Branding Colombia: Violent Myths and New Visions in Contemporary Cultural Production

by

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Dedication

To my Doro—who loves me as I am and as I am becoming.

In you, I feel found.

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kinds, and the ways your love has healed me. You are the best part of every day, and you have brought my life more joy than I thought possible. Truly, it is an honor to be your chosen partner.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines what has Colombia a highly exportable cultural commodity in the global media and literary market. It contends that the Colombian cultural imaginary is a brand-under-construction. The study analyzes contemporary Colombian and U.S. Colombian texts through an exploration of four different kinds of cultural approaches: the narco, the child, the land, and the immigrant. The dissertation investigates how each of the selected works function both as scholarly texts and cultural products by engaging in discourse analysis and reception study. Additionally, this work investigates how cultural producers faciliate branding Colombia or work to challenge an overly simplistic yet export-ready vision of Colombia. These ideas can be found in more detail in the project's introduction.

The first chapter examines the evolving narco-imaginary by tracing a genealogy of narco-narratives, through comparative analyses of Jorge Franco's femme-fatale fiction *Rosario Tijeras* (1999), Netflix's *Narcos* (2015–2016) and Juan Gabriel Vásquez's *El ruido de las cosas al caer* (2011). Chapter two focuses on contrasting representations of children and youth assassins in urban settings juxtaposed to nuanced portrayals of children in the countryside's rural theater of war. Through close-readings of *La vendedora de rosas* (1998) by Victor Gaviria and César Arbeláez's *Los colores de la montaña* (2010), the chapter argues for examining the role and agency of play. The chapter proposes that play sets the child apart from being collapsed as a dark emulation of the narco-criminal adult. In chapter three, the dissertation zeroes in on the crux of the Colombian conflict: land. It analyzes filmic portrayals of Colombia's landscape in two documentaries: *Colombia magia salvaje* (2015) by English-born director Mike Slee and Patricia

Ayala Ruiz's *Un asunto de tierras* (2015). I argue that land is a key pawn in the branding of Colombia and contend that land injustice will continue to be a main contributor to Colombia's legacy of violence, if not resolved. Finally, in the fourth chapter, I turn to the Colombian diaspora in the U.S. as the logical conclusion to decades of geographical displacement. I analyze two works by U.S. Colombian writers: Patricia Engel's debut work *Vida* (2010) and Julianne Pachico's *The Lucky Ones* (2017). This chapter argues that U.S. Colombian transnational belonging is both a process and condition that necessitates a reconceptualization of the notion of homeland. Lastly, the afterword asks what it means to chase peace in a country perpetually at war, in light of the failure of the 2016 peace accords and the FARC's recent August 2019 declaration of war.

Introduction
The Tensions of "Brand Colombia"

Branding Colombia: Violent Myths and New Visions in Contemporary Cultural Production explores the notion of colombianness as a social, cultural, economic, and national identity. It argues that that identity is in flux—shifting through the ways in which Colombians and U.S. Colombians are contending with the vestiges of war (through dispossession, delinquency, and the diaspora). In this dissertation, I propose that a decades-old lingering reputation of being one of the most violent places in the world has made Colombia irresistibly intriguing to global cultural consumers. After all, a war without end is shamefully thrilling to watch, as Susan Sontag writes:

> Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another other country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half's worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists. Wars are now also living room sights and sounds. Information about what is happening elsewhere, called "news," features conflict and violence— "If it bleeds, it leads" runs the venerable guideline of tabloids and twenty-four-hour headline news shows—to which the response is compassion, or indignation, or titillation, or approval, as each misery heaves into view (10).

Because of the appeal of its violent present and past, Colombia has become a media cash-cow. As one example, last year, Netflix announced the release of six new Colombian original series,

premiering over the course of 2018 and 2019, adding to its list of 70 original shows being filmed in Latin America.[1] For viewers everywhere, Colombia is a country that is both real and imagined, associated with both violence and exoticism. How do writers and filmmakers complicate a national identity, riddled with reductive associations, ever-present through media and popular culture? Investigating Colombia, I contend that its successful circulation as a cultural media and literary product is foundational to how Colombians and U.S. Colombians understand themselves, and in turn, how they understand one another.

Moreover, I argue that this current bout of fascination with Colombian culture is *also* due to an increased global presence of it on the world's stage as a "politically safe" alternative to the rise in Latin American leftist governance. Colombia has been seen as a "comeback story"—given its economic success, in spite of the country's decades-long war and high rates of displaced and diasporic peoples. Recent tourism campaigns with catchy lines like "Colombia es pasión" and "El único riesgo es que te quieras quedar" delight foreign investors and make the country's dark underbelly invisible.[2] While successfully promoted as an exotic tourist destination, Colombia also suffers from the second-highest level of income inequality (after Brazil) in Latin America and must wrestle with legacies of government corruption and a landscape replete of political impunity.[3] As a result, what it means to be Colombian is a question

[1] Netflix announced its Latin American launch back in 2011, and its announcement surged its stock prices by 8% to a record $291/share. However, due to challenges in access to high-speed broadband, subscriptions in Latin America have not been as successful as initially predicted. Nevertheless, as a result of the launch, the company has raised their profile in Latin America. In addition, Latinx millenials make up a significant chunk of U.S. viewership, because of "Netflix's ability to leverage a wide and deep variety of well-branded, familiar content from major studios, mainstream broadcast and cable networks, and Spanish-language networks like *Telemundo*—combined with its own selection of critically acclaimed original content" (Clancy, "Latino millennials flock to Netflix"). For more information on the ways Netflix has transformed T.V. viewership, see Verónica Heredia Ruiz's "Revolución Netflix: desafios para la industria audiovisual/Netflix Revolution: challenges/or the audiovisual industry/Revolucao Netflix: desafios para la industria audiovisual."

[2] "Colombia is passion"; "The only risk is wanting to stay"

[3] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/si.pov.gini

brimming with contradictions. It is an identity formed by negotiating those contradictions—both through the ways Colombians articulate themselves and the ways in which international cultural producers articulate (however simplistically) what it means to be Colombian.

Finally, in a country seeking peace, it can seem instructive to assign responsibility for the decades of social wounds and violent mayhem. However, precisely naming whom is responsible for the history of violence in Colombia is an impossible task. Considering the far-reaching nature of Colombia's conflict, Maria Helena Rueda's assertion comes to mind:

> …la violencia en Colombia es una realidad que circula en múltiples relatos que se refieren a ella, en diversos formatos y lenguajes, configurando al respecto no sólo un conjunto de conocimientos, sino también emociones, ansiedades y deseos, que marca la vida social en el país (Rueda 9)

As Rueda points out, almost every kind of cultural product about Colombia manages to chronicle, narrate, or unearth some way that violence has left an imprint on most Colombians. War has been waged between and among many actors—including drug lords, criminal kingpins, guerrilla insurgents, paramilitary members, military personnel, rural peasants, and the urban elite. No one's hands are clean in terms of the devastation of seventy years of violence. I argue that violence is an unwelcome but an inevitable cornerstone for our understanding of Colombia. Through the plethora of popular media products widely available for entertainment, Colombia's violence transforms itself into a made-for-TV myth. Its complexities are collapsed, and its people are objectified. Nevertheless, naming violence as a cornerstone to Colombia's identity does not mean it must also be the scaffold, walls, and roof of this erected conceptual lens. Rather, I ask what it means to articulate its evolution and future, knowing the foundation is built from and through complicated, violent histories.

Several studies inform this project, and I am indebted to the scholarship that goes before me.[4] In particular, Maria Helena Rueda's *La violencia y sus huellas: una mirada desde la narrativa colombiana* (2011) offered an incisive reading of some of Colombia's canonical literature—ranging from Jose Eustasio Rivera's *La voragine* (1924), to Fernando Vallejo's *La virgen de los sicarios* (1994), to Laura Restrepo's *La multitud errante* (2001), and several works by Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez. Rueda frames her engagement with literature and violence in the following way:

> Mi interés en la lectura de autores que han narrado la violencia en Colombia se dirige a la forma como sus historias observan esas estructuras que subyacen a la violencia, desde una perspectiva que es ética porque nos confronta con preguntas generales sobres las motivaciones y las consecuencia de los actos violentos en una sociedad en particular (Rueda 20).

Rather than a study on Colombian literature's ethical approach, however, this project considers how writers (and filmmakers) seek to disrupt totalized versions of Colombia's history or reify those simplistic versions—for the sake of neatly packaging a friendly ready-to-export portrayal of Colombia.

Juana Suarez's *Cinembargo Colombia: Ensayos sobre cine y cultura* (2009) was invaluable to helping me understand the landscape of Colombian film scholarship. Unsurprisingly, Suarez asserts that violence has been an impossible theme to escape, since the dawn of Colombia's cinematic production. Yet, for her part, she indicates that her book "busca demarcar otros ejes recorridos y aproximaciones que permitan expandir el campo de entendimiento del mismo" (3). Suarez also persuasively argues that Colombian filmmakers suffer from an anachronistic presentism to their art, and as such, "sigue[n] enquistado en un

[4] Significantly, *Territories of Conflict: Traversing Colombia through Cultural Studies* (eds. Andrea Fanta Castro, Alejandro Herrero-Olaizola, and Chloe Rutter-Jensen) (2017) has contributed a compilation of essays from a variety of perspectives (environmental studies, gender studies, cinema studies, etc.) that gives the field of Colombian studies an invaluable anthology that attends to exploring the nuances of "conflict."

acercamiento a lo regional basado en el estereotipo, en la burla y en el aminoramiento del otro" (3). I most echo Suarez's claim that "la imagen que proyecta Colombia es determinante en la recepción fílmica y la ansiedad porque el documento visual funcione como un elemento restaurador de la 'buena imagen del país'" (5). While Suárez's book offers a critical geneaology of Colombian cinema's ebbs and flows, this work is preoccupied with how different kinds of film and literature work hand-in-hand to simplify, complicate, or challenge the "buena imagen del país."

As well, Andrea Fanta Castro's *Residuos de la violencia: producción cultural colombiana 1990–2010* (2015) examines the remnants, residue or waste that is left in the wake of the greatest culprit (in Fanta's estimation) of the violence in Colombia: the drug trade. At the heart of her book, "están lo que he decidido llamar *cuerpos residuales.* Esto es, los remanentes humanos de la generalizada violencia social, política y económica inherente a las sociedades de consumo" (Fanta xiv). While Fanta's analysis of critical narco-works is seminal to my understanding of the ways in which the drug trade eats up and spits out bodies, my project is underscoring how we can conceive of the Colombian imaginary beyond narco-narratives and narco-visuality—in hopes of getting at the enmeshed ways in which corruption, inequality, and impunity make Colombia such fertile ground for this illicit market.

Lastly, María Elena Cepeda's *Musical ImagiNation: U. S Colombian Identity and the Latin Music Boom* (2010) was indispensable to helping me conceive of the importance of including the writings of U.S. Colombians in a project about contemporary Colombia. Cepeda's work is a groundbreaking study that pushes for U.S. Colombians to be (rightfully) considered in the broader field of Latinx cultural studies. She does this through a study of Colombian music, its export and its iconography. Specifically, Cepeda's articulation of U.S. Colombians' imagined

relationship to homeland serves as the bedrock for my understanding of the U.S. Colombian experience. Essentially, she asserts that the complex circumstances of violence influence how U.S. Colombians navigate a complicated relationship to their own identity:

> …the characteristic Colombian *desconfianza*, or lack of trust, born of these circumstances, follows those who relocate to the United States, in turn affecting their willingness to interact with other colombianos or to publicly recognize their own national identity at all. While it is a determining factor in the lack of social cohesion among U.S. Colombians—the vast majority of whom do not participate in the illicit drug trade or other illegal activities—the general *desconfianza* that is partly attributable to the drug trafficking stereotype has also paradoxically fortified the community's ties to the (imagined) homeland (Cepeda 18).

Cepeda's study sheds light on the ways the decades of violence in Colombia reverberates onto U.S. Colombians, who forging their own version of colombianness and onto Colombians making sense of their diasporic counterparts.

Each chapter of the dissertation surveys a selection of works that explore a certain vision that has been popularly exported or written about through Colombian and U.S. Colombian cultural production. The four chapters examine the narco, the child, the land, and the immigrant, respectively. In terms of this project's objects of study, I interchangeably use the terms "products" and "texts" to describe them. On the one hand, I use the term "product" because this study considers the reception, circulation, and impact that the objects have in the media and literary market, both in the U.S. and Colombia. On the other hand, I use the term "text" because this study involves a substantive discourse analysis of each object. Each chapter showcases how certain cultural producers are utilizing new forms of visuality and narrative to contend with and complicate a legacy of an over half-century war. In each chapter, I expose the intricacies of how Colombia is branded, especially when authors and filmmakers challenge trends that have tended to objectify Colombia's history. This project approaches the question of Colombia and its people from a variety of genres (novels, short-story collections, films, and documentaries) because it is

invested in considering the ways in which cultural producers are in dialogue across their forms of art. Moreover, as a broad study of contemporary Colombia, I argue that this investigation must be configured across a range of cultural products.

The Uribe Effect: Is Peace Possible?

I focus on a sampling of late 20th century and early 21st century texts that all engage popular cultural imagery (e.g. drug lords, children, land, and immigrants). Each of the chosen objects of study function either as an archetype of narcorealist forms that prevailed in the 1980s and 1990s or are produced in response to those trends. Furthermore, the dissertation is informed by the seismic transformation caused by former president Álvaro Uribe Veléz's tenure (2002-2010). In my estimation, his presidency halted the political progress that stood to be made, at the turn of the century with the death of Pablo Escobar (1993) and collapse of the large-scale drug cartels. Uribe's ascent to presidency led to an outsized political partisanship that contributed to the divisiveness over the passing of the peace accords and has subsequently aided in their failure. His presidency offered an implied soft amnesty for the crimes of right-wing paramilitary groups, as he and his cronies were caught aligned with some of these groups in the *parapolítica* scandal during his first term.[5] Lastly, his presidency fomented an abhorrent social tolerance for a"by all means necessary" approach toward eradicating and cleansing leftist thought and ideologies in

[5] The Colombian parapolitics scandal or "parapolítica" in Spanish (a wry combining of *paramilitar* and *política*) refers to the 2006—present Colombian congressional scandal, where several congressmen and politicians were indicted for collusion with the AUC (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia; Colombia's largest paramilitary army). In February 2007, Colombian Senator Jorge Enrique Robledo suggested the moniker "parauribismo", indicating that the scandal primarily involved allies of or officials connected to former President Álvaro Uribe Vélez. By April 17, 2012, 139 members of Congress were being investigated, and five governors and 32 politicians (including President Uribe's cousin) were convicted. For more information, see *El Tiempo's* reporting in "Parapolítica' generó enfrentamiento entre congresistas y ministros" (February 28, 2007).

Colombia. By hopping up tourism campaigns and incentivizing foreign investment, Uribe justified his repugnant tactics. To do all this, one term was not sufficient. To make a two-term presidency possible, Uribe led an effort to amend the constitution during his first term, so he could run (and win) a second term. As a result of this unprecedented eight-year term, he managed to shift Colombia's conservative parties further right, cementing this swing through a subsequent successful run at a senatorial seat. His persistent presence in Colombian politics has, in turn, made the peace process, accords and post-conflict all the more difficult.

During his presidential campaign, Uribe ran on a program of securing the country, renewing the pledge to guarantee safety to all its citizens in the aftermath of the drug wars and political corruption of the 1990s. Virginia Bouvier, in *Building Peace in a Time of War*, asserts "an electorate that earlier had voted for peace through dialogue now voted for peace through war. In the words of a former Chocó governor, 'People see Uribe as the Messiah, they're desperate'" (360). His particular brand of populism distinguished itself as a delicate balance between hardliner strength and infectious charisma, as his campaign slogan (2002) read "Mano firme, corazón grande." He managed to co-mingle these approaches, instilling a sense of trust from voters that would later serve to help him justify law-breaking acts.

In August 2002, Uribe's inauguration speech demonstrateed the first of his attempts to invoke this populist rhetoric:

> We do not accept violence as a means of attack on the government, or as a means of defense. Both are terrorism. The only mission of the legitimate force of the State is to defend the community, and that force cannot be used to silence its critics. Democracy is the only way in which ideas can compete. We are offering democracy, so that arms can be replaced by argument, and democratic security will be the instrument by which politics can be conducted unarmed, and with the right not to be killed (BBC News Online).

During his tenure as president, he instituted policies labeled *seguridad democrática,* categorized by a wide militarization of civilian life and dogged political polarization. Samir Elhawary, in "Security for Whom? Stabilisation and Civilian Protection in Colombia" discusses how Uribe's unremitting quest for *security* became conflated with providing actual *safety* for Colombia's most vulnerable citizens:

> According to Uribe, protecting civilians is at the heart of the 'democratic security' policy; the most effective way of promoting human rights and protecting civilians is through the expansion of security forces throughout the country. In his words, 'order and security—prerequisites for real freedom and human rights—are the main concerns of this government' (President's Office and Ministry of Defence, 2002) (394).

On the one hand, it would seem as though the main preoccupation was restoring protection to people. Protection, understood as a basic human right, has been absent from Colombian's day-to-day, and Uribe's government held this restoration as a top priority. Yet, Elhawary convincingly points out how security and protection are *far* from synonymous in Uribe's master policy:

> The primary aim of stabilization—that is, ['democratic security' policy]—is to protect the state and its international backers against the threats posed by non-state armed groups, particularly guerrilla and organised crime entities…While levels of violence affecting the civilian population have decreased as a result of efforts to enhance security, the situation is potentially short term and progress has mainly occurred in the main urban centres and areas of strategic economic importance. This is in stark contrast to the humanitarian imperative that requires attention to all people based on need and not any particular affiliation or identity, or in this context, their utility in enhancing security (395).

In hindsight, the situation was short-term, as levels of violence in Colombia have actually climbed since the peace accords were signed in 2016. As for making headway in "areas of strategic economic importance," Uribe's focus was on making sure that cities felt safer, serving to contribute to his donor base, attracting foreign investment, and cementing his reputation as a zero-tolerance president.

Uribe's presidency undoubtedly altered popular discourse surrounding Colombia's civil conflict, even more than any president before him. Colombia's brand became synonymous with a

conservativism, and sense of moral uprightness. As a result, anything left of right was attacked as terrorism or treason. Utilizing the global fear produced by the September 11 attacks, Uribe specifically invoked the terrorist label to demonize the FARC's (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia; Colombia's longest-running leftist guerrilla group) struggle. He may not have been the first president to utilize the label "terrorist" to describe them, but he re-took up this label for the group, with a keen awareness of its transnational resonance in the wake of 9/11. By categorizing the FARC as part of a broader and more dangerous global network of terror, Uribe was thereby able to justify a host of human rights violations by re-branding them as necessary excesses in the new war on terror.

While his scorched-earth tactics isolated the guerillas, they also displaced millions of civilians. Uribe colluded with paramilitaries who committed brutal atrocities, particularly in the rural countryside. Villagers were routinely dismembered or decapitated as soldiers and police stood by and watched. Despite Uribe's appalling human rights record—and the known links between his government and the AUC (unearthed by the opposition in the 2006 "parapolitics" scandal)—his approval rating reached 91 percent in 2008. No surprise then, Juan Manuel Santos (his handpicked successor) glided into power in 2010.[6] Indeed, this popular support allowed for

[6] The AUC was a paramilitary drug trafficking group who played an active role in the Colombian armed conflict from 1997 to 2006. The AUC was responsible for attacks against the FARC and ELN rebel groups, in addition to numerous attacks on civilians throughout the rural parts of the country. This militia had its roots in the 1980s when militias were established by drugs lords to combat rebel kidnappings and extortion. In April 1997, the AUC formed through a merger, orchestrated by the ACCU, of local right-wing militias, each intending to protect different local economic, social and political interests by fighting left-wing insurgents in their areas. Carlos Castaño initially led this organization until his assassination in 2004 and the organization has documented links to some local military commanders in the Colombian Armed Forces. At 20,000, the AUC was mostly financed through the drug trade and support from local landowners, cattle ranchers, mining or petroleum companies and politicians. The Colombian military has been accused of delegating to AUC paramilitaries the task of murdering peasants and labor union leaders. For more information on the AUC, see Human Rights Watch report titled, "Paramilitaries' Heirs: The New Face of Violence in Colombia" and *The Para-State: An Ethnography of Colombia's Death Squads* by Aldo Civico (2015).

27 political scandals that occurred during his presidency to go under-reported, many remaining impune even now.

Today, Álvaro Uribe remains a polarizing presence in Colombian politics. After serving four years as a senator, he was forced to resign amidst a Supreme Court investigation, which accuses him of witness tampering, fraud, and bribery. Despite this setback, he has dominated the Colombian political sphere, even though he failed to change the constitution a second time to make himself eligible to serve a third consecutive term as president. After that defeat, he changed tactics and started a political party (Centro Democrático) and served as their senator from 2014–2018. This party was the leading voice of dissent for the recent referendum on the peace accords.[7] Uribe was the resounding ring-leader of this dissent, deeply enraged at the fact that his hand-picked successor for president, former Minister of Defense Santos, initiated peace talks as soon as he took office instead of continuing Uribe's heinous policies against the FARC. After Santos served as president, Uribe successfully catapulted his prodigy, Iván Dúque, to the presidency in 2018. Pledging to restore Uribe's legacy, the two were conspiring on a grand plan to reorder judicial structure in Colombia, effectively dissolving the Supreme Court—a suspicious move, given its primacy in Uribe's investigation. Despite his ire about needing to resign, he continues to relish political impunity, a plague in Colombia's highest socioeconomic factions for decades that has repeatedly impeded processes of reconciliation and justice throughout its violent history.

[7] In October 2016, after four years of negotiations in Havana, President Juan Manuel Santos launched a public referendum, for the Colombian citizenry to vote on whether to accept the peace accords between the Colombian government and the FARC. That referendum was not passed, with a 51.2% "no" vote and a 49.8% yes vote. In short, close to 30,000 people decided this critical vote. What is more—only 37% of the population voted, with the majority of voting occurring in urban hubs that tend to be more conservative and more in agreement with the ruling political oligarchy. Additionally, Hurricane Matthew's aftermath made it almost impossible for many along the Pacific coast to get to voting booths in time for the referendum, and these almost certainly would have been votes to accept the referendum.

One of Uribe's many gross crimes was the *falsos positivos*. The *falsos positivos* were a series of murders, orchestrated by the government and led by President Uribe, in Colombia, that began at the end of 2006. It was discovered that members of the military lured poor or mentally impaired civilians to remote parts of the country, with offers of work, and then proceeded to kill them and present them to authorities as *guerrilleros* killed in combat—all in an effort to inflate body counts and receive promotions or other benefits. As of April 2015, 3,430 cases have been investigated in all parts of the country and verdicts have been reached in at least 170 cases. A contradictory turn, to be sure, for a president whose foundational speech stated, "arms can be replaced by argument, and democratic security will be the instrument by which politics can be conducted unarmed." Certainly, he safeguarded popular support for his policies, even amidst this scandal, by protecting the hedged bets of foreign investors and economic elite. Despite the grisly nature of this scandal, at least 40 convicted military members have since been freed, as their sentences finished.

Because violence has become part-and-parcel to life in Colombia and many political leaders remain impune, peace is an uphill climb. Even though the low-level war has cost over 220,000 lives and displaced over 7 million people, the war has also affected almost every stratum of society and few are ready to forgive and move forward (*¡Basta Ya!* 31). There is plenty of blame to go around, making reconciliation challenging at best. Ultimately, this study seeks to foreground what social and cultural conditions have contributed to a tenuous, if at all possible, post-conflict Colombia and how to conceive of a post-war Colombia.

