

Being a Colombian/Being a woman: Gender, violence and meaning in Colombia

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Paper to be presented at the XIV meeting of the Association of Colombianists.  
Denison University, Granville, OH.  
August 3-6, 2005,

After much hesitation, I have decided to write about the issue of gender and violence in the Colombian context. The reasons for this are both personal and scholarly. *I am a woman.* I have witnessed, suffered, and inflicted pain. I know violence first hand. I also have experienced it vicariously, on the streets, in stories, at home, and in the news. It lives in me, as a toxic aspect of myself. Writing about it has a personal, “exorcising” value; confronting the darkness within.

*I am Colombian.* A great deal of that violence is inextricably connected to my nationality, both in discourse and practice. I want to understand how. I am also a communication scholar. I am profoundly interested in sense-making processes; in the relationship between discourse and practice, and the inflection of gender on both. I have pursued in the past research that tackles with these issues from a cultural perspective (see bibliography). I do not know very well what it means to be a *Colombiana*, and sometimes think that this ignorance is appropriate and valuable. After all, why would the nation be more than an ideological construct? Why should it be more experientially meaningful than waving a flag or singing an anthem? I know that there are tensions and conflicts among the different aspects of my identity, but I am uncertain whether these tensions are meant to be dispelled and organized in a seamless whole, or whether the fragmentation and uncertainty are, themselves, cues of identity. Writing about violence is

for me a humble contribution to a general conversation about “us” and the social space that we create and inhabit.

The aim of this paper is to offer some observations about gendered violence in Colombia, and suggest some lines for future investigation. It is motivated by some general questions that have intrigued me for some time now. Are there significant differences in the ways men and women experience urban settings in Colombia? Are there significant differences in the ways in which male and female urban dwellers experience or practice violence? Can we theorize a relationship between daily discourse and violence as a social practice? I see it as a punctual contribution to a much larger project, which may take years to develop. The paper will focus on normalized forms of violence, as expressed in discourse and lived in urban settings (Cali and Bogotá are my points of reference). I will provide a brief social context, examine violence using instances that I have witnessed directly, and relate those to others’ experiences and previous research.<sup>1</sup>

### War in Colombia/ Las Colombias y Las Guerras

Many Colombian observers, like the researcher Jesus Martín-Barbero,<sup>2</sup> argue that we should not speak of “Colombia,” but of *Las Colombias*. We have striking and deep divisions in the country, most notably between rural and urban settings, among

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<sup>1</sup> From 1999 to 2001 I participated as lead researcher in a project that investigated the ways in which women dwell in and perceive Cali as a city (Cali, Colombia: Transitando entre la celebración y el miedo). One of the outcomes of this research is a documentary, Tiempo de miedo, directed by the video-maker and Univalle professor Oscar Campo. The second outcome of this project is a series of interviews conducted by Liliana Hurtado, then a student of Social Communication in Cali, and my research assistant. I guided, proposed and analyzed these interviews, but they are really Liliana’s work. Though these interviews are the research basis of the documentary, most of them do not appear in it and were done off-camera. I cite them here as Hurtado, unpublished research.

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication, January, 2005.

geographic regions, and among social classes. These divisions are not only social or economic, but profoundly cultural.

This fragmented and plural Colombia, or Las Colombias, suffers today not from one but several, overlapping wars. The forty year war between the army and the insurgency (“protracted” at times, as Richani argues) exists side by side a so-called “war on drugs,” and these in turn produce a war on civilians, who are caught between drug lords, army, paramilitaries, guerrillas, and opportunistic criminals.

The “official” civil war is fought in the country side, far from the eyes of urban dwellers, but it affects the social fabric at all levels. To paraphrase Uribe Alarcón in her brilliant text, Antropología de la inhumanidad, Colombia faces yet a more generalized form of war: One waged against the social fabric. Society as a whole is being “held hostage” by forces of multiple and overlapping violence CITE. The statistics would support her view. From 1992 to 1999 there were 5,181 kidnappings in Colombia, the highest amount in the world (Nationamster.com). In 2001, there were 26,539 murders in Colombia, the highest per capita in the world (Nationamster.com). As of 2003, we have three million internally displaced persons, over 50% of which are women (“Colombian women”).

