

**MURDER, MYTHS, AND MEDICINE  
IN THE AMAZON:  
REFLECTIONS OF THE COLOMBIAN NATION  
AND STATE IN *FRONTERA VERDE*  
(*GREEN FRONTIER*, 2019)**

Asesinato, mito y medicina en la Amazonia:  
reflejos de la nación y el estado colombianos  
en *Frontera verde* (*Green Frontier*, 2019)

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Abstract

This article analyzes the figure of the detective in the Colombian Netflix original series, *Green Frontier* (2019). Against the framework of a complex jungle space, the detective figure, victims, murderers, and accomplices each struggle with issues of identity and fragmentation. As the detective works to solve the crime, the people with whom she interacts comes to embody a binary relationship (indigenous/non-indigenous; female/male; traditional/Western medicine; oral/written tradition). As she collects evidence for the case, these boundaries are reconciled, and relationships emerge that reflect issues of State, Nation, foreign influences, and identity in contemporary Colombia.

*Keywords:* Colombia, detective, identity, jungle, State

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la figura del detective en la serie colombiana producida por Netflix *Frontera verde* (2019). Dentro del marco de un espacio complejo y selvático, la detective, las víctimas, los asesinos y los cómplices luchan con cuestiones de identidad y fragmentación. Mientras la

detective intenta resolver el crimen, la gente con la que se relaciona llega a personificar una relación binaria (indígena/no-indígena; femenino/masculino; medicina tradicional/occidental; tradición oral/escrita). En el proceso de obtener evidencia para el caso, las fronteras binarias se reconcilian y las relaciones que emergen reflejan el Estado, la nación, las influencias extranjeras y la identidad en la Colombia contemporánea.

*Palabras clave:* Colombia, detective, identidad, selva, Estado

*Recibido:* 29 de junio de 2021. *Aceptado:* 2 de febrero de 2022.

«El crimen es el espejo de la sociedad, esto es, la sociedad es vista desde el crimen...»  
~ Ricardo Piglia (Piglia, «Introducción» 9)

«Somos un país más amazónico que andino, pero no nos conocemos»  
~ Jacques Toulemonde («Es necesario»)

“Anything that does not belong to the jungle destroys it”  
~ Raquel (“The Walkers”)

## Introduction

In the early part of the twenty-first century, a group of directors appeared in Colombia that form part of what is now known as the New Colombian Cinema movement. These filmmakers endeavor to move away from the representation of Colombia as a land of drug trafficking, violent urban landscapes, and political conflict. Instead, they experiment with both form and content, resulting in the presentation of new aesthetic approaches, themes, and landscapes in pursuit of «lo auténtico» (Campos). Additionally, this group has been compelled to negotiate the demands of both domestic and international viewers. Increasingly, they have been forced to respond to expectations created by scholarly critics, movie festivals, and international distribution houses (Campos). This situation has been exacerbated by the realities of production in the twenty-first century. Online services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, etc. have opened new opportunities, but with a caveat; they “provide a limited and ever-changing offering based on their

own, often oblique and usually well-guarded, decisions about what the market desires” (Thornton 370). Consequently, Netflix series depicting Colombia that play to U.S. conceptualizations, such as *Narcos* (2015), present challenges to this group of directors who seek to move beyond stereotypical images of Colombia.

The first original Colombian Netflix series, *Frontera verde* (*Green Frontier*, 2019), is a crime thriller that simultaneously appeals to an international market while at the same time offering a nuanced presentation of the contemporary socio-political context of Colombia. Executive producer and co-director of the series, Ciro Guerra, asserted that the project would “expand the reach of our local stories and share them with global audiences” (De la Fuente), thus playing to both sets of viewers. This is accomplished by placing the country’s extraordinarily complex internal conflict within the context of the Amazon, a space that not only manifests current realities but also reflects the historical processes that have shaped them.

As a director, Ciro Guerra has distinguished the regional and ethnic diversity of Colombia. His first film regarding the Colombian Amazon, *Embrace of the Serpent* (2015), is celebrated for its inversion and questioning of traditional tropes related to the jungle. In it, he challenges the colonial vision both in form (e.g., the camera’s gaze prioritizes the indigenous perspective over the European) and content (e.g., the scientists’ knowledge is lacking and incomplete); prioritizes indigenous languages over Spanish; offers a new representation of nature as fragile and in need of respect; and gives indigenous mythologies and belief systems space within the narrative (D’Argenio). In *Frontera verde*, Guerra builds upon these innovations and utilizes elements that were left out of *Embrace of the Serpent*, including the use of color, a feminine presence, and extra-State actors (Torrijos).

Within popular media, critics have chosen to discuss the series in the context of the conflict between environmental interests, indigenous peoples, and the illegal deforestation of the Amazon Forest. While these issues are central to *Frontera verde*, this article seeks to expand upon this analysis. It offers an examination of the way the jungle space, the victim, her murderer, and the detective reveal a complex relationship between Nation, State, foreign influences, and identity in contemporary Colombia.