Colombians Elsewhere: Fitting in the Diaspora

In addition to focusing on contemporary texts, my project is distinctive because it combines the study of Colombian texts alongside U.S. Colombian texts. I argue for this juxtaposition precisely because the country's complex history of violence has led to one of the largest diasporas coming from Latin America. Colombia's history has had the effect of forcing many Colombians to see themselves out of the country. The 1980s brought the first significant wave of U.S. emigrating Colombians. After all, kidnappings, bombings in urban hubs, and the political assassinations of members of the upper echelon found many seeking socio-political asylum in the United States. Then, the 1990s witnessed a sharp increase in emigration also due to the economic crisis associated with a steep decline in coffee prices and the increasing violence of the armed civil conflict—*fueled precisely* by the vacuum of power left in the wake of the collapse of the large-scale drug cartels (Silva and Massey 165). According to the Pew Research Center, Colombian immigration has increased by 93% since 2000. What is to be done about these bodies that are already elsewhere, defining for themselves what it might mean to be Colombian, with the inheritances of exoticism, magic, and violence placed upon them? What does their Colombian heritage mean to them, if anything? What are the stakes of including their Latinx narratives in a Latin Americanist project? I argue that without understanding how Colombians write about and discursively produce themselves *outside* of Colombia, we are left with an intra-national study that fails to consider Colombia's international circulation. As a result of engaging emerging U.S. Colombian writers, I find it necessary to use Latinx and postcolonial frameworks in the last chapter. These frameworks provide a way to understand the roles of class, gender, and belonging and how they are critical in understanding how U.S. Colombians construct themselves in the diaspora. This project ultimately explores the ways the Colombia's legacy manifests itself

in cultural products, and how these products either challenge reductive visions of Colombia or showcase a more ready-for-export version. Overall, the project argues that the intra and international branding of Colombia is quintessential to the stakes of its post-conflict society.

Chapter Summaries

In my study of the ways in which the Colombian cultural imaginary is created and exported, I argue that the selected grouping of texts complicates a simplistic understanding of Colombia's history. The first chapter, "Colombia's Iconic Export: An Anatomy of the Narco-Imaginary," is an examination of the literary and media exportation of the cultural imaginary surrounding the infamous Colombian narco-cartels from the 1980s to present. In the chapter, I trace the evolving image of the narco—through both the hypersexualized narco-realist best-seller *Rosario Tijeras* (1999) by Jorge Franco and Netflix's newest iteration of a Pablo Escobar remix, *Narcos* (2015-2016). I examine why Pablo Escobar remains a central figure in Colombian cultural narratives. In my examination, I take up Karl Marx's *Economic Manuscripts* and Wendy Brown's *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* to frame my analysis. Using the former, I make the case that capitalism is indebted to the criminal (that is, the narco) and argue that the Colombian state is indistinguishably enmeshed, beyond remedy, in this illicit trade. Considering the latter, I use Brown's articulation of capital as sovereign leviathan to contend that the cartel wealth of the 1990s also knows no bounds—either social or geographical. The chapter concludes with an analysis of *El ruido de las cosas al caer* (2011) by Juan Gabriel Vásquez—a novel that considers how narco-crime and specter of Escobar have become deeply embedded within the fabric of the Colombian experience and therefore form an integral part of *colombianidad.* Taking up Jacque Derrida's positing of spectrality, I consider the ways in which Escobar represents a diachronic

present, challenging teological narrations of the vilified past of the cartel heydays. Through a genealogy of the figure of the Colombian narco, this chapter argues that the obsession with exportation of narco-culture is a hard reputation to shake and risks exporting a simplistic vision of the country as a narco-haven. Ultimately, I point to the difficulty of historicizing the Colombian narco, given the impressive cultural edifice that has been built to sustain the narco-drama industry.

In "Childhood Experienced: The New Social Order of Play," the second chapter, I map the figure of the child through film, demonstrating how the child enacts play as a way to forge a subjectivity unto themselves, wholly as children, disrupting any notions of childhood as inferior to adulthood. Traditionally, in Colombian cinema, the child has been portrayed as an abandoned or addicted delinquent. Depictions of youth, such as the type laid bare in acclaimed director Victor Gaviria's *La vendedora de rosas* (1998) typify the child as a mischievous mimesis of his/her adult counterpart. In that film, the children are "playing" at the adult world of slum-hustling, crime, and addiction through acts of emulation and imitation. I contrast Gaviria's film and César Arbeláez's *Los colores de la montaña* (2010). I draw on Walter Benjamin's concept of the mimetic faculty in *Doctrine of the Similar,* as well as his assertions on the unique subjectivity of the child in *One-Way Street.* In both of these texts (alongside other scholars who take up Benjamin's framework in the study of childhood), I close-read play (and the lack of play) in each film as a way to assert its power. Specifically, I argue that *Los colores de la montaña* shows that children's acts of aggression and play are not infantilized versions of the adult's, but rather a unique rejection of the binaries and rigid paradigms that often define the adult world of politics, war, and violence. This chapter considers how play might be the child's language and serve as a powerful reminder of how childhood subjectivity cannot be collapsed as a simulacrum of the

adult world. I expose how a certain era of films served to totalize the child, and how films like *Los colores de la montaña* offer a rewriting of childhood in terms of the rich alterity of childness.

Chapter three, "Rebranding Colombia: From Land-Grabbing to Magical Landscapes" examines the role documentary films play in branding Colombia as an idyllic land. The preservation and commodification of land in Colombia have become significant factors in the peace accords and subsequent implementation discussions between the government and Colombia's prominent leftist-insurgency, the FARC. This chapter closely analyzes two documentaries: *Un asunto de tierras* (2015) by Patricia Ayala Ruiz and English-born Mike Slee's *Colombia magia salvaje* (2015). I ground my analysis by engaging Maria Ospina's writing on the rural turn in Colombian cinema, Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledges" and Margarita Serje's anthropological lens on foundational nature to explain the ways in which nature's presence (or absence) represents a strategy. The first is a documentary that chronicles the implementation of a historic 2011 law ("La Ley de Víctimas"), meant to restore land to the almost 7 million displaced Colombians. Ayala Ruiz documents the bureaucratic saga and shortcomings of the law by following one community's (Las Palmas) attempt to get their land back. For a film whose title can be roughly translated to "land issues" or "land affairs," there is little on-screen presence of Colombia's land. Instead, the film demonstrates the depth of land injustice that abounds and the ensuing hurdles and frustration that accompany land recuperation.

On the other hand, the second is a nature documentary that focuses exclusively on a visual journey of Colombia's most remote, pristine, and uninhabited land. *Colombia magia salvaje* depicts Colombia as picturesque and unsullied, and its lands are presented as a redemptive metaphor to the endemic pattern of civil conflict that has come to plague the country.

In the film, the country is heralded as a wondrous and matchless natural treasure. The film promotes seeing Colombia's landscapes as tourist eco-haven (similar to the kind of tourism campaigns under Uribe's watch), successively erasing the decades of struggles, conflicts, and bloodshed that have come with land use and access in Colombia. Through side-by-side readings of contrasting documentaries, this chapter ultimately argues for a proper accounting of the history of Colombia's land-grabbing and the wake of live land injustice for a majority of its peoples.

In the last chapter "Diasporic Home in Motion: The Becoming and Belonging of U.S. Colombians," I turn to the Colombian diaspora in the U.S. as the logical conclusion to decades of geographical displacement. I analyze two works by U.S Colombian writers: Julianne Pachico's *The Lucky Ones* (2017) and Patricia Engel's debut work *Vida* (2010). I draw a distinction between the two novels, despite their similar short-story structure, by pointing out the ways in which Pachico's novel takes up tired tropes of narco-realist fiction, with no regard to the ways in which those tropes can exoticize Colombia to an Anglo-speaking audience. On the other hand, *Vida* offers the reader a complex vision of the Colombian immigrant experience, and I argue that the works' piecemeal structure functions as a metaphor for the protagonist's migratory transition. Taking Chandra Mohanty's articulation of "being home" in *Feminism without Borders* (2003) and Avtar Brah's notion of "diasporic space" in *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1999), I contend that home becomes illusory for communities created by legacies of displacement and diaspora. Challenging its salience as a seminal experience of intranational belonging is critical to deprivileging inevitable diasporic solidarities. Ultimately, this chapter considers the stakes of Colombian immigration in forming *colombianidad* through a kind of transnational belonging that is both a process and condition. My reading necessitates a reconceptualization of the notion of

homeland and fruitfully asks what that might mean for U.S. Colombians and the broader U.S. Latinx community.

Chapter 1
Colombia's Iconic Export: An Anatomy of the Narco Imaginary

> Se ha concebido al mafioso como un cuerpo extraño y malign incrustado en una sociedad sana. También se ha creído que el narcotraficante es quien aporta el mal gusto a una cultura con austeros y decorosos valores estéticos. Ambas ideas son falsas. Si la visión del mundo corrupta y criminal del mafioso ha prendido tán bien en nuestras tierras, si su gusto es imitado por todas las capas sociales, es porque el terreno ético estético estaba aquí abonado para que su moral y su gusto pelecharan.
>
> -Hector Abad Faciolince ("Estética y narcotráfico," 2008)

Thanks to Netflix, Pablo Escobar has become a household name in many U.S. homes. Netflix's hit-show *Narcos* has undoubtedly resurfaced interest around Colombia —cocaine, cartels and the country writ large. There is no shortage of Colombian cultural products available—through television, film, and social media—to any willing viewer who may follow the trail of Netflix's algo-rhythmically created "Recommendations for You," based on a single season of *Narcos*. Before *Narcos*, there was Gabo. Gabriel García Márquez and his worldwide best-seller *Cien años de soledad* (1967) put Colombia on the map and placed the term "magical realism" squarely upon it. The horizon of expectation for Colombian scholars today is to contend, in some way, with this literary inheritance, no matter what or how you may research.

Maggie Bowers, in Magic(al) Realism works through the competing etymologies and histories of magic(al) realist terminology, describing the Latin American iteration as follows:

> …Realismo mágico or magical realism was introduced in the 1950s in relations Latin American fiction, but has since been adopted as the main terms used to refer to all narrative fiction that includes magical happenings in a realist matter-of-fact narrative, whereby 'the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, and everyday occurrence - admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism (2).

If anything, her study of this term demonstrates that Colombian magical realism, if such specificity exists, subsists among a host of competing definitions. Today, Colombia's inheritance of magical realism may help make sense of how seven decades of violence became "an ordinary matter and everyday occurrence." Shows like *Narcos* can tend to make emphasis on the "magical" mystery of Colombia by exoticizing graphic shoot-outs and depictions of Escobar's gruesome acts of individual and communal terror. Over decades, Colombianist scholars have nuanced this legacy of a "magical" country—a sublime geography tragically beset by paradoxically violent people—by delving into the study of the complexities of Colombia's civil-conflict, bitter political partisanship, stark income inequality and land injustice through a range of anthropological, historical, economic and sociological approaches. My project is no different, as it approaches the study of Colombia by engaging the kind of cultural products that have defined, and at times reduced, its fascinating yet complicated history.

Colombia has a global reputation for its exports, both legal and illicit: oil, coffee, emeralds, flowers, and cocaine.[8] Indeed, cultural products (novels, films, television, art, etc.) about Colombia frequently portray drugs lords, cartels, *sicarios* (hired assassins), along with the illicit trade of cocaine, heroin, and the use of drug mules in their transport. In many of these depictions, Colombia is often seen as an urban, lawless crime haven.[9] Indeed, if Colombia's most

[8] The World Bank's statistics list oil, coffee, and flowers within the top five exports in Colombia's economy (http://wits.worldbank.org/CountrySnapshot/en/COL/textview).

[9] There is no dearth of Hollywood-style cinema dedicated to portraying Colombia. Some of the most well-known yet inaccurate films include *Blow* (2001) and popular Hollywood version of *Sicario* (2015) —as well as the French-produced film *Colombiana* (2011). Indeed, representations of drug trade and its infamous capos characterize the majority of Hollywood's fascination with Colombia. In most of these films, Pablo Escobar appears either as an implicit specter or explicitly featured character. Aldona Bialowas Pobutsky engages with the preoccupation of the enduring power of the Escobar figure in film and media in "Peddling Pablo: Escobar's Cultural Renaissance" by asserting that the fascination with his criminality in how fantastic it seems. Nevertheless, I argue that Pablo Escobar's latest iterations —particularly in Netflix's *Narcos* —serve to render the myth as man.

lucrative illegal export has been drugs, then it could be argued that one of its most prolific *legal* exports has been the mass visual and literary culture surrounding the drug trade and its most infamous criminal anti-hero: the narco. Countless films have specifically focused on narco-criminality, especially the most macabre of Colombia's narco-traffickers, Pablo Escobar.[10] These texts have not only been exceedingly popular in Colombia, but portrayals of criminality, violence and drug trafficking have fared notoriously well throughout international film and literary markets. Broadly speaking, it would seem that, culturally, Colombia exports criminality.

Insofar as its literature, its writers have historically provided a more nuanced portrayal, with novels cataloging Colombia's former export booms (banana and rubber), grisly periods of partisan violence, or even the 1980s and 1990s drug trade and its aftermath.[11] Contemporary narratives often attend to Colombia's history of violence by chronicling guerrilla life, paramilitary violence, rural *campesinos* caught in the crossfire of these forces, or the relationship among all of these. In short, Colombian violence sells. In "Se vende Colombia: un país de

[10] Pablo Escobar protagonizes, directly or indirectly, a number of cultural fiction and non-fiction literary texts. *Killing Pablo: The Hunt for the World's Greatest Outlaw* (Mark Bowden), *The Accountant's Story: Inside the Violent World of the Medellín Cartel* (Roberto Escobar), and *Pablo Escobar, Mi Padre* (Juan Pablo Escobar) are three that widely and internationally recognized. In the first works, Pablo Escobar is portrayed as this inscrutably mysterious and maniacal crime boss who wielded almost limitless power during the height of his successful drug cartel (1980s and 1990s) through a mastery of manipulation and endless charisma. On the other hand, his son's retrospective provides an antithetical vision to Escobar, in which he is humanized, that is sentimentalized, through his participation in ordinary, fatherly duties. In addition, his rise to infamous prominence is portrayed as a result of his work ethic, cunning, and ambition to leave behind his humble origins. Both of these visions serve to perpetuate Escobar as a mythical figure, either as a tragic hero or cruel villain, leaving aside how Escobar's success is in fact linked to a broader socio-economic structure of impunity that have allowed for illicit markets to thrive in Colombia. While in broad circulation, these texts are not considered scholarly and are often scoffed as a result of their sensationalism and sentimentality. This divide — between the scholarly and low-brow —defines one of the main debates in the studying Escobar across the field of Colombian cultural studies.

[11] Some of the most iconic texts that fit this description include *La vorégine* (José Eustasio Rivera), *Condores no entierran todos los días* (Gustavo Álvarez Gardeazábal), *Cien años de soledad* (Gabriel García Márquez), and *No nacimos pa' semilla* (Alonso Salazar). Each of these texts illustrates that violence has been and remains a social preoccupation. Before the literary fascination with the illicit cocaine trade, these canonic texts offered narrations of the bloody aftermaths of political partisanship, land extraction, and agro-cultivation that indelibly mark Colombia's historical relationship to violence.

delirio," Alejandro Herrero-Olaizola addresses this phenomenon, in which he posits that violence of all kinds successfully wholesales Colombia:

> Es, precisamente, la narrativa colombiana de más éxito comercial la que se relaciona de modo más directo con la violencia, las FARC, el narcotráfico, sus sicarios/as y personajes delirantees…Obviamente, editoriales como Alfaguara y Seix Barral, dos de las grandes en la red de conglomerados mediáticos en el ámbito hispanohablante, han incluido en sus listas a autores que divulgan dicha transformaciones socio-políticas y manifestaciones híbridas en sus novelas (44).

Throughout his article, Herrero-Olaizola makes emphasis on the fact the cultural imaginary of Colombia is built upon its inextricable relationship to violence, and prominent editorial presses serve to propagate this relationship because of the successful run of literary objects related to violence. Essentially, the real (or imagined) notion of Colombia as violent has served to create an industry of cultural products that are sustained by violence as a conceptual, socio-cultural and political modus operandi.

Moreover, media-driven narco-narratives have come to be synonymous with any global imagining of the word "Colombia."[12] Today, Colombian television has a thriving *telenovela* industry that includes works such as *Sin tetas no hay paraíso (2006) Las muñecas de la mafia (2009-2010),* and *El cartel de los sapos (2011).* Similar to the first-person account of Pablo Escobar's scandals, these *telenovelas* are based on anecdotal first-person narratives sustained by the fantastic world of wealth and violence of a narco-boss. Indeed, most narco-production thrives on exhuming the personal ways in which the violence, drama and garishness of the *narco-*

[12] Narco-narratives refer to a vast nomenclature and corpus of texts. Referred to as narco-dramas, narco-realism, or narco-novelas, among other titles, I will use the term narco-narratives in an effort to dissociate the texts from an overtly reliant relationship to the tone (e.g. drama, realism), and rather by utilizing the term "narrative," I am instead laying claim to the relationship among the selected texts, that is, their narration in some way of the Colombian narco-trade. For an in-depth analysis on debate about these terminologies and their iterations across Colombian film and literature, see *El sicario en la novela colombia* by Óscar Osorio (2015) and Maria Elena Rueda's *La violencia y sus huellas: Una mirada desde la narrativa colombiana* (2011).

carteles manifested themselves in urban hubs like Medellín. While the 1980s and 1990s were undoubtedly a frightening time for Colombia's citizenry, the popularity of these products shows the enduring allure with idolizing this period in a highly aesthetic way. In these shows, the captivation with the narco-figure does not limit itself solely to the trafficker of drugs, but rather extends to the whole supporting apparatus: the prostitutes hired by drug lords, the sacred-mother figure, the *sicarios*, the corrupt politicians, and the associated criminal mercenaries. In "Sex, Soap and Society, *telenovela noir* in Álvaro Uribe's Colombia," Nick Morgan addresses the way in which *telenovelas* demonstrate the allure of representations about the dark underbelly of the drug trade:

> Moving away from the gentler melodrama of earlier works, these [*telenovelas*] narratives used the backdrop of Colombia's cocaine trade to tell violent stories of poverty, crime, and corruption in high places, a focus that earned them the generic name *telenovela noir*. Many critics, especially in the country's agenda setting media, attacked them for presenting a distorted and degrading image of Colombian society, and the widespread fascination with their sensationalist storylines was interpreted as confirming a general decline in the nation's values. While this minor moral panic had no impact on the popularity of the narconovela, it did draw attention to the public's continuing fascination with the form, raising questions which recur whenever critical interest in telenovelas is rekindled (61).

The interest in narcotrafficking and the blatant visuality of this violence underpins the way in which Colombian cultural producers have elected to commodify and historicize these figures. While Colombia's political elite considers them a scourge to a more sanitized version of Colombia (useful for global export that promotes foreign investment) narco-criminals also represent an affront to Colombian sociopolitical life, where political impunity runs rampant and the narcotics trade and politics have often existed in one another's crosshairs. Therefore, in the interest of enacting a discourse of distinction, Colombian cultural producers have tended to be in the business of casting the drug lord as one who participates in a unique brand of lawlessness. Nevertheless, I posit that the irony of the drug lords' crime—wealth through illicit means—is

that it actually threatens the entrenched relationship between wealth, elitism, power, and impunity so prevalent in Colombian history. The cartel capo undoes this defined social hierarchy by attempting to insert himself as equal to class-based wealthy Colombians because of his acquired wealth. In fact, the upper echelon benefit from the illicit cash flow in markets like real estate. As we will later see in a discussion of the series *Narcos,* this show chronicles Pablo Escobar's internal tragedy—being rejected in socio-politically elite circles, despite his more than sizeable fortune. Colombian cultural production and exported versions of "Colombia" have tended to reduce the narco-imaginary to an excessive, rabble-rousing caricature, made popular in the overly dramatic *telenovela* industry and *sicaresca* literature. Instead, I argue for seeing the Colombian drug lord as a disagreeable figure whom uncomfortably demonstrates the inequity that forms the very fabric of Colombian society.

As such, this chapter seeks to analyze the way in the narco-imaginary has been cultivated through cultural production, in and about Colombia. It provides an examination of the literary and visual exportation of the cultural catalog surrounding the infamous Colombian narco-cartels from the 1980s to present. Through a study of the evolving image of the narco-lord—across iconic narco-narrative such as *Rosario Tijeras* (Jorge Franco) and Netflix's newest iteration of the Colombia's drug cartel history, *Narcos* (2015-2016)—I investigate the ongoing fascination with this cultural villain/hero whilst providing a complex history of the drug trade in Colombia. I argue that while narco-narratives may mystify figures such as infamous cartel capo Pablo Escobar, these texts also serve to expose how the drug trade cannot be disentangled from Colombia's self-production of national identity. Using Marx's *Economic Manuscripts,* I analyze the relationship between criminality and capitalism, arguing that Colombia's efforts to eradicate the drug trade have failed, in part, because of the ways in which narco-crime has become

inextricably linked to the nation's commercial identity. Ultimately, by theorizing the figure of the criminal and analyzing the creation of the criminal best-seller, this chapter explores in what ways Colombia has created the very identity it purports to disavow.

The chapter concludes with an analysis of the critically-acclaimed novel, *El ruido de las cosas al caer* (2011) by Juan Gabriel Vásquez—a text that complicates the specter of Pablo Escobar and demonstrates the shift away from narco-narratives focused on selling violence as a commodity unto itself. Unlike the narco-narratives and tell-all cartel accounts that precede it, this novel resists commodifying the narco-violence historically associated with Colombia. Instead, it grapples with the incalculability of loss in Colombia—be this through disappearance, displacement or death—and how that loss has manifested into a social consciousness over the course of the last seven decades in Colombia. Vásquez's novel exposes how the multi-layered violence of the drug trade, the decades-long civil conflict, and the political impunity which has plagued Colombia, have together created a collective palimpsest that bears the traces of all these violence(s). Using Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx,* I dissect the figure of the Colombian narco and illustrate the unending obsession with this figure and the subsequent difficulty of literarily representing the drug trade. Ultimately, by selecting three texts that span the range of narcorealism, popular media, and avant-garde novel, I propose a reconsideration of what counts for scholarly study when considering a highly consumable product—that is, the Colombian narco-imaginary. I contend that these texts are mutually constitutive and function to inform one another and to create a dialogic cultural exchange, whereby each of them cannot escape the ways in which they both challenge and reify the specter that is Pablo Escobar. In essence, this chapter looks at the ways in which narco-narratives appeal to a global audience by essentializing Colombia as an endemically violent yet "magically" captivating place.

No doubt violence and criminality have longed defined Colombia, and it remains to be seen whether it will successfully shake that reputation. One effort enacted to de-stigmatize Colombia has been through recent tourism campaigns. In 2005, the Colombian government launched a rigorous tourism campaign ("Colombia es pasión") in an effort to divorce itself from its sordid history with narco-trafficking and civil unrest. Led by Lina Moreno de Uribe (the wife of former president Álvaro Uribe Vélez), Luis Guillermo Plata (president of Colombia's national tourism and export agency) and Fabio Valencia Cossio (Colombia's ex-ambassador to Italy), this campaign was aimed at both spurring intra-national solidarity as well as renewing inter-national interest in tourism and investment. Its signature line was "El único riesgo es que te quieras quedar."[13] Taken from the Colombia Travel website, the tourism board explains the reasoning behind this trademark line: "En resumen: Convertir el riesgo en una oportunidad."[14] Indeed, the goal was to make sure the country was safe for foreigners and investors, whose tourism and word-of-mouth propaganda might be capable of re-writing Colombia's violent reputation. Michelle Rocío Nasser, in "Feminized Topograhies: Women, Nature and Tourism in *Colombia es pasión*" exposes the ways in which this tourism campaigns replaces representations of Colombia as urban and violently male-dominated by substituting a primitive and feminine imaginary of ready-to-explore flora, fauna, and fetishized female bodies:

> By presenting Colombia as an amicable, hospitable, fertile, safe, and consumable country, which is moving away from the old and toward the young and 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 19080s, namely those of male-dominated violence and international drug trafficking…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 (15–16).

[13] The only risk is wanting to stay.
[14] In summary: Convert risk into an opportunity.

