

Feminized Topographies: Women, Nature, and Tourism in *Colombia es Pasión*

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Resumen

Este artículo analiza la campaña de turismo e inversión internacional “Colombia es pasión” que comenzó en 2005. A través de una lectura detenida de tres aspectos de la campaña: el logo con forma de corazón, comerciales de la fase nacional y videos promocionales de la fase internacional, la autora analiza la manera en que la campaña “Colombia es pasión” reapropia la terminología e imágenes de Colombia que circularon en la prensa internacional en las décadas de 1980 y 1990. Esta reapropiación resulta en una re-presentación de eventos de la historia colombiana que omiten imágenes de violencia. Como resultado, al re-presentar Colombia y su historia, la campaña “Colombia es pasión” simplemente presenta otra imagen unilateral del país. Ésta romantiza el país y sus ciudadanos, describiéndolos como fecundos, bellos, pacíficos y amables.

Palabras claves: Colombia es pasión, campañas de turismo, feminización, naturaleza, riesgo

Abstract

This article analyzes “*Colombia es pasión*,” the international tourism and investment campaign begun in 2005. Through a close reading of three aspects of the campaign: the heart logo, commercials from the domestic phase, and promotional videos from the international phase of the campaign, the author analyzes the ways in which “*Colombia es pasión*” reappropriates terminology and images of Colombia that circulated in the international media in the 1980s and 1990s. This reappropriation results in a re-presentation of historical events in Colombia that omits images of violence. As a result, in the re-presentation of Colombia and its citizens, the campaign simply presents another unilateral image of the country. This image romanticizes Colombia and its citizens describing them as fertile, beautiful, peaceful, and hospitable.

Keywords: Colombia is Passion, tourism campaigns, feminization, nature, risk

The first time I saw a promotional video for the *Colombia es pasión* (Colombia is Passion) campaign, I was sitting in a ballroom in Houston, Texas as part of the audience of the annual *Señorita Independencia de Colombia* beauty pageant. This particular video from this international phase of the campaign opens with images of coffee beans and emeralds, shows some fauna, and moves to images of verdant fields and pristine beaches. The narrator, a young Colombian boy of perhaps 7-8 years of age, speaks in English of the great diversity of people, talents, panoramic vistas, climates, and topography present in Colombia. He explains that “[he] want[s] you to see [Colombia] from the

inside because this is how you will really get to know who we are, how we act, and how we dream.” He then goes on to enumerate the many things that make Colombia a unique country and the ways in which Colombians are “ordinary people.” Finally, he reminds viewers that, although there are *all* kinds of people in Colombia, most of all there are “good people, many, many good people.”

It did not come as a surprise to me that the room—filled with Colombians and non-Colombians alike—erupted with applause at the end of the video. By highlighting images of parents and children, of people involved in leisurely activities, of different Colombian cultural events and of successful athletes, musicians and writers, the video presents images of Colombia that have not commonly circulated in the international media. It couples these images with the very clear message that most Colombians—like those sitting in the audience and participating in the pageant—are happy, hardworking, good people who have nothing to do with narco-trafficking. Colombians in the audience saw themselves positively represented in the video and applauded its message. Part of *Colombia es pasión*’s mission lies herein, presenting Colombians as “regular” people divorced from images of narco-trafficking. The other part of the campaign’s mission is to entice non-Colombians to visit Colombia. By presenting Colombia as an amicable, hospitable, fertile, safe, and consumable country, which is moving away from the old and toward the young and the new, *Colombia es pasión* stresses the idea that it is time for an alternative to images that have circulated in the international media since the 1980s, namely those of male-dominated violence and international drug trafficking. In order to achieve this counter-narrative, *Colombia es pasión* employs a three-pronged approach to change perceptions of Colombia internationally. First, it appeals to Colombians by engaging the country’s strongest “common metaphor” (Probyn) of women being part of the country’s natural make-up; second, it retells events in Colombia’s history devoid of the facts and violence that characterize the events; finally, *Colombia es pasión* lures foreign tourists to the country by capitalizing on the idea that Colombia may still represent some sort of risk. In this article, I do a close reading of the different elements that make up *Colombia es pasión*’s three-pronged approach in order to demonstrate how, in its efforts “to close the gap between perception and reality” (www.colombiaespasion.com) and to entice visitors, émigrés, and investors to come (back) to Colombia, the campaign re-appropriates historical events, common metaphors, and terminology used to negatively describe Colombia. In doing so, as I argue, the campaign, instead of complicating representations of Colombia(ns), returns to the practice of using women (especially beauty queens) and exploits commonly circulated perceptions in order to promote tourism and economic expansion. This results, not in a new

image of Colombia, but rather in masking the country's reality by presenting yet another unilateral image of Colombia.

A campaign started as a strategy to increase foreign tourism and investment in the country, *Colombia es pasión* carries out its goal by inviting people to take a second look at Colombia in order to see images that disassociate the country and its people from those of narco-trafficking and the related civil violence. In this effort, however, *Colombia es pasión* fails to acknowledge the still rampant and widespread occurrences of violence, displacements, poverty, and general lack of opportunity for those people still in the country.¹ It also fails to acknowledge the permanence of the narco-trafficking stereotypes and stigma for the transnational Colombian community. While all of these facts inform my analysis, they are not the focus of this article. Instead, my analysis centers on the images presented in the campaign and on the messages implicit in the campaign's logo, commercials, and videos. In interpreting the ways in which the campaign presents images of Colombia that feminize, I draw on the work of Elspeth Probyn and Sherry Ortner; in discussing the campaign's strategies, I reference Slavoj Žižek. Before delving into the analysis, however, I provide an abbreviated background of the images of violence that *Colombia es pasión* engages as well as on the situation in Colombia beginning in the mid 20th century.

From *La violencia* to Pablo Escobar

The relative peace enjoyed in Colombia at the dawn of the 21st century stands in stark contrast to the overwhelming violence that plagued its national image for most of the late 20th century. On April 9, 1948, the murder of presidential hopeful Jorge Eliécer Gaitán set off a period of mass rioting in Bogotá. Known as *nueve de abril*,² these riots quickly spread to the surrounding areas and, eventually, throughout the nation. Known simply as *la violencia* ("The Violence"), the period of civil unrest that ensued is considered to be the most violent period of modern Colombian history.³ However, it has not been the only period of extended violence.