***Frontera verde: a brief synopsis***

*Frontera verde* is an 8-episode limited series marketed as a supernatural crime drama co-directed by Ciro Guerra, Laura Mora, and Jacques Toulemonde. Because the series reconstructs events through various flashbacks and is extraordinarily complex, it may be useful to provide a brief synopsis of the main events, protagonists, and key terms.

The show depicts the border space between Colombia and Brazil.<sup>1</sup> In the 1940's, Yua, an "eternal" and Arupani shaman, chooses Ushe to be his student. The eternals are not immortal but are transformed by drinking a plant-based infusion, which allows them to live many hundreds of years without aging visibly. Eternals are also charged with protecting the Mother Jungle incarnated in the "Walking Tree." Although the "Walking Tree" is fundamental to the cosmovision presented in the series, the most important secret that the eternals hold is the key to "God's Workshop," a celestial place that does not respond to western conceptualizations of time/space, and from which the world is created.<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after Ushe is transformed to an eternal, the Arupani indigenous territory is invaded by illegal loggers. Joseph, a German Nazi scientist/doctor appears under the guise of protecting the community but is in search of answers regarding the eternals and the key to "God's Workshop." He has allied himself with the Ya'arikawa (also known as the «no-conectados», given their lack of contact with the border communities) and declared himself their leader. After Joseph threatens to murder Yua and his people, Ushe promises to share the secret with him. She attempts to kill Joseph by poisoning the infusion, but inadvertently allows him to partially transform into an eternal and enter "God's Workshop." The Ya'arikawa massacre the Arupani in retaliation. Ushe flees the jungle and joins the convent at the Church of Eden.

In the series of flashbacks from the 1970's, Ushe meets Aura and Joaquín, botanists who are attempting to write a book regarding the jungle.

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Brown notes the dangers inherent to the conflation of identity within the series. The directors' choice to invent the indigenous communities in the series creates confusion between the Witoto-speaking communities who inhabit the Colombian/Peruvian border, who have their own rich history, mythologies, and belief systems, and the characters they portray.

<sup>2</sup> The Cerro Chiribiquete, a collection of large basalt cliffs in the Apaporis region of the Amazon, was named "God's Workshop" by U.S. botanist and explorer, Richard Evans Shultes. In this series it refers entirely to a celestial space of potential and creation.

Ushe befriends Aura in the marketplace where the sisters of the Church of Eden sell ointments and creams based on the medicinal knowledge learned from Ushe. Aura almost suffers a miscarriage and Ushe offers to save the baby by transforming it into an eternal. The baby, Helena, is then raised by Aura and Joaquín, and Ushe teaches her the ways of the eternal. Joseph becomes aware of Helena's gifts and attempts to kill her and Ushe by setting the family's house on fire. Ushe, Helena, and Joaquín escape, but Aura is killed, and Helena is severely burned in the incident.

In the present day, Helena is the detective chosen by federal authorities in Bogotá to investigate the murder of four women in the jungle. Once she arrives at the scene of the crime, she finds a fifth victim, Ushe, who then becomes the central figure in the case. At the beginning of the investigation, she has no recollection of her youth in the jungle, her relationship with Ushe, nor the manner that her life is connected to Joseph, the eternal, and the secrets of the Amazon. As she works to solve the case, however, flashbacks to her own story allow her to reconstruct her own identity as well.

### **Detective fiction, Nation, and State in *Frontera verde***

Before discussing the detective's role in *Frontera verde*, it is important to visit some of salient characteristics of this figure within the Latin American context. Crime fiction was traditionally seen to follow a particular pattern: "a criminal act, its investigation, the presence of a detective, and the logical resolution of the crime, which takes the form of a final punishment" (Forero Quintero, "From Globalizing Logic" 28). In these narratives, the detective was considered to represent the *status quo* in opposition to the criminal, who symbolized a threat to societal order.

As the twentieth century progressed, however, detective fiction within Latin America developed nuances that reflected the specific socio-political context of the region. Two main differences emerged: the defining socio-economic paradigm within which the detective operated, and the underlying relationship between the individual and "the law" (Giardinelli, *El género* 224). For readers in the United States and Europe, crime fiction traditionally operates according to the ideals of democracy, capitalism, individualism, and confidence in those institutions fundamental to the restoration of order. In Latin America, these ideals are chal-

lenged by socio-political realities (Forero Quintero, «La novela» 57). Consequently, as Mempo Giardinelli has suggested, the detective genre becomes inherently political («La literatura» 177), the detective is representative of collective action (*El género* 228), and an underlying distrust in the concept of law and its institutions emerges (*El género* 224, 235). This is relevant to *Frontera verde* in that the detective confronts a space marked by a series of political issues both historical and contemporary: the legacies of colonialism, the power of the extra-State actors, and the threats of extractivism. Each of these has posed challenges to Colombia with respect to its people (Nation) and concepts of “order” (State). As we move through the series, traditional notions of law and order are questioned, and the detective is forced to work within the framework of community to arrive at a resolution.

