

# Death's Trampoline:

## A violent inclusion path to the state



Sailing through the “umbilical cord” between Nariño and Putumayo challenges courage and is an X-ray of the political and cultural reality of the region.

By Ximena Serrano Gil  
Pictures Milagro Castro, Simón Uribe

**B**etween the Andes and the Amazon, there is a winding path, penetrating the imposing jungle and contrasting with creepy chasms: It is *Death's Trampoline*, something that, in addition to being considered one of the most dangerous roads in the world, tells part of the conflict and construction history of the state in Putumayo.

It consists of 80 km of an anguishing route, with 18 curves per kilometer, on a 3-meter unpaved single-lane road; there, the dust turns into mud on the unstable ground from continuous rains that accompany the rugged topography of the route, which goes from 600 meters above sea level up to 2,800 meters above sea level. The dense fog and constant landslides only allow one to focus one's attention and fear on the deep cliffs that have claimed the lives of many persons. This is *Death's Trampoline*, which connects San Francisco with Mocoa and connects this border region with the country's interior.

Understanding how road dynamics reflect the violent ways in which the Amazonia has been included in a discursive and material way in the state is the object of study of Simón Uribe Martínez, who has a Ph.D. in Regional Planning and a Master's degree in Human Geography, and is a professor and researcher of the Faculty of International, Political, and Urban Studies of Universidad del Rosario. Author of various articles, books, and the award-winning documentary called *Suspensión*, which refers to the disproportionate construction of a variant in the middle of the jungle that leads nowhere.

On the heels of his doctoral thesis, Uribe published the book *Frontier Road: Power, history, and the everyday state in the Colombian Amazon*, in which, through an ethnographic study on the construction of the road that connects Pasto (Nariño) with Puerto Asís (Putumayo), he centers his argument on the role



↑ Workers working in the section San Francisco-Mocoa, c. 1911.

that regions considered borders, peripheries, or margins have had in construction and legitimation of a hegemonic state project.

### Roads and colonization of the Amazon

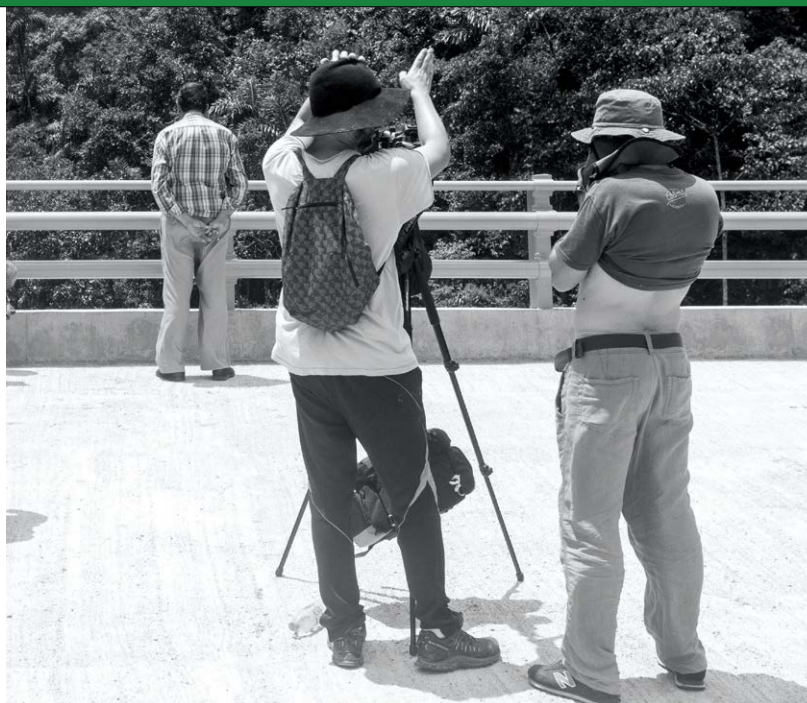
The origins of these roads go back to 1909, when the Capuchin missionaries, in their interest to evangelize Amazon indigenous communities, established the Mission's headquarters in the Sibundoy Valley, between Pasto and Mocoa, and with the government's support, they began the construction of a bridlepath between Pasto and Puerto Asís, known as the Capuchins path (the predecessor of what would later be the San Francisco-Mocoa Variation, an alternate route to *Death's Trampoline*).