Indeed, this tourism campaign only serves to highlight that Colombia—its peoples and products—are highly commodified and function as frequently circulated cultural images. In fact, Escobar remains such a powerfully embedded cultural signifier that Medellín City Tours even offer a "narcotour" of the city, complete with a meander through Escobar's hometown and pilgrimage to his final hideout. To the non-Colombian, there are innumerable available referents to the country through popular media (*Narcos* series on Netflix, Juan Valdéz and his famous coffee, etc.) and therefore a successful tourism campaign that animates visitors to explore Colombia more intimately is invaluable to re-defining the negative cultural signifiers historically associated with the country.

In addition to tourism campaigns, the Colombian government has also worked to eliminate the associations of the country as being a violent drug-capo-heaven through many initiatives aimed at combating the cultivation of the coca and poppy crops. Catastrophic anti-drug policies have defined the U.S. and Colombian relationship for decades. For example, Plan Colombia began as a strategy meant to spur economic development, working on the production side of the drug trade incentivizing crop substitution other than poppy or coca.[15] Nevertheless, it

[15] Plan Colombia is a bilateral diplomatic and military aid initiative, conceived by U.S. President Bill Clinton and Colombian President Andrés Pastrana Arango, signed into law in 2000. Critics of plan have stated that the plan helped fund Colombian security forces, many of whom partnered with violent right-wing paramilitary organizations. Another criticism of the plan is that the aerial fumigation, intended to eradicate coca production, ended up instead harming agro-production and did not actual deter coca manufacturing. Indeed, the U.S. Defense Department funded a two-year study which found that the use of the armed forces to interdict drugs coming into the United States would have minimal or no effect on cocaine traffic and might, in fact, raise the profits of cocaine cartels and manufacturers. Virginia Bouvier's *Building Peace in a Time of War* describes President Pastrana's (1998–2002) disillusion with the effort: "Initially, Pastrana wanted to herald a 'Marshall Plan,' but instead the new Plan Colombia was put into place, which was not aimed at fighting either the various drug cartels or the right-wing paramilitary groups (which admitted that 70 percent of their finances came from drug trafficking) but instead targeted the FARC's strongholds in the southern part of Colombia" (56). My viewpoint is that the Plan ultimately serves to sustain the relationship of neo-imperial dependence the U.S. Moreover, Plan Colombia incorrectly emphasizes that winning the "war on drugs," through cultivation eradication efforts, will thereby correct the country's failed strategies of curbing the illicit trade. Plan Colombia does not fully account for the paramilitaristic violence that has grown around the drug trade and cannot in fact be dismantled through the initiatives set forth in the policy. For more information on the evolution and subsequent failures of Plan Colombia, in addition to the ways in which it morphed into a

ended up being nothing more than a militarized offensive, run by right-wing paramilitary groups working alongside the military—the kind which are frequently aimed at the FARC (Colombia's longest running leftist-guerrilla insurgent group).[16] Through Plan Colombia, the partisan violence that has plagued Colombia actually begot greater violence. This bilateral effort has helped to sustain the idea that the drug trade and its accompanying criminality are synonymous with the concept of Colombia. While many narco-narratives demonstrate the failure of neoliberalism to correct income equality in Colombia (a problem that many scholars have associated with the sustained success of the illegal drug trade), they have historically neglected to highlight the role of U.S. consumption and demand in the success of this illicit market. In addition, until the most recent Netflix iteration of *Narcos,* narco-narratives have mostly failed to examine the complex damage of bilateral initiatives, such as Plan Colombia. While narco-narratives have failed to fully attend to the complexities of the violence in Colombia, they *have* successfully portrayed their protagonist *par excellence*—the drug kingpin—and his empire with tremendous detail, in an effort to clarify the kingpin's enigmatic character.

counter-terrorism initiative after September 11, see Jonathan D. Rosen's *The Losing War: Plan Colombia and Beyond* (2015).

[16] The FARC is Colombia's longest-running guerrilla movement, founded in 1964, formed during the Cold War period as a Marxist-Leninist peasant force. The FARC promotes a political line of agrarianism and anti-imperialism. Gary Leech's *The FARC: The Longest Insurgency* (2011) provides a historical analysis of the FARC, which complicates the popularly circulated notion that the FARC ultimately transformed into a criminal organization or worse, a leftist terrorist group.

1.1 The Drug Kingpin: Capital's Necessary Scourge

The late 1970s heralded the beginnings of the illicit drug trade in Colombia, which radically ruptured Colombian politics, the economy, and its society at large. Paul Gootenberg's study of the history of coca production in *Andean Cocaine: The Making of a Global Drug* serves to illuminate how coca production in Colombia was a direct result of more broadly changing geopolitics in South America, specifically the dictatorship in Chile that marked the whole of the 1970s and 1980s. Gootenberg insists "[a]part from its considerable economic role, the volatile drug adversely pervades the politics of many Latin American nations and has come to complicate, if not at times dominate, inter-American relations" (4). During this early period, Colombia witnesses the *bonanza marimbera* (marijuana boom) which consolidated the marijuana trade worldwide, bringing with it the beginnings of the dark lavishness and extravagance that would later come to characterize the narco-lords of the Medellín and Cali cocaine cartels. The narco-trade balanced a tenuous relationship between privately financed paramilitaries and guerrilla groups—both groups which it used for the protection and distribution of its cartel operations. As the infamous large-scale cartels dissipated by the mid-to-end of the 1990s, the drug trade dispersed among a large swath of smaller scale criminal organizations. Gootenberg also historicizes these infamous capos, indicating that their demise did not lead to a demise of the Latin American cocaine trade in general:

> The traffic in cocaine remains overwhelmingly controlled by homegrown, successful, and eminently "Latin" entrepreneurs and middlemen. It is the one global drug culture based entirely on Latin American initiative, culture, and resources—hence in many ways, all sensationalism about drugs aside, cocaine is now South America's most emblematic product (5).

Indeed, this trade continued to thrive in Colombia even after the deaths of its cartel leaders. Additionally, the trade intensified the conflict between paramilitaries and guerrilla groups. With

the intensity reaching its peak in 2005, under the presidency of Álvaro Uribe Vélez, the government initiated a dual-effort towards demilitarization and an offer of amnesty to the formal paramilitary structures that had formed in addition to the call to wipe out the FARC once and for all. Today, the drug trade has its pockets in many parts of Colombian society and continues to impact efforts at peace. One such effort—the peace accords (signed in 2016) between the FARC and the Colombian government negotiated over the course of four years in Havana, Cuba—had as one of its most salient points of contention the prosecution of FARC members for their participation in the drug trade.[17]

In terms of a relationship between the drug trade and criminality, the role of drug trafficking in Colombia has been misunderstood as something that is an anathema to the smooth functioning of governance, as antithetical to a salient political economy. My reading asserts quite the opposite. The narco-lord is an invaluable part of the capitalist market-flow. Nevertheless, the criminal (in this case the drug lord) remains ostracized because of the ways he exposes the corruption of the system itself. Karl Marx, in the *Economic Manuscripts (1861-1863)* provides an astute analysis of the role of the criminal and the importance of what they produce in the commodity market of capitalism: crime.

> A criminal produces crime. If we take a closer look at the connection between this latter branch of production and society as a whole, we shall rid ourselves of many prejudices. The criminal produces not only crimes but also criminal law, and with this also the professor who gives lectures on criminal law and in addition to this the inevitable

[17] In October 2016, after four years of negotiations in Havana, President Juan Manuel Santos launched a public referendum to be put to a vote on whether to accept the signed peace accords between the Colombian government and the FARC. That referendum was not passed, with a 51.2% "no" vote and a 49.8% yes vote. In short, close to 30,000 people decided this vote. What is more, only 37% of the population voted, with the majority of voting occurring in urban hubs that tend to be more conservative and more in agreement with the ruling political oligarchy. Hurricane Matthew's aftermath made it almost impossible for many along the Pacific coast to get to voting booths in time for the referendum, which would have represented a not-insignificant number of "yes" votes. Former President Alvaro Uribe was the resounding ringleader of this dissent, deeply enraged at the fact that his handpicked successor, former Minister of Defense Santos, initiated peace talks as soon as he took office instead of continuing Uribe's tactically violent policies against the FARC.

> compendium in which this same professor throws his lectures onto the general market as "commodities"…The criminal moreover produces the whole of the police and of criminal justice, constables, judges, hangmen, juries, etc.; and all these different lines of business, which form just as many categories of the social division of labour, develop different capacities of the human mind, create new needs and new ways of satisfying them (MECW 302).

Marx's text invites us to posit whether capitalism is complicit in the dawn and perpetuation of the criminal, suggesting that capitalism *needs* the criminal for its very existence. Indeed, neoliberal forms of commerce often perpetuate social inequity in ways that are themselves inherently criminal. Returning to Marx, he argues elsewhere in the text that upon the criminal rests a host of social responsibilities and, by virtue of producing his commodity (crime), the criminal buoys the labor market, helping it thrive. Yet, in an effort to disassociate itself as an innately criminal enterprise, capitalism purports a desire to eliminate the criminal altogether. I contend that it is crucial to dispel this myth in terms of the history of the drug trade in Colombia, to "rid ourselves of many prejudices" when it comes to the criminal, and to recognize that a whole corpus of "proper" vocations exists *only* because the criminal functions as an essentially invaluable part of capitalism.

Moreover, Marx adds that the criminal produces a necessary element of capitalism—doubt—that is produced by the anxiety and *speculation* about insecurity, writing, "the criminal breaks the monotony and everyday security of bourgeois life" (MECW 304). In this way, he keeps it from stagnation, and gives rise to that uneasy tension and agility without which even the spur of competition would get blunted. Thus, he gives a stimulus to the productive forces (MECW 304). Marx signals that bourgeois life, without that producing labor of the criminal, would suffer from inertia. It is as if the criminal himself generates the productivity of capitalism. Indeed, the irony is that through the criminal, capitalism is sustained, revealing itself to be inexorably criminal. Consider the case of Escobar. Much of his justification for engaging in drug

trafficking was the history of impunity and abuse of oligarchic power at the highest rungs of Colombian society. His wealth was openly criminal, yet his critique of wealth was that in fact—openly or not—many wealthy members of Colombia's highest social classes are the kind of white-collar criminals that are sustained by one another other's nepotism.

What forces does the criminal stimulate? According to Marx, a whole host of labor is created and upheld by the work of the criminal:

> While crime takes a part of the redundant population off the labour market and thus reduces competition among the labourers—up to a certain point preventing wages from falling below the minimum — the struggle against crime absorbs another part of this population. Thus, the criminal comes in as one of those natural "counterweights" which bring about a correct balance and open up a whole perspective of "useful" occupations. The effects of the criminal on the development of productive power can be shown in detail. Would locks ever have reached their present degree of excellence had there been no thieves?…[ ] Crime, through its ever new methods of attack on property, constantly calls into being new methods of defence, and so is as productive as strikes for the invention of machines (MECW 303).

Indeed, the criminal functions to produce misgiving—about security, about wealth, about personal safety—and this misgiving is invaluable in speculation, which forms a basis for modern capitalism. As Marx indicates, crime attacks property, the criminal attacks the proprietor, and the whole operation challenges the system of capitalism. Meaning, the criminal demands that the labor of crime be recognized for what it makes possible and for what it challenges, namely the self-assurance of bourgeois existence. In these economic manuscripts, Marx notes that one of the basic tenets in capitalism—credit—is based on the modern act of speculation. Through speculation, private property produces uninhibitedly, and the land-owning class that has privileged access to speculation reaps the benefits when speculative investment breeds profit. While the criminal contributes to producing the misgivings on which speculation rests, the criminal is also responsible for a more universal sentiment. Moreover, the criminal produces an intangible feeling that is necessary for the fretful nature of capital: fear. He produces that

indispensable unease of modernity. If we extend this reading of criminality in relation to the narco-figure, efforts to eradicate the criminal are bogus, since indeed eradicating the criminal may negatively affect the successful existence of the capitalist economy. In fact, the narco-economy has been absorbed in many ways into the mainstream through money laundering operations and other illicit operations. Rather than enacting law, narco-criminality exposes the precarity behind law's very impermanence. By revealing the farce of law-preserving violence, the narco places himself at odds to the apparatus by which the state creates itself, challenging the very idea of state hegemony or even gesturing towards the possibility of a new hegemony. Moreover, the narco contests the notion of progress, as correlated to a harmonious coexistence with law, by making hyper-visible the sinister and corrupt violence that produces law, shedding light on the criminal nature of law, of speculation, of capitalism itself.

Media-driven depiction of narcos have capitalized on the push-pull fascination with criminality. Their success is sustained by seeing an onscreen version of garish criminality, from which Colombian spectators can distance themselves. Nevertheless, these representations are a reminder of the entrenched nature of narco-criminality within Colombian culture. Yet, fully understanding narco-criminality means understanding its apparatus. After all, what good criminal lacks henchmen?

1.2 The Inescapable Presence of the Narco Lord: Understanding the *Sicaresca*

The *novela sicaresca* is a genre of literature made popular by Colombian authors like Jorge Franco and Fernando Vallejo, and it features as protagonists youth assassins who work to help drug lords and are possessors of the gauche trappings of wealth that come with the lucrative

life of dealing cocaine, often set among scenes of harsh urban violence.[18] Novels emblematic of the *sicaresca* include Fernando Vallejo's acclaimed *La virgen de los sicarios* (1994), and Jorge Franco's femme fatale fiction *Rosario Tijeras* (1999), as well as later works like Laura Restrepo's *Leopardo al sol (2005).* These novels detail how the life of the *sicariato* (assassin life) is interwoven with the illicit sale of drugs, the wielding of power in *comunas* (shantytowns in Medellín), the gross objectification of women, and the deity-like worship of the maternal figure.[19] In what follows, I analyze *Rosario Tijeras,* showing how it demonstrates the complex relationship between social class and criminality through the figure of the female *sicario*. An erstwhile *sicaresca* novel, *Rosario Tijeras* offers a new complication in analyzing the *sicariato:* hyperfeminity, protagonized. Yet, explicit sexual plot lines are charactertistic of narco-realist depictions—both in media, film and literature—so in this way, *Rosario Tijeras* is not uniquely positioned. I contend that the novel, like most *sicaresca* literature, ultimately fails to complicate the interconnected relationship between the drug trade and the other facets of Colombia's violent history, thereby reifying the reductive vision of Colombian criminality common to this genre of literature. Ultimately, by relying on overly graphic depictions (both literary and visual,

[18] Much debate exists about constitutes a *novela sicaresca* and its origins. Colombian author and journalist Hector Abad Faciolince first coins the terms "sicaresca antioqueña" in 1995, elaborated in his 2008 article "Estética y narcotráfico." In this piece, Abad Faciolince explains how the fascination with the *sicario* produced a literature that followed, in line with the demands for generally grisly tell-alls from former cartel members, paramilitary leaders, and others involved in Colombia's conflict. He critiques the paradoxical obsession (demonstrated by the rates of book sales for these kind of titles) with literary depictions of violence whilst Colombians popularly purport a disdain for the delinquency of the drug trade and espouse to have grown tired of its violence. For further information on the genealogy of the term and its iteration through popular literature and film, see "From Rodrigo to Rosario: The Birth and Rise of the *Sicaresca*" by Héctor Fernandez L'Hoeste (2006).

[19] In 1999, writing in one of Colombia's premier newspapers, *El País*, Mario Vargas Llosa details the fixation with the *sicario* as being both created and sustained by the cultural production surrounding the figure, perpetuated by a host of vast cultural consumers of narco-realist texts. "Además de formar parte de la vida social y política de Colombia, los sicarios constituyen también, como los cowboys del Oeste norteamericano o los samurais japoneses, una mitología fraguada por la literatura, el cine, la música, el periodismo y la fantasía popular, de modo que, cuando se habla de ellos conviene advertir que se pisa ese delicioso y resbaladizo territorio, el preferido de los novelistas, donde se confunden ficción y realidad" *(El País*)."

considering its filmic adaptation and telenovela) of violence, I argue that best-selling narratives, exemplified by the press success of *Rosario Tijeras* and similarly structured *sicaresca* works, reproduce the violent imaginary of Colombia and respond to a literary market that has thrived on depictions of Colombia as a lawless land.

Rosario Tijeras draws on the commercial success of the *sicaresca* and brings in the female "*sicario*" or *sicaria* as a way to re-establish the gender binaries of the genre. Published in 1999, the novel's plot revolves around the narco-violence in Colombia during the 1990s. The novel's namesake/protagonist is a young, sexy, and beautiful woman who has gotten herself involved with the Medellín drug capo network as both a *sicaria* and sexual escort. The novel begins in a flashback, where Rosario has been brought into the hospital by her friend Antonio after a near-fatal gunshot wound. Initiating the novel with such catastrophic circumstances, it is clear that Rosario is cast from the very beginning as an enigmatic, reckless, and irresistible woman. Rosario's mystery grows out of the inability of any man (even her dangerous employers) to contain or tame her. The novel dramatizes her addiction to danger, which subsequently leads to her frequent abuse of alcohol and drugs. This dramatization may lead the reader to understand Rosario's struggle not as a singular experience, but rather as a representative stand-in for the collective struggle of slum inhabitants in Medellin during the 1980s and 1990s. Undoubtedly, violence, delinquency, and addiction were prevalent problems in Medellín during this time.[20] Yet, Rosario's characterization as appealing and irresistibly drawn to peril of all kinds risks

[20] Once named the most dangerous city in the world, Medellín faced near-apocalyptic status in the early 1990s, with a homicide rate of 375 per 100,000 residents. Home to Escobar's cartel, it employed violence to keep the neighborhoods safe enough for his narco-team to be able to operate. For more information on crimes rates in Medellín during this period, see "Seguridad y ciudadanía en los 90s en Medellín: El surgimiento de las empresas colombianas de protección violenta" by John J. Bedoya (2006).

delimiting the Colombian cultural export-imaginary to this reductive urban nightmarish vision, realized as a tumultuous tale of inevitability.

Moreover, the fantasy of Rosario is further intensified by how Antonio narrates the moment he and Emilio, his best friend who eventually becomes Rosario's lover, meet her. While at a disco one night, they both spot Rosario:

> La discoteca fue uno de esos tantos sitios que acercaron a los de abajo que comenzaban a subir, y a los de arriba que comenzábamos a bajar. Ellos ya tenían plata para gastar en los sitios donde nosotros pagábamos a crédito, ya hacían negocios con los nuestros, en lo económico ahora estábamos a la par, se ponían nuestra misma ropa, andaban en carros mejores, tenían más droga y nos invitaban a meter—ése fue su mejor gancho-, eran arraigados, temerarios, se hacían respetar, eran lo que nosotros no fuimos, pero en el fondo siempre quisimos ser. Les veíamos sus armas encartuchadas en sus braguetas, aumentándoles el bulto, mostrándonos de mil formas que eran más hombres que nosotros, más verracos. Les coqueteaban a nuestras mujeres y nos exhibían las suyas. Mujeres desinhibidas, tan resueltas como ellos, incondicionales en la entrega, calientes, mestizas, de piernas duras de tanto subir las lomas de sus barrios, más de esta tierra que las nuestras, más complacientes y menos jodonas. Entre ellas entró Rosario (Franco 17).

In this passage, we see Antonio reflecting on some of the very conditions previously discussed about the revelatory power of the drug trade. Antonio and his friend Emilio belong to Colombia's wealthy upper-class, previously the only group capable of accessing fancy discotheques, beautiful escorts, and lavish vehicles. Nevertheless, the era of the cartels in the 1980s and 1990s dismantles this rigid hierarchy of access, and in this case, exposes Antonio and Emilio's insecurities. Thinking back to Marx's interrogation on the criminality of capitalism, Antonio is threatened by the ways in which he perceives himself as collapsed into the same social strata as a criminal. Both Antonio and Emilio feel their position threatened, as the capos remind them that the intersection of class, wealth and criminality are so distinct. These men ("los duros") do not bend to the will of the unspoken class etiquette to which Antonio and Emilio are subject. After all, they have no one to answer to but themselves; and their wealth, while

explicitly illicit, has certainly been earned. In this way, Rosario represents a way out of this newfound exclusion, for both Antonio and Emilio.

After he meets Rosario (after the scene described above), Emilio becomes immediately taken with her, she with him, and they begin a sexual and romantic relationship. Acting as her sexual lover, Emilio perhaps believes that he could be as "berraco" (bad-ass) as her narco-employer, thereby fulfilling the fantasy of his own machismo. Antonio, on the other hand, opts to assuage his own emasculation of power through a *disarming* of Rosario herself, perhaps hoping to metaphorize her vulnerability and intimacy with him as an exposure of the capos own precarity. Emilio wants to belong; Antonio wants to alter the very notion of belonging, believing that if he is needed by Rosario, somehow, he too may be "más de esta tierra" than his life currently appears to be.

Emilio pursues this dangerous romantic tryst with Rosario—in spite of her involvement with drug cartel leaders. As Emilio becomes more seriously involved, to the point of falling in love with Rosario, he is anxious to introduce her to his family. This act represents Emilio's desire to draw Rosario into the law—that is, to make Rosario socially legible despite her protestations. Moreover, Emilio's desperation to bring her into the fold demonstrates the monotony of *his* bourgeois life and how Rosario represents a welcome disruption to that life by breaking its tedium through her lifestyle of crime. Yet, Emilio is oblivious to this and insists on pushing his family's acceptance of her. Unfortunately, upon meeting her, they reject the relationship, as they judge Rosario to be beneath Emilio in terms of social status. Her wealth makes her no more welcome into his rich upper-class home. Emilio is crushed by his family's rejection, while Rosario is livid and indignant at his family's class-based snobbery.

Meanwhile, throughout this unfolding romantic saga, Antonio continues his own platonic relationship with Rosario as her confidante. When Rosario's brother, Johnefe, with whom she lives, is killed, Antonio and Rosario grow closer. He follows her journey in and out of tragedy throughout the novel until she eventually meets her fatal end, precisely where the story begins. Waiting in anticipation for news about his unrequited paramour, Antonio flashes back to another of Rosario's darkest moments:

> Una vez la ví vieja, decrépita, por los días del trago y el bazuco, pegada de los huesos, seca, cansada como si cargara con todos los años del mundo, encogida. A Emilio también lo metió en ese paseo. El pobre casi se pierde. Se metió tanto como ella y hasta que no tocaron fondo no pudieron salir. Por esos días ella había matado a otro, esta vez no a tijeretazos sino a bala, andaba armada y medio loca, paranoica, perseguida por la culpa, y Emilio se refugió con ella en la casita de la montaña, sin más provisiones que alcohol y droga. ¿Qué les pasó, Emilio?—fue lo primero que pude preguntar. -Matamos a un tipo —dijo él. -Matamos es mucha gente —dijo ella con la boca seca y la lengua pesada-. Yo lo maté. -Da lo mismo —volvió a decir Emilio. Lo que haga uno es cosa de los dos. Rosario y yo matamos a un tipo. ¿A quién, por Dios?—pregunté indignado. No sé —dijo Emilio. -Yo tampoco —dijo Rosario (Franco 9).

This passage recalls Marx's perspectives on criminality. In Rosario's estimation, the only person who bore the brunt of murder is her. She implicitly lays claim to be a participant in a criminality that sustains the speculation and system that uphold Emilio's upper-class lifestyle. Yet, Emilio sees himself—in a kind of desperate desire—implicated in the crime. Nevertheless, both characters dodge the legal repercussions for murder, in this case. Their impunity exposes the extent to which corruption functions unfettered, especially amongst those who have the means to pay. Yet, while Emilio is clearly complicit in this crime, he faces no social ostracization for his involvement. Meanwhile, Rosario is seen as Other—not only by Emilio's family, but also by both Emilio and Antonio. She is other-worldly to them and unapologetic about her overt engagement in the criminal lifestyle. They both keep her close and yet distinguish themselves from her, even as they feel sympathy for her. Rosario is the temptress, the criminal, wanton Eve

to Emilio's Adam, and her depiction as such point to the ways in which the criminal must be othered to sustain its fictitious marginality.

