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### Spectacularization and the contemporary land rush in the Colombian *Atillanura*

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# Spectacularization and the contemporary land rush in the Colombian *Altiplanura*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In the outbreak of the contemporary ‘global land rush’, countries included in the ‘most land grabbed’ list ended up, instead, leading the ranking of the so-called ‘failed land deals’. What happened? Spectacularization about land was key to these variable outcomes. It involved a spectacle in which land was depicted in dramatically new ways to attract investors into the frenzy. But for investments to become operational in their proposed capitalist enterprises, such a spectacle is not sufficient. A spectacle is imaginative and speculative in character, and it is due to this character that logically not all projected investments will be turned operational. In the literature and public debates, at times, this is used as evidence to suggest that the scope of the land rush was not as wide as assumed and neither its impacts, suggesting that much of land deals are nothing but a ‘hype’ or empty claims. This paper examines the Colombian case – particularly the *Altiplanura* (‘high plains’), to build on this narrative and try to extend it further. It concludes that a more comprehensive understanding of the land rush should take into consideration both operational, and non-operational land deals, and the role played by spectacle in delivering such outcomes.

**Keywords:** land rush, spectacle, ‘failed land deals’, hype, *Altiplanura*

## 1. Introduction

Images of seeming large, empty swathes of land available for the taking were at the heart of the contemporary ‘global land rush’ (Edelman, Oya, and Borrás 2013; White et al. 2012; Zoomers 2010). However, it was not land availability, on its own, what triggered the investment frenzy. The process of turning land into an attractive investment laid, significantly, on amplifying the promising features of particular lands and the potential returns for investors who came in first – and therefore the land *rush*<sup>2</sup> (Borrás and Franco 2024). Put differently, it necessitated a ‘spectacle’ (Tsing 2000) in which land was depicted in dramatically new ways (Fairbairn 2014; Li 2014).

Yet for investments to become operational in their proposed capitalist enterprises, such a spectacle is not sufficient; more was needed. A spectacle is imaginative and speculative in

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<sup>2</sup> A definition of the land *rush* is provided below.

character, and it is due to this character that logically not all land deals and their projected investments will be pursued (i.e. deals that are concluded and whose capitalist investment is operational) (Borras et al. 2022; Borras and Franco 2024; Wolford et al. 2024:6). Across the globe, several of the initial top listed countries with high intention of investment, in the wake of the land rush, instead ended up with a significant number of non-operational land deals (which includes those that were announced, talked about or that even got started, but that were later recalled, withdrawn or cancelled). Considered the case of the Philippines, for instance, which early on was classified as one of “the leading target countries for land deals” (see IBON Foundation 2011). A re-examination of the Land Matrix dataset by Borras et al. (2022:7) showed, however, that contrary to these projections, the Philippines ranked number one in the list of the so-called “failed” land deals or non-operational, in their terms<sup>3</sup> (see also Salerno 2014). Conversely, countries that did not figure out as prominently resulted with a good number of deals pursued and turned operational (e.g. Indonesia, Cambodia, Russia) (see Land Matrix 2023). In the literature and public debates, at times, this is used as evidence to suggest that the scope of the land rush was not as wide as assumed and neither its impacts, suggesting that much of land deals were nothing but a ‘hype’ (Zoomers and Kaag 2014) and empty claims.

This paper examines the case of Colombia – particularly the so-called *Altiplanura* (‘high plains’), the epicenter of the contemporary land rush in the country – to build on this narrative and try to extend it further. Does spectacularization result in non-operational land deals? Absolutely. Moreover, do operational land deals necessitate of spectacle? Yes. My study found that ‘spectacle’ in Colombia was key in attracting big foreign and domestic capital and that this had implications on the ground, despite several of the announced land deals turned into non-operational. One cannot understand the character of operational land deals in countries like Indonesia or Cambodia, without considering the processes that allowed for the Philippines, for instance, to make it to the top of the most land grabbed countries in the outbreak of the rush – despite many resulted as non-operational (Borras et al. 2022). And one thing that binds both these currents is the production of spectacles. The same applies within Colombia. It is only by having an understanding of such inseparable processes that we can have a better comprehension of the land rush itself. In fact, spectacle is an intrinsic feature of any type of commodity rush – e.g. in the 19<sup>th</sup> century California gold rush (Mountford and Tuffnell 2018), the Peruvian guano rush (Cushman 2013) and the Oklahoma land run (Hightower 2018) – including the most recent ‘global land rush’.

By highlighting the role of ‘spectacle’ in the land rush, this paper seeks to contribute to addressing one of four key questions around the study of global land deals today, over ten years after the *Land Deal Politics Initiative* (LDPI) first emerged in 2010 (Wolford et al. 2024). As introduced by Wolford’s et al. (2024:5) agenda for the upcoming LDPI-2 international conference in Bogotá, Colombia, although a great deal of “sophisticated literature” has addressed pressing issues in the analysis of land deals (around scale, character and historical trajectories), still urgent matters merit deeper examination. One such question concerns “what happened to the thousands of land grabs documented by researchers, non-governmental organizations, activist groups, news media and aid agencies?”. As they explain, several of the “spectacular land deals” spotlighted during the 2010s did not materialize, partly

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<sup>3</sup> See Table 2 of Borras et al. (2022:7) re-examination of the Land Matrix database.

as result of the speculation and ‘hype’ that surrounded these (Zoomers and Kaag 2014). But thanks to years of research on the land rush, we now have a better sense of the different currents that it can take (as hinted at above) (Wolford et al. 2024:6–7). My study derives from different works on land deals that have emphasized the need to examine the rationales and implications of the so-called “failed land deals”, and the role of speculation, spectacle and hype in delivering such outcomes (Borras et al. 2022; Borras and Franco 2024; Li 2014; Tsing 2000; Visser 2017; Zoomers and Kaag 2014).

The methods I employed are a combination of ethnography and archival research. Between January 2022 and March 2023, I conducted fieldwork in the *Atillanura* region, in which I applied semi-structured interviews and engaged in participant observation, including my attendance to two regional agribusinesses investment fairs. In addition, I carried out a review of online press reports on land and investment prospecting in the region for the period between 2000 and 2020. I did the same review of press reports at the paper archives of a local municipal library. Lastly, with the support of a civil society organization – the Norman Pérez Bello Claretian organization, I administered a household survey of 211 respondents.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section two provides theoretical tools to understand spectacle in the land rush debate. Next it presents a brief overview of the role of spectacle in the history of different commodity and land rushes. Section four describes a series of spectacular claims about the *Atillanura*, which I argue played a significant role in shaping the character of the contemporary land rush in the region (section five). Other claims of this kind are explored in section six. The last sections discusses the limits of spectacularization around land and its mixed outcomes.

## **2. A focus on the land *rush*: key concepts and analytical tools**

In the past ten years or so, the study of the contemporary ‘global land *rush*’, and of multiple instances of land ‘grabbing’, has delivered a profuse volume of excellent literature about the phenomenon (Neef et al. 2023; Wolford et al. 2024). From the “initial ‘making sense’ period” (Edelman et al. 2013), largely marked by the influence of NGO narratives, academic research on the global land rush has contributed to frame the debate in various and rich ways (White et al. 2012). For instance, studies have investigated the different drivers of contemporary land grabbing (Cotula 2012; Ojeda 2018; Zoomers 2010), as well as their “historical antecedents and legal contexts” (Alden Wily 2012; Edelman and León 2013). They have also looked into the implications of the land rush for labour (Li 2011), nature (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012; Ojeda 2012) and the ‘commons’ (Dell’Angelo et al. 2017), and on the social reproduction of different peoples and communities (Ojeda 2018, 2021). In addition, the role of finance in the land rush, and that of the financialization of agriculture, has been an important angle of enquiry (Fairbairn 2014, 2020; Ouma 2014; Visser 2017). Moreover, while initial analyses assumed that a weak rule of law facilitated land investments in certain countries, particularly in Africa, recent analyses on the state have delivered a more complex picture. Particular policies and institutional schemes, as well as the role played by different public officials, were found to be key enabling conditions for land investment – often through a combination of consent and coercion (Burnod, Gingembre, and Ratsialonana 2013; Levien 2013; Wolford et al. 2013).

Over time, this significant amount of research has resorted to different terms and concepts in their analyses (e.g. land deals, land grabs, large-scale land acquisitions, land investments), sometimes interchangeably. Each of these concepts, however, carry particular connotations that may or may not apply to different instances. As stated by Borrás and Franco (2024), using these different terms, without discussing its broader theoretical and empirical implications, is problematic. In particular, they argue for a conceptual distinction between the land *rush* and land grabs. While the latter refer to specific instances of “control grabbing”, largely in response to a convergence of multiple crises (finance, food and oil prices) (Borrás et al. 2012:851), the land rush has to do with a wider phenomenon that includes land grabs but goes *beyond*. For the authors, the land *rush* refers to:

[...] a chaotic, relatively short-lived, historical juncture marked by a sudden surge in demand for land, accompanied by an extremely speculative and competitive, often violent and convulsive transition from one set of rules on commodity and land politics to another. [...] Land rush encompasses various elements, namely, land enclosures, land grabs, land deals, land acquisitions, commodity booms – small, medium and large – and multiple actors (state, non-state, corporate and non-corporate), and has distinctive socio-political features, namely, wild speculations, hyperbolic claims, fantastic spectacles, a convulsive atmosphere (Borrás and Franco 2024:3).

