

A FEATURE DOCUMENTARY BY JUAN MEJIA BOTERO

AGAINST THE TIDE

Family members pay their respects at Temístocles Machado's wake — Jan, 2018, Buenaventura

The dangerous journey of a community organizer sheds light on the pervasive human rights abuses in Colombia. Through an intimate and deeply human portrait, **AGAINST THE TIDE** (Contra la Marea) illuminates the humanity of the extraordinary leaders who, day-to-day, face the harrowing political genocide being waged across Colombia.





THE STORY

AGAINST THE TIDE

A local fisherman floats by the port's newest expansion project in Buenaventura

THE STORY

She always dreamed of having a house, and with hard work she achieved it. And yet, now she's afraid to live in it. Instead, she's moved her family four times over the last five years. Each morning she puts on a bulletproof vest before leaving home. Every time her phone rings with an unknown number, she panics, not knowing whether a death threat will be on the other line. These are the lives of social activists in Colombia today. This is the life of Danelly Estupiñán.

When she began her organizing work in the barrios, Danelly remembers Temístocles Machado, Don Temis, called her in for a short meeting. Five hours later, she left exhausted but blown away by his knowledge and unwavering dedication. He'd been waging a legal battle for years, mostly on his own, to protect the neighborhood's land from development projects. He stepped on many toes, and it was dangerous work, but Danelly was convinced to toil alongside him.

Much like Don Temis once did in her neighborhood, today Danelly spends her days organizing the community of barrio Santa Fé—a strategic locality where a Spanish port company is trying to expand operations. Some homes have been bulldozed and water sources cut off; Danelly works with the community to document and denounce the consequences of the port expansion.

After successfully stalling the port company's expansion plan, Danelly encouraged Don Temis to move beyond the legal realm and become more political. In 2017, together, they helped organize what became the largest civil strike Colombia had seen in centuries. It paralyzed the city and the port for weeks. A few months later, Don Temis was murdered. To this day, Danelly carries this guilt with her.

Since Don Temis' passing, Danelly's home has been broken into, she has received death threats by text, she has seen people monitoring and photographing her, and in July 2019, someone saw a photo of her circulating in a local slum; they were bidding her assassination.

It was easy to imagine Don Temis' picture being passed around just months before. Close to 150 social leaders had been killed in the country during the previous six months. Danelly knew well these weren't just empty threats. In fear, Danelly fled the country.



Danelly's daughter, Shani, looks out her window as she waits for her mom to arrive from an organizing meeting.



AGAINST THE TIDE

Temístocles Machado (Don Temis) organizing in the Barrio La Isla, Buenaventura

“Why am I in this? For what?” Danelly wondered during the months she was away.

But today, Danelly is back in Santa Fé continuing her organizing work in the community. The new port company has revamped its efforts to build a massive storage facility in the neighborhood.

"What I am doing now is trying to master the fear. Fear is inferior to the cause of collective justice, to the construction of a better world ... a different world. I finally assumed my work and the importance of my role, but also that it comes with its risks and costs ... that my own life may be at risk. I have accepted it. And it made me calmer. The dilemma for me ended there," Danelly told us.

AGAINST THE TIDE tells the story of Danelly and her family—her partner Victor and her 15 year old daughter, Shani. The film aims to tell a human, intimate story of what it's like to be a community leader in Colombia. It will portray the grueling consequences activism has on the lives of the leaders and their families daily. It aims to humanize social leaders and force viewers to move beyond the numbers and statistics, and embrace the humanity of those risking it all for a more just world.

Danelly's life interweaves deeply with her work—the organizing, *mingas*, community forums, and protests. She must balance it with her relationship with her daughter Shani, who struggles between her own political awakening and the terror of losing her mom. Shani's father, who, in his battle for custody, claims Shani is not safe with Danelly. Her partner, Victor, a human rights defender who recently survived an assassination attempt himself. And her own bodyguard and driver, who have her life in their hands, yet whisper about her period when they drive her to the pharmacy.

AGAINST THE TIDE’S dramatic arc lives in that line between the personal and the political. It's driven by the constant risk that comes from taking on powerful interests head-on, and by the fight for some sanity that allows her to nourish the relationships with those she loves.



AGAINST THE TIDE

Danelly organizing in the Barrio Santa Fé, Buenaventura



THE TOPIC

AGAINST THE TIDE

A young man can't contain his tears during Don Temis' funeral — Buenaventura, 2018

THE TOPIC

After five decades of armed conflict, in 2016 the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas signed a historic peace accord.