By the 1980s, the convergence of widespread illegal drug exportation and its corollary violence had detrimental effects on Colombia. The fifteen-year span between 1980 and 1995 was particularly difficult. According to Marco Palacios, "a tripod of illicit drugs (principally cocaine and heroin), coffee, and oil" sustained Colombia's export economy during this period, despite the fact that illegal drug exportation displaced Colombian coffee and oil, representing 5.3 percent of the country's GDP (Palacios 222).⁴ Colombia was also a world leader in homicides during that period—many of them related to drug trafficking (Bushnell 252). Pablo Escobar, leader of the Medellín Drug Cartel, orchestrated the exportation of the majority of these drugs to the United States. While his death in 1993 curtailed many of the rampant and brutal homicides associated with international drug trafficking, the image of Colombia that dominated international media and Hollywood in the 1980s and 1990s was associated largely with Escobar and violence. News of deaths, car bombs, and kidnappings abounded in the international media and lingered in the imaginations of people around the world.

Almost every sector of Colombian society felt the damaging effects of the narco-trafficking. By 1999, Colombia faced the

worst recession in its history. In 2000, its unemployment rate was nearly 20%, the worst in Latin America (Simons 255). In the five-year span between 1994 and 1999, the number of Colombian emigrants doubled from two to four million (Palacios 214). Colombia's *Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad* (DAS) estimates that between 1996 and 2003 over one and a half million Colombians left the country and did not return. Half of these people emigrated between 1999 and 2001 (Bérubé, 2005).⁵ Many of the emigrants included young adults from major cities who emigrated in search of work and educational opportunities.⁶ Referencing the increased emigration, Pedro Medina, founder of *Yo creo en Colombia* (I Believe in Colombia), recalls a public graffiti image that is said to have read "*el último en salir, por favor apague las luces*" ("the last one to leave, please turn off the lights") (www.yocreoencolombia.com). But even those who did leave did not escape Colombia's reputation or the effects of narco-trafficking. In their study on the fragmentation and mistrust among Colombian immigrants in the United States, Eduardo Guarnizo, Arturo Ignacio Sánchez, and Elizabeth M. Roach argue that international media's heavy focus on drug-related issues, violence, and corruption resulted in the stigmatization of Colombians in the United States (Guarnizo *et. al* 373). By the beginning of the 21st century, the stage was ripe for a change in the lived experiences of Colombia and its citizens.

Campaigns for Change

For many people, the answer to these issues was a change in disposition, approach, and perception. *Colombia es pasión* began in August of 2005 with the goal of changing the way Colombia was perceived domestically and internationally. The first organizing committee headed by Lina Moreno de Uribe, then-President Álvaro Uribe's wife; Luis Guillermo Plata, president of Colombia's national tourism and export agency, ProExport; and Fabio Valencia Cossio, ex-ambassador to Italy, launched a two-pronged inauguration of *Colombia es pasión*. The first event was a private cocktail at Colombia's Museo Nacional (National Museum) in Bogotá. The second event happened on the following Sunday on soccer fields around the city, before games that would draw large crowds. They conceived of *Colombia es pasión* in two phases: a domestic one aimed at changing the way Colombians spoke of and represented Colombia, and an international phase aimed at increasing foreign tourism and investment in the country by changing the way foreigners perceived Colombia. According to its advertising communications, *Colombia es pasión* set out to present "the reality of a country which, despite its many problems, is different today from the erroneous international perception, which denies the country various opportunities for tourism, foreign investment, and exporting." *Colombia es pasión* built its campaign around the idea that Colombia would be in a better position economically and socially if its image around the world were better. The campaign insists that its work is that of "closing the gap between the perception and the reality" (Mejía 2008 qtd in Rosker 13).⁷ *Colombia es pasión* has used several different advertising techniques in order "close the gap." Though the campaign is still developing and adding new components regularly, the most recognizable are its logo, the commercials from the domestic phase, and the promotional videos from its international phase. I discuss each of these below.

Logos and Trends: *Colombia es pasión* and Tourism

Colombia es pasión's logo is reminiscent of a curvaceous woman's midsection. It is a plump, red, slightly lopsided heart with a flame emerging from the middle and resembles a woman putting her weight on one foot and thrusting her hip to one side. The flames that emerge from the dip of the heart correspond to a woman's small waist protruding from extra-round hips. When it was released, Colombians rejected it. Many people felt that the flaming, red heart resembled the Sacred Heart of Jesus too closely and found it irreverent. Others understood the heart to represent love for Colombia, not passion. Still others saw no connection between the heart and Colombia. Finally, some people took issue with the fact that the U.S. firm Visual Marketing Associates designed the heart logo. Most people, in fact, identified the Juan Valdez coffee logo as the one that should represent Colombia internationally (Rosker et al. 16-19). Nevertheless, *Colombia es pasión* chose to use the flaming heart logo as the symbol for the campaign regardless of public opinion because Colombians had identified 'passion' as their most defining characteristic in opinion polls. The heart symbolized 'passion,' according to the designers and *Colombia es pasión* directors; therefore, it would stand as the logo. Aside from ignoring the preferences of Colombians who were supposed to identify with the campaign and the logo, the campaign directors explained that their goal was not "*lograr que los colombianos se sientan bien de ser colombianos, sino que empiecen a actuar por su país*" ("to get Colombians to feel good about being Colombian, but rather to get them to start working for their country")⁸ (Rosker et al 16). Colombians, then, would carry the burden of changing perceptions of Colombia.