Spectacle and speculation is thus an important element of the land rush. In theorizing about the character of the land rush, and not just of land grabs, Borrás and Franco (2024) drew significant inspiration from anthropologist Anna Tsing’s earlier work on her “economy of appearances” (2000). In late 1990s, Tsing (2000) investigated the role of ‘spectacle’ in the context of a localized gold rush taking place in Indonesia (see also Li 2014). The announcement of a fantastic gold find in Borneo Island had attracted the attention of many – including mining companies, as well as regular and nascent investors, pensioners, and ordinary people – seeking a place in the bid. For years, the prospects around gold reserves grew exponentially until it became “the biggest gold strike in the world”. Wide media coverage of the find lifted the expectations around the gold strike further. Amidst the “fevered pitch”, however, the allegedly gold find was reported as fake resulting in massive discontent (2000:116–17). For Tsing, the question is: *how* did a wide array of actors became interested in what turn out to be a scam?

Tsing notes that companies are often dependent on “the self-conscious making of a spectacle” [as] a regular feature of the search for financial capital”. To maximize profits, she argues, companies must promote potential investment returns in the most spectacular manner, in a way that calls the attention of the greatest number of investors. Given that several investors are attracted, simultaneously, there is no time to check the validity of the alleged benefits: “by then their chances for profit will be gone”. In her words, “the more spectacular the conjuring, the more possible an investment frenzy” (2000:118,141). This type of accumulation, characterized by a clearly speculative character, is better termed as “spectacular accumulation” (2000:138). Notably, companies are not the only actors conjuring a spectacle. Countries themselves “must dramatize their potential as places for investment” (2000:118).

Looking at the contemporary 'global land rush', the spectacle involved arguably reached greater proportions than those Tsing (2000) analysed during the 1990s. For Borrás and Franco (2024), the recent land rush was marked by "a feverish global convergence of old and new actors and forces, driven by hyperbolic projections and perceptions of potential windfalls". They added, "the number of actors drawn in by the seduction of a potential windfall ends up far exceeding the probable optimum number of investors, and the amount of land that is implicated far exceeds the amount that is realistically required". Given the challenges to discern how much land is needed, as well as the number of investors who would take up the call: "this creates an atmosphere of extreme competitiveness in terms of speed and timing, which in turn creates an incentive for competitors to shirk the rules in order to 'get ahead'" (Borrás and Franco 2024:7). As we shall see below, speculation and spectacularization around land shaped the recent land rush in many key ways.

As hinted at in the introduction, the outcomes of the contemporary land rush vary. A number of land deals turned operational, while others were cancelled at early stages of implementation, and yet many remained as announcements, resulting in non-operational land deals. Commentators have referred to different reasons behind these outcomes. Writing on the role of finance, Fairbairn (2020) explains that despite land was increasingly targeted as a key "financial asset", the real possibilities of turning land into such were lower than the prospects from popular investment discourse (Visser 2017). She argues that the specific material conditions of land and the (moral) values attached to it make it so substantially different that land is *not* "like any other financial investment" (2020:105). Li (2014:600), for her part, refers to "land's life-giving affordances" as one of the biggest challenges for attempts at land-deal making to actually 'land' on the ground. Still other types of explanations were made. In their study of "the global land grab hype", Kaag and Zoomers (2014) rightly pointed to a "twofold hype"; the first 'hype' referred to the surprising "huge appetite" of investors for accessing land, and the second relates to the ample media coverage about this appetite. Narratives behind both these hypes were, however, very different from the actual ground and consequently, "many of the announced land deals actually did not take place" (2014:1, 216). In the case of Tsing's (2000), as noted above, spectacle was similarly resulting in empty claims. These latter conclusions are empirically correct.

The point is, however, that so-called "failed land deals" are better understood as a logical and expected outcome of the land rush – which is regularly accompanied by hype, spectacle and 'cultural work' (see below), and not as a deviation of the general trend. For Borrás and Franco (2024), the highly speculative character of the land rush necessarily results in different 'currents'. These include pursued corporate land deals or 'operational', and unpursued land deals or 'non-operational'. A third current comprises 'land deals outside the spotlight', of the 'pin-prick' type, where land accumulation is done by non-corporate, less visible actors (2024:8) (also Borrás et al. 2022; Wolford et al. 2024:6). Arguably, according to Sud (2014), the focus on "high profile actors", namely the state and big capital, has often played into disregarding other important actors of land appropriation such as the middlemen. While these are most typically characterised as mere "instruments" or "passive recipients" at the service of higher ranks of the market or state power, these actors also appropriate land out of their own interest (2014:594) and their actions are increasingly widespread like in the case of land mafias (Levien 2021).

Certainly, non-operational land deals, in particular, are one of the most practical outcomes of the land rush. They are a product of the often unrealistic and “hyperbolic projections” around agronomic variables (e.g. quality of soil, water availability, productivity). And they can also result from institutional conditions (formal and informal, state and non-state) that cannot readily accommodate land investment, and of related political constraints (Borras et al. 2022:8–9). Too often, data on non-operational land deals (including cancelled deals or ‘mere’ announcements) has been discarded outright, or used to imply that the recent land rush was not as far-reaching as assumed, by referring to it as polluted information or as an indicator of a lack of methodological rigor. In his analyses of the global data sets on land grabbing, Oya argues that the entries in such datasets should ideally correspond to verifiable cases (‘facts’), in which “the acreage of land [is] actually sold or leased (and confirmed) and put to use [...]”. In reality, however – due to the challenges of verifying this information – the entries are a combination of “perceptions, intentions, rumours, guesstimates” (Oya 2013:506). Similarly, Edelman (2013) called for the need of better quality methods for the study of the land rush. Both Oya and Edelman are absolutely right if what we are trying to understand are the scale and implications of *operational* land deals that are concluded. However, if the idea is to assess the full extent and character of the mad scramble for land, we must necessarily include non-operational land deals, in addition to the operational, in order to grasp “the extent of land and investment prospecting” (Borras et al. 2022:2). In doing so, we will need to be mindful of Oya’s and Edelman’s words of caution, as well as to go beyond.

Indeed, while studying the land rush certainly poses methodological challenges, the issue has to do more with specifying the subject under investigation and the dataset that better fits that purpose.

Analysing the extent of the land rush, by including its different currents, is all the more relevant today. Consider that land deals that remain as “intentions”, in Oya’s (2013) terms, might still have implications for people and the environment that are worth taking into consideration. As Visser (2017:197) highlights, cancelled deals “can leave local people worse off than if they had not entered or, instead, had undergone their full-scale, ongoing investment”. Moreover, they can serve as important indicators of the “spectacle” and “frenzy” shaping the rush.

Consequently, a fixation with so-called ‘facts’ can divert attention away from what are vital components of the contemporary land *rush*. A more comprehensive understanding of the land rush must therefore necessarily pay attention to “the ‘coverage’ of *all* land deals” (original emphasis), operational and non-operational (Borras et al. 2022:2), at the center of which lies spectacle. To date, most studies investigating the land rush can in fact be classified as belonging to the land grabbing research, while less so the discussion has dealt with the *rush* (Borras and Franco 2024) in its own right.

### **3. Spectacularization in the history of commodity and land rushes**

Commodity rushes of all kinds have been generally accompanied by a good dosage of what observers have termed ‘cultural work’. Some of the most iconic commodity rushes during the nineteenth and early twentieth century (e.g. gold, guano) earned such reputation partly as a result of a parallel interest by entrepreneurs, academics, popular writers and journalists – in addition to the more economic-centered accounts – about the possibilities arising from the

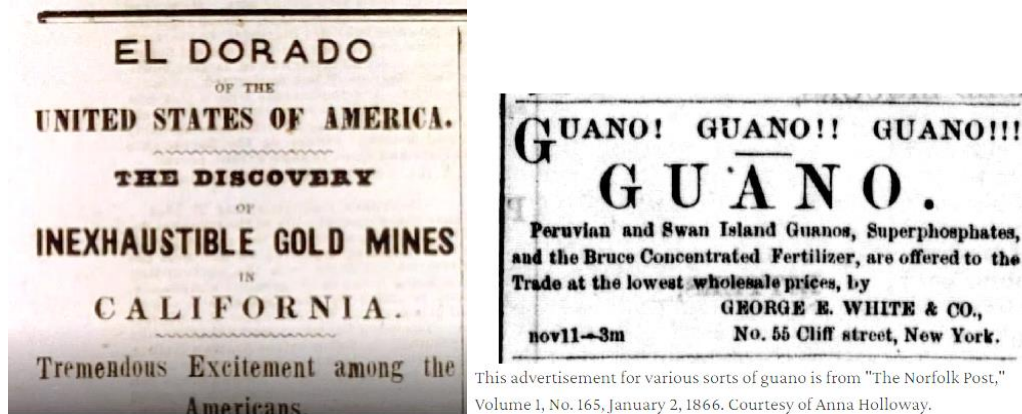
exploitation of these commodities. Writing on the successive gold rushes of the nineteenth century – from California in the United States to parts of Africa – Mountford and Tuffnell (2018), for instance, highlighted the work of writers and journalists documenting on the frenzy and enthusiasm around gold and how, in turn, their writings served to encourage many to join the bandwagon. In their words:

At the mines, in the rare pauses between the swish of the pan, the crunch of the shovel, and the crash of the battery, one might have heard the furious scratching of pens and pencils on paper. Contemporary diarists, journalists, boosters, and administrators (as well as many others) recorded the awe, excitement, dread, and frustration of the dogged quest for gold. [...] An incredible total of 285 emigrant's guides, cheap literary melodramas, and pamphlets about gold rush California and travel to the goldfields had appeared in print by 1860 (2018:5).