As the pen hit the paper, public fears were assuaged. Peace and justice had come to Colombia, the government lauded. The international community celebrated the end of another war, while NGOs and solidarity organizations began packing their bags.

However, some in Colombia were skeptical that violence would suddenly come to an end. Unfortunately, they were right. Since the signing of the accords, over 700 community leaders have been murdered.

In fact, Colombia is currently the most dangerous country in the world for human rights defenders and social activists. According to Colombia's Ombudsman's Office, those assassinated include leaders in rural communities, neighborhood associations, and national organizations, "dedicated to the defense of the territory, the restitution of land, the promotion of human rights, environmental and water protection, voluntary coca eradication and substitution, the prevention of forced recruitment by armed groups, and participation in the formal political process."

No one knows the exact number of deaths, but Colombian think-tank INDEPAZ, estimates that at least 734 activists were killed between 2016 and 2019.



AGAINST THE TIDE

Thousands take the streets to protest Don Temis' assassination.



AGAINST THE TIDE takes place in Buenaventura, a bustling city of 350,000 mostly Afro Descendant inhabitants on the Pacific Coast of Colombia. Afro-Colombians across the country face socio-economic exclusion, discrimination, and high levels of violence; Buenaventura embodies this situation. Even though the city is one of the major ports on the continent—accounting for nearly 60% of all Colombian sea imports and exports—nearly 70% of its inhabitants live in poverty and unemployment rests near 40%. Colombia's most important port-city is a clear example of structural discrimination in a country where the Blackest states are also the poorest and most vulnerable to violence.

Over the past two decades a shocking wave of violence has enveloped Buenaventura. For each of the past five years, Buenaventura has led all Colombian municipalities in the numbers of newly displaced persons. More than 300 people reported to have gone missing in Buenaventura since January 2010 are presumed by officials to have “disappeared”—a slight of phrase that masks the violent end many political leaders and organizers are facing.

Still, President of Colombia Iván Duque continues to tell a different story. In 2019 he announced that activist deaths had fallen 35% during his first year in office. Not surprisingly, government figures continually fall far below those of national and international human rights organizations.

AGAINST THE TIDE seeks to move beyond the numbers. After all, is there an “acceptable” number of dead activists? Foregoing statistics, this film will capture the nuances and humanity of the life of one of Colombia's social leaders working in one of its most dangerous regions. In the words of Francia Marquez—the film’s producer, a prominent social leader, and the winner of the Goldman Environmental Prize—It’s easy for social leaders to forget to care for themselves: “We feel as if we have no right to break down, or embrace self-love. There are days when I feel that everything is against me; that I'm always swimming against the tide; that there is no hope. But I have to convince myself that there is, because I have to send a message of hope to the community. I get tired of seeing that the world praises me and tells me that they admire me, if at the end of the day I’m still alone and frightened. We need a film that reminds the world that social leaders are also human.”

THE VISION



AGAINST THE TIDE

Barrio Santa Fé sits on the banks of the largest port expansion project in Buenaventura

THE VISION

Our documentary approach will have a narrative feel—emotional and deeply rooted in character with keen attention to pacing and tension. The photography will be exceptionally cinematic and driven by mood and atmosphere. Our approach is observational and intimate, staying with Danelly for long takes and allowing the space for action and emotion to come through. It will be shot intentionally and poetically—think *Grey Gardens*, *Darwin's Nightmare*, or *For Ahkeem*.

We will not use a traditional narrator or “voice of god” and will keep talking heads to a minimum. In-depth, sit-down interviews will be used mainly as narration. Our film's poetic and verité style suits an organic, intimate, and energetic portrayal of the lives of Danelly, her daughter, and her partner.

The intimacy will be intertwined with the dynamic and often dangerous nature of Danelly's work as she moves through the bustling city of Buenaventura taking on powerful economic interests. Stylistically, these are driving moments and the shooting will reflect that urgency. Aerial footage will help ground us in Buenaventura and truly grasp both the marginalization of its poorer neighborhoods as well as the magnitude of its port and the powerful port companies.

AGAINST THE TIDE'S arc is found somewhere in between these two worlds as tensions continue to rise between Danelly and the port companies, and she has to contend with the personal consequences of her struggle.

Periodically we will allow ourselves to step outside of Danelly's life and into the inevitable parallels with her mentor, Don Temis. Danelly's close relationship with him makes her the perfect guide into Don Temis' story. She knows his family well, has deep knowledge of his case, and understands better than anyone the importance of pursuing justice for his murder. The style in this section is more investigative and has the tone of a thriller. As Danelly opens a door into a murder investigation, its tragic ending weighs heavily on her and on the audience.