In fact, the campaign's first phase depended on Colombians "buying into the program" by buying products that carried the *Colombia es pasión* logo (Žižek 53-64). In *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, Slavoj Žižek discusses the relationship between consumption (consumerism) and charity, explaining that in today's capitalism there is a greater tendency to bring the two dimensions together so that, by purchasing certain products, consumers also participate in improving some aspect of society (53-64). That is, by buying a product, consumers also "buy into" the program the product supports and, perhaps more importantly, one buys personal redemption by feeling that the purchase of said item contributes to a larger cause (62). By purchasing any of the many items such as T-shirts, key chains, jewelry, lapel pins, and different types of food products that have the *Colombia es pasión* logo, Colombians also bought into the many aspects of the campaign. First, they contributed to the expansion of the campaign by funding future endeavors with their purchases. Secondly, Colombians bought into the idea that by purchasing a T-shirt with the heart logo, they were also helping to replace perceptions of Colombia and Colombians as violent with images of them as passionate and thus to improve the overall situation in Colombia. Finally, Colombians also bought into the campaign's goals by forgoing the rhetoric of violence and fear and adopting one of progress, peace, and femininity. That is, by speaking positively of Colombia and by adopting *Colombia es pasión's* quotes about Colombia's "stable economy, privileged geography, [and] abundant natural resources," Colombians everywhere became advocates for the campaign and for the country (www.colombiaespasion.com).

Despite its uncertain beginnings, people have certainly bought into *Colombia es pasión's* logo. Besides being sold as trinkets and being stamped on consumer products, the heart logo is also used to advertise state-sponsored events, by transnational Colombian groups, and can be seen on everything from Shakira's tour bus to Avianca airplanes. Because of its prominent placement on so many items, the logo in the shape of a woman's lower body is quickly becoming the symbol that identifies Colombia internationally. Not only does the logo connect Colombia to a certain femininity, it also counters the more widespread images of male-dominated narco-violence. Despite *Colombia es pasión's* attempts to connect a new image with Colombia, the (re)presentation of the country with a femininity and the characterization of Colombian people as being passionate, resourceful, hardworking, and beautiful is not a new practice in Colombia. Indeed, Colombia has a history of aligning certain regions with particular characteristics and of aligning women with nature as a strategy for increasing tourism. In fact, the inauguration of Colombia's first national beauty contest, *Concurso Nacional de Belleza*, in 1934, only a few years after the launching of the national tourism board in 1931, strategically mapped women onto the country's regions in order to encourage tourism.

Feminized Tourism Agendas

The promotion of the country as a touristic destination and the promotion of women as natural elements of the country have historically gone hand in hand in Colombia. *Colombia es pasión's* use of the feminine heart logo to encourage a different perception of the country is a return to an earlier relationship between Colombian women and tourism. This relationship is also seen in the commercials that make up the domestic phase of the campaign. Women, especially beauty pageant contestants, have been important elements in tourism campaigns since the inception of Colombia's tourism agenda in the 1930s. Since that time, comparisons between Colombian women and Colombia's natural landscapes—saying, for example, that women are as beautiful as the vistas—has become Colombia's most "common metaphor" (Probyn 2007). Elspeth Probyn complicates the general, common "idea of nation [...] as abstract 'she'" (49) by arguing that it is necessary to understand the local conditions that produce such generalities. To that end, she explains that nations are metaphorized in terms of that which is ordinary and common for the locals (50). In Colombia, the "common metaphors" of feminized topographies that conflate woman and nation have been part of local understandings since the comingling of the tourism agenda and the *Concurso Nacional de Belleza* (National Beauty Contest) in the 1930s. These persist in the 21st century.

In order to promote tourism in Colombia, *departamentos*⁹ began to promote the cultural, historic, and geographic elements that distinguished them from the others by sending young women to the *Concurso Nacional de Belleza*.¹⁰ Colombia's first pageant was held in 1934 in Cartagena de Indias, the coastal city designated the country's "first touristic center" (Bolívar et al. 72). In the pageant, young women representing the traits and characteristics of their particular *departamentos* competed for the title of *Señorita Colombia* and together represented the nation. The *departamentos'* regional topography and distinctive natural

and cultural elements were displayed on the contestants' regional outfits and in the way they were photographed with foliage endemic to their region. Contestants embodied Colombia's different regions and natural resources. Consequently, there was a correlation between the development of a touristic itinerary based on the different characteristics of the regions and the celebration of a national beauty pageant. There was also a correlation between the traits of the women and the *departamentos* they represented.

With the timely integration of the pageant and Colombia's *Agencia Nacional de Turismo*, national tourism agency, an inventory of national riches associated with certain *departamentos* began to arise. Part and parcel with it came the description of products as *lo colombiano* (Colombian), *lo nuestro* (ours), and *producto nacional* (national product) (Bolívar 76). Women, particularly the beauty pageant participants, were also described in this way. Statements such as "there is no doubt that the most beautiful thing in nature is a beautiful woman" found in *Revista Cromos* entered the national discourse (*Revista Cromos* 64, quoted in Bolívar 2005, 18). Women were considered among the country's natural resources and national products. This alignment of nature and women through the tourism agenda gave rise to the "common metaphors" connecting Colombian women and landscapes.

The celebration of women as national and natural resources persists today and is also seen in a global context repeated by non-Colombians. For example, Jacky Akelsberg describes Colombia as a country "known for its coffee and beautiful women" on the Internet travel site www.escapeartist.com. *Colombia es pasión* also joins in this tradition of conflating women with nature. The promotional video that I discuss at the beginning of this article, describes Colombia as a place where "there is progress, exquisite coffee, countless beautiful women, and orchids." In these examples, women are listed among Colombia's many natural elements and primary export products. Aside from the association of women with nature in the previous quotes, the potential to export women is accentuated in the connection between "coffee" (Colombia's primary export product), "beautiful women," and "orchids." The concept and practice of the *exportación de belleza* (exportation of beauty), which is seen not only in international beauty pageants, but also in the promotion of the idea of the country as feminine and passionate, is the result of the timely integration of the tourism industry and the national pageant. Through a close reading of some of the key promotional ads from both phases of the *Colombia es pasión* campaign, I will illustrate how the conflation of women with landscapes and nature and the marking of both as unique to Colombia are central to the project of feminizing the country's image.

¡Colombia es bella, como tú!: Feminized Topographies

Although geared toward different audiences, *Colombia es pasión's* domestic and international phases share two fundamental characteristics. First, both emphasize that images and representation of the country are misinformed and that Colombia is misunderstood. Second, both phases also place the burden of carrying the campaign's messages on consumers. The campaign's commercials and videos are key for understanding these parallels. The following three commercials from the

campaign's domestic phase are among the most prominent and are illustrative of the campaign's major message: Colombia and Colombians are misunderstood and only through a second, closer look, can perceptions be rectified.