Like most contemporary wars across the world, our Colombian versions have another characteristic: They are wars among men, in which women become implicated unwilling or willingly.<sup>3</sup> Florence Thomas expresses this with passion and anger when she speaks of those predatory men who “planean las guerras, deciden las guerras, declaran las guerras, pierden las guerras, mueren en las guerras y creen que las guerras se pueden

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<sup>3</sup> See Amnesty International reports such as Está en nuestras manos: No mas violencia contra las mujeres” and Scarred bodies, hidden crimes: Sexual violence against women in the armed conflict.

ganar.” (237). However, violence against women does not require a state of war. It may precede war, and it will most likely continue after war—unless it is directly addressed.

As Amnesty International states,

“la forma, las circunstancias y el alcance de la violencia [contra las mujeres] varían, pero hay una continuidad entre la violencia durante el conflicto [armado] y la violencia en la paz.” (Está en nuestras manos, 77)

War makes discrimination, abuse and mistreatment more patent, but it does not necessarily create it. Social structures more pervasive and less transitory than war are at play. That is, before the “armed” conflict, there was conflict, not yet armed, not yet fully polarized and oppositional. Before conflict, there may have been un-ease and malaise: Our daily routines and practices may have been “pregnant” with violence. Pregnant, that is, with disdain and disrespect for Self and Other. Triggered by fear, pain, or anger, these practices may give way first to violence, then conflict, then war.

#### Emergent Violence in Daily Life

At this time, I would like to discuss that violence that precedes conflict; that may remain unnamed and unnoticed, maybe fundamentally trivial. I would like to speak of this as “invisible violence,” acts of unnecessary aggression or pregnant violence which are unnoticed, not eventful or exceptional enough to register in our awareness.<sup>4</sup> I call it invisible not because it is harmless but because it is displayed in the routines of discourse and practice, thus becoming a naturalized aspect of social life.<sup>5</sup>

For this purpose, I have chosen six key statements whose utterance I have witnessed or experienced directly while living in Colombia. I cite them in Spanish, as

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<sup>4</sup> Galtung defines violence as “avoidable insult to human needs” (qtd. in Nagler). I find this very intriguing in its simplicity.

<sup>5</sup> Like Michael Nagler, I do not consider violence a “natural” aspect of social intercourse or human societies.

they were uttered. When appropriate, I will relate these statements to the experience of others. I have chosen them because of their importance in my life, and their social relevance. They have a very strong gender component. I find them, and the events that surround them, important for they are the experience of an arguably privileged Colombian woman. I am middle class. I was born in Bogotá, not el Magdalena Medio. I was educated first by nuns, then by Marxists (an ideal and well-balanced education, I believe). I have not been kidnapped or displaced. Hardly any man in my family has actively participated in the armed conflict. No one, to my knowledge, traffics in drugs or pursues other illegal activities. Hardly anyone curses, and no one in my close family has ever seen *una corrida de toros*. I am not a war victim, as war is usually defined.

Las leyes, como las mujeres, se hicieron para violarlas.

I could not bring myself to laugh when this statement was uttered, often by barely known acquaintances or witty strangers. Was this statement uttered like some graphic *piropos*, to induce both repulse and fascination? In an article unrelated to gender, the journalist Hugo Sabogal names it casually as one of the (superficial and hyper-masculine) ways some Colombian men may exercise their Colombian-ness (see p. 6, this paper). The statement proposes an interesting parallel between the nature of law and that of woman. “Violation” in this context holds negative and positive valences. It has a strong ironical quality to it. The statement frankly opposes civility, and in doing so, it seems to express an unspoken truth we easily recognize. Law is a convention and an arbitrary power exercised by the state. It is oppressive, repressive, hypocritical, and downright nonsensical. It is not too worthy of respect. There is something rebellious, daring, empowering, about breaking the law. Is there a similar quality to breaking women?

My male friends would often tell me, jokingly, “en caso de violación, relájese y disfrute.” Just relax and go with the flow, whether it is a flirtatious pass or a physical violation. I doubt that this statement is exclusive of Cali or Colombia. “Tranquila, relájate, que no te va a doler,” whispers a Peruvian before he attempts raping me. He is a Ph.D. student and so I am. I do not think he sees anything terribly wrong with his action, and appears surprised when I, instead of relaxing, kick him out of my house.

“Quiere que la lleve?”