Within the Colombian context, it is important to note that the restoration of order rests on ideals that pertain to the “oligarchy” (Giardinelli, «La literatura» 179) or the “elite,” (Pöppel 18) who represent the vestiges of unjust colonial structures. Margarita Serje explains:

[...] the state is constituted by the visions, interests, and practices of particular groups. [...] who have access to “being” the state, decide for and speak in the name of the state: they design its project; they control its structure and apparatus; they define its priorities and policies [...] Historically, the descendants of the Criollos –literate, modern, urban, and preferably Andean elites– are the ones who have historically incarnated the state in Colombia. Since their imagination embodies what the nation is, it also defines the antonymous non-nation, the wild “Other” that is in need of taming. (39)

In the case of *Frontera verde*, Jacques Toulemonde suggested that the Colombian State’s other is the Amazon (*El Herald*). In his remarks, he alludes to the fact that it is a region that remains unexplored, isolated, and consequently has largely been left out of the national imaginary. Nonetheless, just as crime fiction reflects the underpinnings of society, *Frontera verde* reveals the friction between the Criollo/Andean/State and the Indigenous/Amazonian/Nation.

### Detective fiction questions of genre in *Frontera verde*

The Amazon serves as an ideal backdrop for this narrative as it presents a world which sharply contrasts with an ordered city space. Its chaotic representation underscores the fragmentation of both content (plot) and form (genre) that has come to mark detective fiction within the context of a State whose legal and political infrastructure has been weakened by the presence of political violence, guerrilla groups and/or narcotrafficking. Scholar of Colombian crime fiction, Forero Quintero posits: “[...] since traditional logic (or *ratio*) cannot encompass the totality of [...] reality, the plot is fragmented; it becomes impossible to maintain the fundamental logical relationship between crime and penalization that restores a supposed order, since in reality the law either does not exist or does not work” (“From Globalizing Logic” 38).

Notions of law, justice, and order in Colombia have been challenged since the beginning of its conflicts. They become exacerbated, however, in the outlying regions such as the Amazon where guerrilla groups, narcotraffickers, and illegal extractivists have taken hold.

In her study of Mexican crime fiction, Aileen El-Kadi adds the observation that to adequately portray the complexities inherent to a weakened State, multiple literary genres and subgenres must be grafted together (329). Such weaving together of disparate genres, histories, and characters is fundamental to the construction of *Frontera verde*. Even director Ciro Guerra encountered difficulty in defining *Frontera verde*'s genre, opting for the term «policiaocosmicoselvaticofeministapsicodelico» to describe the series (Torrijos).

In the case of *Frontera verde* this conflation of genre is further complicated for there are traditionally three models of crime fiction: the enigma, which includes an element that has a meaning that needs to be deciphered; the mystery, whose explanation defies the logic within which we operate; and, finally, the secret, which contains information that is known to someone who chooses not to share it (Piglia, «Secreto» 188-190). Conventionally, authors of crime narrative have chosen to craft their story around one of these models.

In *Frontera verde* viewers confront all three simultaneously. The murder of an indigenous woman and four missionary women represents the *enigma*. As the detective works to decipher the clues in the case, she encounters a world of *mystery* in which indigenous myths surrounding “the

eternals,” “the Walking Tree”, and “God’s Workshop” circulate. It is only through her own experiences in the world of indigenous and traditional medicine that the *secret* long guarded by the eternal is revealed, and she can resolve the case, not only of the murder victim, but of her own identity.

### **The jungle as setting<sup>3</sup> and protagonist in *Frontera verde***

Like the genre of crime fiction, which itself responds to a series of binary relationships (love/hate; power/submission; loyalty/betrayal; etc.) (Giardinelli, «La literatura»174), the jungle traditionally has been defined by dichotomies within the literary and visual imagination (man/nature; civilization/barbarism, order/chaos, etc.).<sup>4</sup> These oppositional relationships are further complicated by the jungle space’s ability to simultaneously conflate multiple histories, actors, conflicts, and values upon this one geographic location. Ileana Rodríguez asserts, «Todo relato del área está sobredeterminada [sic] por los valores del colonialismo o del positivismo, del neo-positivismo, y del neoliberalismo [...]» (38). In this case, the Amazon acts as a “contact zone”<sup>5</sup> as it not only reflects a colonial past, but also serves as a microcosm of the complexities inherent to contemporary Colombia. Several scholars have noted that the Colombian Amazon functions as the “Other” to the nation as it encompasses an array of tensions, whether these focus on environmental vs. extractivist priorities (Escobar 199; Serje 46, 51), issues of national vs. indigenous sovereignty (Trejos Rosero 43-4), or the presence of multiple extra-State actors (guerrilla groups, narcotraffickers, illegal miners and loggers, etc.), each with its own relationship to notions of “law” and “order.”

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<sup>3</sup> In Lefebvre’s study of the tension between landscape and setting in cinema, he defines setting as “the space of story and event [...] the place where the action or events occur” (20-21), and landscape as: “any strategy for directing the spectator’s attention toward the exterior space rather than toward the action taking place within it [...]” (33). While it could be argued that the jungle space also functions as landscape in the series, particularly when the spectator is invited to contemplate the vastness of the Colombian Amazon, this article focuses primarily upon the actions occurring in this space.