Indeed, mid-nineteenth century California's gold rush was as much about the discovery of gold reserves, as it was about the glorious narratives resulting from it – which quickly circulated across the United States and beyond. In early 1848, while building a lumber mill near the American River in California, carpenter James Marshall saw little shiny flakes on the ground; it only took some hours to confirm it was gold. Just about two weeks afterwards, in a striking coincidence, the United States took control of today's Southwest lands, including California, as part of the agreements that put an end to the war with Mexico. Coincidences did not stop there. As described by West (2018), the discovery of gold was also concurrent with an exponential increase in industrial and technological development, as well as communication and transportation, which altogether contributed to the widespread recognition of California as seemingly “the most valuable place on earth” (2018:42–43). Popular writings and journalist accounts quickly picked up those coincidences and reproduced promises of the California's bonanza.

The realization of the high nutrients and possible usages of guano, and its reach beyond the Peruvian coast, was similarly the outcome of different elements at play – including the role of key social groups and powerful narratives with profound cultural influence. As described by Cushman (2013), for years before scientist Alexander Von Humboldt became acquainted of guano's extraordinary concentration of nitrogen (around 1804) while visiting Peru, it was already familiar to European circles. But never before guano was praised as such a remarkable organic fertilizer as it was after Humboldt. Upon his return, Humboldt made sure to ask leading chemists and researchers to run tests of the guano samples he had collected and to produce their own analyses, which in turn went public in widely read magazines. Possibilities offered by guano raised the expectations of fellow scientists, farmers, explorers and poets alike who started asking “[...] If guano could make Peru's coastal desert bloom, could it reverse the exhaustion of soils in other regions?” (2013:25–27). By 1826, following the decolonization of a great part of Latin America, a remarkable rush for guano was truly in place.





This advertisement for various sorts of guano is from "The Norfolk Post," Volume 1, No. 165, January 2, 1866. Courtesy of Anna Holloway.

Figure. 1, Banners of the 'gold rush' and the 'guano rush', appearing in newspapers during late nineteenth century. Source: Ives (2019) ; Johnston (2017).

Securing land in itself, and not only the natural resources of soil, was the main driver of yet another illustrative rush during the nineteenth century. As with the preceding cases, charismatic characters, slogans and popularized imagery were also central to animating the rush. A series of pro-settlement mobilizations advocating for the opening of vast swaths of lands in the Indian territory of (today's) Oklahoma county gained momentum around 1870s. David Payne, originally from Indiana and born to a family of farmers, became a leading character of this advocacy. Throughout different early positions at the military and the federal government level, Payne had seen first-hand the immense landscape of the Midwest. His purpose became the opening of the Indian Territory for homesteaders (Hightower 2018:35–37).

The 1889 Land Run – an actual race to secure a piece of land in today's Oklahoma state – followed initial invasions in late 1870s. Payne repeatedly shared hopeful images of the future, at different gatherings inviting people to the competition for land. Fragments of Payne's speeches at the time, reported by media outlets, read of Oklahoma lands as "[...] the land of promise, where the green waves and the restless pioneer longs to be" (Hightower 2018:46). Interest in Oklahoma lands increased precipitously as more "boomers" joined the frenzy. Magazines reporting on the rush kept fueling the flame. *Cosmopolitan magazine* correspondents wrote at the time how the 1889 run was "all excitement and expectation. Every nerve was on tension and every muscle strained. The great event for which these brawny noblemen of the West have been waiting for years was on the point of transpiring" (2018:164). Allusions to Oklahoma as "the new El dorado" became regular epithets around the quest for land.

## A MAD RACE FOR HOMES

Boomers by the Hundred Thousand Dash Into the Strip.

A WILD STRUGGLE FOR TOWN LOTS.

The Opening of 8,000,000 Acres of Land Attended by Scenes Such as Will Never Be Witnessed Again—All Carry Their Drinking Water With Them.

ARKANSAS CITY, Kan., Sept. 18.—Precisely at noon today 8,000,000 acres of land known as the Cherokee strip, the largest body of purely agricultural land on the American continent that was up to now unsettled and uncultivated, was thrown open to settlement under the homestead laws. By nightfall of this eventful day 100,000 people will have found homes upon that land.

The race of the boomers was such a one

Trouton Evening Times (Trouton, New Jersey), 16 September 1890, page 2

Figure 2. Poster about the 'Oklahoma Land Run'. Source: Petinatto (2019).

In the contemporary global land rush of the past decades, spectacularization around land equally played a significant role in attracting investors' attention. Colourful pamphlets, extravagant marketing campaigns (Gutiérrez 2024) and fascinating discourses about the promises of land in different countries and regions were regular – e.g., “like gold with yield” (Fairbairn 2014), “the new Saudi Arabia” or “green oil field” (Borras et al. 2022). In the case of Colombia, as we shall see below, government officials and investment prospectors alike resorted to a variety of banners to encourage land investment in the *Altiplanura*, to the point of it being “the last agricultural frontier” (Semana 2010c) of the country and “the promised land” (Semana 2007b).

#### 4. The production of the *Altiplanura* and the centrality of spectacle

The eastern *Altiplanura* in Colombia typically refers to an area encompassing the entire department (akin to a state or province) of Vichada and parts of Meta – the municipalities of Puerto López, Puerto Gaitán and Mapiripán (DNP 2014:7) (Fig. 3). The *Altiplanura* pertains, in turn, to the broader Orinoquía region (also *Llanos Orientales* or eastern plains), according to the country's administrative division. “Every now and then this region has taken away the sleep of several presidents”, a report notes (Semana 2007b). For instance, during the 1980s the *Altiplanura* was thought as the setting of a futuristic city by the name of ‘Marandúa’ (Fig. 4). Then president Belisario Betancur dreamed with the construction of the “The New Colombia”, an area of over 1,5 million hectares intended for agriculture, industry, and commerce. Marandúa was imagined following the example of Brasília, Brazil's current capital – a city inaugurated in 1960, meticulously designed, and characterized by its modern architecture and planning. At that time, Marandúa remained on paper, so as the massive transformation envisioned for the surrounding areas (Rutas del Conflicto 2017b; Semana 2007b).

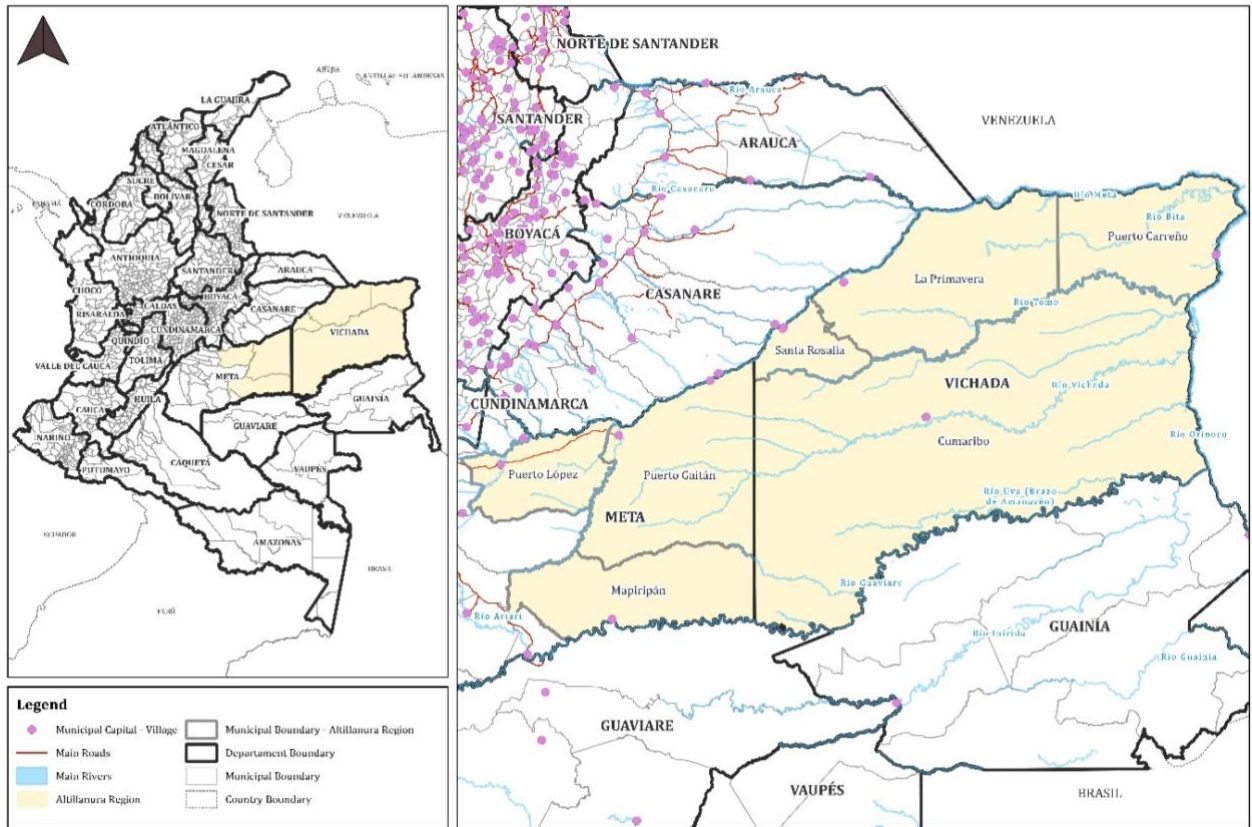


Figure 3. Map of the *Atillanura* region. Elaborated by Nicolás Rosero Peralta (2022) on behalf of the author.



Figure 4. Marandúa: “The city of the future”. Stamp, 1984. Source: Rutas del Conflicto (2017b).

Beginning in the early 2000s, however, the *Atillanura* was brought back into the centre of the national political agenda – in what can be termed a spectacle-making process to advertise the region for land investment. During that time, president Álvaro Uribe embarked on a so-called “reconversion program” of over 6 million hectares of land across the eastern plains entitled “The Renaissance of the Orinoco River savannahs: A Colombian mega project for the world” (Ministry of Agriculture 2004) (Fig.5). Building from Díaz (2016a, 2016b), I argue that this

initiative, and its associated developments, were key features of the spectacularization that accompanied the recent land rush in the Colombian *Atillanura*.