The first commercial, "*Mercado*" ("Market"), speaks to Colombia's uniqueness and fertility, making the point that it is the best country in the world, even if misrepresented. It opens with an aerial shot of two women—a vendor and a customer—who are standing in front of a booth at a farmers' market. As the camera begins to zoom in on the women, the vendor seems to be yelling at the customer. There is no dialogue, only what appears to be fast-forwarded, muted speech and the movement of one woman's arms as she gesticulates vehemently toward the woman standing in front of her. The vendor's movements, followed by the camera, are fast and aggressive and punctuated by the yellow and green fruit she holds in her hands—all the more apparent because the entire rest of the scene is in black and white. In the fifth second, the scene gains sound and color, and the audience can hear the women's discussion. While the initial shots suggest that they are engaged in an aggressive exchange, the addition of the audio allows viewers to hear that, in reality, they are engaged in a discussion of the wide variety of fruit available in Colombia that are not found in other countries because of Colombia's immeasurable fertility. The vendor poses the rhetorical question: "*Acá en Colombia, ¿qué es lo que no se da?*" ("Here in Colombia, what doesn't grow?"). She hardly pauses before she answers her own question: "*Lo que usted tire en la tierra crece, mi señora: papa, yuca, plátano, frijol, lechuga, tomate —todo, mi señora, todo*" ("Whatever you throw in the ground grows: potatoes, yucca, plantains, beans, lettuce, tomato—everything, my lady, everything."). Her insistence that 'everything' grows in Colombia underlines this notion of fertility and opportunity, for in a country that is this fertile, what is not possible? The customer agrees and adds to this notion of fertility by stressing the uniqueness of Colombia. She states: "*Hay frutas que no se dan en ningún otro país del mundo*" ("There are fruits here that don't grow in any other country in the world."). The vendor continues, once again waving the fruit in her hand, and saying "*Como el maracuyá, mi señora*" ("like the passion fruit, my lady"). This obvious, albeit inaccurate, statement that passion (fruit) is unique to Colombia coincides easily with a comment about the unique geographic position of Colombia as the only South American country with Atlantic and Pacific coasts and with enviable agricultural soil. The dialogue also underscores the position of women as part of the domestic sphere and suggests their intimate knowledge of the fertility of the land. Their conversation concludes amicably when they agree that, "*Colombia sí es que es el mejor país del mundo que tenemos, mi señora*" ("Colombia sure is the best country we have in this world, my lady."). Aside from the closing exclamation that Colombia is the best country in the world, the yellow, blue and red colors of the Colombia flag strategically pepper the commercial. In this ad, only the yellow and green fruits have color at the very beginning; by the middle, however, the Colombian flag is fully centered as a man dressed in a yellow jumpsuit holding a blue bucket passes by a vendor dressed in a red blouse and blue skirt. The emphasis on Colombia is strong and is also present in the other two commercials I analyze.

The second commercial, "*Sordomudos*" ("Deaf-mutes"), begins much like "*Mercado*": an aerial shot shows two people

who seem to be arguing. The emphasis in this commercial is more squarely on the idea that Colombians' passions are misunderstood. Most of it is shot in black and white, and there is no audible dialogue. The camera switches focus between the two people. The first shot shows a man's face and accusatory fingers being pointed at him. He defensively brushes off the accusation with brisk hand motions. The camera's gaze then turns to focus on a woman—his interlocutor—as she motions the act of crying with her hands. The two are apparently having a heated and potentially threatening argument as their gesturing includes strong and lengthy arm movements and well-known hand expressions such as fingers to the temple and a flicking off of the interlocutor. Their faces contort and show frustration and anger. For the first six seconds of this commercial there is no sound, and the only color in the shot is the red of the man's ski cap and the blue strap of the woman's purse. It is unclear where this exchange takes place, but some sort of barrier, possibly a gate or bars, appears between them as the camera moves. In the sixth second, the commercial gains full color, and the audience is made privy to the dialogue. There is still no sound, however, since the two people engaged in the exchange are deaf-mutes who are conversing in sign language.

Although still focusing on their hand and body gestures, the camera pans out to show that the two are standing in front of a carousel in a park. We see his red t-shirt and ski cap, her yellow shirt and blue bag—the Colombian flag is signaled again—and with the addition of the subtitles, it is clear that the intense discussion from the beginning was not a threatening argument, but instead friendly and 'passionate' chat about Colombia's beauty. Their dialogue opens as he says to her "*Mira el cielo azul; esto es Colombia. Es divina... La amo*" ("Look at the blue sky, this is Colombia. She's beautiful... I love her."). Their animated discussion continues as she responds, "*Sí, su gente... La comida es deliciosa y sus paisajes son hermosos*" ("Yes, its people... The food is delicious and its landscapes are beautiful."). Although their hand signs are as expressive and intense as in the beginning, their dialogue suggests that it's not aggression but passion that they are expressing. Nonetheless, it is not until the very last comment that change in their facial expressions signifies something more. The man is intently engaged in what the woman is saying. The intention in his gaze only softens with her comment about the beauty of the landscapes. He smiles wide and responds "*Sí, Colombia es preciosa... Como tú*" ("Yes, Colombia is beautiful... Like you."). The man's smile, his body motions, and his comment that Colombia's beauty is equal to that of the woman mark a space of pride for Colombians who understand their landscapes to be as beautiful as their women. Beyond speaking of the uniqueness and beauty of Colombia, as all of the commercials do, this one incorporates elements absent from the others. The deaf-mutes' wildly gesturing hand movements further complicate the opening scene. The commercial relies on audiences initially interpreting the hand gestures as violent and aggressive. By including deaf-mutes who rely on their hands for communication, the campaign emphasizes that all Colombians are passionate and express themselves passionately, not violently and further stresses that anyone can be misunderstood.

The final commercial takes place at a traffic light. It is the most complex of the commercials as it makes two strong points about Colombians: first, it emphasizes the comparable beauty

of Colombian landscapes and women; second, it illustrates amiability among Colombians. The first shot focuses on a red traffic light before spanning around to show buildings, cars, and a man reaching his body out of his driver's side window, and gesturing wildly with his hands and face. Once again the entire scene, except for carefully placed spots of red (the traffic light) and yellow (the frame of his taxi) is in black and white. The man—a taxi driver—points and expresses himself using his hands. A woman engaged in similar behavior reaches her body out of the passenger's side window of a car. Eventually, the two face each other and speak face to face. The only sounds in the scene are those of the traffic zooming by. At the third second, the dialogue between the male taxi driver and woman who asked him for directions becomes audible.