Later, according to the investigation made by Uribe Martínez, in the the 1930s, the opening of colonization roads of the Amazon took place. The war with Peru in Putumayo (between 1932 and 1933) forced the government to decree the construction of the Pasto to Mocoa road an emergency measure, given the need to have control over the borders for territorial defense.

In this new project, the engineer in charge, Rafael Agudelo, decided to build an alternative road for the section between San Francisco and Mocoa, which had been built years ago by the Capuchin monks. This is the new layout that has been in operation since 1944, and it is the one known today as *Death's Trampoline*.

## Documentary *Suspensión* Misfortune echoes and road hope of Putumayo

Vintage still images that account for the early road construction, where settlers and natives made their way into the rugged Andean–Amazonian mountains to connect Mocoa to Puerto Asís, are the narrative context with which the documentary *Suspensión* begins, which shows the secrets of one of the most dangerous roads in the world, Death’s Trampoline. This production is directed by Simón Uribe Martínez, on the basis of his research: “In my interest in knowing the border not only as a geographic connection but also as a political and social condition, as well as exploring new ways of transmitting knowledge, I conducted a documentary derived from my doctoral research, thanks to a scholarship in ethnographic cinema from the Wenner–Gren Foundation and subsequent funding of the Fondo de Desarrollo Cinematográfico de Colombia [Cinematographic Development Fund of Colombia]”, Uribe narrates.



↑ Filming of the documentary *Suspensión*.

Because of the high danger that the *Trampoline* represents, at the beginning of 2000, the government authorized the construction of the San Francisco–Mocoa variant, which follows the same route that the old Capuchin road does; however, and despite being of vital international, national, and regional interest, because it is part of a multimodal corridor that seeks to connect the Atlantic in Brazil to the Pacific in southern Colombia, since December 2016, the work lies suspended because of the lack of economic resources.

But what was the real impact of all this infrastructure? Uribe clarifies that although the government’s immediate priority was to facilitate the movement of troops and artillery to establish national sovereignty throughout the region, the importance of these paths has to be located in a larger story of agrarian conflicts and the colonization of the lowlands of Putumayo. “The roads in the Colombian Amazon were, for a long time, the main state policies to colonize the region. This generated many social, territorial, and environmental conflicts that persist to this day,” he emphasizes.

This is how roads are a way of understanding how this region has been colonized and the importance of the roads in the contemporary occupation of the Colombian Amazon.

### Infrastructure violent dynamics

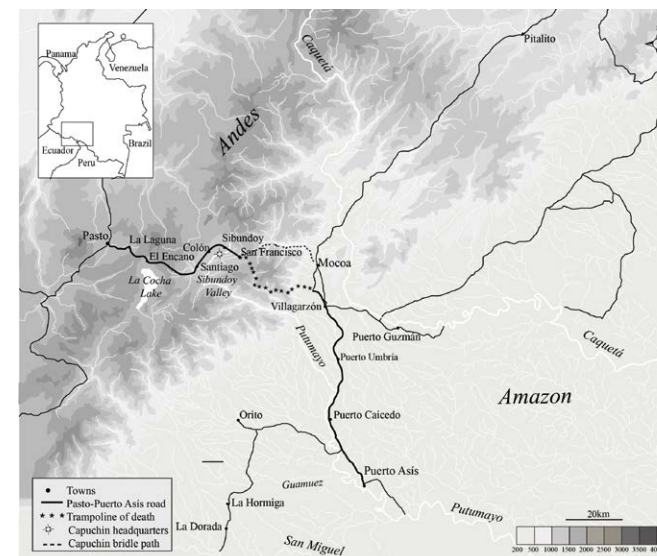
These roads are so precarious that for the region’s inhabitants, it became part of the landscape and synonymous with abandonment or state absence. However, as the expert says in the conclusions: “The problem is not state exclusion but the way in which these regions have been violently included into a dominant political and social order of the state. It is not the absence of the state, but the way in which they have been incorporated,” argues Uribe, who challenges the concept of “absence of state,” because he assures that it has to do with the way in which the state has been traditionally conceived.