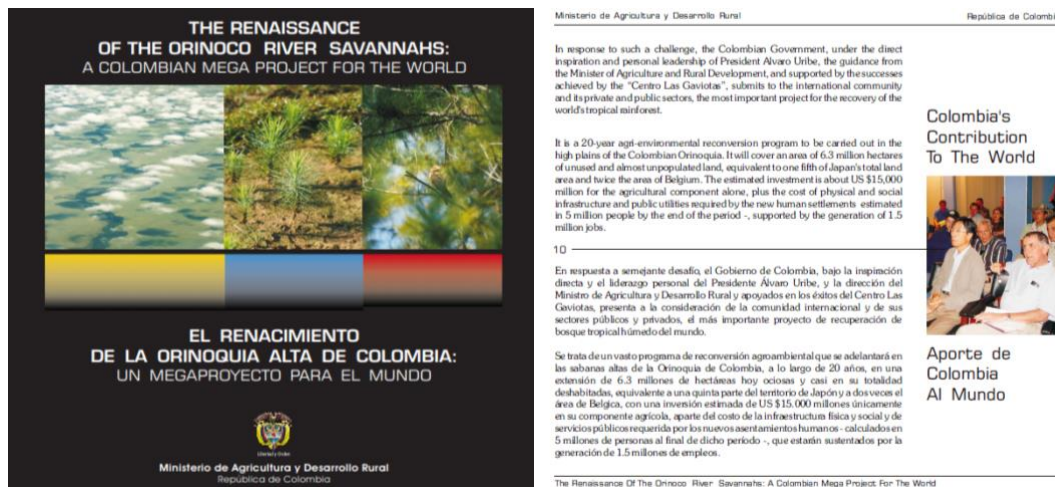


Figure 5. Fragments of the policy document “The Reinassance of the Orinoco River Savannas: A Colombian mega-project for the world. Source: Ministry of Agriculture (2004).

The report introducing the government initiative resembled a brochure more than anything (Fig. 5). It starts with a brief context of the alleged challenges faced by traditional agriculture in an era of climate change and high population growth. Despite these acute circumstances, notes the report, voluntary targets for reducing GHG emissions are far from implementation. Colombia, however, was offering “a unique opportunity for a sustainable systemic rural development [...] both to the world and to its own people” (Ministry of Agriculture 2004:11). Later pages pointed at existing large-scale commercial agriculture and reforestation, from which to draw useful lessons, and next it outlined the different stages to implement the “reconversion program” – starting at 150,000 hectares planted until gradually covering the total targeted area, an apparent terrain of 6,3 million hectares (2004:7–21).

### Building ambiance, rising expectations

As a build up to the 2004 brochure, former president Álvaro Uribe had made explicit his plans for the region on several other occasions. In late 2003 – one year after his inauguration – at a regular communal council in Orinoquía, he expressed to local authorities:

[...] I see that the **Orinoquía** has an already immediate future in agriculture. In those 600 thousand square kilometers, we could say that there are 350 thousand of jungle and 250 thousand of savannas. Do you realize how important is it for the agricultural world to have 250 thousand square kilometers flat, without stone, ready to cultivate and without the ecological obstacle that you must reach there *with the ax*?

We have great faith in the growth of the African palm, [and on] the vision that biodiesel will be produced. We have a lot of faith in rubber, a lot of faith in timber. I see that you have great possibilities [...]. Work with them [the banks] [...], *attract investors* to these provinces. In Colombia today perennial crops are exempt from taxes (emphasis added) (Uribe 2003).

Early in 2004, at the installation of the National Congress, Uribe revealed:

We are exploring a special project for Vichada, *for its definitive conquest*. President Betancur conceived Marandúa, where today the Air Force owns 64,000 hectares. This would be the start of an agro-environmental development with African palm, rubber, Caribbean pine, and other species. The project will seek international investment financed by green markets (emphasis added) (Uribe 2004).

The later publication of the ‘brochure’ that year (2004) only sealed the spectacle. Uribe’s call to attract investors escalated. The idea of the *Altillanura* as a plain area, without dense vegetation and allegedly easy to reach without “the ax” played an important part in drawing investors’ attention. The region was presented in opposition to the Amazon where large investments (in agriculture, mining, oil exploitation and others) had been necessarily carried out at the expense of the natural ecosystem (personal interview 04/2022). But perhaps “the most spectacular mode of enrolment”<sup>4</sup> was the appeal to the productive potential of the *Altillanura*, until then ‘unused’, on the verge of becoming the next “Colombian *cerrado*” (Semana 2010a). Historically, land in the area was considered as highly acidic and therefore not readily apt for agriculture. There was a need to improve the quality of the soil, as well as to develop road infrastructure for transport, before one could anticipate any positive investment returns. The *cerrado* region, for its part, comprises a large area in the centre-west of Brazil (Cabral, Sauer, and Shankland 2023; Calmon 2022)<sup>5</sup> and is considered to have similar characteristics to the *Altillanura* (i.e., savanna landscape, acidic soils). Around early 2000s, this region proved that soil quality was no apparent obstacle to reach high productivity and efficiency. It was “the miracle of the *cerrado*”, as reported by The Economist (2010) – resulting from vast injections of lime and fertilizers, the development of genetically modified variants of staple crops, and the promotion of industrial mechanized agriculture (Nehring 2016). One testimony of its success was the seeming astonishing farm production, on the way to surpass that of the so-called “big five grain exporters” (The Economist 2010). A similar development was expected in the Colombian *Altillanura*.

### **The role of science**

For years before reaching the national level, the possibilities to develop the productive potential of the *Altillanura*, and its alleged resemblance with the Brazilian *cerrado*, had remained as a subject of interest for many local and regional actors. In 1969, ICA (the Colombian institute for research in agriculture, today AGROSAVIA) created ‘Carimagua’, a

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<sup>4</sup> A term borrowed from Li, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> The *cerrado* comprises one of different biomes in Brazil covering an area of over 200 million hectares of (largely) public lands – and was likewise declared as the “last frontier” for agricultural expansion. The intense socio-ecological and economic transformation of the *cerrado* since late 1970s has called the attention of civil society organizations and scholars, and has been contested and resisted by different social movements (Cabral, Sauer, and Shankland 2023; Calmon 2022).

regional research center in the department of Meta for the study of acidic soils. Over time, the center brought together several institutions and independent researchers from all over the world searching for formulas to increase soil fertility in the tropics, until it became a leading worldwide institution in the field (Arias 2022:150–53).

In 1973, Brazil created Embrapa – the Brazilian Agriculture Research Corporation (see Nehring 2016). The story goes that several Brazilian researchers and others affiliated to Embrapa, initially travelled to Colombia to learn from the country's lessons in increasing soil productivity in the *Altiplanura*, and even invited personnel of Carimagua to strengthening the capacities of Embrapa's team. In the end, however, the Brazilians were the ones who quickly took this research in agriculture further and implemented a state policy to 'develop' the cerrado<sup>6</sup> (Nehring 2016; Wolford and Nehring 2015). This is how a functionary of AGROSAVIA, former ICA, put it: "What I am trying to emphasize is that much was done in Colombia decades ago, but due to a lack of strategic vision on our part many of the original efforts were lost" (personal interview 08/2022).

By the late 1990s, Embrapa was already well positioned and the transformation of the cerrado was ongoing (Nehring 2016). An associate research center of Carimagua, by the name 'La Libertad' (also located in Meta), inaugurated a long-term collaboration with its Brazilian counterpart. Former director of La Libertad's research center, Jaime Triana (see Fig.6), became a regular visitor to Brazil in order to learn from Embrapa's experience in the cerrado, and spent years studying the transformation of the area. When he returned from his trips, he started persuading his colleagues in Colombia to envision a similar development for the country's high plains. Another functionary of AGROSAVIA that I interviewed recalled, "Triana was in love with the Altiplanura". He "inspired" a whole generation of researchers and collaborators of La Libertad to transform the area into a truly agricultural power following the Brazilian cerrado. Even many of his colleagues went to Brazil in the late 1990s and early 2000s to participate in tourings and events to know the region, and to pursue their doctorate studies<sup>7</sup>. Once they returned to Colombia, they joined in the first pilot projects for improving soil quality in the high plains.

In the past, researchers at CORPOICA in Colombia used to work under a philosophy consisting of pouring a small amount of fertilisers into the soil so as to create a 'productive layer' for cultivation. However, when they realized that the cerrado 'miracle' was the result of working with large amounts of lime and big investments in soil fertility, they changed their philosophy of 'little inputs'. "We are talking about two tons of lime, instead of the 500 kilograms that we used to work with", one functionary of CORPOICA expressed. In the early 2000s, the center developed the first pilot projects applying the new paradigm of large amounts of lime and other fertilisers. A businessperson and large landowner in the municipalities of Puerto López and Puerto Gaitán (Arias 2020), was one in a number of entrepreneurs that lend their land to CORPOICA to advance these trials. As noted by one of the employees at the research center: "the trial worked out really well and [you might say that] it was the real antecedent of the

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<sup>6</sup> This included the strategic location of its capital city, and a strong official program on infrastructure, research and subsidies – in addition to the relocation of people from the south, dedicated to agriculture, to an area closer to the cerrado (Calmon 2022:5).

<sup>7</sup> Under Jaime Triana's administration, personnel of ICA, today AGROSAVIA, followed a similar path of "education and expertise" to the one followed by researchers at Embrapa, many of whom received intensive training in the United States, as noted by Nehring (2016:213)

land rush. Those businesspeople told their friends and colleagues about it [...]. People coming from other departments started to arrive in search of plain and cheap lands". The dream about the *Altillanura* had indeed started locally and scientists at CORPOICA played an important role in forging the recent land rush.