<sup>4</sup> In the Colombian case, these themes are first introduced in José Eustasio Rivera’s canonical text, *La vorágine*, which examines the jungle space and its inhabitants, and focuses upon the atrocities committed during the rubber boom in the Colombian Amazon.

<sup>5</sup> The contact zone is: “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (Pratt 6).



Just as the protagonists of the series reveal various aspects of contemporary Colombian identity, the jungle in *Frontera verde*, also serves as a protagonist and consequently confronts multiple facets of its own identity. Those who write about the Amazon use the terms such as «selva» and «manigua» interchangeably; however, as Rodríguez notes, these have distinct connotations. Whereas each implies a border between civilization, the Nation, law, and their opposites (28), *manigua* is considered wild and untamed, while *selva* refers to the idea of forest and thus signifies domestication, or at least contact with humans.

In his analysis of the jungle in *Frontera verde*, Rodrigo Torrijos explains this distinction further:

Una cosa es selva y otra manigua. En la selva se elevan ceibas milenarias, corren ríos impetuosos y reinan las fieras. La manigua no existe en el esplendor, es un amasijo de ramas, bejucos y plantas bajitas entre las que se escabullen todo tipo de especies, pero igualmente está viva y palpita verde. Es profusa la manigua, responde bien a la voz que los indios tainos elevaron para definirla como una «abundancia desordenada». *Frontera verde* se ubica entre la selva y la manigua (Torrijos).

The tension between *selva*, *manigua*, and the space in between is reflected in the series title. *Frontera verde* embodies the struggle between natural forces and social, it focuses on a politically constructed border between Colombia and Brazil, but at the same time presents an environment whose nature dissolves such clear definitions.

It is within this context, with a jungle that acts simultaneously as protagonist and setting, *selva* and *manigua*, that the first episode depicts the murder of four female missionaries, their bodies strewn along a muddy path deep within the jungle. While we visually penetrate the space, a voice in off speaks in Tikuna:

The deep green. The animal's song. The flow of the river full of life. Mother Jungle, you are my home. No matter how much I flee, although men do not wish to see, you are the home of the world. Mother Jungle, you are the origin of

everything. The spiral, the seed, and the skull. Eternity is yours. Mother Jungle, a demon has set foot in your entrails. One that does not belong here, in your nature. I have been with the moon, the sun, the jaguars, and the walkers. Their wisdom has accompanied me for 200 years. And although I have abandoned you, allow me to free you from the white demon that rots your insides.<sup>6</sup> (“The Deep Jungle”)

From the beginning, this series offers a new representation of the jungle. While well-established dichotomies between man/nature; colonial past/present, life/death, and White/Indigenous are evident in the monologue, this description of the jungle presents an image of wholeness, a force that is able to unify these seemingly opposing forces. It is origin, home, and body to all, as opposed to merely a site upon which conflicts are enacted.

### **Ushe: heart of the jungle, body of the Nation**

The directors of *Frontera verde* not only present each protagonist, but also a counterpart who comes to symbolize a binary relationship. Ushe is introduced together with Yua to represent the autochthonous elements of the jungle space and together they embody the female/male, student/teacher, heart/mind, and spiritual/physical. As members of the region's indigenous communities, Ushe and Yua personify the religious, economic, and political tensions inherent to repeated processes of colonization and economic development of the Colombian Amazon by those foreign to the jungle space. While the destruction of the jungle through deforestation is a direct referent to the extractivism that plagues the Amazon,<sup>7</sup> the series also introduces more systemic intrusions upon this space.

The murder of Ushe and mutilation of her body, read together with the jungle that forms her home and (eventually) her body, are suggestive of the Nation. Her murder alludes to economic, religious, and political projects that have intruded upon the Colombian space. Her body reflects the violence endured during the rubber boom, reveals the forced inscription of

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<sup>6</sup> All transcriptions of dialogue are taken directly from the official subtitles; however, I have altered the punctuation for readability.

<sup>7</sup> This is revealed through repeated shots of Ushe standing alone at the center of chaotically cleared land as chainsaws buzz with varying intensity.

Christian religious ideologies, and exposes a series of conflicting views of how to use the jungle's resources and indigenous knowledge.

While initially viewers believe the crime centers around the four missionaries, in fact, it is Ushe's murder that is central to the case. Her body is discovered only when Helena arrives, in the middle of an indigenous cemetery inside the borders of a *resguardo*. She is hanging by her wrists on a platform used as a public torture site by the rubber mill workers of the past century. As Helena investigates further, she discovers that Ushe's heart has been cut from her chest. Even though the evidence suggests that she was killed at the same time as the other victims, her body does not demonstrate any signs of decomposition, nor is there blood present at the crime scene. Around the twine ropes that bind her, there is a fragile vine growing, at the end of which there is a small, purple cup-shaped flower, the *Chiric Añégüi* ("flower of eternal souls").