Moreover, in this passage, while Rosario is indeed being described as a tragic anti-heroine, it also illustrates a common trope found in *sicaresca* literature. It references addiction that leads to a degenerate state—the kind that that might lead a low-level criminal to commit murder. The repeated references to Rosario throughout the novel as someone who is unable to let go of a deadly lifestyle—both of illicit crime and bodily recklessness. This characterization serves to sustain the idea that Colombia's urban history is part and parcel with one of urban narco-lawlessness. Moreover, the impulse that Emilio demonstrates to assert Rosario's belonging reveals his unease with her wealth as being illicitly attained. Emilio enacts his judgment upon Rosario by demonstrating his misunderstanding her desire to reject social standards. In fact, in her rejection of these standards, she exposes them as constructed to the benefit of few and therefore criminal in themselves. Finally, Rosario is described, over and over, as a femme fatale—an idea which only reifies the notion that Colombia's women are a stand-in for a broader metaphor of the exported imaginary of the country: beautifully risky. Instead of serving to narrate marginalized histories of suffering, novels like this one serve to circulate an imaginary of Colombia that is reductive.

1.3 Escobar's Tragic Humanity: The Ordinary Narco-Baron in Netflix's *Narcos*

One of the most recent iterations of Escobar's renderings in contemporary cultural production can been found in the 2015 Netflix TV series *Narcos*, a docu-drama that has been criticized for its reductive portrayal of 1980s and 1990s Colombia. I utilize this hybrid term—docu-drama—because while key elements of the show draw heavily on photography and archival

video footage, *Narcos* is undergirded by a dramatic flair present in most media and television portrayals of Colombia. Colombian film critic Omar Rincón published in *El Tiempo* (one of Colombia's most prominent newspapers) his review of *Narcos*:

> Ahora llega la versión USA: la DEA lo hizo todo. Una historia válida como las otras. Ahí ya llevamos cuatro versiones y un solo pecado: NarColombia. 'Narcos' se refiere con imágenes documentales a don Pablo 'rating' Escobar, a los Ochoa, a Rodríguez Gacha…pero ellos no son los protagonistas, tampoco el Estado colombiano, sino la DEA (*El Tiempo).*

Rincón's critique is ultimately useful in complicating *Narcos'* success. *Narcos* provides a U.S.-narrated and U.S.–centric version of the events that essentializes Colombia *just* enough to be popular with American audiences. The show also identifies the complications and various sides of the conflict, as it is set *in* Colombia and a significant amount of the dialogue is in Spanish. Both of these aspects represent a certain kind of visual and aural "authenticity" and have served to bolster its critical acclaim. Based on true events—but subject to dramatics (as each episode opens with the tantalizing title track and montage video)—the show is narrated by the voice of Steve Murphy (played by American actor Boyd Holbrook), a former DEA agent who worked in Colombia in the 1980s and 1990s. The show has garnered huge success, mostly with audiences outside of Colombia, with stellar ratings even into the release of the second season in 2016.[21] The third season focuses on the evolution of the cartels post-Escobar (Season 2 ends with his death), but this reading focuses on the portrayals of Escobar in Season 1 and 2.[22] While

[21] Unlike the telenovela industry that mostly attracts Latin American audiences, *Narcos* has successfully performed an Escobar redux fascination for U.S. viewers. I argue that part of the show's success lies in its linguistic hybridity, as it is narrated by an American DEA officer, but invites audiences to audibly enjoy the Colombian accents played by the various cast members of Escobar's cartel. This hybridity serves to expose the hierarchy implicit in the show; the cartels' existence is permissible insofar as dictated by American power.
[22] Since its successful run of Season 3 (which details the metamorphosis and reign of Escobar's commercial archenemy—the Cali cartel), Netflix has now launched what they term a "companion series," *Narcos: Mexico* (2018), that chronicles the transformation of loosely-organized groups of cannabis growers into infamous crime rings like the Guadalajara Cartel.

the show is set on location (a rare occurrence, since most films made about Colombia are shot in different locales), the cast of characters ironically hails from all over Latin America, even Spain, with the show's complicated anti-hero/villain (Escobar) played by Brazilian actor Wagner Moura.[23] In what follows, I analyze the way in which *Narcos* complicates the concept of geographically-bounded criminality—pushing at the limits of the definition of what is criminal—and the continued fascination with U.S. narrated intervention. Moreover, I examine the way in which the series portrays Pablo Escobar as plainly human—by exposing his physically vulnerable existence and uncouth appearance—without resorting to either a sympathetic or a grandiose portrayal of the nefarious capo. While the show falls short of offering a more nuanced version of Colombia's drug cartel history, it *does* offer audiences a rare and true-to-life portraiture of Colombia's narco-legend, Pablo Escobar.

Wendy Brown, in *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* offers a way to understand the boundless empire of Escobar in terms of his contribution to the production of capital. She discusses capitalism's transformation from the realm of the material to the divine. particularly in states where the presence of the sovereign or state-power feels like a phantom. I extend her reading to the case of Colombia. The Colombian government has blamed its failure to quell the drug trade to its incapacity to reach remote sectors of the country. Moreover, in many rural regions that have been subject to the divisive violence of guerrilla and paramilitary conflict, the

[23] Significant drama surrounds the fact that nefarious drug lord Escobar is played by the Brazilian actor, and much of the buzz about a poorly portrayed accent has all but turned off Colombian audiences. According to a *Rolling Stone* interview, Moura was approached by one of the show's producers, José Padilha, for the role, and *Rolling Stone* claims that "the result: his performance is a masterpiece of charismatic ambiguity." On the one hand, the decision to have Escobar portrayed by a non-Colombian may have been a strategy to attract Colombian audiences who have grown tired of seeing Colombians cast in overly violent and dramatic portrayals of their history. On the other hand, Colombian audiences can tend towards a parochially insular attitude toward their self-narration, demonstrating a proclivity to seeing their accent, geography, and even violent history with a paradoxically complex pride.

state appears to be altogether absent, having resigned its citizens to live wedged between those warring factions. Considering the roles that capital and criminality have played in Colombia's drug trade, I offer Brown as a way to not only consider capitalism as a dubious criminal enterprise, but also to understand capital—the exchange of value within this system—as criminally sovereign unto itself:

> Capital appears to be ascending to a form of sovereignty without a sovereign, that is, without an anthropomorphized God at its heart. At first blush, this would seem to comport with a view of capital as a relentless force of desacralization, a view proffered, by both Marxists and neoliberals, who regard the market as attenuating religious and tribal passions and attachments. But there is another way to understand global capital as embodying elements of sovereignty without the sovereign. Perhaps it is in a certain way more God-like than modern political sovereigns ever were, insofar as it more closely approximates a god's power to make the world without deliberation or calculation (Brown 65).

By blurring the lines of what is materially necessary, capital (along with its extreme accumulation) makes itself a divine sovereign, a god—thereby its possessor a high priest. Capital transforms itself into an alternate state deity, not defined by borders or physical frontiers, but rather sustained through a created sphere of exchange, profit and poverty. Indeed, recollections of Escobar often cast him as a saint unto the people, the ultimate equalizer of inequity, as he built schools and roads, and improved infrastructure in places where the state had removed itself.

Indeed, capital undoes what the state so heavily relies on—constructed borders and limits of sovereignty—by demonstrating its capacity to transcend those imposed delimitations. No place is this better seen than in Escobar's capacity to blur borders amongst the pawns of his drug domain: Miami, Medellín, Bogotá, Cali, and even New York. Capital allows him to transcend, even pose a threat, in all of these places. In turn, Brown goes on to discuss the impact of what she calls this "alternative reading" of capital, which offers an even more provocative understanding of the intersection of capital and criminality:

> This alternative reading turns the first one inside out: as capital, God is not dead, but rather finally deanthropomorphized—finally God. Here is how the theses concerning the unleashing of religious power and the sovereignty of global capital could be put together: Capital is both master and coin of the realm, except there is no realm, no global polity, governance, or society, and neither are there boundaries or territory that delimit capital's domain. Rather today, we face increasingly faltering theological political sovereignty, on the one hand, and capital as global power, on the other. This makes for a strange inversion and paradox. While weakening nation-state sovereigns yoke their fate and legitimacy to God, capital, that most desacralizing of forces, becomes God-like: almighty, limitless, and uncontrollable (Brown 66).

Capital, symbolized by Escobar, undoubtedly becomes "almighty, limitless and uncontrollable" throughout the development of his empire, as portrayed through the show. This paradox is aptly demonstrated in Netflix's *Narcos,* as capital demonstrates its limitless reach across the breadth of Escobar's empire. In the show, capital lays bare how borders and territories become fluid. Throughout the first and second seasons, Pablo Escobar's kingdom begins in Chilean jungles, grows in the Colombian Amazon, stretches to the barrios of Medellín, and thrives even in Miami's beaches and New York's high-rise harbor. In the show, we see how capital and crime work hand in hand to evade U.S. and Colombian authorities. The entangled relationship between both countries, as depicted by the show, demonstrate how capital's decimation of delineated domains forces a bitter co-dependence, since both Colombia and the U.S. seem to want to be responsible for Escobar's capture, showcasing that sovereign strength still rules. Yet, by the third season of the show, the viewer becomes aware that the master is capital and that its reach is not delimited to a single capo. After all, Season Two ends with the death of the infamous kingpin Escobar, and yet we find the narcotrade thriving at the start of Season 3. *Narcos* essentially exposes the unbridled potential of capital—that mighty and sovereign leviathan.

Narcos's opening song has a melancholic yet can't-look-away quality to it—like an accident scene that bottlenecks traffic. It opens with a humming ballad beat, the kind of sound one might associate with a low-lit bar and people giving one another a "come hither" look in the

dim room. Indeed, the genre of narco-realism hinges on this kind of desire—a blend of darkness mixed with addictive fascination—and the genre defines itself by its many glorified depictions of assassin criminality. Yet, the *Narcos's* opening video challenges the narco-aesthetic familiar to the precedent of the *sicaresca* genre, as the different montages visually capture the reach of Escobar's empire, rather than a more graphic depiction of its symbolic headquarters, Medellín. The song traces a complex and at times contradictory visual journey: From the beauty queen on a beach, smiling seductively at what we can imagine might be her narco-lover who casts a glance in her direction, to a television set featuring Ronald Reagan likely asserting the U.S. position of launching a war on drugs, to a playful panorama of Escobar's paradise plantation outside of Medellín (Hacienda Nápoles), where his wealth is magnificently peacocked through his collection of exotic animals, alongside the scene of a dozen motorcycles on the same plantation that are revving for a race among his capo-comrades. This montage shows us that Escobar's criminality is unbounded; it cannot be reduced to either *comunas* or the high-rises of Medellín. Likewise, it is a threat to both Colombian and U.S. interests alike, as the final shot of the song shows back-and-forth face takes of DEA Agent Steve Murphy and Escobar himself, poised for a metaphorical face-off.

The final episodes of Season 1 and Season 2 undoubtedly offer depictions of a Pablo Escobar that is, above all, human. In the Season 1 finale, "Despegue," we find Pablo Escobar in "jail,"—that is, a jail of his making—whose moniker (La Catedral) gestures at both its sacred and palatial qualities. Locking up Pablo Escobar in La Catedral was a bitter compromise, made by then-President César Gaviria, in an effort to curb the violence of Escobar's making that had come to define day-to-day life for the citizens of Medellín. In an exchange for Escobar "laying down arms," he would be allowed to construct his own prison, protected by his own men, with

access to all the trappings of wealth to which he was accustomed. Here we find him at the end of Season 1. One would think Escobar would have it made in this gaudy prison-of-his-own-making. Nevertheless, the episode opens with a shot of Escobar lying in bed, looking fatigued and disheveled. It seems clear that prison life does not suit him. Upon waking up (sans his wife, Tata), he immediately lights up a weed cigarette, as if seeking to find an instantaneous mental escape in lieu of the possibility of a physical one. He proceeds to sit up, and we begin to see the magnitude of his state of abandon. His white shirt is dirtied, he has a growing belly, and his hair is unkempt. Instead of proceeding to shower and dress for the day, Escobar merely puts on tennis shoes and walks out of his bedroom, running into his swath of followers, hired hit men, and groupies. Dissatisfaction is plastered on his face, and we see a Pablo that is diminished, reduced to a shadow of his former glory and living in quarantine. His physical decay signals a slow desperation, in which he moves through conversations dejected and expressionless. Escobar is rendered a conventional, unsympathetic mortal—a depiction which diminishes Escobar's powerful position in previous narco-narratives.

A similarly disturbing encounter happens during the finale of Season 2. In "¡Al Fin Cayó!" Pablo has a bitter heart-to-heart with his father, during his phase of hiding out on his father's farm outside of Medellín. In the beginning of the scene, he and his father sit outside, and he finds himself wistfully wondering what life would have been like had he grown up in a more idyllic farm environment. Asking his father whether he should buy a farm nearby with his own family, Escobar says, "Podríamos administrarla juntos. ¿Usted qué piensa de eso?" Meanwhile, his father avoids the questions and says they should get back to work. Later in the episode, he is tasked to help his father butcher a pig. The first cut into the pig's body unexpectedly sprays blood onto Escobar's face and clothes. He yells angrily, and his father says "Chistoso que no le

guste la sangre." Escobar furiously replies, "¿Usted qué me quiere decir con eso?" Losing his temper, he confronts his father, demanding whether he knows the scope of his infamy. His father admits he knows exactly who he is and is ashamed. This scene is a dark parallel of the undoing that occurs at the end of Season 1. Yet, in Season 2, Escobar's emotional desperation is depicted as having grown more profound. In the plainest terms, Escobar's money has made his life mayhem; it has ultimately afforded him none of what he truly craves: love, admiration, and belonging. He most certainly is beloved by his family, and he is admired, even revered, by his army of *sicarios* who cannot imagine their kingdom being ruled by any other. Escobar's initial rise into this mad empire was to challenge and mock the injustice of wealth and elitism in Colombia. That is, that wealth cannot buy belonging, and the system of capitalism itself is criminal. The "hijos de papi" are more than just wealthy. They belong to a sphere that is exclusive and is sustained by that very exclusivity through channels of corruption and impunity. Yet, Escobar will never be beloved or admired by this crowd, who shun his class-less upbringing and scorn his garish displays of wealth. Escobar may have been rich, but at the end of his life, he tragically finds himself no closer to a place among the elite than his middle-class Medellín neighborhood days, as a teenager hustling scams and engaged in petty crime. Ultimately, Escobar is revealed to be utterly human, preoccupied with aspirations as conventional as belonging.

In addition to more realistic depiction of Escobar, *Narcos* also showcases the messianic intentions of U.S.-backed anti-cartel efforts. These efforts not only served to harm more than to help squelching the cartels, but also continued the U.S. neoimperial legacy in Colombia. In Season 1, Colombian President Cesar Gaviria challenges the DEA's involvement in the war against drugs, saying "well, your government research says 660 tons of cocaine were consumed

in the United states last year. Perhaps if your resources were focused at home, we'd all be better off." In this war against drugs, the dueling interests of the Colombian and U.S. governments are exposed, in terms of their hopes for Escobar's ultimate demise. The U.S. interest was to have extradition on the table, so that Escobar could be tried and jailed in the United States, solidifying their role as the savior of the global South. The Colombian government, faced with the need for greater resources to fight Escobar's empire, had to decide between extradition and working alone to catch and capture Escobar, in order to have him duly tried and jailed in his home country. For them, this would signify a sign of pride, serving justice to the country's most infamous criminal.

This conflict is highlighted when President Cesar Gaviria gives a speech, demonstrating his resistance to negotiate on the terms of extradition with Escobar and his fellow kingpins. Indeed, most of the violence enacted by Escobar and his cronies in response to extradition remains on the table. Escobar unleashed his wrath in the form of multiple bombings of police stations, the bomb explosion and subsequent fatal crash of an Avianca flight, and multiple kidnappings of politically-connected Colombians, including the famous journalist/daughter of a former president, Diana Turbay, in order to send a clear signal about his unwillingness to ever be extradited. In his speech, President Gaviria states:

> Colombians say God made our land so beautiful it was unfair to the rest of the world. So, to even the score, God populated the land with a race of evil men. The primary impediment to a free and uninhibited future is the violence and terror that currently grips our beloved country. A violence initiated by these evil men will be brought to justice. In the name of decency and in the memory of Luis Carlos Galán, we will extradite. This decision will not come from fear. It has come from a clarity of judgment, free from the cloud of terror that surrounds us and obscures our view. I can say only one thing to Colombians in this time of peril: there will be a future.

In addition to highlighting the central tension between the U.S. and Colombian forces in reference to Escobar, Gaviria's speech also exemplifies another dichotomy of the show: the beauty of Colombia alongside the violence of its people, as if both relied upon one another. In

fact, the show commences with opening credits that establish this supposed contradiction with the following lines: “Magical realism is defined as what happens when a highly detailed realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe. There is a reason magic realism was born in Colombia.” To those familiar with the term, this definition of magic realism smacks of a reductive and exoticized vision of Colombia as an endemically violent yet mysterious place. Yet, *Narcos’* opening credits show the unrelenting obsession with a Colombian imaginary as an enigmatic place, irresistibly risky to encounter. Aldona Bialowas Pobutsky’s essay, “Going Down Narco-Memory Lane: Pablo Escobar in Visual Media” concludes with a brief but important consideration of these opening credits, which invoke this long-heralded mythic identity of magic realism:

> The opening credits of *Narcos* announce that magical realism is the natural consequence of Colombia’s history. This has less to do with Gabriel García Márquez than with the exoticism Anglo viewership may seek in the series. Weaving together the historical fiction of a docudrama with the bravado of an action film - with frequent subtitling in Spanish - the series provides a false sense of historical accuracy for a public with little exposure to Latin American culture (290).

While the show comes up short in terms of accuracy, I echo Pobutsky’s claim elsewhere in the text that the series *Narcos* does serve to humanize—that is to render ordinary and humanly vulnerable—the extraordinary figure which has become Escobar’s legacy. Ultimately, *Narcos* highlights how U.S. audiences best understand the story of the Colombian cocaine trade: as a criminal enterprise native to Colombia and as a social catastrophe which begs for the aid of U.S. intervention.

Narcos is not telling a new story, nor is it even telling an old story differently. Rather, the show has successfully combined fragments of different visual genres - documentary, telenovela, and television drama—to come up with a formula that repurposes what is known about Escobar and the *narco-carteles*. It showcases a mix of well-historicized Colombian anti-milestones (the

bombing of an Avianca flight that was meant to be carrying then-presidential candidate Cesar Gaviria, the siege of the Palace of Justice, the assassination of Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, and the list goes on) alongside anecdotes that initially seem quixotically appropriate to a country that has staked, willingly or not, its reputation on magic. Nevertheless, the show *does* unwittingly re-hash an unhealed wound in Colombian society. Meaning, Pablo Escobar continues to defy categories—is he history, memory, legend, nightmare or myth? In many ways, considering the difficulty in historicizing Escobar is to consider the difficulty in historicizing any of the violent histories in Colombia. Certainly, Escobar attained power through unbridled wealth, gained from an illicit cocaine market. The show demonstrates (albeit dramatically) Escobar's ingenuity, pride, and reckless pursuit of power. Ironically, the pursuit of Escobar and his brand of narco-criminality highlights what other crimes go unpunished, and how power is ultimately not for sale in Colombia.

While Escobar's humanity may be on full parade in *Narcos,* Juan Gabriel Vásquez takes a different approach in his 2011 *El ruido de las cosas al caer.* Set in the early 2000s (amidst several flashbacks), the novel reveals how Escobar's assassination might have stopped him in body, but not in spirit. Throughout the novel, Escobar and his grandiose Medellín serve as ghostly backdrop to most of the plot twists and tragedies. Dead in body, but alive in legacy, Escobar's specter is inextinguishable. In what follows, I trace the life after death of Escobar in *El ruido de las cosas al caer.*

1.4 Ghostly Renderings: Specters of Escobar in Vásquez's *El ruido de las cosas al caer*

Netflix's *Narcos* shows us that Escobar is not going anywhere anytime soon. His legacy and the violence associated with the drug trade remain a central preoccupation in much of

Colombian literature. Memoirs and novels tend to either indirectly or directly reference the aftermath of the 1980s and 1990s—works which include *El olvido que seremos* (Faciolince, 2006), *Delirio* (Restrepo, 2007), *Los ejercitos* (Rosero, 2010), and *El ruido de las cosas al caer* (Vásquez, 2011). This final novel takes up the ghost of Escobar as a central thread, whilst exploring the ways in which his cultural legacy is embedded into the urban landscape and collective discourse of what it means to be Colombian.

El ruido de las cosas al caer (2011) chronicles one man's journey through the trauma of personal loss and the accompanying collective memory of the 1980s and 1990s drug wars in Colombia. Published in 2011 and winner of the Premio Alfaguara, the novel hit shelves at a particularly volatile moment of the nation's political crossfire, following Álvaro Uribe's unprecedented two-term tenure as president. Going back to the opening lines of *Narcos* that invoke magical realism as "something too strange to believe," Vásquez's work disavows this idea, suggesting instead how bewildering it might be to believe (and even accept) the realities in Colombia. He says, "I want to forget this absurd rhetoric of Latin America as a magical or marvelous continent. In my novel[s] there is a disproportionate reality, but that which is disproportionate in it is the violence and cruelty of our history and of our politics" (White, *New York Times*).[24] As for the novel, Vásquez's work represents, among other things, a sort of

[24] Indeed, Vásquez's writing is inextricably linked to an estrangement from his motherland. Interviewed by the *Washington Post*, he stated, "I had to spend six years living abroad to find how to write about Colombia, how to deal with the country in fiction…I felt I didn't have any moral right to deal with it in fiction. Then I realized that the fact that I didn't understand my country was the best reason to write about it." (2013). Vásquez's book has been acclaimed by well-known Colombian authors (Hector Abad Faciolince describes it "el objeto verbal mejor logrado…de los últimos tiempos") and his prose has been described as a welcome break from narcorealist writing that has often defined Colombian literature. Vásquez's work ranges across? an exploration of the ways in which Colombia's violence has embedded itself into all facets of society. He utilizes modes of flashback, varied depictions of rural and urban life, and in all ways, Vásquez's work analyzes how the narcotrade has defined cultural discourse for the better part of a century. *El ruido de las cosas al caer* marks a shift in literary trends that do away with realism and embrace the tense exposure of how criminality and impunity exist within the fabric of Colombian society.

generational move away from the style of canonical authors and their treatment of the endemic violence that has long plagued Colombia. He and his contemporaries (Mario Mendoza, Santiago Gamboa, etc.) resist a singular exploration of Colombia (and Latin America for that matter) through the lens of outdated glorification of the past, and instead work to de-mythify violence as somehow romantically pervasive of Colombia's character.

In *El ruido de las cosas al caer,* the landscape of the capital, Bogotá, serves as the main setting for the novel and functions as a spectral reminder of the complex history of violence in Colombia. In *Periferias de la narcocracia*, Alberto Fonseca describes the value of the novel in terms of its contribution to the corpus of literature, in, around, and about the drug trade in Colombia:

> La manera en que *El ruido de las cosas al caer* articula el pasado del narcotráfico y el presente de la sociedad colombiana después de la lucha contra los carteles es su valor principal. Una parte importante de esta novela es poder leer entre líneas la necesidad que tiene una sociedad de discutir sus miedos y los eventos que marcaron su historia reciente (82).

The novel offers a way to understand the tense dialectic between past and present—all mediated by the specter of Escobar. This parallels the haunted feelings experienced by the protagonist, Antonio Yammara, feelings which are brought on by a near-death experience and narrated in reference to Escobar's historical legacy. The novel's imagining of violence is not propelled by an overly-reliant narrative representation of violence. Instead, the novel is guided by a ghostly referent to the life and death of Pablo Escobar. Jacques Derrida, in *Specters of Marx,* utilizes the concept of spectrality as a lens to understand the legacy of Marxism in relationship to the rise of neoliberal, global capitalism. Using his conceptual framework, I would like to argue for spectrality as a non-reductive apparatus through which to understand the never-ending ghost of of Pablo Escobar in the novel. In *El ruido de las cosas al caer,* rather than attempting a reflection

of the past as it was (as in *Rosario Tijeras)* or a strategic narration of the past (as in *Narcos),* the novel spectralizes the ghost of Pablo Escobar. Specifically, the flashing *mise en scène* with which the novel begins is a dead hippopotamus. This hippo is a "former resident" of Pablo Escobar's extravagant dream-estate Hacienda Nápoles, and his discovery is described in meticulous detail:

> El primero de los hipopótamos, un macho del coló de las perlas negras y tonelada y media de peso, cayó muerto a mediados de 2009. Había escapado dos años atrás del antiguo zoológico de Pablo Escobar en el valle del Magdalena, y en ese tiempo de libertad había destruido cultivos, invadido abrevaderos, atemorizado a los pescadores y llegado a atacar a los sementales de una hacienda ganadera. Los francotiradores que lo alcanzaron le dispararon un tiro a la cabeza y otro al corazón (con balas de calibre .375, pues la piel de un hipopótamo es gruesa; posaron con el cuerpo muerto, la gran mole oscura y rugosa, un meteorito recién caído (Vásquez 10).