Figure 6. Jaime Triana, former regional director of Corpoica in Meta department. Source: Herrera (2016).

When in 2002 Álvaro Uribe became president and learnt from the *Altillanura's* alleged potential, he quickly stepped in to support the local initial efforts by CORPOICA and others. Around that year, suddenly the "Colombian cerrado" turned plausible and the frenzy around land became truly unprecedented. Top national Colombian officers and businesspeople, as well as local and national newspapers, replicated the idea of turning the *Altillanura* into the next "agricultural miracle" (Dinero 2011; El Tiempo 2011; Semana 2007b, 2010a). In the following years, a myriad of corporate and non-corporate actors quickly joined the bandwagon and rushed to secure a place in the miracle, to which we now turn.

## 5. The contemporary land rush in the *Altillanura*

### Becoming international

Wide promotion and advertisement followed Uribe's 2004 brochure. In 2005 his Minister of Agriculture visited Japan with the sole purpose of introducing the plans for the "Renaissance of the Orinoco" to both government authorities and businesspeople (GOC 2014). For several days, Japanese television stations traveled across the *Altillanura* and introduced the region to its audience in Asia. On a number of occasions, even scientists at CORPOICA accompanied a delegation of Japanese government officials and investors to the region, as one of my interviewees recalled. It was president Uribe himself who later presented the project in the United States, as part of a diplomatic visit to the country. He also took the opportunity to meet with Bill Gates – US-billionaire, business magnate and today's "biggest private owner of farmland" in the country (Estes 2021) – and invited him to invest in biofuel projects in the region (Semana 2007b).

The touring events and promotions soon called the attention of others such as J.P Morgan Chase – a US-based multinational investment bank. Members of the bank were reported to have traveled to the *Altillanura* at least a dozen times to finalize a major investment, with a

seed capital of US\$ 325 million. Meetings were also held in London with Uribe's vice-president to best align J.P Morgan's plans with those of the government, one report says (Semana 2007b). The renovated interest for the *Altilianura* likewise attracted the Norwegian-based shipping company, Siem – registered in the Cayman Islands. Members were also said to have met with the Colombian government to discuss its investment plans (*ibid*).

One of the soundest announcements of possible land deals came from the Chinese ambassador to Colombia at the time, who together with a group of Chinese investors declared their interest in acquiring over 400,000 hectares of land in the region. Former president of Colombia's agricultural guild, who was reported to hold several meetings with them, indicated: "They only wanted to buy it [land], as they would bring along the necessary labour force, supplies and machinery, while all the grain production would be exported to their country" (Portafolio 2010a). Years later, the Chinese company Tianshi (the apparent largest private Chinese company at the time) picked up part of that interest. In 2011, it announced their intention to establish a mining-energy company in the high plains with a starting capital of US\$ 1,000 millions. Other investments by the company in the sector of agriculture and food processing were also publicised (El Espectador 2011).

### **Regional players**

Interest in the making of the "Colombian cerrado" also came from Latin America – exemplifying one of the main stamps of contemporary land grabbing in the region, namely the key role of "Trasns-(Latina) companies (Borras et al. 2012), especially driven by the cultivation of "flex crops" (i.e. crops with various and flexible uses) (Borras et al. 2016). Early in 2008, the Grupo Maggi – property of Brazilian businessman Blairo Maggi, also known as "the king of soy" – paid several visits to the *Altilianura*. "The intention of Maggi is big, and it has big numbers", one report claimed (El Tiempo 2008). Already in the Brazilian cerrado, Maggi owned circa 400,000 hectares producing soy and maize. In the *Altilianura*, it appeared, the potential for achieving high productivity was even larger than in his country due to excellent rainfall. His appetite for expansion within the region is one in a number of different cases documented across Latin America, through "network companies" and different business strategies (Sosa Varrotti and Gras 2021). The relationship between Maggi and the region remained close for several years in which top executives travelled back and forth trying to seal the land deal (Semana 2008).

In the meantime, another 'king' would soon enter the competition. It was Gustavo Grobocopatel, nicknamed "Argentina's king of soy", who in 2010 announced the intention of his company – Los Grobo – to investing in *Altilianura* as well (Finagro 2010). Uribe's successor in the presidency, Juan Manuel Santos<sup>8</sup> (2010 -2018), just inaugurated that year, followed

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<sup>8</sup> While the Santos administration led the negotiations resulting in the signature of the Peace Agreement with the long-time FARC guerrilla, other set of legislation attempted competing aims. For instance, one key pillar of the Peace Accord was the implementation of a comprehensive rural reform that could contribute to reverse the trend of land concentration in the country. At the same time, however, in the context of the recent land rush – the government promoted a number of initiatives aimed at, for instance, facilitating the acquisition of large swathes of previously *baldíos* or state lands – as part of its National Development Plan (see Arias 2011). Although some of these latter initiatives



with vigor the legacy about the transformation of the region. For Gustavo Grobocopatel then: “What is interesting is the concern of President Santos and his cabinet for the issue of agribusiness development in Colombia, because they have quite an important and still unexplored potential, and that is a priority” (Portafolio 2010b). With the president on his side, the investment could not go wrong. Other regional investors add to the list.

### **Land frenzy from within the country**

Competition for land and related resources was increasing at a rapid pace. “¡Al Llano! The Llano is the new fashion”, reported with irony Colombian journalist and sociologist Alfredo Molano, in reference to the sudden fever for land investment in the region. Those concerned were not regular domestic actors; these were corporations and individuals with ties to New York or Tokyo for whom the Llano “is half the country. A half that is savage, virgin and at hand” (2011) – he emphasized.

For some of the major Colombian players in the agro-food sector, Uribe’s initial invitation to “develop” the Altillanura also came as a unique opportunity to expand their existing operations. That was the case of La Fazenda, an enterprise owned by different businesspeople, assembled in the corporate group Aliar-Contegral. Fazenda is a term in Portuguese that stands for large landholding (or *hacienda*). In Colombia, La Fazenda evolved into a mega pig farm comprising 16,000 hectares of land in the region, according to recent estimates (La República 2017).

In early 2000s, La Fazenda had started as a small project under a different name lead by Jaime Liévano — the company’s current head. Liévano offered a piece of land of a few hectares as the setting of one of the different pilot projects that CORPOICA carried out in the *Altillanura*, before it became the target of the recent land boom (see section 4). One employee at the research center expressed: “Our friend Jaime Liévano visited us several times. We conducted a study of the soil at his terrain and we even brought Brazil’s Minister of Agriculture for him to explain to Liévano and other businesspeople how they developed the cerrado (...)”. While the company started operations around 2002, it was during the recent land rush that Aliar-Contegral infused the project with more capital for its final consolidation. In 2008 Aliar was reported to “be in the process of carrying out a four-year investment plan of US\$ 130 millions in Puerto Gaitán, Meta” (Portafolio 2008a).

National bankers and financial investors actively participated in the rush as well. In 2009 the multimillionaire family “The Santo Domingo” invested in soil preparation in an area of nearly 65,000 hectares of land in the region. They even hired a subsidiary of the Brazilian Embrapa (Dinero, 2011). The holding started a pilot project of maize cultivation in some 800 hectares, as well as the construction of piers, roads, grain silos and landing strips. Millionaire agreements with providers of tractors and agricultural tools were also signed around that year – with an initial investment totaling circa US\$ 300 million (El Tiempo 2013; Semana 2014b, 2014a).

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spawned ample debate and were dropped at the time, the government continued to push through similar reforms.

Corficolombiana (through Pajonales, one of its subsidiaries), owned by Colombia's multimillionaire banker Luis Carlos Sarmiento, also took control of some 30,000 hectares of land intended for rubber, soy, maize and rice production. Pajonales represented an addition to an already large rubber plantation by the name of Mavalle, located between the municipalities of Puerto López and Puerto Gaitán, the biggest one in the country (Las2orillas 2021, 2023).

Amidst the recent rush, the largest oil camp (Rubiales) in the country located in Puerto Gaitán, changed hands – from the Canadian Pacific Rubiales to Frontera Energy and later to Ecopetrol, Colombia's largest domestic oil company. In the course of the 2000s, Pacific Rubiales had accumulated some 55,000 hectares of land, a third of which did not have titles and were de facto occupied by displaced peasant communities. Those communities who have resisted in the area were forced to adapt to the company's rules in what appears “an independent republic owned by Pacific Rubiales”, notes a journalist investigation (Rutas del Conflicto 2017a).

Frank Kanayet – a major shareholder of Ecopetrol, and the representative of Ferrari and Maserati automobile brands in the country – was one major enthusiast of the *Atillanura*. His dreams about the region had started around 2003 when he first sketched the construction plans of a biofuel plant on the outskirts of Puerto López, right “in the middle of nowhere”. In late 2009, with a seed capital of US \$25 million, the plant initiated operations with the transformation of cassava into ethanol, and plans for the company's expansion into Vichada were ongoing. In Vichada, Kanayet estimated the acquisition of at least 20,000 hectares more in the following years, in what he thought could resemble “a private agrarian reform that will become a laboratory of peace” (Semana 2010b).

The creation of the largest ethanol manufacturing facility in Puerto López, Meta was also part of the possibilities that seemed to open in the “last agricultural frontier” of the country. “El Alcaraván”, of 25,500 hectares and operated by Bioenergy, was supposed to generate around 504,000 liters of ethanol on a daily basis (Semana 2016).