In their interviews, Helena and Reynaldo (the excommunicated Nai police officer who assists her) attempt to learn more about the alleged murderers, a feared, elusive indigenous group, the «no-conectados». When consulting with members of local indigenous groups, Reynaldo learns that the removal of the heart is a ritual that is foreign to the regional indigenous practices; however, is a highly symbolic act within the indigenous mythologies. A former rubber worker explains: "The heart is life. It provides blood to all the other organs. It's like the Mother Jungle" ("The Walkers"). When speaking with the Nai community's shaman (Wilson Nai, the "Grandfather"), this information is combined with the myth of an ancient people related by his elders: "They are eternal. They don't have blood or odor in their bodies. They don't eat, they don't sleep. They are a reflection of the *manigua* and they return to her, in the form of the Walking Tree" ("The Deep Jungle"). As the series progresses, the connection between Ushe's heart, her body, and the jungle becomes clear.

As the details of the case unfold, Ushe and the jungle space become increasingly interconnected and intertwined. Her body becomes a referent for both the *manigua* and *selva*. Through her interactions with the Church of the Sisters of Eden, and the missionary Raquel, we learn that Ushe not only embodies the jungle within the indigenous cosmovision, but that she is regarded as the incarnation of the Tree of Life. In a flashback to Raquel's arrival in Yarupí, she approaches Ushe sitting alone on the stairs, then introduces her to the Church. Ushe is treated as an object: her body

is washed, dressed, and a cross placed around her neck. Raquel and the sisters teach her to read, write, and listen to the words of the Bible. As the camera cuts between each scene, viewers hear Raquel's voice in off:

The daughter of the jungle will open your eyes to what is sacred. When I found her, I felt that the Garden of Eden lived within her. That her veins were roots, and she was the guardian of something sacred. That we had to learn from her and protect her from men [...]. I [...] recognized that God's wisdom lived inside that woman born in Eden ("The Seed").

Throughout the series, Raquel attempts to control Ushe's body. In life, she attempts to keep her within the church, with several scenes showing the sisters circling Ushe, worshipping her; in her death, they do the same and Raquel actively hides Ushe's body from the detective. It is Yua who recovers the body and returns it to the jungle. There, he performs a ritual in which her physical body is absorbed by the vegetation leaving only an outline of her human self, and a vine with the purple flowers first seen at the crime scene. She is transformed both into the physical manifestation of the jungle as the Walking Tree and becomes fully formed in "God's Workshop." As this process occurs, her disembodied heart, held captive in Joseph's laboratory, gradually ceases to beat.

### **Myths and medicine: the jungle, Ushe, and foreign influences**

Curiously, it is through the metaphor of healing and medicine that the series explores the conflicting foreign influences upon the jungle/Ushe. In order to embody the complicated relationship between Colombia and the (neo)colonial forces that have acted upon it, the series embodies Ushe's murderer in the figure of a Nazi doctor, Joseph. Again, *Frontera verde* does not present the figure of Joseph alone, but instead complements his character with the Ya'arikawa, or «no-contactados». Their relationship is representative of the traditional binary of civilization/barbarism, underscored by the Ya'arikawa's reference to Joseph as "Master" as opposed to "Grandfather" used with shamans in the Arupani and Nai communities. Joseph's character is further complicated by his juxtaposition to the representatives of traditional medicine, Ushe and

Yua; and to the botanists who seek to use the jungle's resources to find medicines, Aura and Joaquín.

It is through the interaction of traditional shamanic medicine together with Western science that *Frontera verde* enters the realm of mystery, by presenting the myth of the eternal, centered around a root-based infusion that enables Yua/Ushe to become one with the jungle. In his initial encounter with Yua in the 1940s, Joseph attempts to gain Yua's trust by recognizing Yua's reputation as healer and positioning himself as an ally: "I used to be a doctor in my country. But I've been walking for years with the Ya'arikawa. More loggers will come if we don't stop them now. With deadly machines they will annihilate Arupanis, Ya'arikawas, and all their knowledge. They'll only bring death. We must protect the jungle" ("The Tree").

While Joseph posits the immediate menace to the jungle as the illegal loggers, Yua and Ushe recognize Joseph as the true threat from the beginning. Later in this scene, Yua challenges Joseph's motives, questioning his willingness to use violence and kill if he purportedly is a protector of life. The incongruence between his words and intentions is clear. He attempts to present himself as student, healer, and ally to the indigenous groups. However, his words expose his desire to exploit and manipulate.

It is Ushe who attempts to save the jungle from Joseph. While Joseph believes that he has forced Ushe to prepare the mixture necessary to make him eternal, she offers it to him in an attempt to kill him.<sup>8</sup> Suspicious of her intentions, he demands that she drink first, and she complies. It is through a comparison of his experience to hers presented visually that viewers can discern that Ushe has maintained power and control. Whereas during Ushe's transition viewers see and hear what she does, during Joseph's he remains external to the process. Viewers are unable to observe his thoughts and visions, and instead must rely on his conversation with Ushe to guide them through his transformation. Once his transition is complete, he begins to suffer physically. Simultaneously, black liquid begins to drip from Ushe's nose, while clear tears run from her eyes. Although Joseph is united with the jungle/Ushe now, he is also an outsider.

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to remember that the shaman only as healer is an image popularized in the West. It does not take into consideration the nuances inherent to this figure and ignores the use of shamanic power to destroy perceived enemies and even kill (Fotiou, 162-3).

