Diego Calderon during the Bio Anorí Expedition. Antioquia, July 22, 2018.

cockroaches, rats, and lizards.⁶ It is at once logical and extraordinary that the FARC has such deep ecological knowledge, which, thanks to the peace agreement, it could make accessible to the country's scientific community. While the partnership hints at utopian possibilities, the window for realizing those possibilities in the short to medium term shut quickly, giving way to a more ominous political horizon. Now that the FARC has left these regions, who will be the stewards of this biodiversity as extractive industries look to expand? Will other armed groups move in to seize the territory they ceded?

The answer to the last question, as those who have been following post-peace accord politics know, is yes. Narco-paramilitaries, narco-FARC dissident groups, and the National Liberation Army (a smaller guerrilla group that has expanded since 2017) have all sought to fill the all too predictable vacuum that, in theory, the government was supposed to prevent by expanding its services. Of all his adventures, Rios Escobar describes his time covering a FARC dissident group that broke with leadership to keep fighting after the peace accord in northwestern Colombia as the most harrowing. If there is one image in *Verde* that summarizes the current state of Colombia's layered predicaments, it's of a child doing homework on the floor by the light of the only lightbulb in the house, with the uniform of a FARC dissident lying on the floor a few feet away. It does not have the visual impact of the foldout panoramic shot of a sole of a guerrilla

6. See "Bienvenidas! La ciencia saluda a 14 nuevas especies develadas en Anorí," Universidad EAFIT, October, 30, 2018, www.eafit.edu.co/noticias/agenciadenoticias/2018/bienvenidas-la-ciencia-saluda-a-14-nuevas-especies-develadas-en-anori.



IMAGE 5. Camouflaged guerrillas in plain sight. Mandé, Antioquia, May 3, 2016. Here the uncropped image is printed. In *Verde*, the image is cropped above the dog, which accentuates the palette of greens and camouflage effect while enabling the fold-out panoramic printing.

mounted on a horse in a river struggling to make headway against the current as the water creeps up the neck of the horse and toward that of the rider, but it encapsulates the predicament of the country with a blend of empathy, tragedy, and hope.

It is clear from many of the photos in *Verde* that Rios Escobar has the gift of a photojournalist's eye, able to visually compose masterpieces with startling frequency. My favorite image, visually speaking, is one of the foldout panoramic shots that at first appears to be a simple yet strikingly beautiful palette of the jungle's greens, a landscape shot, until you look at it long enough to notice six FARC fighters expertly camouflaged in the foreground (a justification of the book's title in a single image). But beyond having an expert eye, Rios Escobar evinces a strong social concern and transmits a sociological sensibility. *Verde* is a testament to what happens when eye, heart, and brain are all clicking. To the consternation of the gatekeepers of the country's fraying mediated hegemony, it is bound to be a classic in Colombia. ■

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