Illusions around the *Atillanura* even made the national government itself to offer the 17,000 hectares of land by the name of Carimagua in Puerto Gaitán, initially conceived for displaced peasant communities, as part of a land concession for private companies and individual landowners. Several domestic oil palm companies, and even investors from Malaysia, were reported to be interested in the land deal. It was a “surprising change in tenants” spurred by the rush, as put sarcastically by a magazine (El Tiempo 2009).

### **Informal land brokers, politicians, nephews and more**

Corporate actors were not the only ones taking the investment call. Typical of spectacle-making processes of any sort is their ability to attract a wide array of different actors whose main activity may not immediately seem like a good match with the investment in question. Whenever imagery of spectacular outcomes from investments drag other, more unusual competitors to the scene, one can consider that the job was done. Put differently, this is what actually makes of a process a truly spectacular one, in the first place. In the *Atillanura*, in addition to corporations and traditional landowners, informal land brokers (Levien 2021; Sud

2014), “*titerreros*” (Ramírez and Ortega 2020), paramilitary commanders, and even mid-range politicians (Ballvé 2013, 2020; Del Pilar Peña-Huertas et al. 2017; Grajales 2011, 2013; Gutiérrez Sanín and Vargas Reina 2016; Rodríguez González 2014; Vargas Reina 2021) were also drawn in by the spectacle. Here, I refer to only a handful of cases to illustrate my point.

In 2007 former congressman Habib Merheg was the protagonist of a new land grab scandal in the country. He was reported to have taken control of over 16,000 hectares of *baldío*<sup>9</sup> or state lands in Vichada, which are subject to specific government regulation. The actual amount of land in the hands of Merheg was probably higher because in the region, “[...] with the announcement of possible foreign millionaire investments, the land plots for which no one gave anything before are now highly valued”, one report suggested (Semana 2007a). When he was asked for the reasons behind the ‘land acquisition’ in the area, ex-senator Merheg recalled he had ventured to invest after meeting with Norwegian businesspeople some four years before, as they were looking for a site to invest. Was he referring to the Norwegian-based Siem that rushed to the region after Uribe’s first call for investors in 2004? (see above). It remains unknown, but the coincidences are striking. After he met with the Norwegians, he brought friends and family to the *Altilanura* so they could see first-hand the “opportunities of the region”. “I am thrilled with Vichada”, said Merheg. He added: “Everything has been done under a legitimate business interest to bring development to the region”. Merheg himself, as well as friends, acquaintances, former employees and colleagues acquired lands (Semana 2007a).

Another case involves land brokers that arrived in the *Altilanura* from the country’s south-west, also attracted by the same land fever that inspired ex-senator Merheg and others. In 2007-08 it was reported the arrival of several individuals connected to business groups in Valle department (“*Los intermediarios del Valle*”), who took advantage of a new wave of violence in the region to gain control over land. They were said to have bought, at fire-sale prices, numerous land plots owned by *campesino* families. “All of a sudden there were many interested in buying thousands of hectares of land that until then had lacked any significant economic value”, one report said (Rutas del Conflicto 2017b).

Land transfers did not end there. Soon after the land brokers had purchased the land, they sold it to Cargill<sup>11</sup> – a US-based top global food corporation – for a price several times exceeding the original one. In one case, brokers bought the land owned by a peasant family

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<sup>9</sup> According to the Colombian legislation, *baldíos* should only be allocated to landless peasants or those in need of more and better quality of land to improve their livelihoods. To prevent from land concentration, Law 160 of 1994 specifically mandated that allocation of *baldíos* could not exceed the UAF (*Unidad Agrícola Familiar* or Agricultural Family Unit). UAF refers to an area large enough to provide peasant families with adequate living conditions and it is different for every region of the country, according to agrological characteristics. The law also prohibits any individual or corporation from accumulating lands that were previously *baldíos* exceeding one UAF (GOC 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Most lands across the eastern plains were subject of intense colonization in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, particularly by cattle ranchers (Gómez 1988) and peasant settlers (*colonos*) seeking to escape the domain of big haciendas (LeGrand 1986). As of mid-twentieth century, threats of land dispossession and evictions amidst a period of generalized violence in the country (*La Violencia*), further contributed to the colonization of the region (Fajardo 1983, 2015). To date, while most lands in the region are occupied, land tenure informality prevails (INCODER and Misión Rural 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Investments by Cargill have been documented in other countries within Latin America and in Asia, in which the company deploys different adaptation strategies according to the institutional and political conditions of each context, what Salerno (2014) refers to as the “Cargill method”.

at approximately US\$ 13,000, only to transfer it a year after to Cargill for the equivalent of roughly US\$ 260,000. This is the same for several other land plots first acquired by intermediaries, on behalf of influencing individuals from Valle province, and later transferred to Cargill (Verdad Abierta 2013).

In another case, in the summer of 2022, I met a group of over 10 Indigenous who had been victims of land dispossession and forced displacement around 2010. That year members of a private armed group allegedly directed by Alfonso Mattos (politician, cattle rancher, charged with several crimes and one of three brothers, members of a powerful family nicknamed as “The Mattos”) took control of some 14,000 hectares of land in the municipality of La Primavera. He appropriated a total of eight land plots comprising the ancestral territory of indigenous Sikuaní, Cuiba and Amorúa who recall living there from the 1900s (Jaimes 2018). In early 2008, according to their testimonies, one person arrived claiming to be the representative of Mr. Mattos. “He wanted to come to an agreement to appropriate our lands; he arrived with 20 armed men. But we said we refuse to leave”. Within months, portions of their settlement were torn down and members of the community started to face death threats. They were ultimately forced to leave a year later, in 2010. Mattos received support from the national government in the form of subsidies, and even the local authorities took part in the police proceedings to evict indigenous communities (Liga contra el silencio 2020). Some families were offered an equivalent of \$1,000 US dollars each for not to return to the area.

Former Minister of Agriculture, Aurelio Irigorri (2014-2017), could not resist to the promises of the *Altilanura* either. There created a company, integrated by Irigorri’s cousins and nephews, to take control of land in Vichada. When one of his nephews was interviewed in relation to the land purchase he ironically declared: “what happened in reality was that I flew around and when I saw those lands down there I wanted to have them right away to take health brigades to the people. We had a great time taking nurses there” (Semana 2017). The list of related cases goes on.

In Puerto Gaitán, a similar case of land accumulation by stealth was starting to draw the attention of the press. In 2018, newspapers reported on the arrival of a large group of people presumably belonging to the same religious congregation, Mennonite. Since 2012, they had traveled to the area several times to look for available land to settle in. Around 2016, their presence started to be more prominent in the municipalities of Puerto Gaitán and Puerto López and in Villavicencio (the capital city of Meta). Contrary to other cases of land deals noted here, in which the key players are Colombians or foreigners that work with local associates, in this case members of the community were themselves negotiating the land. Their physical appearance stood out as far too distant (white skin, light color hair and light eyes) from that of locals that people started pointing at them as the outsiders, “The Mennonites” (personal interviews). By 2018, they were said to own nearly 17,000 hectares of land in Puerto Gaitán planted in soy and maize. In my field visit to Meta province in June 2022, people talked about twice that number, some 30,000 hectares. When “The Mennonites” were asked what triggered them to come to Colombia, they often respond that a businessman from the oil sector told them that there was cheap and fertile land in the eastern plains and that the area was becoming peaceful<sup>12</sup> and available for investors (El Tiempo 2018). Indeed,

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<sup>12</sup> The signature of the Peace Agreement between the former FARC guerrilla and the Colombian government in 2016 is said to be one key enabling condition for the recent land grabs across the eastern plains and the Amazon.

as Jacobo Grajales explains, the *Atillanura* is a clear example of the ways in which “a frontier narrative is linked to a security consolidation policy that opened up new possibilities for agricultural investment” (2020:1153).

## 6. Spectacularization expands its reach

### The play by local elites

Just as the national government, local political and economic elites were eager to participate in the spectacular promises of the region, and actively engaged in spreading the word about the *Atillanura*'s 'productive potential'. Following the promotional events by Álvaro Uribe and his cabinet, at the local level an important advertising campaign started to take place. As of 2008, the municipality of Puerto Gaitán (Arias 2020) in the department of Meta, became the epicentre of an annual **forum** on the *Atillanura* and its features and possibilities.

In 2008 the forum's first edition brought together some 100 participants, including middle-size and large landowners from around the area and 20 panelists – most of whom were researchers at CORPOICA that had participated in the very same pilot projects that Jaime Triana “inspired” in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Plenaries referred to the astonishing productivity results of these first projects (mostly focused on soy, maize, rice and oil palm), as resulting from both the scientific expertise of CORPOICA alone, and from its long-term collaboration with Embrapa. Fascinated by the results, attendees quickly spread the message about the region's great possibilities.

In 2009, the response to the call was massive and it went all beyond the expectations of the organizers. Nearly 400 people arrived in Puerto Gaitán that November. Among the participants were leading businesspeople from Bogotá and other departments, all dragged by the idea of accessing to land in the area. This time the panelists were not only the researchers at CORPOICA, but also included top government officers such as then Minister of Agriculture, the head of the National Planning Office and the Minister of Commerce.

Behind the idea of the forum was a highly respected woman in the political and economic circles in the region – whose real name I changed for confidentiality reasons. I chose to refer to her as Claudia. In the small town of Puerto Gaitán, the compound adapted to host the forum became an arena for investors and government officers to engage in direct conversation about investors' needs. “They would not talk to the mayor of Puerto Gaitán or to the Governor of Meta department (...). Why would they do that [the investors] if they had direct communication with Uribe and his cabinet?” – said Claudia. Investors' demands ranged from the expansion of electrical and fuel stations at particular farms, subsidies for the purchase lime and other fertilizers, and even the construction of a cargo airport at Puerto Gaitán, and a railroad connecting Colombia's eastern plains with Venezuela. Some people reported to have invested in large amounts of land and simply waited for the roads to be built, while several other land deals were also strategically located alongside the Meta River

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The relative decrease of insurgent military actions in these areas was purposely used to invite foreign capital and domestic investors to “develop” the area under the appeal of peace (Gutiérrez Sanín 21; Prieto Ríos and Uruña 2017).

seeking to benefit from possible related infrastructure, as my interviewees noted. Expectations only heightened.