“Hola, subete al carro. Yo te llevo al colegio,” the driver of an elegant car tells me. I am nine years old, waiting for the school bus at 6:00 a.m. Nobody else is on the street. Mom and siblings are upstairs, in the apartment. I do not want to go, but I am afraid of angering this man. I say no. He insists, and offers me some candy, which I think is really stupid. He is about to get out the car, when a police car passes by. The driver gets in, hurries away. I say nothing to my family, feeling vaguely ashamed.

“Mamita, quiere que la lleve”? It happens monthly if not weekly. One or another male driver passes by as I walk home. He wants to give me a ride, I keep walking. I understand this is normal. It does not bother me. I am 14 years old.

“Quiere que la llevemos?” I am waiting for the bus on the south-east outskirts of Cali (above wealthy Ciudad Jardin). It is 6:15 p.m. Only a few minutes of light remain, in a place not yet urban enough to have night illumination. Seven soldiers in four motorcycles have stopped and offer me a ride. They have an empty seat in one of the motorcycles. I cannot accept and fear saying no. I mumble something about my father

coming. They think about it and leave. If I had a god I would thank him for the grace. I am 18.

“Damelo o te mato.”

I have made the mistake of accepting a ride from a biker, a complete stranger. I am in Palmira, going to Buga. I sense that something is wrong, and ask him to stop. Instead, he takes a side road, and speeds up. I ask again. He stops. I get out of the motorcycle and start walking toward the highway. We are now in the middle of a sugar cane plantation. He approaches me to apologize. I stop to listen. Then he slaps me and yells, “Damelo.” I don’t understand. He hits my crouch. “Dame esto o te mato.” I scream as hard as I can, and run faster than I have ever had. I hid among the sugar canes, and the angry and confused biker gives up searching for me. I don’t tell mom, dad, or any of the men in the family. I know they will say it is my fault, and I would have to agree. I just gave papaya, big, big time. I develop an irrational fear of single men in vehicles. I am afraid of taxis, buses, and motorcycles.

“Que vaya a que la curen donde la chuzaron.”

A prostitute approaches a police station in Juanchito, the famous dancing town north-west of Cali. She is bleeding copiously from an ugly slice on her left wrist. She tries to walk in the station. A police man pushes her out, saying “no nos ensucie el piso.” She explains that she got in a fight and was hurt with a broken beer bottle. The officer retorts, “vaya a que la curen donde la chuzaron.” The woman stays outside the station. She is drunk, dirty, and bloody. She has no money. My friend and I improvise a tourniquet and convince a taxi driver, after a generous pay, to take her to the hospital.

Was she meeting the fate that she has been asking for? Minutes later another officer approaches me, and asks me out.

“Es la raza.”

“Es la raza,” tells me Gloria, a Colombian lawyer explaining why Colombian women stay at home with abusive husbands. Las Colombianas are submissive and ignorant. It is in their race. The latter mixes the lawlessness of Spaniards and the submissiveness of (Western) Indians. It is a hopeless combination.

“Los hombres son asi.” Laura, my 54 year old friend, sees a man riding a motorcycle, with a three year old girl on his lap (most likely his daughter). She tells me, “this is how bad things start. Now she is on his lap, later on he will abuse her. He should not be allowed to take her in the motorcycle.” It appears to Laura that men cannot help but exercise their sexual needs. It is our job as women, whether mothers, sisters or friends, to keep men off the girls and the women on their path. The mother of this girl should not allow the father to be alone with their daughter.

Julieta, a radio D.J in Cali, explains that she is not afraid to go to certain working class sectors because the men there have their women, and therefore, their sexual needs are satisfied (Hurtado). The men’s sexual aggressiveness (and thus their risk to her) is controlled by their steady companions. Both Laura and Julieta seem to assume that a man without a woman is a rapist. Or, in other words, a rapist is a man who was given the chance.

A similar explanation is sometimes given for the actions of Colombians in general. It is our race. This is why we are violent. Our mixed blood is no good. We are uncivilized. We are the worst, the most violent (thus, maybe really good at something?).



It's in the genes. The argument, like anyone born of an ideological or cultural need to explain the incomprehensible, is often tautological or contradictory. There is violence because we are violent. And, we are violent because there is violence. For example, Nancy, an entomologist, explains that "El colombiano es violento." "No media el diálogo, no discute, porque manejamos unos niveles diarios de violencia muy fuertes." (Hurtado).