As the poison spreads, Joseph begins to clutch at his chest and arm, as black liquid oozes from his eyes and sputters from his mouth before he collapses to the ground.

In a subsequent episode, it is revealed that Joseph survived. After recovering in the Nazi-run church (present day Church of Eden), Joseph meets with his superiors and relates the experiences that he has had as a result of consuming the liquid infusion. While her intention was to kill him, instead Ushe inadvertently allowed him to enter the sacred space of “God’s Workshop.”

Joseph explains to his commanding officers: “Everything is true. Everything we have read. Everything they have told us. In the jungle lies the consciousness of humankind, and inside that consciousness is all. Darkness is the heart of the jungle, the door to an infinite power, the perfect weapon. A supreme race created from darkness. Able to manipulate human consciousness...” (“The Seed”).

Once again, the traditional model of the jungle is challenged. This jungle holds two incompatible forces in tension –the world of written knowledge *and* oral, the light (associated in the West with knowledge) *and* darkness, and perversion/manipulation of power *and* creation. Unlike the oppositional binary relationships that are traditionally associated with the jungle space, the jungle/Ushe, simultaneously embodies both elements.

In contrast, Joseph is a symbol of destruction. While at various moments throughout the series Joseph performs his role as doctor, saving members of the Arupani from gunshot wounds or working with medicinal plants in his tent, his medical knowledge is used to gain power, not to heal. Joseph’s exploitative relationship to medicine is juxtaposed to Aura and Joaquín, who seek to explore the jungle’s resources to find new ways to alleviate illness and disease.

It is during the flashbacks to the 1970s that a complimentary relationship to Western medicine is portrayed. Aura explains her project to Ushe:

AURA: After all this time, I’ve realized that it’s not only the plants [...] or their roots, but even the animals contain elements that can cure disease. I’m sure, Ushe, that all the answers are here in the Amazon. [...] That’s why I’m writing the book. To discover and share the miracles of the jungle.

USHE: The jungle is the consciousness of the heart. She does not perform miracles. Each root that comes from the earth is a vein that nurtures the others and connects the mother to everything. (At this point Aura approaches Ushe and turns over her hand. She looks at her palm which shows a series of veins that appear leaf-like.) Including us. (“The Seed”)

Ushe’s trust and willingness to share her knowledge with Aura is clear. Ushe leads Aura to the *Chiric Añégüi* flower, the plant that was needed to complete the project, and teaches her how to respectfully remove specimens from the jungle. More importantly, however, when Aura faces the danger of miscarriage, Ushe offers to save the baby (Helena) by transforming her into an eternal.

### **Helena: Nation, State, and the “Other”**

Whereas Ushe reflects the Nation and Joseph, foreign influences, Helena is reminiscent of the complex structure of the Colombian State. Due to the nature of her birth, she embodies the series of binary relationships that have traditionally marked Colombian identity (written/oral tradition; city/jungle; criollo/indigenous; outside/internal forces). As she works to solve the case, she begins to erase the borders between the two worlds and emerges of the protector of the jungle and its secrets.

Throughout *Frontera verde*, her physical relationship to the jungle space is underscored visually. At first, she is presented as completely out of place in the space. When we are introduced to Helena, she rides in a helicopter high above the jungle canopy. In her lap, she carries the book authored by her parents; she pertains to the “lettered city.”<sup>9</sup> Her first interactions with her counterpart, Reynaldo Bueno, are tense. She criticizes the local police force for their actions (not wearing a uniform, removing

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<sup>9</sup> In his seminal text, *The Lettered City*, Ángel Rama posits the city space (established during the process of Spanish colonization) as one in which the seat of legal and institutional powers resides. According to Rama, power was maintained through the administrative structures overseen by a group of elites who had access to the written word (*los letrados*). In this series, Helena Poveda represents the power structures of the city space (the detective, the law, etc.) and also relies upon the written text left by her parents (science) to interpret the signs, both visual and oral, that she encounters in the jungle space.

the bodies from the crime scene, taking pictures with a personal cell phone, etc.). Her lack of familiarity with a different socio-political setting is clear: as a former member of the Nai community, a uniform would keep Reynaldo from acquiring information from the indigenous communities, the bodies have been moved because they have begun to decompose in the heat, and it is dangerous to travel the river at night, etc.

However, it is the beginning of the investigation that most clearly marks the tension between inclusion/exclusion. It is at this point that Helena emerges from the jungle dressed from head to foot in the white hazmat suit, its fabric framing her face and completely covering her body, with the exception of the light blue medical gloves. In the frame, her figure is diminished in relationship to the overgrown and chaotic vegetation that envelops her. She stands in complete contrast to the jungle surrounding her as her suit is smooth, clean, and without color (“The Deep Jungle”). Throughout her introduction to the Colombian Amazon, Helena is the “other”; she is intellectually, visually, and physically separated from the space.