As the taxi driver leans out of his car, this time in a much more relaxed manner, we see his blue shirt framed by the yellow of his taxi. When he begins to speak, he is no longer gesticulating vehemently or reaching out of his car in an aggressive stance; instead, his smiling face, beaming eyes, and relaxed hands indicate a bit of coquettishness as he gives the women directions. His hand and facial gestures punctuate his flirtation; it is clear that the vehement gesturing from the beginning of the commercial was, once again, an expression of something other than anger, frustration, or violence. The first thing out of his mouth is precisely a flirtatious comment. He begins, "*Montañas tan bonitas y paisajes tan hermosos como ustedes, mis amores, no hay en otro lugar del mundo. Es que definitivamente ésa es Colombia*" ("Mountains as pretty and vistas as beautiful as you, my loves, don't exist in any other part of the world. That is definitely Colombia."). The ease with which the taxi driver delivers this "common metaphor" is noteworthy. Colombians often use comments like these to express the physical beauty of both Colombia and Colombian women. Accustomed to such comments, the two women in the other car return the flirtation when they lean into each other and in unison agree ¡Ay, tan divino! ("Ah, how sweet!"). Although this commercial is similar to the other two in some of its formal elements and in the overall general theme—namely, that there is a misconception about Colombians—it is much more apparent and purposeful in its conflation of Colombian landscapes and women. The taxi driver does not only unambiguously and unabashedly delineate both Colombia and Colombian women as beautiful, but by expressing their equal beauty in one comparative breath, he also collapses women and nature. Regardless of whether or not the taxi driver has any experience outside of Colombia, by ending his comments with the statement that such beauties "don't exist in any other part of the world," he pronounces the common and often repeated sentiment that beautiful landscapes—whether in the form of mountains or women—are unique to Colombia.

There is no doubt that Colombia *does* have breathtaking vistas and unique landscapes. There is also no doubt that there *are* beautiful women in Colombia, but surely other countries have unique qualities, breathtaking vistas, and beautiful women. The oft-repeated and little scrutinized conflation that marks Colombian women as part of the natural landscape of the country while also marking Colombia as feminine is what I am calling a feminized topography. In order to better understand the governing project in Colombia, it is essential to acknowledge this conflation as one of Colombia's principle metaphors (Probyn). As discussed above, this comparison is historical—it began with the initial

development of the tourist industry in the 1930s. The conflation of woman and nation in Colombia does not simply fall into the universal relegation of woman to the domestic and natural spheres as Sherry Ortner argues in her influential article “Is Female to Male and Nature is to Culture.” Instead, the conflation is concerned with both a geography of the country and an inventory of national goods, it is based on the economic practice of enticing tourism and is tied with the practice of exportation. That is, if women are aligned with the mountains, rivers, and coasts available for tourists to explore and if they are aligned with the roses, fruit, and coffee that are consumed and exported, then the juxtaposition of women, export, items, and geographical elements creates a system in which women are employed to increase tourism and foreign investment. In this way, Colombians’ commonly accepted and repeated pronouncements of women and landscapes as being equally fertile, unique, beautiful, and hospitable create a way in which both women and nation are seen as enticing (everything is beautiful), fertile (everything grows), and lucrative (everything is exportable). Likewise, understanding the development of this metaphor allows one to ground it in the “material evidence of its historical production” (Probyn 51) in order to understand its importance. As such, it is clear that the deaf-mute man and the taxi driver’s flirtatious comments, which compare beautiful women to the landscape and the country, are not gratuitous; instead, they stem from a historical connection between women, nature, and tourism that arose in the 1930s. The importance of these comments rests in the fact that they have been used historically to encourage tourism and investment.

The conflation of woman and Colombia, though, is so common that Colombians do not dwell on it. After comparing the women and landscapes, the taxi driver immediately goes on to talk about Colombians in general. He moves beyond the flirting and says: “Mire, miren mis amores: ustedes cogen por la vía que les dije y no se les olvide parar donde la Mona porque esa mujer hace un lechón asado...” (“Look, look my loves: go the way I told you and don’t forget to stop at Mona’s because that woman makes a bar-b-que pork that...”) as the sound fades. The second half of the commercial speaks to the amiability and familiarity of Colombians. As the taxi driver continues with his directions, he recommends a place where the women should stop to eat. Although the recommendation is for Mona’s bar-b-que, it is not clear whether “Mona’s” is a house or a restaurant. Nevertheless, he suggests that she would be open to receiving them. To further demonstrate the suggestion of amiability among Colombians, a motorbike driver comes between the two cars and ingratiates himself into the conversation. His nodding head and smile show that he agrees with the taxi driver’s physical directions and indications to stop at Mona’s place.

Though subtle, the positioning of the motorbike driver in this commercial is powerful. It serves three purposes: to show the familiarity of Colombians, to insinuate that Colombian women will take care of them by feeding them, and to assuage Colombians’ fears. Though principally in the cities of Medellín and Bogotá, motorbike drivers threatened citizens and inspired fear for many years because they were readily associated with young *sicarios en moto* (gunmen on bikes) often hired by narco-traffickers to do drive-by shootings during the 1980 and 1990s.¹¹ Since their presence became so ominous, the motorbike driver’s presence and the ease with which he joins the conversation between

two presumable strangers are impressive. The commercial re-appropriates the image of the motorbike driver and imbues it with a warm familiarity so as to encourage Colombians to understand images of their own country in a new light. Furthermore, by placing the motorbike driver in this position, the *Colombia es pasión* campaign retells part of Colombian history by omitting the acts of violence associated with motorbike drivers.