It may be of interest to ponder whether the overwhelming presence of violence in Colombia (and our powerlessness to explain it) does not appeal at some level as a form of self-identity. After all, our "Colombianhood," is imprecise, ambiguous, and multiple. In the words of the Colombian journalist Hugo Sabogal, "Vivimos en un panorama de desolación de identidad." He adds, with some exasperation,

¿...quién, en esta sala, puede explicar lo que significa, cultural y filosóficamente hablando, ser colombiano? Es más que sentarse a ver un partido de la selección de fútbol de Colombia, recibir al torero César Rincón, cantar el Himno Nacional o decir, con voz de macho cabrío, que "las leyes, como las mujeres, se hicieron para violarlas".

To find out who we are as a nation may require an "act of faith" as a Colombian character in a Borges story memorably says. But, as faith in our ability to live somewhat peacefully under a common set of ideals wears off, we may cling to another form of faith: The acknowledgement of a common experience, violence, as a form of describing "us," and thus constructing identity in some way. In turn, this distinction would help us to deal with a devastating reality by declaring ourselves guilty, thus turning aggression (once again) against ourselves.

"No dar papaya."

For the project Cali, Colombia: Transitando entre la celebracion y el miedo, my then research assistant, Liliana Hurtado conducted in-depth interviews with 11 women from Cali, including a radio D.J, a police officer, a rapper, an entomologist, a bodybuilder, a taxi-driver, an architecture student, and a social communicator.

Most of the interviewees spoke of their experience of fear and insecurity in the city, and many mentioned their commitment not to be afraid “of anything.” It may be of interest to note that no one identified “men” as a source of fear, speaking instead of “people.” Julieta, for example, stated that the only time she may feel afraid in Cali (she is never afraid, she confides) is “cuando la gente es morbosa” “y te tocan el cuerpo al pasar.”

Aside from the acknowledgement of insecurity, many of them agreed in a common way to deal with it: *No dar papaya*. Repeatedly, women stated, you have to learn to live with insecurity. “Y no de el papayaso.” In other words, it is one’s responsibility to avoid giving the opportunity to be hurt. The question follows, as to what is considered an opportunity. As I gather from my experience and others’, this includes, wearing revealing clothes, any jewelry, looking confused, asking for directions, walking alone at night, walking alone in unknown neighborhoods, smiling at strangers, frowning at strangers, sitting at the front of the bus, sitting at the back of the bus, obeying the law, not obeying the law, being friendly, being unfriendly, carrying more than the necessary money, not having enough money, attending too little or too much to the surroundings. One’s job is not to provoke the myriad “predators” that seemingly inhabit the city. Not being game.

Because such a wide range of actions may be risky, it may not be surprising that Julieta has chosen to pray every time someone suspicious approaches her (note, however, that she considers herself fearless). It is nothing less than grace the reason she makes it back every night. Ana Maria concurs. “You know when you are leaving but not if you are coming back.”<sup>6</sup> Had I had a god, I think I would have opted for Julieta’s approach. In its absence, I resigned myself to writing my will silently every time a two-men motorcycle (it was the 1980’s. Shooting from co-pilots was common). Like the man-horse monster that terrified indigenous people when the conquistadores arrived, the bi-manned motorcycle was a terrifying unit, always unpredictable, and almost always at a strategic advantage.

When I visited Cali this last December, I found that “no dar papaya” has become an official campaign: Police had people dressed in papaya outfits in streets corners, asking passersby and drivers to avoid papaya-giving. This is, I believe, a *war tactic*. And as such, we, urban dwellers, male and female, have been positioned as actors (i.e., active participants, not victims) in guerrilla warfare. It is my intention to further examine this hypothesis in future research.

#### Some concluding remarks.

The meaning of gender is complex and multidimensional for it is a cultural construct and not a biological determinant. It is inflected by class, region, ethnicity, and religion. It responds to a wide range of understandings of masculinity and femininity, and may imply a complex set of power strategies and tactics related to its practice. In trying to understand the ways in which men and women experience violence, therefore, we have to ask what counts as a man or a woman; and how they are positioned socially.