## The voice of the mountain

Guillermo Guerrero Urrutia, an experienced highway engineer, who knows every centimeter of the road is the one in charge of telling the story of this journey for the documentary, while he makes the tour in his camper, accompanied by his faithful canine friend, Coqui.

He tells of how the Capuchins built the bridle path in two years with 1,400 workers while building the new road took over 10 years with a larger number of workers. This path, which began as a bridle path, evolved into a road, and today, it is part of a large transnational project that, in addition to connecting the Atlantic with the Pacific, has as its main objective to give the Pacific access to Brazil. “However, from the local view, for Putumayo, this road responds to a historical demand to have a highway that replaces Death’s Trampoline,” emphasizes the professor.

The grandeur and beauty of the landscape contrasts with the harshness of the weather under which workers work hard building bridges that connect the road. Images that link to the speech of abandonment in one inhabitant’s voice, who narrates what happened with the work’s suspension, while locations portray the precarious conditions of their environment: “At last, they lowered everything, they were firing from 10 to 10, they didn’t work anymore, they suspended workers, they suspended everything, and they even got rid of the garbage,” testimony of an inhabitant of the area.



↑ Via Pasto–Puerto Asís. Section of *Death’s Trampoline* and the Capuchin road.

In accordance with the general approaches of the investigation, under the concept of infrastructural violence, the different forms of integration and inclusion that are produced or maintained through built environments are critically analyzed.

According to the researcher, in infrastructures such as *Death’s Trampoline*, that form of violent inclusion is expressed not only in the physical space of the road but also in the way in which the existence of this space is assumed as “normal.” On the other hand, it is a form of violence expressed in many aspects of daily life in the region, and from a long-term perspective, it has been instrumental in its assimilation of the state’s political order.

## The documentary as a knowledge tool

One of the challenges of this cinematographic bet for Simón Uribe was adapting scientific language to audiovisual: “I wanted to tell that story through a different medium, such as the audiovisual, not to make it a version of the book, but to approach some aspects of story from the audiovisual point of view. This has to do with the interest of transmitting knowledge differently, and the documentary allows, through simpler language, to interact with audiences that are not exclusively academic.”

This production was selected in the category best first film in *Idfa* (Amsterdam), one of the most prestigious documentary film festivals worldwide. After *Idfa*, where *Suspensión* had its world premiere, the documentary has been selected in numerous festivals, such as the Cartagena International Film Festival, Docs Barcelona, Trento’s Film Festival, and DokMunich, among others.

“For me, it has been a very interesting way to carry knowledge generated from the academy to other spaces

where usually researchers cannot reach. The documentary allowed me, through the images and voices that intervene in it, to make an ethnographic discourse analysis by telling a story and getting the message across.”

### Data sheet

Title: *Suspensión*  
Genre: Documentary  
Director: Simón Uribe  
Producer: Joaquín Uribe  
Executive Producer: Marcela Lizcano  
Co-producers: Simón Uribe, Joaquín Uribe, María Elisa Balen, Mateo Rudas, Viceversa Cinema, Tempestarii  
Country: Colombia  
Language: Spanish  
Duration: 73 min  
Year: 2019

→ Simón Uribe Martínez, researcher of Faculty of International, Political, and Urban Studies of Universidad del Rosario, explains that his object of study is to understand how road dynamics reflect the violent ways in which the Amazonia has been included in a discursive and material way in the state.



Therefore, Uribe concludes: “Borders have played a discursive role in the construction of a hegemonic project of Nation-State in Colombia, specifically in their representation as spaces whose integration into the state requires its pacification or civilization. One of the objectives of the investigation is to understand how this discursive construction materializes through roads or in broader terms to analyze the relationship between discourses and material practices of the state in the configuration of spaces that are considered border or marginal.” ■