Retelling History and Re-appropriating “Risk”: International Tourism

Colombia es pasión’s strategy of retelling history devoid of the violence that circumscribes certain events extends to the campaign’s international phase. Here, *Colombia es pasión* re-appropriates images and terminology associated with Colombia’s most intense moments of narco-violence to entice potential adventure seeking tourists to visit the country. The international phase of the campaign relies heavily on foreigners telling their stories and discrediting Colombia’s negative reputation for international audiences. Because of the continued strength of Colombia’s stigma as a violent and dangerous country, this phase speaks to the tourist who would not be deterred by the country’s reputation, but who would instead choose to travel to Colombia precisely because it has a seedy reputation. In fact, a *New York Times* article highlighting the “31 places to go in 2010,” recognizes that because “[Colombia] is still [unfairly or not] known for its cocaine cartels and street violence,” it appeals to “cool-hunting travelers [who] are calling it Latin America’s next affordable hot spot” (Lee). The *Colombia es pasión* campaign capitalizes on the suggestion that “cool-hunting travelers” would be lured to travel to Colombia, despite or, perhaps, because of its reputation. In fact, the slogan and video-stories from the international phase of the campaign exploit the use of terms such as “risk” and “danger” as well as images of narco-violence in order to attract tourists who are undeterred by such things and who seek adventure and to be ahead of their times. This phase of the campaign strives to simultaneously strip the negative association with terms like risk and danger and to profit from them by playing up the possible adventures to be found in Colombia. The use and appropriation of terms such as ‘risk,’ ‘danger,’ and ‘warning’ in the campaign’s ads and slogan for the international phase allow the campaign to speak to a certain kind of tourist while side-stepping the country’s negative reputation. Below I discuss a promotional video that relies on the images of Colombia that have been circulated in the past and assumes that foreign viewers are complicit in the understanding, if not construction, of the image.

This promotional video opens with a flashing sign in red block letters that reads “WARNING.” The male narrator announces an “FBI Warning” before he describes the people for whom the following video is not apt: children, siblings, cousins, in-laws, nephews, grandparents, nannies, pets, in short, “anyone with a weak heart.” Even those who “enjoy extreme sports, like to live on the edge of danger, and enjoy adrenaline rushes” should also take precautions, he warns, suggesting that even for the most adventurous, Colombia might be too much to handle. Images of Colombia, intermixed with screenshots of emails regarding “Columbia” flash across the screen as the narrator points out the differences between Colombia and ‘Columbia.’ He concentrates more on the misunderstanding of the country than on the

misspelling of its name, though the two go hand in hand. The narrator describes “Columbia” as the place imagined by the U.S. government and by producers and consumers of Hollywood films alike. That place, the narrator goes on to caution, “is a third-world country inhabited by dangerous guerrilla and narco-traffickers where multiple families live in small huts and small children are left alone while their parents go into the fields to cultivate marijuana, cocaine and poppy...” This description of ‘Columbia’ advises people to employ caution, or else face the multiple threats of kidnappings, car bombs, and shootings.

“Colombia,” on the other hand, is quite different, the video explains with the help of three foreigners classified as “crazy” for their desire to travel to Colombia. The tone of the video changes from the tongue-in-cheek descriptions of “Columbia” as a dangerous place to avoid to a somewhat romanticized description of “Colombia” as a hospitable, surprising, and beautiful country that only those willing to look beyond the reputation of narco-violence would visit. The video features the stories of three tourists—one Argentine and two French—who ignored cautionary tales and took the ‘risk’ to travel to Colombia. Through short video-stories within the promotional video, the tourists describe the natural wonders and excitement they experienced in Colombia. The video’s message is clear: those who ‘take the risk’ will experience something amazing. However, as with the domestic phase, in the international phase it is not enough for the campaign to change the individual perceptions. *Colombia es pasión* employs foreigners in much the same way it employs Colombians: it relies on tourists “buying into” the concept that the ‘risk’ presented by 21st-century Colombia is not the risk of the 20th century and it employs tourists to relay their experiences to other potential tourists by speaking of Colombia’s ‘reality’.¹²

The international phase of the campaign plays the old and the new, the past and the present against one another in order to affirm that, in fact, there are two Colombias. Although the video-stories do not speak directly of “Columbia,” they do draw a distinction between the Colombia of the past and that of the present. In one of the video-stories, two Argentine men illustrate the difference between the two Colombias. They pit images of what can be considered the old, dangerous Colombia against images of a new, peaceful one. In the video-story, a young backpacker and older gentleman meet in the street. As their conversation unfolds, the older gentleman asks the younger one about his upcoming trip. When the young backpacker explains that he is headed to Colombia, the older gentleman says to his young compatriot: “¿A Colombia? ¿Estás loco, vos? ¿Acaso no ves las noticias? Vos no te imaginás cómo es Colombia.” (“Colombia? Are you crazy? Don’t you watch the news? You have no idea what Colombia is like.”). The young backpacker, dressed in the Argentine team’s official blue and white soccer jersey, says nothing and simply shrugs his shoulders as if accepting the choice to assume that risk and embarks on his journey anyway. The scenes that follow their conversation show the exciting and peaceful times he had celebrating among fans of the Colombian national soccer team, all of whom are dressed in official yellow, blue, and red soccer jerseys. Here again the campaign retells an event in Colombian history and strips it of the actual occurrences in order to recast Colombia in a different light. In 1993, the Colombian soccer team arrived in Argentina for a second qualifying match for the 1994 World Cup. Argentine fans received the Colombian team

with taunts of “*narcotraficantes*” at the airport (Zimbalist and Zimbalist). These jeers came just three weeks after Colombia defeated Argentina in a qualifying game, breaking the rival’s 33-game winning streak. In the second qualifier, Colombia defeated Argentina 5-0, prompting what has come to be known as Argentina’s most “humbling and humiliating” match (www.fifa.com). The two teams and their fans continue to be rivals. The celebration between fans of the two countries, as depicted in the video-story, not only is unlikely, it is historically inaccurate: Argentine and Colombian fans have not and do not celebrate soccer victories together, much less peacefully. Additionally, *Colombia es pasión* also paints Colombian soccer with broad, celebratory strokes and strategically omits the more violent reality that shrouds the sport. After the exuberance of defeating Argentina and being billed as the favorite to win the 1994 World Cup,¹³ the Colombian team saw its lowest moment. In the World Cup match against the United States, which Colombia was favored to win, Andrés Escobar scored a goal against his own team as he tried to defend his net and the ball ricocheted off his foot and into Colombia’s net. The subsequent defeat of the Colombian team by the United States would result in Escobar’s murder just weeks later.¹⁴ Colombia’s victory over Argentina and its defeat by the United States are very important moments in Colombia’s recent sports history. Violence—either in the form of taunts against the Colombian team or the homicide of one of its members—circumscribes both. Nevertheless, in this retelling, *Colombia es pasión* strategically omits the violence in order to recast Colombia as a peaceful place. Although the video-story does not make clear which team won, it does not matter because, after all, the point of the video-story is that the Argentine visitor’s “risk” paid off—he watched his team play and is peacefully celebrating alongside Colombian soccer fans. The Argentine visitor’s experience in Colombia underlines *Colombia es pasión*’s message that there is no risk in Colombia other than enjoyment.

