

# The Cleansing

Stephen Muecke

Michael T. Taussig  
LAW IN A LAWLESS LAND:  
DIARY OF A *LIMPIEZA* IN COLOMBIA  
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ON THE COVER of Mick Taussig's new book, video artist Juan Manuel Echavarría performs a rather clever metaphor for the disintegration of the state. A floral pottery platter with the legend *Republica de Colombia para siempre* ('The Republic of Colombia for ever') is progressively broken up until it is nothing but a pile of white powder: the state as drug cartel.

Taussig is an expatriate Sydney-sider who is really only known among anthropologists, but should be appreciated much more widely. In anthropology, he has reached the top of his profession, as a professor at Columbia University, New York, where his innovative methods have set the cat among the pigeons. If you were around Sydney's pubs in the mid-1960s with the Push, you might have met Taussig as a medical student at the University of Sydney. He practised medicine for a while, then worked his way to London as a ship's doctor, only to become involved with radical political experiments at the London School of Economics and in the anti-psychiatry movement. After learning Spanish, he headed off to South America, where his medical skills were in demand. There he found the lure of the intellectual puzzlement that was traditional shamanism too strong to ignore, especially as it intersected so strongly with what he was later to call 'the magic of the state'. What is the essence of this political power whose stories of saints and dead heroes feed off the vitality of the people? How is it that the hallucinogenic medicines and magical cures of the oppressed Indians of the Putumayo in the upper reaches of the Amazon, where colonials plied a murderous rubber trade, were still so much in demand that they could only be seen as cures for a deeply festering historical wound? Thus the ideas that would appear in the book that catapulted him to fame (*Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man*, 1987) were forming, and by the late 1980s Taussig was already the most significant anthropologist, and maybe intellectual, that Australia could lay claim to.

I love this new work, which finds its roots in Marx and Walter Benjamin, because it has such strong explanatory force, unlike the fairly simple social science still dominating our institutions, which is basically about descriptions and statistics. Too many researchers are happy to let someone else come along *later* to do something significant with 'the data' collected. How much more powerful to create one's own significance urgently in *this* writing, to forge a necessary blend of history and political economics, and, at the same time, to understand the value of cultures.

Cultural value emerges in strange ways. We value secu-

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rity, and take it for granted, until lawlessness threatens it. Colombians, now under relatively lawless conditions, have been engulfed by a 'culture of terror', and this is Taussig's subject matter. This culture is complex, for 'security' can be provided by paramilitaries, the delivery of justice is more than uncertain, and even human life seems devalued.

*Law in a Lawless Land* is the diary of two weeks in a country that Taussig has visited nearly every year for the past thirty. It is the diary of a *limpieza* — a cleansing — as paramilitaries impose law and order through selective assassinations, hitting a town and consulting a list of potential victims on a laptop: 'soldiers who are not really soldiers but more like ghosts flitting between the visible and the invisible, between the regular army and the criminal underworld of killers and torturers that all states have no trouble recruiting when their backs are up against the wall.' (It reminds me of old Sam Woolagoodja in the Kimberley who told me years ago about the armed pastoralists coming through and having to 'clean-im up country'.) How tempting it is to speculate that this everyday terror, which was the past for some of us, might also be our future. But Taussig does not go into allegorical connections between the so-called 'war on terror' and the terror that has infiltrated the everyday in Colombian towns. He writes from what he knows and what he observes:

6.30 p.m., back in town to discover that a twenty-eight-year-old man was killed last night in his store opposite the home of my old friend L. Killed by two *malandros* (criminals), they say, not by paras! L.'s daughter, age nineteen, is hardly able to talk, she's so excited. She knows the family well. 'He told them, "Take what you want, but don't kill me. Rice, *aguardiente* ... take it all!" But they killed him with a bullet through the liver, in front of his children.'

And no one will go to the police, because in their corruption they will target the complainant. Maybe the paramilitaries will take out these *delinquentes* in the swirling lawlessness that seems to lack structure or ideology.

Taussig asks if we can trust the laws delivered by the state any more, since even the idea of justice gets shaky in the face of the deceit and fabrication necessary to its maintenance. Who else keeps advocating 'small government/free market', I wonder?

And why the diary form? Because in it can be enacted the fear, frustration and fatigue rarely admitted to fieldwork accounts. There's even an erotic glance: 'semi-transparent blouses and shorts so short you blush.' Language is the theatre of memory, not its instrument, he says. It describes, speculates, reflects on theory, and in the process swells and takes on its own volume, hopefully displacing 'the malignity of the events it describes'. But this diary does not banish the evil in some purifying redemptive gesture; rather, the spirits are conjured and they crowd the text, lending their incantatory power: the philosophers, anthropologists, historians, the dead friends, politicians, judges and drug addicts. As they flit in and out of the text, they constitute Taussig's mesmerising voice.