An even bigger success were forums number three and four, in 2010 and 2011 respectively. On the third one (2010), Claudia was pleased to retell, they were able to group at least ten European ambassadors to Colombia and nearly 800 other attendees. She added, “It was the first time that such a small municipality like Puerto Gaitán received these prominent visitors”. Once the forum ended, on a Saturday afternoon, many used to hit the road to see first-hand the lands they had just discussed. During those first years, there was a “real boom for land (...). People would drive around on Saturday afternoon and maybe on Sunday, and would seal the deal the week after”, says Claudia. The demand for land was high, “we are talking about 10,000, 20,000, 30,000 hectares or more (...). You could see that people from other countries arrived in Puerto Gaitán that year” (personal interview). In 2011, former President Juan Manuel Santos himself attended the forum. Over a thousand more people also participated that year, including visitors from Panama, Mexico, Brazil and the United States – as recalled by Claudia.

As it turned out, spectacularization around land in the *Altilanura* was already having a material impact in the area. Months prior to the first forum in 2008, the road that connects Villavicencio (the capital city of Meta department) with Puerto Gaitán was completed, allowing more people to access the municipality in a faster and safer way. An oil boom also contributed to an increase in migration flows and the development of other road infrastructure functional to the oil camps (Rivera Huertas 2023). In order to accommodate the many attendees of the forums, over the years there built several hotels and resorts, and a bunch of restaurants, discos, pharmacies and convenience stores also opened. As one of my interviewees noted, even the local governor at the time thought of creating a new municipality next to Puerto Gaitán given that it was running short in capacity. For the “big success” of 2011, Puerto Gaitán was certainly crowded and bursting in creative ideas around land.

### **Media coverage: facilitating the push for land**

The rush for land simultaneously produced a rush of local and national-level press reports that further contributed to the spectacle. At the local level, the leading newspaper *Llano 7 días* dedicated front-page headlines, editorials and extensive reports publicizing different land investments and the seeming positive implications for the region.

On July 31, 2008, *Llano 7 días* titled its daily edition: “The Altilanura started its own food factory”, in reference to the expansion of La Fazenda. The note read, “La Fazenda is the first step towards agroindustry in Meta department. [...] The Altilanura is currently the region in Meta where a serious process of agriculture industrialization is taking place”. Similarly, it welcomed the expansion of biofuels in the region on several press releases between 2010 and 2012. Some of the most remarkable headlines in 2010 included: “A biotechnological future”; “We dream of being a little Brazil”; “Uribe ‘blessed’ biodiesel in Meta”.

National magazines and newspapers were simultaneously reporting on the push for land. For instance, both Aliar-Contegral, owners of La Fazenda, and the Santo Domingo are some of the

leading characters of a 2011-suggestive editorial entitled “*Los nuevos llaneros*” [The new men of the eastern plains] (see Dinero 2011). The term ‘new *llaneros*’ was a euphemism of the otherwise massive transformation of land use and ownership that was resulting from the investment frenzy. In addition, in 2012, *Semana* – the country’s largest weekly magazine – launched an extensive special series on the potential of the Colombian Orinoquía entitled: “The New Colombia: Between *Orinoquía* and the Amazon the future of the country’s next 50 years is in play. Will we rise to the challenge?” (see *Semana*, 2012). Note that the special’s title, “The new Colombia”, is the same that three decades ago former President Betancur had chosen as the name for its massive plans of turning the Altillanura into Colombia’s biggest hub of industry and commerce (see above).

Another special issue followed in 2013, entitled “Land in sight” (*Tierra a la vista*). The purpose was said to “stressing the natural, social and economic qualities that make it [Orinoquía] the future and the gate of progress of Colombia”. The magazine’s first edition about *Orinoquía* was presented at a conference set up by *Semana* in the department of Meta, with over 200 guests – including regional leaders and businesspeople (*Semana* 2010d).



Figure. 7. *Dinero* magazine cover “The new *llaneros*”; *Semana* magazine cover “Land in sight”. Source: *Semana* (2013).

## 7. Dreams around land face reality

In spectacle-making processes as that of the *Altillanura* variety, chances of real success are however, few. As noted above, one can consider as an actual measure of success, in any spectacle-making process, the interest that particular investments arouse in varied actors, some of which have unusual profiles in comparison to each investment. Another question entirely is whether these types of actors, and the more usual investors, are able to realize investment promises. The outcome is generally low. In the *Altillanura*, one might argue, no one really could have kept the spectacle around the region for too long. As described below, a number of different circumstances play into its decay.

### Discursive and material constraints

One reason has to do with the unexpected turn of events that contributed to diminish the relevance of the last editions of the *Altillanura* forum – as explained by Claudia. Between 2012 and 2014, the event continued to take place, but with significantly less political support at the local level. The newly elected mayor of Puerto Gaitán (2012-2016) had a different set of ideas for the municipality, leaning towards conferring a more protagonist role to indigenous and peasant settlers instead of investors from elsewhere. Jaime Triana, former executive of CORPOICA and one of the biggest enthusiasts around the *Altillanura*, was murdered in late 2012 in what became a sounded police investigation. The thematic of the forum changed and the number of attendees decreased, accordingly.

On the actual ground, prospects around the *Altillanura* were similarly facing challenges. As time went by – and despite the media hype –, only a few of the announced land deals appeared to be promising in reality. To start with, the Government of Japan expressed concerns around the security conditions of the country and pulled back from their interest to invest in the region within months. J.P Morgan Chase's chairman was reported to have met President Uribe at the presidential house with a concrete plan of investment for the *Altillanura*, but it seemed it was not a free-flowing conversation (Semana 2007b).

Meanwhile, there was no evidence that the Norwegian-based Siem had developed any concrete projects in the *Altillanura* (Semana 2007b). As for the keen interest of the Chinese, it was the director of Colombia's agricultural guild that himself acknowledged the non-existence of 400,000 hectares of aggregated land readily available to "offer" (Portafolio 2010a). The Chinese-based company Tianshi was reported to be active in Colombia in the areas of health services and cosmetics (see Las empresas 2021), but there was no evidence of it having established a mining-energy company in the country following their 2011-announcement.

"*Illusions about Altillanura 'deflated'*" (Portafolio 2008b). Interest in land from Latin America was also falling precipitously. After the multiple visits to the *Altillanura* by members of the Brazilian-based Grupo Maggi, it seemed they have found a good place to settle. However, when the company was ready to seal the deal, there were no land titles upon which to back it up and they ultimately withdrew from the project (ibid). "Argentina's king of soy" did not find it easy to land its plans either, though he was arguably more persistent than his Brazilian competitor was. While there is no evidence that Los Grobo is running a project of its own in



the region, Grobocopatel remained as a top guest in Juan Manuel Santos's (Uribe's successor)<sup>[3]</sup> events on – and prospects for – the *Altillanura* (Lewin 2016).

Even key Colombian players were reported to face “obstacles” to “develop” the *Altillanura* at their will. In 2013, some four years after the Santo Domingo family invested in the region, they cancelled operations. “*Goodbye to the Llano*”, “*Altillanura: A missed opportunity?*”<sup>13</sup>, newspapers reported (Semana 2014b, 2014a). The Santo Domingo referred to the land legislation on *baldíos* as one “obstacle” that “limits the possibilities for large investors to access arable areas that can generate acceptable profitability levels for agro-industrial projects” (ibid). They concluded that the losses resulting from closing down the project were running into millions. From the rest of the cases presented above – this is by no means an exhaustive list – a minority seemed ahead of the rest of the participants in the land rush.

### **Colombian *Altillanura* and Brazilian cerrado: a wrong homology**

Corporations and businesspeople were not the only ones expressing concern. At CORPOICA, many of the pioneers researching the *Altillanura* were highly confronted by the actual agrological conditions of the area – some of which did not completely resemble those of the cerrado, contrary to originally thought. As research in this area advanced, personnel of CORPOICA realized that while both the Brazilian cerrado (Cabral et al. 2023; Calmon 2022) and Colombia's high plains do share geographical commonalities, they do not have the same physicochemical features and the weather conditions differ<sup>14</sup>. As one researcher I interviewed put it: “we made a wrong homology with the cerrado”. This realization had serious implications for CORPOICA's work and for the many actors that ventured to invest in the *Altillanura* and trusted the research center. Because much of the technology they worked with came directly from Embrapa (and is built and adapted to the Brazilian context), in the *Altillanura* the results were low.

During the mid-2010s, according to its personnel, CORPOICA tried to advice many of the different interested participants that kept arriving in the *Altillanura* to lower their original expectations and to adapt to the actual conditions of the area. Another functionary from the institute noted: “The *Altillanura* was indeed the last agricultural frontier, but one should have entered slowly because we knew nothing about it”. Nevertheless, the initial spectacular promises around the area resulted in actors that were not willing to give up their dreams that easily.

### **Institutional and political constrains: investor's determination to land**

A number of companies were determined to ‘land’ their deals at all costs. Take the case of Timberland Holdings – a US-based manufacturer and retailer. In 2011, the company took control of 12,000 hectares of land in *Altillanura* to produce timber for export. To turn their plans of investment a reality, however, they needed a good dosage of imagination. As noted above, most lands across the eastern plains are classified as *baldíos* and are subject of special

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<sup>13</sup> *Semana*, “¡Adiós al Llano!”, 19 February 2014; *Semana*, “Altillanura: ¿una oportunidad perdida?”, 18 April 2014.