Upon his return to Argentina, the young backpacker meets his friend again. Smiling, he says to him: “¿Sabés algo, ché? Tenías razón. Vos no te imaginás cómo es Colombia” (“You know what? You were right. You have no idea what Colombia is like.”). This time, it is the older man who shrugs his shoulders, almost in disbelief. Both men pronounce the same statement: “Vos no te imaginás cómo es Colombia” (“You have no idea what Colombia is like”). The undertone and meaning of each statement is very different, however. The older gentleman, grounded in the past and the international news, aims to deter the young backpacker’s travel plans by insisting that he is ignorant of the reality of violence and danger in Colombia—he “has no idea what Colombia is like.” The younger man’s declaration, on the other hand, insinuates that it is the older man who is misinformed and outdated. Making this statement upon his return from Colombia, the young backpacker contradicts the older man by insisting that, in fact, it is he who “has no idea what Colombia is like.” The video-story contends that the perception held particularly by older people (presumably those who were socialized during the 1980s and 1990s and who remember Colombia in its most violent moments), is erroneous and archaic. Furthermore, it places the burden of discrediting those outdated preconceived ideas of Colombia on the young, adventurous tourist. Finally, it also makes clear that in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of Colombia, one must travel there. The campaign frames the backpacking Argentine as

an explorer ready to take on new adventures and to see things differently, whereas the older man is stuck in the past. By doing this, the video-story constructs the idea of two different Colombias and insists that in order to move beyond the past and toward the future one must “take the risk” and travel to Colombia.

By coupling ‘Colombia’ and ‘risk’, *Colombia es pasión* toys with images of a dangerous Colombia in order to deauthorize that very terminology. ‘Risk’ is employed as a tongue-in-cheek reference to the language of the U.S. State Department Travel Warnings that speak of the imminent threats and danger present in Colombia. Although the current warning recognizes that “security in Colombia has improved significantly in recent years,” it still warns that by traveling to Colombia, one “risks” falling victim to the “terrorist activity by the FARC,” “kidnappings,” “murders” and other “violent crimes [. . . of which] in recent months there has been a marked increase” (U.S. State Department 2011). *Colombia es pasión* appropriates the term “risk” to turn it on its head. The promotional video uses much of the same language as the State Department in order to advise viewers that traveling to Colombia is “risky.” Risks are met with more risks, however. Upon taking the ‘risk’ to travel to Colombia, the video explains, one must take more risks, such as accepting that Colombia is made up of “42 million people, of which 99% are nice, hardworking, and honest and don’t grow marijuana, cocaine, or poppy.” One must also “take the risk of enjoying its people’s kindness and hospitality, their customs, their foods, their passions, and the beauty of their women. . . .” In this sense, one must take the risk to have his or her preconceptions of Colombia challenged.

Interestingly, the ‘risks’ listed in the promotional video of the campaign’s international phase match the list of unique characteristics highlighted in commercials of its domestic phase. In this way, *Colombia es pasión* appropriates ‘risk’ as well as other terminology used to describe Colombia to divest the terms of their negative connotations. Ultimately, by appropriating and de-authorizing these terms, the campaign strengthens its construction of the idea of two Colombias—the one of the past, associated with danger and violence, and the one of the future, associated with “hard working people,” “unique foods,” and “beautiful women.” By referencing Colombia’s history, people’s misconceptions, and the travel warnings, *Colombia es pasión*’s international phase replaces the idea of ‘risking’ not being able to leave Colombia with the ‘risk’ of not wanting to. The video’s narrator closes by reinforcing that misinformed perceptions of Colombia result in two Colombias. He assures the viewer that “after taking all of these risks, [he’ll] know that everything [he] heard about Colombia must be happening in Colombia.” The video associates the latter, Colombia, with violence, danger, narco-trafficking, and the past, whereas Colombia is associated with peace, opportunity, and the present.

Conclusion

The *Colombia es pasión* campaign presents a unilateral, romanticized, and inaccurate image of 21st-century Colombia—one of a Colombia free of narco-trafficking, one in which kidnappings, homicides, armed conflict, and internal and external displacements are a thing of the past. As an alternative, Colombia’s present, *Colombia es pasión* presents verdant pastures, flora,

fauna, export products, beautiful women, and images of happy, peaceful, hardworking people. While neither image paints a complete picture, neither is wrong. The fact is Colombia is not a country free of violence and full of “passion.” It is also not solely a country of armed conflict, displacement, poverty, and narco-trafficking. I decided to study this campaign precisely because of the images it presents and the discourse it promotes. My interests rest in the ways in which *Colombia es pasión* approaches the widespread stigmatization of Colombia as a violent, narco-exporting country and encourages tourism vis-à-vis the feminization of the nation and the reappropriation of the past. Despite, or perhaps because of *Colombia es pasión*’s unilateral focus, it is important to consider the campaign when engaging discussions of representations of Colombia and Colombians. I am especially interested in the shifts in representation. That is, *Colombia es pasión* compensates for Colombia’s reputation as a narco-exporting country by recasting Colombia as a country of beauty and peace.

As I argue, *Colombia es pasión* attempts to redeem Colombia’s reputation as a violent, dangerous country of narco-traffickers, first, by employing the country’s common metaphors of feminized topographies in which the beauty of Colombian women is equated with the natural beauty of the landscape and then by retelling stories of Colombia’s history by omitting their violent facts. Relying heavily on consumers to “buy into” the program and then to disseminate the message to others, *Colombia es pasión*’s success as an international campaign comes in part from its catchy slogans and from its ability to turn consumers into actors. Admittedly, it is difficult to define a program that presents a unilateral image and that omits historical facts as successful. However, the primary concern of this article is not *Colombia es pasión*’s success or failure at painting an accurate picture of Colombia. Instead, my concern herein has been in the way in which *Colombia es pasión* relies on consumers to carry its message and privileges the feminine and the young as representative of 21st-century Colombia. In that regard, the blog entry that I detail below, though anecdotal, attests to the campaign’s success at encouraging tourists to reconsider Colombia and to encourage others to rethink their perceptions of Colombia.

