

Max Counter  
Department of Geography  
CU-Boulder  
2014 AAG LASG Travel Grant  
Master's Level

Dear Professor Radel:

Over the course of July and August 2014 I spent approximately six weeks conducting field research in Colombia, primarily in the northeastern city of Bucaramanga, Santander. This field research, concerning landmine victims' intersecting experiences of internal displacement and physical disability, forms the basis for my MA thesis (to be defended in April 2015) in CU-Boulder's Department of Geography. I used the \$300 received through the 2014 AAG LASG Travel Grant over this six-week period to sustain basic in-country travel expenses, most notably round-trip bus fare between Bogotá and Bucaramanga. The remaining funds were used for travel within Santander, specifically for multiple trips to the small, relatively isolated towns of San Vicente de Chucurí and El Carmen de Chucurí where I attended regional summits of landmine survivors' associations as well as met with municipal officials concerning the implementation of restitution programs for landmine victims.

The bulk of my field research time was spent in Girón, a small suburb south of Bucaramanga, which houses *Finca El Tabacal*, a landmine survivor support facility operated by the Colombian Campaign Against Landmines. At *El Tabacal*, I spent significant time developing rapport with ten landmine victims currently living at the site. I then conducted a series of semi-structured interviews concerning survivors' experiences of physical disability, perceptions about re-constituting social and economic activities in light of internal displacement, and difficulties in obtaining restitution measures promised by Colombia's 2011 "Victims' and Land Restitution Law" (Victims' Law). Beyond these semi-structured interviews, I also engaged in daily path analysis in which I accompanied landmine survivors on their daily travels between *El Tabacal* and the municipality of Girón. Through daily path analysis, landmine victims (all of whom had suffered severe physical injury) were able to display their capacities for physical mobility in spite of such injury.

I hypothesized that landmine victims' physical mobility would play a key role in their establishment of new social and economic connections within Girón and Bucaramanga insofar as they would be able to access a wider range of places of labor, education, and recreation. And while I found that questions of mobility may determine the ease with which someone can physically access such sites, the ability to utilize the resources contained within these sites is not heavily predicated on physical proclivities. Rather, my interviews and participant observation showed that the largest challenges facing landmine victims were not necessarily their injured bodies, but rather the institutional and bureaucratic challenges they faced (almost daily) as they sought to realize the restitution measures to which they are guaranteed by Colombia's Victims' Law. Landmine victims, as well as local directors of *El Tabacal* and the Colombian

Campaign Against Landmines, viewed both the state government of Santander as well as the municipal government of Girón as negligent entities refusing to take seriously their legally mandated obligations to provide reparations to Colombia's conflict-affected population.

In this sense, I came to understand how a constant sense of frustration regarding governmental authorities functioned as a disabling barrier for those with physically impaired bodies. Landmine victims' were only able to access a patchwork of the reparation measures to which they are legally entitled, which had very real corporeal and spatial consequences. Corporeally, landmine victims' bodies were recognized as ones deserving medical attention, yet difficulty in accessing medical reparation rights ensured that their bodies' physical recovery was constantly in jeopardy. As internally displaced individuals, landmine victims were also spatially liminal—unable to return to the site of their accident due to fear or reprisal violence or inability to perform demanding agricultural labor—yet continually unable to establish a firm footing within Girón or Bucaramanga due to difficulty accessing education and work-training programs stipulated by the Victims' Law which would help them transition into an urban context/workforce.

As I continue to work on my MA thesis, the above observations form the main structure of my analysis. Briefly, my thesis considers Colombia's Victims' Law as a biopolitical program that uses a specifically defined notion of "victimhood" as an epistemic lens through which to define and govern certain precarious populations. The slippages of the Victims' Law's implementation, however, engenders a sense of re-victimization amongst landmine survivors who feel that their rights to reparations are woefully neglected. As mentioned above, this situation produces victims as liminal beings who, having been recognized as rights bearing subjects, are unable to fully realize this status due to constant difficulty in accessing such restitution rights.

I am very thankful to the AAG LASG for their support in undertaking this project. I look forward to more fully presenting my findings at the upcoming AAG annual conference in Chicago in which I will participate in Dr. Zeiderman and Dr. Ghertner's "Outcast Cities" panel, presenting insights on how the rural-to-urban interface occasioned by internal displacement produces experiences of disability.

Sincerely,

Max Counter