As Helena circulates within the Amazon, the lack of confidence in societal institutions becomes even more pronounced due to the presence of strong, politically active extra-State actors and a corrupt police force that deliberately thwarts the investigation, at the behest of the illegal loggers. In an attempt to protect Márquez, Iván, the local police chief, orders Reynaldo to kill Helena. As they make their way to an interview with Márquez, Helena reveals her budding integration into the jungle, both in her recognition of the power dynamics, and in her navigation through the space. At first, Reynaldo leads Helena through the forest. He is physically distanced from her; only one of them appears in the camera frame at a time. At one point she stops and pulls her father’s map from her backpack:

HELENA: Show me where we are? [Reynaldo returns to her and points angrily to a place on the map] How do you know?

REYNALDO: [dismissively]: The river is there and the trail is over there.

HELENA: But how are you so sure?

REYNALDO: Because of the sun. We must walk east. Don’t you trust me? Let’s go back. It was stupid to come.

HELENA: Why? I’m authorized anyway.



REYNALDO: [with a smirk] Authorized by whom? By Bogotá's government?

HELENA: By Efraín Márquez. ("The Poison")

Helena still relies on those conventions known to her in order to navigate (the map) but is also learning gaining spatial knowledge through her questions. She seeks to understand the space as an insider and to read the signs within the jungle, rather than from a document imposed upon it. At the same time, her relationship to Bogotá has begun to shift. She realizes that the authority familiar to her is absent in the jungle, and that she must adhere to a new dynamic of power.

Reynaldo does attempt to kill Helena; yet she fights back and is able to escape. After losing him as her guide, Helena relies on her own abilities to arrive at the meeting point and interview Márquez. While her spatial ability to navigate the jungle is lacking (she is not able to discern the path easily, she becomes disoriented and lost), using the map that she found in her parents' book, and unknowingly responding to the jungle's guidance, she was able to arrive at the meeting point and interview Márquez deep within the jungle:

EFRAÍN: This is a land built on myths. It's better for me if people think I'm the white demon, so they don't mess with my business. But the things I've seen in the jungle... I wonder who could do such things. [...] They call them Ya'arikawa. They're savages. Whenever we hunt them, we keep their masks, so they understand who's in charge. The government says they are uncontacted people. But not all of them are indigenous. Whoever's out there, they just want to fuck me. I want you to help me find them.

HELENA: I don't work for you.

EFRAÍN: I know that. But nobody moves a finger around here without my consent. ("The Poison")

Throughout her conversations with Efraín Márquez (a prime suspect in the case), a clear relationship is founded between the domestic extra-State actors, the perceived "others" to the state, and the foreign actors upon the space.

The tenuous connection with the State is repeatedly communicated by Helena's inability to get cell phone signal. She is forced to use the telephone at the local police station to communicate to her headquarters in Bogotá. As tension mounts, Helena stands with one foot in both worlds. She learns to navigate the power structures, but still relies on the conventions that have served as a framework to this point. After discovering Márquez's role in the case, she makes a phone call to Julio while Iván stands across the room and attempts to intimidate her:

HELENA: (into the phone) Julio. How are you? Márquez isn't guilty and also I have a witness. I may know where the alleged killer is. Julio, listen to me. Iván [sent someone] to kill me. Yes. Yes, it's true. I'm alone in this shithole, I need people. Backup, I don't know. Okay.

[...]

IVÁN: Are you asking for backup?

HELENA: (to Iván) Yes.

IVÁN: If you're scared, I'll protect you.

HELENA: (to Iván) Thanks. But if they knew what you have done, they'd send the entire army. Don't you think? ("The Death")

The absence of State is clear. Not only is Helena physically distant from the capital and its resources, but there is also an inversion in her perceptions of the institutions that traditionally would protect her. As she moves closer to solving the murder, she begins to challenge the power structures she encounters without the assistance of the State. She uses her parents' book, the police archives, oral information gathered by Reynaldo, and the revelations she makes in conversation with Yua, to piece together the elements in the case.

As she becomes more immersed with the investigation, so does her connection with the jungle space. The flashbacks begin to reveal her childhood when she lived with her parents and Ushe. She begins to remember the fire that destroyed her home and killed her mother and discovers that her father is no longer in prison (for drug trafficking and illegal logging), but instead is on life support in the hospital. She hears Ushe's voice calling

to her with the nickname «Cachicamo» (armadillo),<sup>10</sup> and has repeated flashbacks to the past when she learned from Ushe how to speak telepathically, how to use her connections with the plants to make herself invisible, etc. At first, she believes that she is “crazy” or “mad” as a result of being in the jungle, and the frustrated efforts to make progress in the case.

It is on the night that Ushe’s body is returned to the jungle (and simultaneously her heart stops beating under the glass shield that lies in Joseph’s lab) that Yua gives Helena a drink that allows her to complete the reconstruction of her youth and thus gain clarity around her experiences. In the vision, she discovers that her mother was killed by an arrow of the Ya’arikawa, and that Joseph was her murderer (“The Light”). The night of the fire, after being severely burned, Ushe and her father decide to send her to Bogotá to save her from Joseph. When she awakes from this vision, she walks along the roots of the Walking Tree, physically touching the tree and seeking comfort from the conscious recognition that she embodies two worlds. Initially the realization is overwhelming, and she seeks to retreat to her “normal life” in Bogotá. Yet, Ushe, who appears to her and speaks to her telepathically, and Yua both recognize Helena as the new guardian to the eternal.