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<sup>6</sup> Personal communication, May, 2005. Ana Maria is an art curator in Bogotá.

It is because of this reason that it is important to inquire as to the experience of concrete, social actors, for the meaning of gender lives in its practice. I have focused on my experience and that of a few other women. However, the inter-subjective nature of these experiences makes them significant beyond the personal dimension. Though it is not possible to generalize based on experience, it is possible to inquire as to the patterns that emerge from it.

Many of the women interviewed for our “Cali, Colombia: Entre la celebración y el miedo” project, have a complex relationship with the urban setting. Joy and fear, repulsion and appreciation are intertwined. There is as much violence in their recollection as there is compassion; nightmares as well as sweet dreams. They like Cali’s intensity and exuberance. They find the people in Cali to be “muy alegre,” friendly, liberal, and fun-seeking. The women are very strong and independent. The men are boisterous and more fun- than work-loving. The threat of certain places, times, and people is something one might want to forget.

Like some of the women interviewed, I often boasted to be afraid of nothing (*boasting* is the key word here). Fear simply was not a part of my vocabulary. But as removed as it was from my speaking, it was deeply ingrained in my doing. Fear guided the ways I lived and used the city. It still does. In boasting fearlessness as a young woman I may have been resisting, with the tools available to me, a reality too painful to face and too shapeless to see. I was a target, but so was everybody else. It felt like war, but there was no shooting and no battles. There was just my learned tactics on the street—move in zigzag fashion. Avoid the inside of the sidewalk. Avoid men with free

hands. This is not a war that would make deadlines, and the targeting, if it exists, is ambiguous and imprecise.

Nancy tells us “En esta sociedad todos somos blanco.” She should know for as an entomologist her main job is to identify, using the fruit-fly technique, the time of death of unidentified corpses. She deals with peasants and wealthy people, children and adults, men and women. It is in part this daily conversation with the deceased which has prompted her to avoid the city at all costs. She is at peace with the dead, not so the living.

One of the ways we deal with violence is by denying it. But that is certainly not the only way, and would most definitely not work in some cases. When violence becomes named, visible, and identified as a tangible phenomenon, denial becomes very difficult if not impossible (as it is the case of the armed conflict or when one’s day job entails corpses). Other approaches become necessary.

I would suggest that invisible or normalized violence is fundamentally dealt with denial, justification, and resignation. Visible, named violence, on the other hand, allows for two other approaches: willing participation and resistance. Much more research needs to be conducted on this subject, but for now, a few words need suffice.

*Justification* comes from blaming the victim. For example, it is because of her outfit that she was raped. *Denial* implies blinding oneself to violent action whether one is the initiator or recipient. For example, asserting one’s fearlessness in the very face of fear. *Resignation* comes from assuming things cannot be changed. It is an acceptance of powerlessness. Such resignation takes us to “no dar papaya” as the only recourse, by which we, paradoxically, gain some sense of power.

*Willing participation* is the choice of those who join the guerrillas (whose female membership is 30%). It is Isabel Bolanos, AUC leader. It is every mother who consciously neglects or abuses her child physically or psychologically. *Resistance* comes from organizing, from bringing to discourse that which is experienced in practice, and from seeking alternatives to current war tactics, employed in discourse and practice. The people and organizations that are doing just that in Colombia, need to be supported and celebrated.

Though it seems clear that there are forms of gendered violence in Colombia (and elsewhere for that matter), it is not clear how these come to be. It is not clear either whether the ways of dealing with violence I have identified are woman-specific or plainly human. Moreover, if woman-specific, are they female or feminine? If the former, they would be a part of women's essence. This seems to be the position of the work Afectos y efectos de la Guerra en la mujer desplazada. If the latter, they would be used and experienced by anyone who is socially positioned as feminine, whether male or female. I would say that if forced to live life under the logic of guerrilla warfare (i.e., tactics) one has already been positioned as a feminine actor in a patriarchal system.<sup>7</sup> Nancy believes that "en esta sociedad todos somos blanco." I think many Colombians would concur. But if we all are targets, who is doing the targeting? Are we all potentially game *and* predator, wounded animal and wounded hunter?

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<sup>7</sup> The French theorist Michel De Certeau has discussed tactic and strategy as forms of power. Tactic is the power of the powerless, whether women, slaves, or the working class.

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