<sup>14</sup> See Wolford and Nehring's analysis (2015) of a similar case of wrong homology between the Brazilian cerrado and the PROSAVANA project in Mozambique.

regulation. It is precisely this regulation that *should have* prevented the large amassing of *baldío* lands by Timberland (and others). How was the contrary possible? As part of a sophisticated judicial and administrative scheme, Timberland was advised to create a number of ‘paper companies’ for each to purchase different land plots at a time, just below the land size ceiling for the region (see footnote 9). Companies were registered in the Virgin Islands – an archipelago located in the Caribbean Sea, popularly known as a tax haven. A total of 10 different land plots that had been *baldíos* allocated to landless peasants between 1998 and 2003 – were later aggregated and planted with timber, totaling 12,000 hectares (La Silla Vacía 2013).

Mónica Semillas was perhaps the pioneer of the strategy that later followed a number of different companies including the US Timberland Holding. Brazilian businessperson Sergio Marchett, owner of Monica, calls himself a “new colonizer”. Before he became interested in the *Altilanura*, Marchett had long been a “colonizer” of Mato Grosso in Brazil and Santa Cruz in Bolivia. In Colombia, he envisioned a 12,000 hectares-size project in soy, maize and rice, but the ‘UAF’ threshold was a real impediment to this realization. Marchett was reported to exchange direct correspondence with then president Uribe, in which he openly expressed that he had no other choice but to break the law – by creating at least seven paper companies for each to buy different land plots, amounting to some 13,000 hectares (Arias 2018; El Espectador 2012). Judicial strategies of this kind went on the spotlight around 2013 when opposition senators publicly questioned the “unlawful accumulation of land”<sup>15</sup> in the area, followed by investigations from the Comptroller’s Office and related authorities.

## 8. Spectacularization outcomes: beyond ‘hype’

Repeatedly, as material and judicial difficulties to operate land deals increased, many started calling the *Altilanura* as a simply speculative enterprise, or “nothing more than a big fantasy”, as expressed by one of my interviewees. But, while it is certainly true that several land deals were ultimately abandoned or remained as intentions, many others did become operational. Based on the sample of cases discussed here (this is by no means exhaustive), a rough estimate of 1,121,383 hectares represents the amount of land implicated in the land-deal making in the *Altilanura* – considering both these types.

Spectacularization around land thus simultaneously resulted in operational and non-operational land deals, respectively. What is more, the latter played a significant role in rising the expectations and animating the frenzy for land in the region, which in the end resulted in different operational deals. This is to say that, as much as operational land deals, non-operational were key components of the contemporary land rush in the *Altilanura*, and the two are co-constitutive (Borras et al. 2022; Borras and Franco 2024). Consider that many of the above-mentioned domestic players in the recent land rush would not have joined the bandwagon, and pursued their investments, if bigger players within Latin America and elsewhere were not interested in the first place – many of which remained as attempts of deals. Take the particular case of former senator Habib Merheg, who together with family members and colleagues became interested in Vichada after Norwegian-based firms (perhaps

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<sup>15</sup> One of the first public contestations against land grabbing in the *Altilanura* was made by Congressman Wilson Arias in 2012-13, through a series of congressional hearings. He was later nicknamed “the *baldíos*’ detective” (Bermúdez Liévano 2013).

Siem) announced their plans for Altillanura around 2005 – according to his own testimony. And while interest from the Norwegians never actually materialized, Merheg did managed to take control of some 38,000 of land in the area.

A similar story can be told with respect to other actors. Note that La Fazenda’s owner Jaime Liévano expanded operations in Puerto Gaitán – until it became the leading meat-processing company in the country – after Brazilian and Argentinian “kings of soy” announced their interest in the *Altillanura* – though they never actually started operations in the region. Colombia’s richest multimillionaires Luis Carlos Sarmiento and Alejandro Santo Domingo were equally dragged into the competition for land in the *Altillanura*, and turned their investments into operational deals, as soon as big international players such as J.P Morgan Chase and Bill Gates started to explicitly put an eye in the region, but whose investment interests ultimately dropped.

In short, attempts at explaining the land rush in the Colombian *Altillanura* by taking into account only one aspect of the phenomenon falls short to understating its real scope and possible related implications. The preceding sections have emphasized on the crucial role of spectacularization in the land rush, and how hype and scams are better understood as a symptom of its broader scope as opposing to an outright failure.

**Table 1. A sample list of operational and non-operational land deals amidst the recent land rush in the Altillanura**

Year	Actor			Land deal				Status
	Name	Origin	Main sector/ activity	Location	Area (hectares)	Land use	Capital	
2005	<b>Government of Japan</b>	Japan	National government	Altillanura	-		-	Non-operational
2005	<b>Bill Gates</b>	United States		Altillanura				
2006	<b>J.P Morgan Chase</b>	United States	Investment bank	Altillanura	-		US\$ 325 million	
2006	<b>Siem</b>	Norway (Cayman Islands)	Shipping	Altillanura	-		-	
2007	<b>Grupo Maggi (Blairo Maggi)</b>	Brazil	Agro-industrial	Altillanura	100,000		-	
2009	<b>Government of Colombia (Carimagua)</b>	Colombia	National government	Puerto Gaitán, Meta				
2011	<b>Tianshi</b>	China	Cosmetics; health services	Altillanura	-	Mining, energy, agro-industrial	US\$ 1,000 millions	
2011	<b>Los Grobo (Gustavo Grobocopatel)</b>	Argentina	Agro-industrial	Altillanura	-	Soy, maize	-	
2011	<b>El Tejar</b>	Argentina	Agro-industrial	Altillanura		Soy, maize and rice		
2012	<b>Chinese Ambassador to Colombia + Businesspeople</b>	China	Public servant/ Private business	Altillanura	400,000		-	
2007	<b>Aliar-Contegral (La Fazenda)</b>	Colombia	Agro-industrial	Meta	16,350	Maize, soy for pig-feeding	US\$ 130 millions	
2008-2009	<b>Mónica Semillas</b>	Brazil	Agro-industrial	Puerto Gaitán – Meta	13,000	Soy, maize		
2009	<b>Corficolombiana (Organización Pajonales)</b>	Colombia	Financial intermediation	Puerto López, Puerto Gaitán – Meta	22,000	Rubber		
2009	<b>Valorem (Santo Domingo family)</b>	Colombia	Financial intermediation	Meta (Puerto Gaitán), Vichada (La Primavera)	65,000	Soy and maize	US \$300 million	
2009	<b>Frank Kanayet</b>	Colombia	Oil commerce	Puerto López, Meta	45,000	Biofuel (ethanol)	US \$25 million	
2010-12	<b>Cargill</b>	United States	Agro-industrial	Cumaribo, La Primavera, Santa Rosalía – Vichada	62,000	Soy, maize	-	

2010	<b>Bioenergy</b>	Colombia	Biofuel production	Puerto López – Meta	14,400	Biofuel (ethanol)	
2010	<b>Indupalma</b>	Colombia	Agro-industrial	Vichada	40,000	Rubber	650,000 millions
2010	<b>Forest First</b>	United States	Commercial reforestation	Puerto Carreño, La Primavera – Vichada	133,000	Commercial reforestation and REDD+	
2010	<b>Riopaila Castilla</b>	Colombia	Agro-industrial	La Primavera – Vichada	41,300	Oil palm, grains	
2011	<b>Timberland Holdings Limited</b>	United States	Logging	Altillanura - Vichada (La Primavera)	11,494	Timber	-
2012	<b>Frontera Eney (Pacific Ruabilaes)</b>	Canada	Oil extraction	Puerto Gaitán – Meta	55,000	Oil extraction	
2006	<b>Habib Merheg</b>	Colombia	Former congressman	Altillanura - Vichada province	38,144	-	-
2007-08	<b>Los intermediarios del Valle</b>	Colombia	-	Altillanura - Vichada	-	-	-
2007	<b>Alfonso Mattos (Agrícola El Encanto)</b>	Colombia	Former Congressperson	La Primavera – Vichada	13,879	Oil palm	
2013	<b>Aurelio Iragorri</b>	Colombia	Former Minister of Agriculture	La Primavera – Vichada	3,816		
2014	<b>Gustavo Londoño Nicolás Laserna</b>	Colombia	Former Congressperson	La Primavera – Vichada	7,000		
2016	<b>The Mennonites</b>	Mexico		Puerto Gaitán – Meta	40,000	Soy, maize	

Note: Prepared by the author based on press review.

## 8. Conclusion

Spectacular claims about land were central to the contemporary global land rush. They have been a regular picture of different commodity rushes throughout history. This paper problematized popular accounts, in scholarly and public debates, which tend to lessen the scope of the land rush on the basis that it resulted in several non-operational land deals. By its very nature, the great deal of imagination and speculation put into ‘spectacle-making’ resulted in land deals that were ultimately abandoned once they met ground-level realities. Based on research findings from Colombia’s *Atillanura*, the country’s main hotspot in the recent land rush, I argued that non-operational land deals actually played an important role in rising the expectations and fueling the investment frenzy, which also facilitated the conditions for certain deals to become operational. In other words, both these categories are co-constitutive.

To date, a majority of the analyses about the land rush in the *Atillanura* are focused – albeit for good reasons – on the land deals that became operational. Seldom have the studies delved into the role of spectacle and spectacular claims in a broader sense, so as to include non-operational and its implications for different peoples and the environment. As a result, more comprehensive understandings of the real scope and effects of the land rush in the region are still largely absent. A consideration of the role of spectacle in the contemporary land rush within Colombia and elsewhere remains an urgent task of academic and political interest.

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