As I was writing this article, I read a Mexican-American friend’s blog posting which proved timely given the subject of this essay. While traveling in Colombia for the first time, he blogged about his experiences and insights: he observed the hospitality and ease with which Colombians accepted him, visited areas that many Colombians have not visited, and noted that lots of Colombians still “have a chip on their shoulder when it comes to narco-trafficking.” After a couple of week’s worth of traveling and blogging, he closed his travel diary with a firsthand account of the conditions of the country and his thoughts on Colombia’s seductiveness:

I think [Colombia’s negative] reputation is undeserved. I found Colombia to be a hospitable and safe country and I hope sharing my stories and photos convinced you of that, and... maybe, just maybe... inspired you to one day visit this lovely country full of amazing history, beautiful people, and amazing natural wonders. Whoever came up with Colombia’s motto was absolutely right: “the only risk is wanting to stay.” (Vallejo)

As I read that post, I could not help but to think of the implications of my friend—a well-educated, well-traveled, critical thinker—having “bought into” the campaign’s slogan and blogging about it. Despite presenting a unilateral image of Colombia, *Colombia es pasión*’s campaign advances its goal of changing international perceptions and images of Colombia. It achieves this through the multi-layered images of its promotional materials, which recast

Colombia in a positive light, retell Colombia’s history, and makes Colombians and tourists into actors without them even knowing it. We are certainly far from a complete and accurate picture of the complexities of Colombia. However, we would be remiss not to consider the reach of this campaign, particularly the role given to women, in discussions of 21st-century Colombia.

Endnotes

- 1 For a critique of the concept of “passion” as used in the *Colombia es pasión* campaign, see Héctor Abad Faciolince (2007). The website www.colombiaespasion.org presents articles that discuss the human rights abuse in Colombia as well as contains information for activists and people who oppose the messages put forth by the *Colombia es pasión* campaign.
- 2 The riots are also often referred to as the “*bogotazo*,” though this term is more common outside of Colombia. See Bushnell pp 201-209 for further discussion of the riots and their national impact.
- 3 By its end in 1965, *la violencia* had claimed between 100,000 and 200,000 lives and had seen the birth of the leftist *guerrilla* group the *Fuerzas armadas revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) and of pro-government vigilantes.

There are differing accounts as to the exact number of casualties of *La Violencia*. See Palacios and Bushnell for further discussion.
- 4 During this period, coffee made up 4.5 percent of the country’s GDP while oil represented a mere 1.9 percent (Palacios 222). See Palacios for a more complete picture of the prominence of illegal narcotics in Colombia’s economy in the late 20th century (219-223).
- 5 The increase in emigration at the end of the 20th century coincides with the implementation of “Plan Colombia” and another period of increased violence and tension between the paramilitary group *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC), the FARC, and *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN).

Former Colombian President Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) originally conceived of “Plan Colombia” as a six-year plan (1999-2005) to curb Colombia’s armed conflict, eliminate drug trafficking, and promote economic and social development by developing alternative eradication programs (Veillette, 2). Under Plan Colombia and the Andean Counterdrug Initiative (the U.S. program that supports Plan Colombia) Colombia received \$4.5 billion for funding of military operatives and for eradication of drug crops. The objectives of the U.S. were to eliminate the traffic of drugs from Colombia to the U.S. Since 2005, and especially under former President Álvaro Uribe, Plan Colombia evolved significantly into a heavy-handed program against the guerrilla groups.
- 6 Beginning in the mid 1990s, the third major wave of migration of Colombians to the United States is made up of young professionals with high levels of formal education, typically from the middle and upper classes.
- 7 That ‘reality’ is partial. Although there has been an overall improvement in security, safety and investments, there are still innumerable human rights abuses, threats to and murders of trade unionists and journalists. There is persistent internal displacement, poverty, a lack of education for many people as well as difficulties growing licit crops in areas that have been fumigated in efforts to eradicate illicit crops. In its efforts to “close the gap between perception and reality” and to “change the way Colombia is seen,” the campaign strategically masks the country’s actual reality.
- 8 All translations mine unless otherwise noted.
- 9 Colombia is a country of regions. It is divided into 6 distinct geographical regions and has 32 administrative divisions or *departamentos* as well as the Federal District of Bogotá.
- 10 Señorita Bolívar, María Yolanda Emiliani Román, was Colombia’s first beauty queen. She was elected in 1934 and held the title and crown for thirteen years. After her crowning, the pageant was paused until 1947 because of different political situations, but mostly because of the Second World War.
- 11 In December of 1999, the Mayor of Bogotá, Enrique Peñalosa Londoño, signed ordinance 950 ordering all motorbike drivers to use reflective vests and helmets that clearly show the motorbike’s license plate number. The ordinance took effect on January 1, 2000. In this commercial, the motorbike driver is wearing such a vest.
- 12 I do not ignore the fact that *Colombia es pasión* omits representation of the reality of widespread violence, poverty, unemployment, and general lack of opportunity in Colombia. I do, however, read the omission as a strategic ploy by *Colombia es pasión* to drive home the point that Colombia is misunderstood and to attract potential tourists and investors, which is the campaign’s main function.

- 13 Many commentators called Colombia the favorite to win the 1994 World Cup after the team defeated several teams who had multiple Cup victories, including Brazil and Argentina.
- 14 Though perhaps the most internationally recognized soccer-related homicide in Colombia, Escobar's was not the first. In 1989, referee Álvaro Ortega was shot six times after refereeing a match between Colombian teams Nacional de Medellín and América de Cali in which América de Cali won against Pablo Escobar's favorite Nacional de Medellín. Before him eight Colombian soccer officials were murdered in 1986 and the secretary of the Metropolitan Soccer League was murdered in 1988. All of these murders are attributed to narco-violence.

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