The purpose of this film is not to offer a historical or political analysis of post-war Colombia. We will not be consumed by portraying the country's civil strife—this has been done numerous times before. **AGAINST THE TIDE** is above all a human portrait and a portrait of communities, told from their own point of view.

BARRIO SANTA FÉ

AGAINST THE TIDE

Barrio Santa Fe suffered a terrible fire where over 10 homes were lost
Residents suspect foul play as the TC BUEN port company pressures them to evacuate

DANELLY



AGAINST THE TIDE

A woman with long braided hair, wearing a leopard print top, is seen from the side, looking out a window. The window has horizontal blinds that are partially open, allowing bright sunlight to stream in, creating a warm, golden glow. The view outside the window shows a multi-story building with a grid of windows, some of which appear to be boarded up or have dark frames. The overall mood is contemplative and hopeful.

SHANI

AGAINST THE TIDE

SHANI, 13, is the daughter of one of the most vocal black leaders in Buenaventura, Danelly. She has inherited her mother's commitment to activism but struggles to reconcile the exhausting demands on her mother's time, and, most importantly, the risks that her job entails. At the funeral of yet another black activist—a member of the civil strike's organizing committee—Shani struggles emotionally as she grapples with the numerous death-threats her mom has received for being one of the leaders of the strike.

Regardless, the next day Shani is out marching alongside her mother in a huge protest demanding State response to the murders of Black leaders.

Despite her father's protestations about her safety, Shani opts to continue living with Danelly and Victor in Buenaventura. He is currently suing for custody.



VICTOR

AGAINST THE TIDE

VICTOR and Danelly have been together for over 6 years now.

Victor is a human rights defender and a beloved community organizer and leader of one of the most important community councils in the Pacific Littoral. He received repeated death threats in 2014 and was forced to relocate for almost a year, returning home to Buenaventura in 2015.

On May 4th, 2019, while attending a meeting of Black community leaders, Victor and 14 others were shot at repeatedly with automatic weapons by a group of unidentified men. Although nobody was hurt, two days later Victor received a text message that read: “The other day was just the beginning, next time we will kill you all”.

Victor currently lives with Danelly and Shani in Buenaventura.



TC BUEN

AGAINST THE TIDE

TCB (TCBUEN) is the leading Spanish maritime operator of port terminals for container and general cargo. It is co-owned by the Spanish aristocratic Perez Maura family and Dutch and British investment funds.

It already has 11 maritime container terminals throughout the world. A third of all goods that pass through the Buenaventura Port pass through TCBUEN hands.

The company has been seeking to expand in Buenaventura for the past five years—including in Danelly's community of barrio Santa Fé. Community leaders contend that TCBUEN's activity has made life in the neighborhood of Santa Fe, adjacent to the project, unlivable, forcing many residents to abandon their homes. The impact of TCBUEN on the estuary where the community and the mangrove ecosystem coexist has impacted traditional fishing activity.

TC BUEN been accused by activists in the area of using intimidation and violence in pursuit of their development plans. They see it as a is a calculated effort in order to appropriate their land.



AGAINST THE TIDE

THE TEAM



JUAN MEJIA BOTERO, Director.

Juan is an award-winning film director with over twenty years of experience. His work has focused primarily on human rights abuses and struggles for social justice. Juan's most recent documentary, *Death by a Thousand Cuts*, won the Audience Award at DocNYC and the Grand Jury Prize at the Seattle International Film Festival and Yale Environmental Film Festival. It was Best Changing Planet Program at the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival.



FRANCIA MARQUEZ, Producer.

Francia is one of Colombia's most formidable social leaders. She is from Yolombó, Colombia, home to more than 250,000 Colombians of African descent. Francia's activism has centered on anti-illegal mining campaigns. In 2018, Francia was awarded the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize. She continues her activism around territorial rights and environmental protection in Colombia.



OLIVIA HEFFERNAN, Associate Producer.

Olivia is a journalist and filmmaker. Her work focuses on labor, race and criminal justice. Olivia received her Masters at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs. She produced a documentary series for The Marshall Project and continues documenting human rights abuses for a number of publications.



JUAN E. YEPES, Line Producer.

Juan E. Yepes is a film producer with experience in business management and project entrepreneurship. His production experience has focused on documentary filmmaking and short films with a social impact angle. Juan has produced work in Cambodia, Thailand, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Colombia, Peru, and several locations in the United States.