In the final episode, Yua and Ushe call on Helena to protect the jungle. She initially flees from this proposal but is then kidnapped by the Ya’arikawa and taken to Joseph’s laboratory. While she explores the lab, Joseph observes her from a distance. His skin is peeled back in places, revealing leprosy-like lesions on his arms and around his face; he appears to be in a dual state, alive but decomposing. Joseph begins to show Helena the drawings and journals he has made. He explains to her what his life mission has been, to understand this place and learn the secrets. His viewpoint accentuates the differences in worldviews:

JOSEPH: I think that place is a wormhole. There, energy, time, and space are the same thing. [...] Ushe and Yua have never wanted to analyze the secret they control. They are

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<sup>10</sup> Within the Tukano tradition, the armadillo is celebrated for its astuteness and ability to make itself invisible. (Reichell-Dolmatoff, 101). The tribal cultures portrayed in the film belong to the Amazonas Department and are not Tukano. While I do not wish to engage in the same conflation of tribal cultures, this conceptualization of the armadillo dialogues directly with the character of Helena in the film.

both ignorant. You are an educated person. You understand.  
HELENA: No. They protected this knowledge for years. They know this can't be touched. They have maintained the balance.

JOSEPH: Do you think the world is balanced? Helena, this is a gift for the world. [...] We could cure diseases, stop wars, improve the human race. I need you. You are the door to that place ("The Dark").

While Joseph continues to convey his perceived superiority and knowledge, Helena recognizes that there are human limitations to the understanding of this place.

She agrees to let him use her body to enter "God's Workshop" through a blood transfusion. As his black blood and her red blood mix, she closes her eyes and finds herself in the cosmic realm with Joseph, their bodies reconstructed as constellations. Throughout this sequence, images of Helena and Joseph in the celestial space are interspersed with those of the jungle slowly burning and of Yua looking skyward and addressing Helena telepathically, as she does with Ushe from within the realm. The struggle for control of the space of creation begins. Joseph begins to pull the stars from Helena's form. She turns to face him and stumbles toward him as she tries to comprehend not only the world of "God's Workshop," but also how to harness its power.

As the tug of war between Joseph and Helena continues, Yua looks up at the sky above and viewers hear his voice in off: "You are the key and the door, the light and the darkness."<sup>11</sup> In the next shot Joseph and Helena face one another. In one final effort, she pulls him toward her, his body reaching hers and then dissolving into stars within her constellation. Helena places her hand over her heart as more light accumulates there and a glow emerges. Then, there is an explosion of light.

While the temptation would be to read the series as a restoration of order, a triumph of the jungle over the external influences, after flashing to a completely white screen, the sounds of rock music emerge. There are strobe lights around her, and she appears and disappears from the frame. The camera then shows a tunnel, anonymous bodies dancing to the rock

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<sup>11</sup> This translation is my own.

music crowd the sides, and the smoky haze makes it impossible to identify them. Helena walks toward the camera from a distance, and as she approaches, her face becomes mixed with Joseph's. As she gets closer, switching between the faces becomes more frequent, eventually timed with the strobe lights, and ends with the image of Helena's face occupying the full frame, tears of dark liquid streaming from her eyes.

The end of the series, then, does not only fail to present a simple restoration of order, it also completely undermines the portrayal of the Colombian State as being White, Andean, and urban. While the final scene appears to take place in the city (Bogotá), the figure of the detective also embodies the territory and spirit of the Nation (jungle/Ushe). In doing so, she absorbed the presence of colonial (Raquel) and contemporary foreign actors to this land, both destructive (Joseph) and constructive (Aura). The merging of these distinct aspects to Helena's identity in the end are not seamless. Joseph and she continue to fight for control over her body as she walks toward the camera, and while she is alive (underscored by the soundtrack blaring "So alive"), she has also been poisoned by her inclusion of Joseph in her cosmic and physical forms.

## Conclusion

*Frontera verde* is a film that reflects the historical and modern-day socio-economic and political forces that have operated upon the Colombian territory. Far from being just a crime thriller set in the Amazon, this series is one that surfaces and proposes alternate models both for the jungle as well as for the conceptualization of "law and order." In terms of the jungle, instead of merely functioning as a site upon which multiple oppositional relationships struggle, the directors propose a model that underscores the *and* as opposed to the *or*. In other words, a space that is inclusive and unifies these binaries. It is only within the jungle that such a proposition could function, as it is this space that can simultaneously hold past and present, domestic and foreign, nature and man, and whose natural structure mirrors the social complexities. *Frontera verde's* definition as crime thriller allow the directors to question traditional classifications of identity within the Colombian context and demonstrate the complexities inherent to it. In doing so, they are able to use a space in which multiple forces and actors interact and construct a new model that is inclusive and privileges the voices and ideas of the autochthonous over foreign influences. *Frontera*

*verde* does in fact function as a “mirror of society”: its tenuous resolution resonates with its current realities. What remains to be seen is the Colombia that emerges from “God’s Workshop.”

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