Not only does the novel open with a reference to Escobar by its second sentence, but it also starts by narrating an eerily similar scene of destruction to that of Escobar's own reign of terror, manhunt and assassination—and is therefore symbolic of how rooted the memory of Escobar remains in the collective Colombian imaginary. Throughout the novel, this specter—that is Pablo Escobar's legacy — is all at once anticipatory, fearful and fascinating. While he wrought a unique violence upon Colombia, throughout the novel he is invoked as a dialectical figure-in-return—a figure who resists being either memorialized or flatly forgotten.

In the novel, Antonio references a generationally shared fear based on collective memories of a horrific childhood in Colombia, set in the 1980s and 1990s, at the height of the Colombian drug cartels. This violence left a series of urban ruins, both physically and figuratively. At the time, he narrates how news cycle after news cycle reported of bombed airplanes and assassinated politicians. Antonio walks the reader through this history:

> Yo tenía catorce años esa tarde de 1984 en que Pablo Escobar mató o mandó a matar a su perseguidor más ilustre, el ministro de Justicia, Rodrigo Lara Bonilla (dos sicarios en moto, una curva de la calle 127). Tenía dieciséis cuando Escobar mató o mandó a matar a

> Guillermo Cano, director de *El Espectador* (a pocos metros de las instalaciones del periódico, el asesino le metió ocho tiros en el pecho). Tenía diecinueve y ya era un adulto, aunque no había votado todavía, cuando murió Luis Carlos Galán, candidato a la presidencia del país, cuyo asesinato fue distinto o es distinto en nuestro imaginario porque se vio en televisión…Y poco después fue lo del avión de Avianca, un Boeing 727-21 que Escobar hizo estallar en el aire—en algún lugar del aire que hay entre Bogotá y Cali—para matar a un político que ni siquiera estaba en él (Vásquez 19).

These haunted encounters with violence shake the protagonist, laying bare a fear that permeates the different ways in which he confronts the impenetrable city of Bogotá. Antonio walks around the world with trepidation, and in his day-to-day life, moves about with a calculated rhythm—from his home, to his office, to the billiard hall and back—all in an effort to avoid the dangers he internalizes as part of the urban landscape of his city.

Moreover, in the word play, "mató o mandó a matar" as indistinguishable, it becomes clear that the two are synonymous. Whether Escobar murdered or tasked someone else to carry out these violent acts, he is the protagonist, the criminal mind, behind it all. It suggests an inescapability to the far reaches of his criminal empire—as if the scope of his power is ubiquitous and infinitely reaching. At the time, it surely felt that way. Escobar's name was on the tongue of nearly every Colombian, young and old, rich and poor. If you were a wealthy upper-class Colombian, you would find yourself lamenting the shame this nouveau riche scoundrel had wrought upon your country. If you were poor, you might instead find yourself applauding massive acts of violence inflicted to teach the elite political class that they were not above reproach or tragedy. Escobar's action, while heinous, expose the extent to which he engaged the cracks of capitalism. He was an affront—both through tangible and intangible ways—to the elite. While he enjoyed even greater wealth than most, he laid bare the ways in which belonging to a social echelon in Colombia had less to do with economic status and more to do with political favors and financial you-scratch-my-back-and-I'll-scratch yours maneuvers. To claim that

Escobar's criminality was greater than these other acts is to be blind to the distinctions capitalism creates around the forces that both sustain it and that it also must obscure in order to proceed unfettered. To have Escobar belong to this stratum of society would be, in a sense, condemnatory of their own criminality.

In the novel, it becomes clear from the beginning that Escobar himself is the tint, so to speak, through which Antonio's adolescence and young adulthood are colored. Moreover, the novel's disjointed structure—beginning with a newspaper piece about Hacienda Nápoles (past referent) and a hippopotamus escape (present referent)—shows us that Escobar is inseparably linked to both the past, the present, and the future of Colombia. In this way, Escobar's specter functions to challenge time's supposed teleology. In *Specters of Marx,* Derrida challenges teleological temporality in the following way:

> Before knowing whether one can differentiate between the specter of the past and the specter of the future, of the past present and of the future present, one must perhaps ask oneself if the *spectrality effect* does not consist in undoing this opposition, or even this dialectic, between the actual, effective presence and its other. One must perhaps ask oneself whether this opposition, be it a dialectical opposition, has not always been a closed field and a common axiomatic for the antagonism between Marxism and the cohort or the alliance of its adversaries (40).

In the same way that narco-criminality exposes the cracks in the foundation of law, so Escobar's spectrality exposes the indistinct nature of past, present, and future. This disruption of temporality—present through and by the constant referents to Escobar and the disjointed flashback structure of the novel—challenge the notion of a progressive and teleological time. The novel is ultimately complicating temporality and the limits between past and present, in terms of the scale and history of violence in Colombia. Antonio himself says, after reflecting on the sordid blood bath which characterized his childhood in the city, "Y me digo al mismo tiempo que somos pésimos jueces del momento presente, tal vez porque el presente no existe en

realidad: todo es recuerdo, esta frase que acabo de escribir ya es recuerdo, es recuerdo esta palabra que usted, lector, acabó de leer" (Vásquez 57). By questioning the very notion of the material present, Antonio lays bare Escobar's legacy: a violent ghost that refuses to disappear. Rather than seeing the violence of the drug cartels as a historical period isolated from the other histories of violence in Colombia, Vásquez's novel asserts that violence itself is a national idiosyncrasy whose history resists being neatly written and whose roots, causes and symptoms are ever-intertwined to the present.

In addition to the disjointed depiction of time in the novel, the novel's central relationship haphazardly formed between the protagonist, Antonio Yammara, and his unlikely friend, Ricardo Laverde, demonstrates how Escobar manifests as a relational specter of the Other. Antonio is a law professor who works in Bogotá, who takes up playing billiards in the afternoons at a café close to the university. There, he meets Ricardo, a mysterious man recently released from prison who has come to frequent this pool hall. The two strike up an unlikely friendship, given Antonio's reservations about Ricardo's lawless past. The initial climax of the novel is reached when Antonio experiences a near-fatal gunshot wound while standing beside Ricardo, right outside their pool hall. Ricardo ends up killed from the bullet, and Antonio is critically injured. In the aftermath of the shooting, Antonio begins to descend into a post-traumatic panic, unable to cope with his anxiety. Physically incapacitated, he also experiences a parallel mental and emotional emasculation due to his injuries. Even though Ricardo is dead, he has become the Other through his parallel injury. As Judith Butler theorizes:

> If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. But they have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). They cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or rather, never "were" and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness. Violence

> renews itself in the face of the apparent inexhaustibility of its object. The derealization of the "Other" means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral (33—34).

On the one hand, for Antonio, Ricardo "live[s] on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness." Unable to make peace with the shooting and the subsequent death of Ricardo, he sets out on a quest to discover Ricardo's past, and through this journey, discovers how his own past (and that of his generation) has always been characterized by angst, produced in large measure to the effect of cartel violence of the 1980s and 1990s. At the end of the novel, he returns to an empty life, without his wife and child, leaving the reader wondering whether the outcome was worth the quest.

In addition to the ghost of Escobar (set off by the reference to Hacienda Nápoles when the novel begins) Vásquez also riddles the novel with references to the vestiges of the Palace of Justice siege, political assassinations during the drug wars of the 1980s and 1990s, and even the Bogotázo—signaling how they all work together to produce internalized angst in Antonio. At one point, Antonio gives a poignant meditation on how he endures, in spite of this macabre urban geography:

> Imaginé una ciudad en que las calles, las aceras, se van cerrando poco a poco a nosotros, como las habitaciones de la casa en el cuento de Cortázar, hasta acabar por expulsarnos. <<Estábamos bien, y poco a poco empezábamaos a vivir sin pensar>>, dice el hermano del cuento aquel después de que la presencia misteriosa se ha tomado otra parte de la casa. Y añade: <<Se puede vivir sin pensar>>. Es cierto: se puede. Después de que la calle 14 me fuera robada --y después de largas terapias, de soportar mareos y estómagos destrozados por la medicación --comencé a aborrecer la ciudad, a tenerle miedo, a sentirme amenazado por ella (Vásquez 66).

Fear is a pestilence for Antonio that ultimately displaces him from his own life. The lives of these characters—the protagonists in Cortazar's "Casa Tomada" and in *El ruido de las cosas al caer*—hauntingly resemble one another, as each of them struggles with preoccupation of intangible horror and the threat of what they know to be a portent of danger. Whether that danger

is real, imagined, past or present makes no difference, and Antonio's post-traumatic experience exists to expose Bogotá's riskiness—a riskiness that has come to characterize a way of living in Colombia and signifies both the desperation and desire to understand its enigmatic history.

In this chapter, I have proposed an analysis of the different facets, myths, and trademarks of the narco-trade in Colombia, as seen through Colombian cultural products, popular both at home and abroad. By exploring the intersection of the narco-trade and cultural consumption, the specter of Colombia's narco-cartels exposes itself as under construction, consistently being re-written and even deconstructed. Escobar wields a powerful symbolism, as Miguel A. Cabañas writes, "When Escobar became the Other, and thus, spectral, he became a multidimensional ghost that for some symbolizes social mobility, for some pure evil, and for some, capitalist success" (181). No matter which dimension you choose, the ghost of Escobar is impervious to erasure. No doubt, then, that the Colombian narco-trade resists a neat history. Rather than being categorically villain or hero, the narco is both and neither, instead sustained by the economic system of inequality that creates him, consumes him, but seeks to also contain him.

Chapter 2
Childhood Experienced: The New Social Order of Play

> Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one. The norms of this small world must be kept in mind if one wishes to create things specially for children, rather than let one's adult activity, through its requisites and instruments, find its own way to them.
>
> -Walter Benjamin (*One-Way Street and Other Writings,* 1928)

As discussed in the previous chapter, Colombian cultural production has historically relied on the violent export of representation in filmic production—focusing on grim depictions of urban slums, endemic poverty, and criminality. Juana Suárez, in *Critical Essays on Colombian Cinema and Culture*, explains the push-pull of the "best-seller" mentality in Colombian cinema:

> New discourses demand breaking through the limits of only discussing Colombia's best-known films…It is not a matter of refusing to discuss the *sicaresca,* the diverse forms of violence that converge in Colombia or its historical violence, its marginality, and poverty, topics that have recurred so often in Colombian cinema that they seem to bring shame not on the national situation but on the work of the directors. The discourse on the 'negative image' that Colombian cinema exports is paradoxical. Writer Jorge Franco Ramos has summed it up as 'the same old story about our national image' ("El regreso" 124) (11).

What Suárez points to is the transformation of recent visual and literary texts that seek to reconfigure discourses of Colombian historiography and its relationship with the decades-long conflict. Essentially, she and other scholars are calling for a reconceptualization of how to produce and circulate Colombia by way of cultural products, without resorting to a commodified vision of the country as a violent haven. This chapter, too, is preoccupied with cultural products that resist objectifying a certain figure in filmic production: the child.

Considering the role of youth, Latin American cinema writ large has historically focused on portrayals of the child as victim, delinquent, addict or somewhere at the intersection of these conditions. Laura Podalsky's *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema* (2011) demonstrates how certain cinematic renditions of childhood—across Latin America—can strategically utilize affect to draw in the spectator. Podalsky's book is focused on the "sensorial and emotional appeals of recent Latin/a American films" in order to "see how today's cinema participates in larger sociocultural processes and to discern the degree to which contemporary filmmaking represents a break with older traditions of the region" (4). Podalsky's argument for using a different approach, through the framework of affect theory, is in part a rejection of a collapsing of media culture (as she cites Jean Franco, Beatriz Sarlo, and Nelly Richard can tend to do) and she ultimately finds problematic the "reification of avant-garde aesthetics as the best means to adequately address the past" (6). She focuses her book on Latin American films and in the chapter "Alien/Nation: Contemporary Youth in Film," she "explores the proliferation of Latin American films about disaffected young adults and their place in the shifting landscape of the contemporary nation" (Podalsky, "Alien/Nation" 23). Her study offers a generative discussion around the ways affect does not have to be collapsed into sentimentalism. However, leaving affect aside, this chapter advocates for an exploration of the child through the concept of experience.

As such, Karen Lury's *The Child in Film: Tears, Fears, and Fairytales* (2010) positing of a fruitful Otherness of the child gets at how the childhood experience and the child experiencing may unearth a new kind of subjectivity. Lury's study is inspired by "the sense that the child and childhood, and indeed children themselves, occupy a situation in which are 'other': other to the supposedly rational, civilised, 'grown up' human animal that is the adult" (Lury 1). By focusing

on a variety of films that portray the child's sexuality, abandonment, murder, and trauma, she is provoked by "how these child characters are seen to participate, react, and perform in an adult's world" (2). This chapter takes up Lury's conceptualization of the child as Other, positing that the Otherness can be explored through and by the child's experience of play. I argue for examining the child as a subject who plays, and through that play, discover themselves outside and transcendent to the adult world, rather than a simulacrum of that world.

If the child is Other, than what does that exploration of their alterity offer the adult world? Ana Rodríguez Navas, in "Global Market Hyperlocal Aesthetics: Framing Childhood Poverty in Contemporary Latin American Cinema" writes the following:

> the figure of the child is, as Eduardo Ledesma proposes, 'especially poised to represent issues of marginality on account of their special condition of alterity' (Ledesma 2012: 152). The child, by definition excluded from the adult world, makes a fitting focal point for films that turn away from broader questions of cause and context in favour of depicting lived realities (57).

Indeed, in Colombia, the portrayals of children in film have focused on these lived realities of poverty, criminality and the drug trade—specifically depicting the child as a manifestation of metropolitan misery and abandonment. Amongst the most iconic films is Victor Gaviria's *La vendedora de rosas* (1998).[25] When released, *La vendedora de rosas* was internationally recognized at the Cannes Film Festival, even ranked in competition for the Palme D'Or.[26] *La vendedora de rosas* is part of a trilogy of films, which include *Rodrigo D: No futuro* (1991) and

[25] Victoria Gaviria (1955) is a film director, writer and poet from Medellin, Colombia. Having grown up during the beginning of the Colombian conflict, he has first-hand witnessed the results of the civil war between the Colombian government and extremist groups (including drug cartels) which have historically led to high levels violence and unrest throughout Medellin—particularly in the 1980s and 1990s during the era of Pablo Escobar and the Medellín cartel. Gaviria attended the University of Antioquia in Colombia for psychology. In addition to filmmaking, Gaviria's seven poetry collections have garnered him acclaimed as well as several awards.

[26] The film garnered praise at the Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano de la Habana, Festival Internacional de Bratislava; el Festival Hispano de Miami, Festival de Cine de Bogotá, and it was nominated for the Ariel de Plata de la Academia de México award as well.

Sumas y restas (2004). In all these films, childhood marginality is falsely conflated as slum-set criminality. The youth *sicariato* is also protagonized in Colombian best-sellers, such as *La virgen de los sicarios* (Barbet Schroeder, 2000) and *Rosario Tijeras* (Emilio Maillé, 2005)—a spin-off of the novel analyzed in the previous chapter.[27]

In film (and cultural production generally), Colombian violence *especially* sells. All these works present visions of urban life and narco-realism in grossly graphic ways. In each of them, children participate in the urban hustle as hired assassins, low-level drug dealers, or gang members. The plots of all these films are subsumed in some way by the narcotrade, often reducing Colombia to appear as one giant metropolitan dystopia.

Depictions of youth—such as the type laid bare in Gaviria's film—typify the child as a mischievous mimesis of his/her adult counterpart.[28] Like most of Gaviria's work, the film is not depicted by professional actors, but rather by local children from the *comuna* in Medellín.[29] Like other Colombian *sicaresca* films, the show is filled with exaggerated and caricatured acting, referents to cartels and shantytown thugs, and local slang (known as *parlache*).[30] In a 2008 interview for the Arizona Journal of Hispanic Studies, Gaviria describes how this choice is made

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[27] As explored in the previous chapter, the *sicaresca* trope has been successfully exported, in both Colombian literature and film for decades. For further study on the *sicaresca* Françoise Bouvet's, "La novela sicaresca colombiana o la crónica de una muerte ordinaria" (2015) traces the genealogy of cultural production and its obsession with death, manifest through this genre.

[28] In order to define mimesis, I draw upon a combination of texts by Walter Benjamin: *The Doctrine of the Similar* (1933) and *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (1928). In *One-Way Street,* Benjamin's take on the production of a child's world, all unto themselves and distinctive from that of the adult, is the basis upon which this chapter defines mimesis. This chapter considers not only the vantage point of the child, but also what it might to privilege that mimetic instinct as a creative birth, rather than a parroted echo.

[29] *Comunas* are the shantytowns on the outskirts of the city of Medellín, located along the at-times treacherous mountainside and are often accessible only by informal bus routes, cable car, or by foot.

[30] The term *parlache* was coined by a group of sociolinguists, from the Department of Communication at the Universidad de Antioquia, determined to find a term that explained this linguistic phenomenon. Other possibilities included *el hablar torcido, el parceñol,* and *el sisasnolas.* For further information on the study, see "Hacia un diccionario de parlache: estudio lexicográfico de un argot colombiano" (2006) by Neus Vila Rubio and Luz Stella Naranjo.

to enfranchise the poor and push against what he sees as a reductive media portrayal of urban lower-class life in Colombia:

> Those in charge of the media show that the social fabric of the lower classes — of life, of neighborhoods, of cities, of people that remain outside of the media — is degenerate, absurd fabric and leads to nowhere. All the time the media reports on the general reality of the country and shows chaos and disorder, a country with no principle of order. All the time the media is reporting - the news most of all - and creating a sense that reality is absurd and full of chaos, disorder, and degeneration. Why? They do this to completely discourage the power of the people. The media gives the impression of complete disorder of the organizing powers of neighborhoods and the families that inhabit them (238-239).

The irony is, of course, that Gaviria's film trilogy—particularly *La vendedora de rosas*—can be critiqued of doing the opposite—that is, showcasing the very chaos and disorder which Gaviria blames as a media creation.[31] In fact, Gaviria's films may be part of the discouraging vision of urban degeneracy that he seeks to resist as a monolithic vision of Colombian's urban landscape. After all, his body of work is seemingly obsessed with the narco-trade and the *sicariato*.

On the other hand, instead of engaging in graphic narco-visuality, César Arbelaez's *Los colores de la montaña* (2010) is a film that engages the child *as* a child, experiencing the multiple valences of childhood. In other words, rather than focusing on the child as a dark imitation of the vagrant adult, in Arbelaez's film, the child is depicted in their element: at school, playing games, and among other children. Moreover, this film's setting does not rely on urban-set hustling. Rather, the plot is centered around a young boy, living with his family in a rural village. The protagonist, Manuel, must navigate an adult world of violence that threatens his day-

[31] Deborah Martin's essay, "Childhood and Its Representational Uses: Cinematic Experience and Agency in Victor Gaviria's *La vendedora de rosas"* also posits, in error, that the avant-garde form used in Gaviria's film serves to enfranchise the children's protagonism. Instead, my reading argues that the protagonism in Gaviria's work *disenfranchises* the child through an objectification of the children, whereby the spectator becomes a sympathetic voyeur unto the child's tragically pathetic condition.

to-day life, and yet, he manages to hold fast to his childness throughout the film—without either resorting to imitation of the adults or exhibiting an infantilized naivete.

Therefore, alongside a critical analysis of the reductive vision of the child in *La vendedora de rosas,* this chapter offers a contrasting close-reading of the childhood seen in César Arbelaéz's *Los colores de la montaña*. I contend that *Los colores de la montaña* offers a vision of the child that undermines the reductive ways in which childhood has been previously portrayed in Colombian cinema. In the film, the child is playful, cunning, and at once, innocent without being naive. The child understands much of the layered meanings of the adult world, and yet manages to build for themselves a world in which the adult is the outsider, rather than the other way around. Joseph Weiss, in "The Idea of Mimesis: Semblance, Play, and Critique in the Works of Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno" describes the precarity with which children hold onto the very intangible that defines "childhood" in the following:

> Children hear music with all the paradise of immersion, with all the hope of a "mimetic genius" that is given hope—"for the sake of the hopeless ones" but they are also always within an inch of precocious adulthood, within an inch of banishing their playmates from the playground, degenerating into a vicious mode of protective self-preservation (13-14).

Rather than leaning into adulthood, *Los colores de la montaña* envisions a child fully grounded in their childness. Rather than infantilizing the child, play functions as a tool for them to create a world unto themselves. By breaking from objectified portrayals of the child as an abandoned degenerate, *Los colores de la montaña* examines how children's acts of play are not infantilized versions of adult behavior, but rather a unique rejection of the binaries and rigid paradigms that often define the adult world of politics, war, and violence. This reading displaces traditional discourses on childhood innocence by contending a productive alterity in the very experience of childhood.

Moreover, *Los colores de la montaña* breaks from established trends of narcorealism and visions of urban debasement that are characteristic of both Gaviria's film and the subsequent soap opera spin-off.[32] More broadly, the film challenges the idea of Colombian cultural products being determined through an already-subsumed relationship to the drug trade. That is, the presence of violence in Colombia exists both outside and beyond the specters of the 1980s and 1990s *narcocarteles*. Drug trafficking fails to appear as a main story arc, signaling that it is but *one* facet in an embroiled history of violence, inequity and civil conflict. Colombia's history of violence exposes an enmeshed relationship among poor governance, staggering income inequality, political and social elitism, bitter partisanship, and unjust distribution and access to land—factors which together have led to guerrilla insurgency, paramilitarism, drug-related violence and delinquency, and high rates of intra-displaced peoples. Many of these multi-layered issues are present in the film and made visually manifest in complex ways. Ultimately, *Los colores de la montaña* foregrounds that "paradise of immersion" that is childhood without being a childish film.

2.1 *Pornomiseria* Embodied: Dark Mimicry in *La vendedora de rosas*

La vendedora de rosas is typical of a 1990s Colombian film: hyperlocal, slum-set, and grimly violent. Michéle Faguet's "Pornomiseria: Or How Not to Make a Documentary Film" defines the misery trope that was widely used in 1980s and 1990s narcorealist cinema. In the article, Faguet analyzes *Oiga vea* (1971), which was filmed as an ethnographic and critical conscience avant-garde documentary. At the time, the garish displays of the VI Annual Pan-

[32] In 2015, owing to the film's initial success, RCN Televisión released a telenovela, *Lady, la vendedora de rosas,* which chronicles the life of the actress, Leidy Tabares, who played the original film's protagonist (Mónica) and was subsequently wrongly convicted for being an accomplice in a drug ring murder.

American Games—held in Cali—highlighted the wretched conditions of the surrounding urban plight in Cali, and the film was intended to serve as a social justice commentary on this stark contrast. Yet, Faguet outlines the problematic nature of this justice-minded impulse:

> A desire to produce critical consciousness through the transparency or visibility of marginality always carries the risk of producing the opposite effect: that of cynical indifference which comes from a saturation and fetishisation of this visibility in the absence of proper analysis or even a basic code of ethics. In Colombia, the most significant cultural historical aspect of Mayolo and Ospina's [the filmmakers of *Oiga vea*] legacy may very well be the term they invented '*pornomiseria,* or 'poverty-misery'—to articulate a problem that became endemic to Colombian film-making in the 1970s, but that continues to haunt any discussion (historical or contemporary) about the representation of socio-economic hardship (7).

Victor Gaviria's *La vendedora de rosas* may have been directed with the intent to "produce critical consciousness," yet its form—using street children in the place of professional actors—places it in a corpus of films that risk engaging in what Faguet terms as *miserabilismo,* that is a "spectacular, fetishistic, and above all, consumable character of the images that passively attested to the degree of estrangement that existed among divided social classes in Colombia (and throughout Latin America)" (8).

In reference to Gaviria's film oeuvre, scholars have interpreted his impulse at a depiction of "voluntad realista" as demonstrative of a social justice minded dedication to ethical representation and his outright rejection of *pornomiseria.* Repeatedly in interviews, Gaviria articulates how his trilogy of avant-garde realist films are to be interpreted as social conscience raising visual manifestos around poverty and inequity in Medellín. Film scholars Juana Suarez and Carlos A. Jáuregui, in "Profilaxis, traducción y ética" argue that rather than *pornomiseria,* Gaviria's films represent a rejection of "el tropo del "desecho" y la "basura humana" (386) and write the following defense for *La vendedora de rosas:*

> Gaviria intenta—si bien no siempre lo logra—una búsqueda común con el Otro, sin el paternalismo de un proyecto redentor ni disciplinario y sin la predisposición jerárquica a

> la traducción; asumiendo la incomprensibilidad y alteridad del Otro; en otras palabras, se trata de un tipo de representación fundada en una observación mutua, en una óptica ética….La participación de los actores naturales en la narración fílmica, la ininteligibilidad de la imagen y el lenguaje, la constante resistencia a la traducción y la alusión a la alteridad como externa al acto representación, reinstalan la asechanza ética de lo "Real" (Jáuregui and Suárez 386-387).

I disagree with Jáuregui and Suarez's claim that somehow the film engages in an "observación mutua, en una óptica ética." If the film, as Rengifo describes, serves to alienate audiences, it serves to distance them from the ability to connect with those who inhabit the vast slums in Medellín. After all, the film often gets lumped within a corpus of works that include *La virgen de los sicarios* (Fernando Vallejo) and *Rosario Tijeras* (Jorge Franco)—two *sicaresca* works whose on-screen action figures graphic shootings, bloody gang battles, and sexual violence. I contend that Gaviria's public proclamations about his political commitments—as he sees enacted through his films-—have been detrimentally persuasive in having his work heralded as a socially engaged cinema. Instead, I posit re-reading his film as emblematic of *pornomiseria* and reconsidering how we see conceive of this director's work within the scholarly study of Colombian film.

In the aforementioned 2008 interview, Gaviria declares the following about the primacy of reality in his films:

> Obviously, I want to make movies that are so close to reality that they appear to be reality itself. I don't differentiate between the movie I'm making and reality. The non-professional actors don't differentiate these two things either...I think that cinema registers reality, real time and real things. I believe that cinema has become so fictional, so full of lies, that it has deceived us, covered up reality and whisked it away (244-245)

One of the ways Gaviria has lived out this commitment for his films to be "reality itself" is through the casting of non-professional actors. In *La vendedora de rosas,* Gaviria exclusively casts local children as actors. The film is set in Niquitáo (an impoverished neighborhood) in the city of Medellín. The casting of local, non-professional actors has been a facet of the film that

Gaviria has insisted captures a more "real" sense of the children's lives and humanizes their troubling family histories and upbringing for an otherwise apathetic Colombian audience. However, casting non-professional actors instead further distances the viewer from the lives portrayed on-screen than if the actors were professional. By using non-professional actors, the film sets an expectation for spectators to perceive that what they see on-screen is more real, more authentic, and more like reality. In fact, the use of natural actors is exploitative, and it ends up erasing the reality of screenplay, direction, casting (after all, the decisions to choose the specific children that Gaviria did inevitably meant that some who auditioned were not chosen), and the acting itself. By placing some sort of narrative primacy on the children *actually* being street children, it sends a message that those who best portray misery are, in fact, the miserable.

Moreover, not investing the production money to pay professional actors sends an antithetical message from the one the film purportedly intends to deliver. If, as Gaviria claims, these stories need to be heard, then why not spend the money to have them told with the most professional actors and in the most professional manner? Rather, the lack of resourcing professional actors cheapens the children's histories and reduces them to caricatures, forced to act out their lived realities. Additionally, the ethics of paying slum-dwelling children for acting out their own realities aside, the film's production model does not account for the social and economic aftermath that the children faced. On the one hand, socially, the children participated in an intensive production process, where they were forced to adhere to a schedule, exposed to a different range of people (directors, lighting crew, sound crew, etc.), and involved in a project that offered their lives a temporary and meaningful structure.[33] While the structure may have

[33] Today, many of these child stars are now dead or in prison. Giovanni Quiroz, who plays the villainous *El Zarco,* was murdered in Medellín in 2000. Prior to 2000, Elkin Giovanny Rodriguez (Don Hector) and Alex Bedoya (another child who plays Milton) were also found dead.

benefited the children during production, it is clear that Gaviria's venture to showcase reality forgets to showcase the ruins left in the wake of his well-intentioned docu-project.

On the other hand, economically, because of the film's success, these children had access to the kind of pay that, although far less than a professional actor's, was more money than they had ever known—given their meager living conditions. While Gaviria asserts that contemporary cinema has "covered up reality and whisked it away," that is precisely what he does for the children who participated in the film, albeit temporarily, during the project's production. He whisks away the reality of the squalor through a model of unsustainable compensation, without considering the ethics of the impermanent nature of his cinematic foray.

The film takes place over the course of one Christmas Eve, and follows a group of homeless street kids, selling individual roses to restaurant-goers, cocaine (colloquially known as *perico*) to cars waiting at traffic lights, and celebrating their earnings afterwards with cheap liquor, weed, and glue-sniffing. The cast of characters is divided into a female crew and male crew, where the boys sell the drugs, engage in gang fights, and the girls sell the roses and engage in backstabbing and prostitution. The film is led by Mónica (the protagonist), who is played by Leidy Tabares. In real life, Tabares received praise for this role, and it launched an unexpected albeit brief career in acting. On a national level, her portrayal became romanticized as a kind of Cinderella story—where her rise to stardom rescues her from a life of grim poverty and delinquency. This role became a breakout moment for this slum-dwelling child and initiates a career that ends up becoming a national obsession.

Unfortunately for Tabares, she finds herself right back in her former shanty neighborhood, in a crash-and-burn following her brief stint in acting. Eventually, she gets wrapped up in the street hustle and crime from whence she first attracted Gaviria's attention. Her

life takes a tragic turn in 2002, when she ends up complicit to a murder, charged in conjunction with her partner at the time/father to her second son, Edison Castañeda. Subsequently, she is sentenced to 26 years in prison, and ends up serving 13 years before being released to house arrest to serve as the only head-of-household for her two sons. In a 2016 interview with the Colombian television show, "Se dice de mí," Tabares shares how her rise to stardom briefly punctuated an otherwise appalling life of sexual abuse, physical trauma, loss and violence. In the interview, she asserts, "*La vendedora de rosas* cambió mi vida. ¿Ha traído cosas negativas? Sí. Pero es que nada en la vida es perfecto. Por *La vendedora de rosas,* hoy tengo esta casa. Por *La vendedora de rosas,* ya no vivimos en Niquitáo" (21:34-21:48). The public's continued obsession with Tabares, more than twenty years after the film's release, demonstrates the ways in which she has been reduced to a figure in the national canopy of the rise and fall of child actors. Rather than being distinguished as a non-professional actor, Leidy is now heralded as another failed child star. Without forcing the viewing public to sit with the material realities that are visually present in *La vendedora de rosas,* the film risks making a mockery of her and the other children's tragedies, both past and present.

Leidy's portrayal of the film and Gaviria's blurring the line between "fiction" and "reality" also make the movie feel as though it is a biopic of Tabares's life. Nevertheless, the actual writing—around a group of young girls who sells roses on the street—is not really any one of their stories. Writing about the role of women in contemporary narco-films, Francisca Flores asserts the critical symbolism in the use of the roses as a main trope—given Colombia's prolific exportation of flowers—writing: "además de producto de exportación, la rosa también tiene un significado lírico tradicional como símbolo de amor y esperanza de futuro, justo a lo que las protagonistas de *La vendedora de rosas* y de *María llena eres de gracia* aspiran" (Flores 289).

While I disagree with Flores's assertion that Mónica's feminine actions (e.g. sexual friendship and group leader amongst the women) proffer her any sort of power (they do not), I do echo her reading about the ways in which roses (and the flower export market) reinscribe this hyperlocal film into a broader conversation around the transitory state of globalization:

> En palabras de Jorge Ruffinelli, al hablar de este largometraje de Gaviria, 'la historia en esta película es tránsito, continuo tránsito…Todos los personajes huyen de algo o buscan algo' (160), y esta es una huida física llevada a la pantalla a través de una cámara que se mueve constantemente por lugares difícilmente identificables, usando varios planos secuencia (como el que al comienzo de la pelíicula introduce al espectador en el corazón de las comunas donde una madre maltrata a una niña), y que sólo reposa (en los planos cortos de la cara de Mónica) en los momentos en que Mónica recupera la vida familiar perdida en la pensión gracias al sacol (Flores 291).

The film is in fact a frenetic vision of a *Nochebuena* in one of Medellín's poorest neighborhoods, and it revelas the kind of fast-paced squalor in which the children exist. Nevertheless, by using a still-camera approach in the short planes, the film may risk overdramatizing the children's conditions and objectifying them as flat, tragic caricatures of misery.

The film's depiction of drug use also manages to dehumanize the children, Othering them to the point of denying them agency. In one of the first scenes of the film, we encounter Milton—a young boy who is Mónica's close friend. He is lying on the ground, slightly hidden under a bush, near a busy plaza and street vendor thoroughfare. With squinted eyes and half-awake between drags of a glue bottle, Monica begs him to share a snuff from his huffing container. He replies, angrily, "¿Cuál botella? No tengo ninguna botella" (2:16-2:19). Throughout the film, glue-sniffing and marijuana use is frequently utilized as an escape or distraction by the prepubescent amateur actors. The entire film has a drug-trip metaphorical quality to it—with its erratic story lines, plotless-driven action, and heavy use of local slang. In several scenes, the plot trails off, meandering into portraying the children's drugged dreams. In one such dream, we have Anderson (another one of Mónica's friends who sometimes serves as

her boyfriend) fighting zombies" he believes are attacking him. When the camera pans to Mónica, we realize that Anderson is making up the encounter, as Mónica watches him clumsily shadow box. Even in this instance of childlike play, Anderson is enmeshed in drug and delinquent culture, as he clutches his glue bottle, high, and is thereby reduced to desperate shell.

Finally, during one of the final scenes of the film, Mónica finds herself in an oversized and tattered sweater, wandering the streets, intoxicated from glue-sniffing for hours. In this particular outfit, she looks especially emaciated—with her threadbare clothing and her stick-thin, bruised legs. Her look is finished off by oversized heels. Monica's whole appearance looks like a more abandoned version of the adult women in the film; she looks nothing like what one might expect for a child. She has been walking the streets for hours, alone on Christmas Eve, sniffing glue for respite from the familial and existential loneliness that plagues her. Her best friend (Yudi) has abandoned her to get high with her latest older adult love interest. Her older sister kicked her out of her house for fear of being robbed by Monica. She inhales until she finds herself passed out, in another drug-induced dream state, this time involving her mother, levitation and visions of the Virgin Mary. In the dream, we see her beg her dead mother, "¿Usted por qué se fue y no me llevo?" (45:50-45:52). Monica is abandonment embodied, and the film's emphasis on her state serves to dehumanize her. Moreover, this kind of misery portrayed leads to the kind of estrangement Faguet points to—stigmatizing this cheap drug use and othering children and adolescents who engage in it.[34] As a result, a kind of dark recklessness follows both

[34] Since the late 1980s, glue-sniffing and the use of *bazuco* have been popular among Colombia's homeless children and adolescents. Grassroots projects like Beyond Glue and Bazuco have sprung to counter this stigma, educate the public about urban poverty, and provide addiction treatment for children and teens. These kinds of initiatives also illuminate the ways in which children are suspicious to trust adults, given high rates of child abuse, both physical and sexual. Ultimately, the kind of childhood portrayal in *La vendedora de rosas* serves to dehumanize the children and objectify them as impoverished and abject—a simulacrum of the urban slum-world of adults.

children and adults in the film, given their proclivities towards crime and substance abuse. At another point in the film, Andrea—the youngest girl to join the crew of homeless girls—finds herself running from a stranger who is chasing her in the city plaza of Medellín and will not relent, even when she wanders out into the dark, night streets. Two young boys, who are friends with Andrea, spot her and recognize that she is in danger. They start chasing the man on their bikes. Instead of apprehending him and stopping him—in their intoxicated state—they mindlessly end up stabbing the man to death, resembling the manic state in which one might step repeatedly on a dangerous insect. In the world of the film, the adult's world becomes a way for the children to engage in mimicry. Child and adult alike are defined through a lifestyle of addiction, delinquency, and poverty. The thoughtlessness that comes with being a child has a sinister edge, as the children's lives are characterized by the dark trappings of the violent adult world.

One of the trappings of that adult world is the slang that accompanies the life on the streets that rules the children's existence. The film is also characterized by the characters' extensive use of *parlache. Parlache* is street slang (or *jerga)*, originally utilized by criminals in prisons in order to euphemize and code violent acts. There is differing literature that describes *parlache* as either jargon or slang (with the etymology tracing back to the Latin *parlare*) but most of all, it is known as the street speak of those who hustle in the underworld of Medellín's *comunas*. In Colombia, *parlache* traces its origins to Medellín narco-street culture, used by the nefarious poor—*sicarios,* delinquents, sex workers, thugs, and thieves It is an identifier for groups seeking to distinguish themselves from the mainstream and who wield a kind of power by utilizing this difficult register. *Parlache* is defined by its dropped consonants, rolled inflections,

constant cursing, and fast tempo. Consequently, the speech in the movie is incredibly difficult to understand and follow, even as a native Spanish (or Colombian) speaker.

As an example, an often-repeated insult in the film—and a hallmark of *parlache*— is to call someone a "gonorrhea." In this world of euphemized and coded language, even the insults are overly-sexualized and stigmatized. Defined as a bacterial STI, when used in the film, it is delivered as the ultimate insult—as the child engages in a mimicry of the hypersexualized, criminally-enmeshed adult world. Diego Echverry Rengifo, in "Los pasos perdidos y las casas abandonadas: *La vendedora de rosas*" argues for the film's slang as a productive way to estrange the spectator:

> La intimidad de esta lengua con la que hablan los personajes de *La vendedora de rosas*, a pesar de que algunas palabras de su jerga se hayan popularizado, está excluida de la opinión pública, por más que un noticiero, por ejemplo, entrevisté a los habitantes del barrio La Iguaná o a la mismísima Leidy Tabares, y de la publicidad, así Juanes diga parce o se intente representar en una telenovela a uno de sus personajes. Que su expresión verbal siempre sea tan impredecible en la misma cotidianidad en la que surge, tan inaudita para la opinión pública (los medios de comunicación y cierto sector de la cinematografía), y tan inédita en la vida común y corriente…demuestra que este lenguaje…es una expresión radicalmente otra de la intimidad exuberante y ambivalente de nuestra lengua (26).

Rengifo's argument, like Suarez and Jauregui's, rests on Gaviria's own defense of the film. In interviews, he argues that the *jerga* used in the film alienates the privileged spectator and plays an important role in enacting a productive, metaphorical violence upon them. That is, the subjects of the film—the slum-dwelling children—are themselves victims of violence, and the spectator's outsideness to their world serves to level the affective playing field, so to speak. Nevertheless, I contend that this phenomenon—the use of unintelligible *jerga*—produces the *opposite* effect. Instead of the spectator engaging in this thoughtful reflection on the conditions of the actors, it serves to further reify the social strata that exists in Colombian society—whereby the poor are understood as a societal malaise, haplessly vacillating between addiction,

homelessness, and criminality. In my estimation, Gaviria's film is successfully marketed and sold within a "best-seller" market of Colombian culture, where violence is king. Colombia, as an imaginary-in-export, is synonymized as criminal. The film's *parlache* serves as a way to distance the viewer and other the child protagonists—totalizing them precisely by the language that was taken up as a way for them to be discursively different. Through the repeated filming of the *parlache,* this inside-speak instead functions to render these youth slum-dwelling caricatures.

2.2 Theorizing Childhood Subjectivity Through Play: Agency in *Los colores de la montaña*

Contrastingly, *Los colores de la montaña* offer a new perspective of the child in the decades-long crossfire of war—drug-related, guerrilla, paramilitary, and otherwise. In the film, the child is not an objectified figure of misery. In fact, the film is devoid of the drug-related abandonment and addiction. Released in 2010, the plot revolves around a young boy who lives in rural Colombia and whom—along with his group of friends—is forced into the firefight of conflict that has become familiar to Colombia's remote, rural villages. The film is set in a mountainous region of present-day Colombia, focusing on the perspective of 9-year-old Manuel, who lives in a fictional *vereda* (rural village) called *La Pradera.* Through a fictional yet believable setting, the film distances itself from the hyperlocal realist trends of narcofilms past. The plot follows Manuel through his day-to-day life (at school, playing with friends, at home with family), and the main conflict of the film is that his treasured birthday gift—a soccer ball—finds itself accidentally kicked onto a field covered in landmines. As a result of the decades-long war in Colombia, this situation is common in rural and remote villages across the country, as the vestiges of the war exist as dark and dangerous palimpsests on the land. It avoids the long takes of a desperate wide-eyed kid or close-ups of a drugged-up child. Moreover, *Los colores de la*

montaña challenges the notion of violence and its effects as a solely urban problem in Colombia—as the film is set exclusively in a rural environment. The storyline of the adult world—with Manuel's father being pulled between two opposing poles of militancy and his family's fearing a violent breakout among the guerrilla and paramilitary factions at any moment—exists in the background of the children's lives. Instead of portraying children who are emulating the adult world, *Los colores de la montaña* is a film in which children engage in an even more powerful act: play.

Psychoanalyst Alan Bass, in "Play's the Thing: Jugs are Us" unpacks the the ontological stakes of play. Considering the intersection of play, time, and space in *Los colores de la montaña*, Bass's assertion conceives of how imagination creates connection and therefore, is a vital part in the composition of its forging a social identity:

> Ontological knowledge has to do with synthesis, imagination, and time as the opening of a space for play, the *Spielraum* in which a finite creature is connected things…Winnicott too grounds all cultural activity - art, science, psychoanalysis - in play. And he too does so by thinking about play in relation to time and space (Bass 154).

In the film, play operates as both an escape from the present and a way to re-inscribe the children into the space of social order of the film—without resorting to the children imitating the adult world. Meaning, the arc that follows the children's lives exists as separate from and at times as a challenge to the problems plaguing the adults. Children are establishing themselves as an integral part of their own social world, existing within the time and space of the film through play. Play—in the form of soccer matches and quotidian childlike mischief—is enacted not in referent to the binary of chaos vs. order. The children in the film use play to forge alternative spaces of action in the film, and through play, enact a resistance to a plot dominated by adults and plagued by uncertainty. Moreover, the children fully inhabit the adult world of violence (after all, the

soccer field in which the majority of the action of the film takes place is riddled with landmines) while maintaining a relationship of distinction to the adult's world of sociopolitical chaos.

In one of the first scenes of the movie, Manuel first receives the soccer ball that nearly serve as the film's protagonist on his birthday. On that day, Manuel's mother, father Ernesto and infant brother all celebrate him with cake and singing, on their small farm. That evening, he unwraps his dream gift—a soccer ball and pair of goalkeeper gloves. This gift opens a whole new world for the children in the film. The next day, Manuel and his friends are all playing soccer with the new ball and end up kicking it into a rocky area near the paramilitary training field. Within moments, as the children are still lamenting the lost ball and strategizing its retrieval, a large black sow runs through the field. Instantly, a detonation is heard—causing the animal to fly fatally into the air in pieces. Everyone is stunned, and Ernesto angrily escorts his son home after the epic loss of his livestock. The next day, Manuel's schoolteacher proposes posting a sign near the field, warning the community of the presence of landmines. For the remainder of the film, the plot ultimately revolves around Manuel's attempts to retrieve the lost ball—with imagination and sheer will—along with the help of his friend Julian and Poca Luz, an albino boy. The plot line of the soccer ball is juxtaposed to the more tragic backdrop families being threatened and fleeing, as the war wages on between paramilitaries and guerrillas, a war that ultimately leads to the displacement that many Colombians in reality have faced. In fact, the film does not really clarify which armed group represents the "enemy" or which one is the one that most threatens the *campesinos'* livelihoods. The story is one that characterizes much of rural Colombia and, through the ordinary depictions of the family and the vaguely depicted *vereda, Los colores de la montaña* serves as an emblematic example of the precarity of life in

Colombia's countryside. Neither resorting to portrayals of urban violence nor characterizing the children as delinquents, this film serves to showcase a different edge to Colombia's conflict.

Early on in the film, one scene depicts the children entering a school room that contains five different grade levels. The newly arrived young teacher begins to take attendance, and notices that Manuel is distracted drawing and doodling, instead of attending to his workbook. The school is a symbolic space of agency for the children, and creativity—enacted through drawing and art—is utilized by them, when they are threatened by the adult world of politics and violence. At the end of the school day, the children walk home through swampy grass and pass a paramilitary troupe training in their soccer field. Indeed, the film primarily takes play in two locations in the dream-like Colombian *vereda*: the school and the soccer field, and the initial takes of the *vereda* stand in stark contrast to the kind of urban dystopias so prominent in much of Colombian cinema.

For the children, the school symbolizes a tenuous and unsteady presence. When arriving for school the next day, the children see that the school building has been vandalized. The paramilitaries prominently spray paint on the school's main wall, "Guerrillero, ponte el camoflado o muere de civil." (1:04:11). Indeed, school becomes a place invaded by a stern warning for the town to surrender to the paramilitaries. As evidenced by the childrens' and teacher's expressions upon seeing the defaced school building, it is clear that these threats that have led to a revolving door of teachers, all of whom have come and gone—fearful to stay due to the insecurity and violence in the town.

Despite the threat, Carmen (the current teacher) refuses to fold and instead responds aloud to the children's panic by emphatically saying "La escuela merece nuestro respeto, ¿no?" (1:05:45-1:05:47). Instead of consenting to fear, Carmen invites the children to enact resistance

through play. Her and the children paint a rich and colorful mural, over the threatening message left by the paramilitaries. The mural they paint, together, represents a kind of retort. The children are enacting their own kind of painted and cunning warning to those that threaten them. Their bright, colorful and idyllic painting warns the paramilitaries; their act implicitly states that they will not be ruled by fear. Miriam Hansen's "Room for Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema" articulates not only how play works as freedom embodied, but also "perfect order" can come from play:

> Both Huizinga and Caillois define play as a free activity—and source of freedom-inasmuch as it is separated from 'ordinary' or 'everyday life' ('reality'), diametrically opposed to work, drudgery, necessity, and associated with leisure and a life of luxury. Huizinga in particular stresses the 'disinterested character' of play, its lack of material purpose, which he considers necessary for play to fulfill its civilizing function. Not surprisingly, he accounts for play's tendency to create a perfect order-"to [be] order"-in the language of idealist aesthetics, 'terms with which we try to describe the effects of beauty: tension, poise, balance, contrast, variation, solution, resolution, etc.'" (12-13).

On the one hand, we have play being enacted as resistance to a binary of chaos vs. disorder in the children's home lives through their many adventures on the soccer field. Yet, on the other hand, play functions as a civilizing function, a way to re-order perfectly, precisely because of its "disinterested character"—that is a character opposed to work and disassociated with necessity. Meaning, play denaturalizes work as a means towards material purposefulness. In fact, Manuel seems disinterested in anything *other* than playing, and yet through that play, he is most powerful articulating the narration of the film and his own role in that enunciative act.

Considering children, then, as the enactors of this play through painting means considering how they might wield agency that deconstructs the binaries which pit play and work in opposition to one another. If play and work are not diametrically opposed to one another (one being associated with chaos and the other associated with order), then, in fact, play itself *can* order. Play can civilize, and the child that plays can also serve as a civilizing agent. Hansen's

reading suggests the possibility of such acts (play vs. work) being on a continuum and in relationship to one another. In this case, instead of being infantilized through the act of painting and imagination, the children belong to the adult order of things insofar as they are effecting their freedom from the threats of either the paramilitaries or guerrillas through play. They are creating for themselves a "perfect order" of things, despite the catastrophe of disorder that surrounds them.

Juan Camilo Bustamante and Cristina Gil, in "Cine y derecho: A propósito de la película *Los colores de la montaña*" analyze the role of the soccer field and its relationship to armed conflict in Colombia, writing the following:

> The soccer field, as a space of play, is where the relationships are fortified among the children as such, the space that at the same time initiates contact with the armed various groups, where the very day that [the children] arrive to play on the field after attending school, they find a group of armed men in formation, impeding the children's use of the field, which begins to suggest a tense relationship (3, translation mine).

In short, the field represents a negotiable space in the film; it is the only space in which you the children share equivalent screen space as the guerrilla. Moreover, the contrast of the heavily symbolic black and white ball and the rich colorful landscape of the *vereda* cannot be overlooked. Supposedly, there are two sides to the violence that has come to characterize Colombian film. Left and right, symbolized by the soccer ball, are in direct opposition to one another.

Considering the symbology of the soccer ball as both partisan and a play, Nicola Gess, in "Gaining Sovereignty: On the Figure of the Child in Walter Benjamin's writing" argues for the political potential of children's game-playing: "[children's] destructive and mimetic potential come together in the games children play, leading dialectically to a gain of sovereignty in which intimacy with history or the strange, analytical destruction and steady new creation mutually

specify each other" (Gess 683). Gess is staging play as a symbol of the exercise of sovereignty. Instead of play being an infantilized or childish behavior, the actions of destruction and creation—present in the making and breaking of alliances in the soccer teams created by the children and even the ways the children make playful any number of activities during the school day—are a way for the child to exercise their libertine potential. She concludes by writing the following: "The crux of this idea is the dialectical transformation of mimesis as constraint—as marking, for Benjamin, the so-called "primitive"—to mimesis as cunning, play, and "bricolage"—concepts Benjamin draws from the figure of the child" (689). Manuel's obsession with the soccer ball shows his play as cunning, play as potential, rather than primitive distraction. The portrayal of children in the film—through the role of soccer—restores agency to the child.

Yet, to extend to this metaphor, as the soccer ball moves and spins, it becomes more difficult to see the stark color contrasts, and in many ways, this more closely characterizes the everyday experience of what has come to be called Colombia's "low-level conflict." In the *vereda*, the most significant experience of the violence is not *who* is the perpetrator, but rather *what* are the results. The film concludes that the results of this conflict are displacement and death. The binary color of the ball reminds the spectator of the powerful divisions that have ravaged these towns. For instance, Manuel's father seems caught in this tailspin between the guerrilla meetings and paramilitary threats. Several times in the film, guerrilla members (or paramilitary members; it remains unclear to the very end) come to his home and menacingly ask him or his wife why he has not attended the local bloc's meeting. Manuel's father clearly wants to remain outside of the firefight altogether. However, neutrality is often an impossible position in the Colombian countryside. Ultimately, his indecision ends fatally. Yet, had he committed to either of the conflict, there is no reason to believe that he would have been spared from death.

Therefore, drawing a distinction and assigning blame to one side of the partisan binary (returning to the symbol of the soccer ball) is no longer a useful apparatus for conceiving of a way out of the long trajectory of historical violence in Colombia. Ultimately, in *Los colores de la montaña*, play exposes a dialectical ambiguity, figuratively and materially, to the sociopolitical history of violence in Colombia. This violence both sustains itself by a gross symbiosis, each side (guerrilla and paramilitary) feeding off the existence of the other. Manuel's father's death serves as a fatal warning of the repercussions of attempting a so-called neutrality in this decades-old war.

Another significant scene in the film occurs inside Julian's home, Manuel's best friend, and it depicts a tangible blurring of the line between play and peril. Manuel joins Julian after school, and Julian shows him his collection of bullets, given to him by his brother who has purportedly joined the guerrilla and fled to the "costa de plomo." The boys marvel at the bullets, beginning to move them around the way a child might position toy soldiers in formation. In a strange way, these bullets thereby become trinkets. For Manuel and Julian, these bullets transform themselves into knick knacks that stand for the paradoxical "freedom" of war and the boys are drawn in by the freedom being at war might offer. Manuel and Julian are not bystanders through which the film tells a story; rather, they are the narrators of their own reality, makers of their own destiny.

In *Los colores de la montaña,* the child becomes a place *not* about which one speaks, but rather *from* which one speaks. Silvana P. Vignale describes this approach by referencing Walter Benjamin's study of the subject, that is, the subject as the *flâneur* or the child. According to her excavation of Benjamin's work on this enunciative experience of childhood, she submits the following assessment: "Quizás, más que nadie, los niños pueden estar parados en el instante del presente, sin considerar lo amenazador y peligroso de un futuro incierto, o de un pasado que se

nos viene encima con un muro que ni siquiera quisimos edificar" (Vignale 80). In this scene, Manuel and Julian are considering only the present of their circumstances, as children playing with these weapons-come-trinkets. They are unaware of the ways in which the armed struggle may or may not affect them, and they are unaffected by the ways in which decades of rural firefights have made it so that bullets have come to be pawns for play. They are unabashedly existing in childhood, without childishness. Their play engages in alterity—an experience of existence suspended exclusively in the present. Regarding play, Benjamin's framework considers the role of alterity, in and through the child's play: "Estas idea benjaminianas acerca del juego como capacidad de producir semejanzas nos invitan a pensar en la constitución de la subjetividad a partir de la alteridad…la experiencia de ser Otro en el juego infantil nos interpela a pensar un sujeto entendido desde la transformación a partir de la diferencia" (Vignale 82). The child manifests themselves through difference, not through emulation. Manuel and Julian are playing, not at being an adult, but rather, playing in that difference of childness. What game are they playing? The game that has come to be the backdrop of their lives: war.

Considering the productive difference that the child carves out as a byproduct of their alterity, Lisa Farley, in "Squiggle Evidence: The Child, the Canvas, and the "Negative Labor" of History," warns against collapsing the child's understanding of war as somehow manufactured by the adult's influence:

> It is sometimes imagined that children would not think of war if it were not put into their heads. But anyone who takes the trouble to find out what goes on beneath the surface of a child's mind can discover for himself that the child already knows about greed, hate, and cruelty, as about love and remorse, and the urge to make good and about sadness. To locate the cause of aggression in the outside world is to deny the child's mind (Farley 12).

Here, Farley points out how critical it might be to assess the child's aggression as somehow intrinsic to the child, rather than an imprint of the adult world upon the child. That is, conceiving

of the child's aggression as already existing within them undoes decades of discourse on notions of infantile innocence. It is not to say that the child is not affected by situations of aggression, as Julian and Manuel are rabid for the freedom that war may offer them. Rather, we find a critical entry into discerning that the child's desire to engage in aggression may not be *caused* by outside aggression, but rather innate to the very identity of childhood, as it is to the very subjectivity of adulthood. Therefore, portrayals of children as always-imitating the world of adult violence—which in turn creates a violent child—misplaces that the child's agency in the capacity to themselves enact (or not) violence.

Earlier in the film, we hear Julian telling Manuel about his brother and how he left the *vereda.* It seems that Julian's brother escaped the trap of life in the *vereda*, dashing towards an ostensibly more daring, if not certainly dangerous, life in the Colombian mountains. Meanwhile, the children in the film are confined; their education depends on a teacher whose presence is uncertain, their play is limited by a field riddled by landmines, and their homes are subject to threat by both sides of the armed conflict. Julian's brother lives in the *monte* (a euphemism for joining the ranks of the armed conflict) and for the boys, this autonomous life represents sovereignty from their daily constraints. Nonetheless, this scene shows the boys exercising sovereignty through and on these bullets. Thus, the objects of the "costa de plomo" life (the bullets) transform to a fetish of freedom, and the camera take serves to gesture towards their symbolism as a ready object of play. Moreover, the repeated use of the diminutive in describing the parts and shape of the gun where the bullets belong (tamborcito, escopetica, chiquitita, etc.) serve to infantilize these deadly pieces. In an ironic inversion, the token of death becomes an imaginative and juvenile fascination for the children, as in a shot where they line up the different

sized bullets in a formation that mirrors a play act. The metamorphosis of the bullets signifies a way for the children to explore their own freedom through play.

In *Doctrine of the Similar* (1933), Walter Benjamin writes, "nature produces similarities- one need only think of mimicry. Human beings, however, possess the very highest capability to produce similarities" (65). Benjamin goes on to describe the relationship between the mimetic faculty, play, and the figure of the child.

> With respect to the latter [mimetic faculty], it is in many ways formed by play…a child not only plays at being a grocer or a teacher, but also at being a windmill or a train. The question which matters, however, is the following: what does a human being actually gain by this training in mimetic attitudes? (65)

The ways in which Manuel plays throughout the film culminates in the chilling final scenes. Walking back to his home after another Manuel sits down to milk the family's cow, which we have seen his father do several times throughout the film. Impatiently, Manuel yells ,scolding her "suelte lecha, maldita vaca, no la esconda" urging her to let herself be milked, otherwise he will face grave consequences from his father: "[él] me pega o me castiga" (1:24:54-1:24:59). While Manuel is coaxing milk from the cow, Manuel's father (Ernesto) is attempting to escape from the armed group that has come to kill him and will end up taking his life. Manuel's mother, Miriam, had issued a warning to Ernesto, earlier in the film, about the perils of trying to stay neutral within the two worlds, saying: "¿Usted sabe que él que no está con esa gente es porque está en contra de ellos, cierto?" (24:49-24:52). Sadly, she points to the inexorable risk of this fatal binary. Ernesto has resisted going to meetings with the guerrilla and yet, his resistance to ally himself with the paramilitaries leaves him equally vulnerable to violence from both sides of the conflict. As he meets his death, Manuel's mimetic gesture at the beginning of this scene functions as a dark foreshadowing.

In many ways, the final scenes appear as a sinister cycle, as Manuel takes the role of provider almost undoubtedly caught between two worlds, like his father. After his father's death, Manuel, his mother, and his little sibling pack up their few possessions and get onto a bus, and the cycle of displacement and resettlement repeats itself. The final exchange between Manuel and another child on the bus symbolizes the mnemonic role of object, as each holds fast to their beloved toys—the little girl gripping her stuffed animal as Manuel clasps his precious soccer ball. Their mournful gazes function as a harrowing reminder about life's delicately balanced relationship between life and loss, joy and tragedy. By rejecting the tropes of *miserabilismo,* this film opens a critical conversation around conceptualizing of the child as a figure capable of forging an autochthonous identity and able to imagine their subjectivity not wholly predetermined by a causal relationship to violence and the adult social order. Rather, by engaging play, the child upends the predetermined social order, disrupting the binaries of partisanship, militancy, and violence that have defined much of Colombia's history.

2.3 Conclusion: The Protagonism and Power of the Child

Karen Lury's study *The Child in Film: Tears, Fears, and Fairytales* also asserts a necessary examination about the curiosity of the state of childhood. Her hypothesizing is not driven by the belief "that [I] will reach a confident conclusion or even a series of conclusions about what this child means or 'does' to cinema, or to the body of the films in which he or she appears" (Lury 1). Instead, she posits, "I am more interested in thinking about, thinking with worrying and speculating about this child, and undertaking a mode of questioning that is akin to the child's accelerating queries of 'but why'? (1). By denaturalizing the infantilization of the child, we can come to discover the child as a figure uniquely whole unto themselves, instead of a

part, portion or a diminutive of the adult. On the one hand, what *La vendedora de rosas* illustrates is a child subsumed in a dark imitation game. The child exists prematurely as an adult, together with other children, another pawn in the urban plight and the criminal underworlds of Colombia. This kind of portrayal of the child risks ignoring the unique subjectivity of the child. On the other hand, what *Los colores de la montaña* offers is a re-reading of childlike apparatuses—primarily play—that have come to be associated with childishness. Instead, through the film, these behaviors come to symbolize the way in which the child interfaces with the world and exerts agency through and by these actions.

Nevertheless, these films do demonstrate that the child is indivisibly tethered to the adult and their world. In *La vendedora de rosas,* the children attempt to ignore the beckonings of home, some to little avail. The youngest child in the film, Andrea, starts the film off with her stomping off from her own house, after a particularly cruel fight with her mother. Nevertheless, by the end of the movie, life on the streets of Medellín has proven even crueler and she returns home, tailed tucked and apologetic to her mother. Meanwhile, while Mónica meets her tragic end from a fatal inhalation, some of the final scenes of the movie show her returning to her home (now occupied by her sister and her husband), going through a trunk of her grandmother's possessions in a drugged-up haze, exhibiting a hallucinatory longing for the days before her homelessness. In the end, *La vendedora de rosas* shows that all the children are subject to the same desperation of the adult world. This renders them incapable of enacting any distinction or agency as children *in* a world of adults.

Los colores de la montaña ends with Manuel being forced to flee his home, despite his protests and being harangued by his mother. Manuel has no choice in the matter. It may be tempting to contend, then, that Manuel also ultimately lacks agency. However, further

deconstructing the child as Other may function to demonstrate how the child does *not* exist in a hierarchy to the adult; the child exists in their own realm. In her book, Lury takes up Otherness, as articulated by Owain Jones, in the following:

> Otherness…does not just mean simple separation and unknowability. It is more a subtle idea of the knowable and unknowable, the familiar and the strange, the close and the distance, being co-present in adult-child relations…otherness is not only healthy for children and for child-adult relationships, it is essential to what children are. It should be central to the idea of childhood too (2).

What might it mean for the relationship of knowability vs. unknowability to be a primary tenant to childhood? What may be critical to consider the child as unknowably distinct? A reconsideration of this kind may imply interrogating the power of the child's mimetic instinct. Challenging the idea that mimesis and possession exist in tandem, Atsuko Tsuji writes, "Mimesis points instead to a strangeness or otherness that we cannot fully know or possess" (Tsuji 132). Rather than merely infantile, the child instead becomes one to be discovered, precisely because of the present from which the child speaks and the radical alterity they demonstrate through their childlike acts—that is, play. *Los colores de la montaña* powerfully exemplifies a film that narrates *as* the child, rather than through a gaze *at* the child. After all, the child offers the adult world a way to know itself differently—rather than as an inferior simulacrum of itself.

Chapter 3
Rebranding Colombia: From Land-Grabbing to Magical Landscapes

> For in Colombia, extremes of climate, of altitude, and of civilization meet. There the present and the past live for a moment side by side, almost on terms of equality; before both give place to the waiting wonder which is the future.
>
> -Blair Niles (*Colombia, Land of Miracles,* 1924)

3.1 Origins of Colombian Land Injustice: Whose Fault?

In Colombia, "land" might as well be a synonym for "conflict." Colombia's land is indivisibly tied to its decades-long war between two rival loosely-defined factions (paramilitarism and guerrilla insurgency) and its history of illicit drug trade. Recently, it has become amongst the most polemic terms of the 2016 peace accords. Laura Morrisey's 2011 photo essay, "Reclaiming Land and Livelihoods in Colombia" cites the following statistical dissonance about the unequal nature of land distribution: "One hundred and fifty landowners own 75% of the land in the country, while 2 million farmers own less than 5% of the total land" (132). In 2016, Oxfam reported that 84% of small Colombian farms controlled just 4% of productive land. This inequality creates poverty statistics that are no more heartening. Morrissey writes "Between 57% and 77% of the population live in poverty, while a staggering 17-43% lives in extreme poverty," which, as defined by the World Bank, stands at ~$1.00/day (133). These rationales behind the rates of lop-sided land distribution have been hypothesized in a number of ways. On the one hand, scholars discuss Colombia's decentralized governance structure, which is often blamed on the varying and difficult to maneuver landscapes that make-up the country's geography. Whether because of governance structure or topography,

decentralization has undoubtedly contributed to the ways in which land ownership is highly conflictive. Mauricio Uribe López, in "El veto de las élites rurales a la redistribución de la tierra en Colombia" indicates the challenge of decentralization with the following argument:

> No obstante, el desafío que representan el conflicto armado y las *zonas marrones* de la geografía política colombiana ha sido fuente de efectos perversos en el proceso descentralizador. La exacerbación de la competencia política en el nivel local, en vez de alentar la sustitución de balas por votos, escaló la violencia de los grupos armados contra las autoridades y funcionarios municipales (98).

In this work, López references Guillermo O'Donnell's classification of *zonas marrones*, and describes how they instate themselves as a sick symptom of decentralization: "se insertan de forma oportunista y perversa en los clivajes sociales, generando un círculo vicioso entre la legalidad fallida y la violencia" (Lopez 111). This perversion that López describes—that "brown zones" where the central government removes itself and stokes the fire of local (often criminal) politics—points at the difficulties of identifying an origin to the vicious cycle of land inequity.

Anthro-geographer Teo Ballvé writes extensively on the relationship between Colombia's decentralization, land inequity and its complex history of violence. In "Everyday State Formation: Territory, Decentralization, and the Narco-Landgrab in Colombia," Ballvé explains how decentralization has become part-and-parcel of what is understood as a developed-world market structure—seen as a necessary scaffold to global capitalism. Ballvé, though, persuasively contends that decentralization is far from a neutral free-market policy, in the case of Colombia:

> Decentralization has emerged as a globally reigning policy regime, a penchant of the free-market-oriented strictures demanded by world financial institutions and development agencies…Colombia's decentralization was deeply articulated with and by local political dynamics—though still well-aligned with structural adjustment (606).

To articulate decentralization as either a default of the country's difficult-to-maneuver landscape or as a way to be more aligned with supposed first-world market orientation is precisely how the Colombian government has manipulated decentralization to its advantage.

In fact, this decentralization has its roots all the way to the Spanish conquest. Rather than redistributing amongst Spanish settlers, the Spanish crown kept the land it conquered and offered instead the enslaved indigenous peoples to some of the conquerors. The Spanish did not move through Colombia to settle, but rather to disrupt, through the specialized extraction of gold, silver and precious stones. The crown's chosen elites maintained ownership of the land. Additionally, when the revolutionary Simón Bolivar came through to liberate the territories of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador and Panamá from the Spanish, he himself was no ardent supporter of distributed land. In his November 1830 letter to General Juan José Flores, he delivers a scathing warning:

> Use the past to predict the future. You know that I have ruled for twenty years, and I have derived from these only a few sure conclusions: () America is ungovernable, for us; () Those who serve revolution plough the sea; () The only thing one can do in America is emigrate; () This country will fall inevitably into the hands of the unrestrained multitudes and then into the hands of tyrants so insignificant they will be almost imperceptible, of all colors and races...If it were possible for any part of the world to revert to primitive chaos, it would be America in her last hour (146).

In the letter, Bolívar specifically hones in his worries about Colombia's landed elite and the "masses" being unable to govern themselves. Forcefully, Bolívar delivers a powerful message about his lack of confidence in the capacity for a broad coalition to self-govern. In his opinion, the demise of Latin America (and Colombia) was imminent.

As such, Colombia would be a country that would embody Spain's legacy of unequal land ownership, where a few own a majority, thereby slowly gaining its reputation for the greatest land imbalance in South America. It is this very inequality (past and present) that leads

to the powerful and unjust local politics that undergird the rife impunity that characterizes Colombian governance. So, is the decentralization caused by the topography, and therefore, local government structures are strengthened by their otherwise isolated status, becoming subject to bribes and manipulation? Or, has intense partisanship created an atmosphere ripe for impunity and coercion, and that rogue governance is then aggravated an already-challenging geography?

No matter which comes first, it is impossible to discuss land without considering governance and vice versa. At the heart of the low-level war that has characterized Colombia's geopolitics for seven decades is a fundamental disagreement about land rights, land use, and land ownership. Scholars tend to trace the birth of Colombia's deep partisanship (in which land figures prominently) to the 1948 assassination of liberal leader—Jorge Eliécer Gaitan—an event which divided its society, set off urban riots in the capital (an event known as the Bogotazo) and instigated the historical period known as *La Violencia.* Knowing Colombia's history, this moniker seems paradoxical, since Colombia has since and before endured periods of extreme violence.[35] In their book, *Bandits, Peasants, and Politics: The Case of 'La Violencia' in Colombia,* historians Gonzalo Sánchez and Donny Meertens historicize the ambivalent power dynamics that have fueled and facilitated the varied, albeit problematic, approaches of work on *La Violencia.*

> The reduction of *La Violencia* to a simple bipartisan struggle for hegemony, or to a confrontation within the dominant classes that enmeshed the masses in a struggle that

[35] While many scholars cite the assasination of Gaitán as the beginning of today's civil conflict, Colombia's War of a Thousand Days undoubtedly lays the foundation for partisanship that comes to define its political landscape. This civil war, which lasted from 1899 to 1902, was caused by the longstanding ideological tug-of-war of federalism vs. centralism between the liberals, conservatives, and nationalists of Colombia. After the passing of the 1886 Constitution, hostilities ultimately led to three years of brutal warfare. The war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Neerlandia—with the Conservatives boasting victory that would lead to their political prominence for the next three decades. An estimated 100,000 to 150,000 fatalities occurred during this war (almost 3% of the country's population at the time), and it remains the deadliest war in the nation's history. The political, economic and social devastation left in the wake of the war ultimately contributed to the loss of the territory of Panamá in 1903. For further exploration about this lesser-known war and the lessons it may indicate about a possible post-conflict Colombia, see Geoffrey Demarest's "War of a Thousand Days."

> was not theirs, limited the inquiries into the multiple facets of the process. Had the masses, the oppressed, not put up their own struggle? Had they not, on many occasions, made a mockery of attempts to quell protest and rebellion? (xv).

Sánchez and Meertens point out both the risk in simplifying and the difficulty in delimiting a certain history about this period—since identifying the breadth of social actors most affected and involved in *La Violencia* remains a challenge today. Its legacy remains a confounding project for theorists and historians alike, given its unanswered crimes and ruptured social networks left in its wake. If anything, *La Violencia* demonstrates one point of origin of Colombia's vexed history of violence.

In reality, some of the roots of the conflict over and about land can also be traced to what followed *La Violencia* and Gaitán's assassination. Uribe López discusses how the outcomes of this partisan period—one that led to the initial decrying of inequality of land distribution by the rise of guerrilla insurgencies—became aggravated by that period of oligarchic compromise that followed *La Violencia*: *El Frente Nacional:*

> De ese modo, La Violencia fue un proceso social en el que el sectarismo político encubrió la expulsión del campesinado y la concentración de la tierra…[La Violencia] no condujo a una revolución ni a la adopción de reformas sociales de envergadura. Al contrario, culminó en un pacto elitista, el Frente Nacional, luego de la dictadura de Rojas Pinillas, y en un nuevo impulso de la colonización y la expansión de la frontera agraria (Uribe López 94).

The advent of *El Frente Nacional* is a key piece to understanding the ways in which partisanship became more entrenched and laid the groundwork for land conflict to become a mainstay of Colombian politics. This elite gentleman's agreement of power-sharing (lasting from 1958-1974) inspired one of the basic platforms upon which the FARC founded their insurgent movement—that is, this period was the very embodiment of a suspension of democratic rights in the name of the oligarchy. Initially, it began as an effort to end *La Violencia*. Political leaders at the highest factions of society mulled over solutions, and this brain-storming ultimately culminated in an

oligarchic soft dictatorial takeover of government. This historical period saw political power swapped back and forth between Conservative and Liberal elites for almost two decades. The effect of this politically exclusivist performance of authority—whereby the deep classist divisions in Colombia were further exposed and embedded—led to the establishment of many leftist guerrilla groups. These groups—one of them being the FARC—ultimately rose up against this negotiated perversion of democracy that excluded the exercised and sovereign will of Colombia's citizenry through rightful democratic elections.

While drug trafficking, decentralizing terrain and the weakness of the central Colombian government have been cited as contributors to the strength, success and longevity of the FARC's insurgent movement, none of these fully explain its growth and success. After all, the FARC's "birth" occurs in 1964—at the tail end of the *El Frente Nacional*—almost twenty years prior to the beginnings of the *bonanza marimbera* and nearly 25 before the reign of Pablo Escobar. While its decentralizing terrain has made it so that these guerrilla fighters may have a kind of "home-field" advantage, it *should* have also served as an impediment. The FARC's modus operandi is as a mobile insurgency—carving out new territories to find shelter in and forging new connections with local communities who have been harassed by paramilitaries or whom have borne the brunt of land injustice. In this case, Colombia's terrain can and should prove challenging. Moreover, keeping food, supplies, and weapons safe can be a treacherous task in some of the remote areas of Colombia's countryside.

Finally, the weakness of the central state can only be upheld as a justification insofar as its understood as a *perceived* absence in remote areas of Colombia. After all, municipal and regional governments have proven to be rich havens for partisanship, political elitism, and therefore, tend to be rampant with impunity. It should not go unsaid that "in the last 30 years, the

Colombian political class has fought drug cartels, diminished the FARC in combat, demobilized paramilitary groups, and written a new constitution. These are not the characteristics of a powerless state" (Flores 24). This idea of a powerless state can often justify failures of governance associated with sustaining the inequity faced by everyday citizens—subject to land grabbing and seizing from several different groups.

Alongside these periods of grisly partisanship *(La Violencia)* and negotiated power (*El Frente Nacional)*, the drug trade in Colombia also immediately calls to mind conflicts over land access and use. As discussed in the previous chapters, starting in the 1980s, the drug bosses, flush with new money, found themselves in the crossfire of large-scale owners (who were being subjected to kidnapping and coercion by guerrilla groups, seeking funds for their insurgency) and their hired guns (paramilitary forces hired by these rich *hacendados)*. Give the narco-capos need for an effective avenue for money laundering, land presented itself as the perfect solution, and so the 1980s saw an immense increase in large-scale cattle ranch purchases (an effective way to hold land idly, a point which I will discuss later). Yet, these cartel bosses ended up also subjected to the same threats as *hacienda* owners, and so enlisted their own private security forces.[36] Armed and financed, this patchwork of private armies inevitably consolidated with their own ideas of how to crush guerrilla insurgency and also launched their own land-grab. As a result, they soon began smoothly functioning independently of the land-owners and cartel kings. By 2002, under Álvaro Uribe's presidency, these paramilitaries—having been lucratively funded by the drug trade and possessing impunity because of garnered good-will with Colombia's

[36] Teo Ballvé explains how instead of dividing the rich, the guerilla insurgency functioned to strengthen the bond between the only things the drug lords and political elite had in common: their financial status: "Elite fragmentation—between narcos and the landed elites—would have likely continued apace were it not, paradoxically, for the threat posed by guerrilla insurgents. As the newly minted agrarian elite, narcos became subject to the same extortive guerrilla kidnappings once reserved for rural oligarchs" (Ballvé 610).

economic and social elite—coalesced into a far-right private military known as the AUC (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia), boasting more than 25,000 members.

Paramilitarism has undoubtedly been a scourge to land justice in Colombia. Paramilitaries have functioned to protect land for rich *hacendados* and they have enacted their own rule of law in remote and rural areas of the country. Through bribery, coercion and armed violence, they have illicitly appropriated swaths of profitable land for both poppy and coca cultivation. Latin American historian Joshua Lund, in "The Poetics of Paramilitarism," discusses what he defines as three distinct proliferations of paramilitarism. In particular, his coined category of "vulgar paramilitarism" poignantly describes Colombia: "I call this last category *vulgar paramilitarism*…Colombia is the obvious choice for critical reflection on vulgar paramilitarism, the proliferation of local security forces that operate with impunity alongside the state" (Lund 66). Indeed, the state has relied on this extra-martial apparatus blending security forces that are composed of members of the military, police and paramilitary forces. Bluntly put, Lunds asserts "paramilitarism—in case it was not already clear to everybody—is now a mainstream part of Colombia's national narrative, the fabric of its identity" (ibid). While they have no doubt experienced a contemporary renaissance in the last twenty years, extra-legal armed forces are integral to the military and security infrastructure of Colombian governance, which has made them almost impossible to prosecute and offers them impunity from legal repercussions.

The most recent iteration of a paramilitary apparatus—the AUC (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia)—was responsible for attacks against the FARC and ELN rebel groups, in addition to numerous attacks on civilians throughout the rural parts of the country, from 1997 to 2006. They formally began to coalesce in April 1997, forming through a merger of local right-wing militias.

Each of these were intended to protect different local economic, social and political interests by fighting left-wing insurgents in their areas. Carlos Castaño (one of the founding brothers) initially led this organization until his assassination in 2004. By the time it swelled to 25,000, the AUC was mostly financed through the drug trade and support from local landowners, cattle ranchers, mining or petroleum companies, and politicians. The Colombian military has been accused of delegating to AUC paramilitaries the task of murdering peasants and labor union leaders.[37] In "Territories of Life or Death on the Colombian Frontier" Ballvé describes the process by which decentralized governmental structures all but assured the paramilitaries' entrenched praxis:

> In fact, the efficiency with which paramilitaries seized the region in the late 1990s was in part due to existing structures of government. Municipalities had recently gained new political, administrative, and fiscal power under the decentralization reforms of the 1991 Constitution, which was widely seen as a peace offering of political inclusion to guerrillas. But it was the paramilitaries who harnessed municipal structures, becoming the local handmaidens of the decentralization process (239).

Across the range of his work, Ballvé's main assertion (with which I agree) is that the paramilitaries' success is not an "anathema to projects of liberal governance" but instead is "deeply tied to initiatives aimed at producing governable spaces and subjects, expanding trade, and attracting capital" (240). So embedded is paramilitarism to governance that the first palm firm in the region—Urapalma—was established by one of the heads of the AUC, Vicente Castaño. Discursively, palm oil projects are successful by promoting the region as a wasteland, thereby inviting the idea that agribusiness like palm oil can help it rise like a phoenix from the ashes. Paramilitary-run projects develop *within* the state framework, not outside of it, cementing

[37] For more information on the AUC, see Human Rights Watch report titled, "Paramilitaries' Heirs: The New Face of Violence in Colombia." Moreover, Aldo Civico's *The Para-State: An Ethnography of Colombia's Death Squads* (2015) offers a critical perspective on paramilitarism's long history in Colombia and how privately-financed security has been a long-established apparatus for consolidating power and securing land rights.

their legitimacy as legal structures. Essentially, it is a mistake to read Colombia's long-running conflict betwixt far-left and far-right actors, about the most prized resource (land), as some product of either a helpless, hapless, or absent state. In fact, it is the presence, *not* the absence, of the state that makes possible the coalescence between the paramilitary presence, local law enforcement, and large-scale landowners—all of whom stand to benefit and accumulate capital by owning land.

On the other hand, the FARC's beginnings are a direct response to this compulsion of primitive accumulation. Rather than maintaining the *hacienda* model of large-scale owners, the FARC assert that the state needs to reform practices around land-holding and title acquisition, so that those who work (and have historically worked) the land can more easily *own* the land. Previous to the FARC's formation in 1964, Colombia had a long-established communist party (Partido Comunista de Colombia). During its 10th Congress, in 1966, the FARC were recognized as a guerrilla movement, two years after their formation. They claimed the need for a rural peasant movement, where the new FARC leadership "encouraged the peasant communities to share the land among the residents and created mechanisms for collective work and assistance to the individual exploration of parcels of land and applied the movement's justice by collective decision of assemblies of the populace" (LeGrand 176). In his thorough-going study *Revolutionary Social Change in Colombia: The Origin and Direction of the FARC-EP*, James Brittain describes exactly how the FARC initially set out to re-envision land in Colombia:

> Prior to the Congress, the guerrilla movement established itself as a goal-oriented defence-based peasant collective in the face of extreme political and militaristic coercion. Working with several thousand rural civilians, the PCC [Partido Comunista de Colombia] organized networks of cooperation and security in response to expanding capitalist interest which sought the elimination of primitive accumulation through state-induced repression (Brittain 8).

Essentially, the FARC was responding to the accumulation by few of most of Colombia's land. Land has been at the center of Colombia's conflict precisely because of discord around the injustice of land ownership.

Considering how significant a role land has played in the Colombian conflict, the recent filmic obsession about and around land should come as no surprise. As Maria Ospina outlines in "The Rural Turn in Contemporary Colombian Cinema," contemporary Colombian cinematic production has indeed "turned to the countryside to narrate untold stories about rural life, nature, tourism, and violent conflict…[and] emerge at a time of major historical changes shaping the Colombian countryside" (248). Referring to film scholar Juana Suárez, Ospina further explains the rural turn in the following way:

> They [the films] signal a stark departure from the fixation that many Colombian filmmakers have had with the urban topographies and the drug-related violence in burn areas during the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century. Suárez has noted a general tendency of films of that period to privilege stories about violence in marginal areas of Colombian cities, as they rely on specific visual grammars of reification of urban space (Ospina 249).

As a result, there are no scarcity of recent films that have a prominently featured the Colombian landscape. For example, Ciro Guerra's *Los viajes del viento* (2009) and *El abrazo del serpiente* (2015) both emphasize varied geographical settings and vivid cinematography. *La tierra y la sombra* (Acevedo, 2015) and *La sirga* (Vega, 2012) also have a weak plot set around conditions of socioeconomic and agricultural degradation juxtaposed with a rich cinematography that drives the film.[38]

[38] Other films that are in line with the style of the rural turn include *El vuelco del cangrejo* (2009), *Los colores de la montaña* (2010), *La sirga* (2013), *Alias María* (2015), and *Oscuro animal* (2016). Maria Ospina's essay provides a close-reading of *El vuelco del cangrejo* (2009) and *La sirga* (2013) by highlighting how these films are emblematic of the kind of cinema that deprivileges urban life and begins to consider the countryside as the Colombia's richest sociopolitical mise-en-scene.

As such, this chapter analyzes filmic portrayals of Colombia's landscape—considering how both preservation and commodification of land in Colombia have been seminal to an understanding of the country's decades-long war and too have become significant factors in the peace accords and implementation discussions between the government and the FARC. This chapter explores how power is exercised by the visualities present (and visualities purposefully made *absent*) in Patricia Ayala Ruiz's documentary film, *Un asunto de tierras* (2015) and English-born Mike Slee's 2015 wildlife documentary, *Colombia magia salvaje*. Unlike its filmic contemporaries, *Colombia magia salvaje* is not about displacement, agricultural degradation, or the rurality of violence. Instead, *Colombia magia salvaje* sets out to re-brand Colombia as a commercial cultural product and is driven by the promotion of a unique geographical vision of Colombia. Through *Colombia magia salvaje's* box-office success, Colombia successfully rebranded itself as an exotic treasure and has strategically distanced itself from a narrative of controversially politicized land evidenced in *Un asunto de tierras*. This chapter emphasizes how the land itself serves as a critical point of origin to the country's decades-long history of violence. This vision of an unsullied land functions to abstract and distance any discussion of land access, ownership and injustice—thereby silencing the histories of conflict to which land has borne witness. The chapter furthers an interrogation about how land informs our understanding of the complex and conflictive place we call Colombia.

3.2 Land, Laws and Failures: Patricia Ayala's *Un asunto de tierras*

The decades that have followed the heydays of large-scale cartels have been characterized by a rise in land abandonment, dispossession, and rural violence—at levels that had not been seen since the days of *La Violencia.* The myriad of causes for land injustice have

led to the installment of land distribution initiatives and reconciliation laws—all of which have failed to fully restore land to affected peasants and change social practices that have led to systemic injustices. Albert Berry, in "Reflections on injustice, inequality, and land conflict in Colombia" concludes that basically "the most defining characteristic of Colombia's agrarian history [is] the dearth of justice" between policies that victimize small farmers and embedded bureaucratic structures (such as the notary system) that are highly susceptible to bribery and difficult to access by rural farmers. Berry ponders the inequality of Colombia, and while unable to establish any single chronology, his intervention does indicate that early 20th-century wealth was tied up in land. Since land distribution has been historically unequal, unequal patterns of wealth accumulation have followed in a self-sustaining model of systemic injustice. Moreover, by the late 19th century, "Colombia was one of the least educated countries in the world among those with a similar level of income" since local elites discouraged general public education (Berry 279). As evidenced, land injustice is interwoven and sustained through embedded injustices in education and income distribution.

Many initiatives historically attempted to redistribute land, as a way to counter the income inequity that made land injustice so widespread. Donny Meertens, in "Discursive Frictions: The Transitional Justice Paradigm, Land Restitution, and Gender in Colombia," demonstrates how the failure of justice-bound land redistribution programs have led to the large-scale dispossession and displacement characteristic of Colombia's human landscape:

> The term *despojo* (which has no clear and unambiguous translation into English) refers to the illegal and mostly violent appropriation of land during armed conflict by private actors—armed and unarmed, legal and illegal. It includes multiple modalities: violent seizure and armed occupation; reversal of former land reform redistributions to the landless; occupation and fraudulent legalization of land titles; forced and below market price selling and buying (Meertens 359).

Historically, land laws and subsequent menial attempts at land reform have fallen short of establishing a means for a path to equitable land ownership across social and economic classes in Colombia. On the contrary, one of the main ways land has been for the interests of large-scale land owners is in laws created to incentivize tax havens by falsely categorizing lands as "productive," so as to negate peasant and sharecropper claims to ownership. The main vehicle to safeguard this has been the dominant class's foray into cattle ranching. In "The Agrarian Rentier Political Economy: Land Concentration and Food Insecurity in Colombia," Nazih Richani discusses how land policies (especially those implemented according to World Bank recommendations in the 1960s and 1970s) served to contribute to what would later result in an abundance of narco-land-ownership:

> Credit policies tended to discriminate against small peasants—only one-third of small peasants obtained loans—and tax policies converted agricultural land into a tax shelter for both income and capital-gains taxation, thus providing incentives to hold land as a tax shelter rather than for agricultural production (Heath and Binswanger 1998, 25) This important incentive encouraged capital owners and high-income groups, including drug traffickers, to use land as a commodity that embodies capital, thereby sheltering their fortunes from taxation (60).

Essentially, these economic policies encouraged idle land-holding as a way to evade taxation. The result: rural small-land-owning *campesinos* face obstacles to access land—either for ownership or subsistence—and a surplus of idle land is held by an elite swath of Colombia. Richani indicate that as a result of these favorable policies, the "narco-bourgeoisie opted to invest around 45 percent of its narco-dollars obtained between 1980 and 1988 in the sector [land]" (60).[39] Unequal land ownership, then, is embedded into economic policies in such a way

[39] I will continue to utilize Richani's term (narco-bourgeoisie) when referring to narco-lords, since it is particularly suited to semantically capture the intersection of wealth, class and illicit land ownership in Colombia and asserts the critical element of the way in which the drug trade is embedded to the successful flow of capitalism in Colombia. In "The Agrarian Rentier Political Economy: Land Concentration and Food Insecurity In Colombia," he footnotes his term as follows: "Richani (2002) introduced the term narco-bourgeoisie to distinguish this wealthy faction from the remaining bourgeoisie in terms of its social class

that redistribution efforts (even those promoted by the recent peace accords) have decades of injustice to undo. Furthermore, economic policies would have to dramatically change, in order for small-scale landowners to have truly equal access to land ownership.

Contemporarily, land ownership also is endangered from the growing threat of agribusiness. Jacobo Grajales, in "State Involvement, Land Grabbing and Counter-Insurgency in Colombia," discusses Law 70 (approved in 1993)—which served to provide "recognition of property rights over land in the form of collective titles" (221). However, Grajales also asserts that those entities most interested in these collective titles—community action councils—often experience this law's provisions as an "abstract claim" (221). Despite legal claims to the land, it is clear that members of communities are often subjected to massive forced displacement, and the military and paramilitary co-coordinate the efforts to land-grab—all in the name of progress, peace, and modernization. This is further cemented by investments in agribusiness. Often, the government has painted agribusiness as a wholesale solution to the violent effects of power struggles between the paramilitary and guerrilla factions in rural communities. As such, promoted by the state, alliances between community councils and agribusiness producers are fostered, with no heed given to the imbalance of power and disparate levels of leverage in these interactions. Indeed, "state discourses obscure the ways in which collective land titles are delegitimized through strategic alliances. This process is secured by the state through the implementation of pro-agribusiness public policies" (Grajales 225). While on the one hand, the Colombian government purports to want to eliminate the illegal drug trade—for instance, by

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origins, source of capital accumulation (drug trafficking), illegal activities, and exploitation of labor nationally (production cycle) and internationally (distribution and marketing). The narco-bourgeoisie shares with its counterparts a commitment to the capitalist system; its members are neoliberals par excellence (Thoumi 1994; Richani 2002) (60).

selling oil palm as a key part of U.S.-funded Plan Colombia's "Alternative Development Plan." Yet, the state has simultaneously worked to encourage "national policy that was favorable to changes in land tenure aimed at capital accumulation through agribusiness" (Grajales 221). These unfair policies are justified as a way to further the competitiveness of Colombia as a rising biofuel powerhouse, which then spurs the foreign investment that thrills the country's socio-political elite. The fact remains that some of the very firms that financially benefit from this crop substitution are also *directly* involved with illicit paramilitarism and drug smuggling.

Furthermore, the recent controversial presidency of Álvaro Uribe Veléz only further aggravated systemic inequality in land distribution. Passed during his unprecedented 8-year tenure, Law 812 (2003) "favored those with enough capital to afford the costs of creating an economy of scale in their agribusiness" (Richani 67). What this meant is that Uribe's government made even higher hurdles for small-scale landowners, aiming to use their land for subsistence only. Instead, the law served to reify "a model of agrarian development that would undermine subsistence peasant economy" (Richani 67). This was further provoked by the subsequent passing of Law 1882 (2008) that "expedited the registry of land titles by authorizing not only judges but also notary publics and other personnel to register titles" (Richani 67). As a result of decentralization and built-in local partisan political machines, these kinds of officials have been subject to bribery and threat by the host of state and non-state actors, making justice even more difficult.

Additionally, Alvaro Uribe's presidency fueled enmity at any version of leftist ideology through his vitriolic discourse about the FARC. Unfortunately, one of the trends that has accompanied the trajectory of unjust land use in Colombia is that resistance to dispossession has been conflated as support for leftist ideologies. In Uribe's Colombia, a peasant farmer defying

their land being taken from them was automatically deemed a threat to the peace process and a labeled a FARC sympathizer. Jacobo Grajales describes this, writing, "when locals have resisted dispossession and displacement through collective mobilization and legal recourse, they have been accused of supporting the guerrillas—the military's justification for counter-insurgent repression" (213). This way of collapsing a resistance to land repossession as a politically subversive act makes it impossible, then, for local peasants to organize effectively to resist the military's tactics. Land, then, becomes a weapon for these burgeoning insurgents, and therefore must be relocated into the hands of neutral parties, e.g. the government. In his article, Grajales takes as his object of study the Lower Atrato region, part of the municipality of Chocó, and one of the most fertile and yet polluted areas of the country. This area has been a target for all armed actors, seeking to land-grab, as well as a huge hub of state intervention around foreign investment in land tracts. He writes the following:

> Narratives of development defined the Lower Atrato region as a frontier region, or a 'land to be conquered', and in so doing, justified state intervention, the integration of the region in the market economy and violent patterns of dispossession (215).

His ethnography examines Colombia's south, but this trend demonstrates that land, as an entity "to be conquered," will be so by those who have the power to do so.

Unsurprisingly, the most recent efforts to address land redistribution, through reconciliation projects and peace accords, have failed at *actually* addressing one of the most egregious impediments to land justice: public opinion. Law 1448 (short-hand called "Ley de Víctimas") was approved in July 2011, implemented in January 2012, and meant to be in place until 2021. Catalina Montoya Londoño and Maryluz Vallejo Mejía, in "Development vs. peace? The role of the media in the Law of Victims and Land Restitution in Colombia" lay out the Law's purpose as follows:

> The Law is a transitional justice tool guaranteeing that those responsible for human rights violations are brought to justice and that the rights to justice, reparation, truth and guarantees of non-repetition are secured for victims. It also includes measures to restore land stolen by illegal armed actors to its original owners (Londoño and Mejía 337).

The difficulty, of course, is the law's implementation occurs amidst "an ongoing armed conflict that includes left-wing insurgency, right-wing paramilitarism, criminal gangster activity, drug trafficking, institutional corruption and impunity" (Londoño and Mejía 337). With all these factors still in play and the citizenry still experiencing negative effects, it means that the law's efficacy is tested by the ways in which it needs to adapt to changing conditions created by the conflicts amongst these entities. As the conflict has morphed—with demilitarized paramilitary actors forming into highly-organized criminal mercenary gangs—the law fails to address these changes. As a result, its incapacity to adapt to an ever-changing political landscape makes public opinion even more generally suspicious and wary towards it.

Patricia Ayala Ruíz's 2015 documentary, *Un asunto de tierras,* focuses almost exclusively on the implementation of this law. The film functions as a visual antidote to what viewers experience with Mike Slee's infomercial-of-sorts *Colombia magia salvaje.* Her second film, the director crafts the 80-minute work by following one community (Las Palmas) on their journey to get their land back through due process of Law 1448. With a dramatic narration in Ayala's voice, she starts the film with a solemn declaration that sets the stage for understanding the stakes of the passage, implementation, and feared failure of this law: "si tener la tierra es tenerlo todo, entonces perder la tierra es perderlo todo…En mi país, millones de personas han perdido la tierra, por la guerra, por el engaño, por la violencia" (1:02-1:32). From there, the film focuses on a series of stand-still camera takes of displaced Colombians—standing next to or in front of their former homes that are now dilapidated and abandoned. In the background, Ayala cites the alarming statistics of dispossession—noting that in Colombia, more than 6 millions

hectares have been taken and draws a comparison of "es como robarse a Suiza entera" (1:43) The film is slow and is mostly a dry compilation of documenting meetings, senate discussions, and the stagnant bureaucracy of governmental waiting areas. In an interview with Sandra Ríos, director Ayala shares her shock at the outcome of the filming process. Initially, she had predicted that the community Las Palmas would have their land returned to them and—either due to threats or to lack of investment opportunities—they would newly abandon their land. In the interview, she shares the reasoning behind this hypothesis:

> Una razón muy sencilla: esta comunidad tendría una cámara detrás, además que desde un principio la Unidad de Restitución de Tierras y el Ministerio de Agricultura supieron del proyecto y desde un inicio sabían que el documental no tenía un ánimo ni propagandístico, ni institucional. Si yo soy del gobierno y sé que tengo una cámara de cine, no una cámara que va a hacer una nota de tres minutos, sino una película de 80 minutos, yo hago todo lo posible para restituirte y que finalmente el espectador diga que sí se cumple la ley (Ríos, Cinevista Blog).

Surprisingly, instead, what ends up happening is that the bureaucracy is cumbersome and the infrastructure for restitution is too weak to work. Although there are willing government workers, their hands are tied in terms of being able to fully comply with and carry out the guarantees and provisions of the law. In many cases, titles have been transferred without the proper paperwork ever having been filed, through a kind-of-handshake agreement, and in other cases, titles were transferred or purchased fraudulently under threat of death. Paradoxically, Ayala states that one of the reasons behind the inefficacy of the land restoration process is precisely *because* the government cites that there might still be the threat of death to those who return. In another interview with Colombia's *Semana* magazine, Ayala says, "Es increíble el argumento: yo soy Estado y yo te digo que para que entres debes tener seguridad, pero ¿quién es el encargado de garantizar la seguridad? Es como un perro mordiéndose la cola (*Semana.com)* Essentially, the government itself creates obstacles that impede the process it purports to seek to

enact. Without the proper recourse and means for the law to be implemented, justice is impossible for rural peasants whose land no longer belongs to them.

The most striking part of Ayala's film is her documenting the days of the scheduled (and then rescheduled) vote of Law 1448. The first time that Law 1448 is scheduled to be voted upon, the senatorial attendance is illustrative of the divisions internal to the passing of this law. In the house, 59 senators were present and 42 were absent. The camera holds still, fully letting the spectator take in the hall of empty seats, indicative of the push-back against this polemic law. This scene is followed by taping of the second day of the scheduled vote. This scene begins with a fiery senator warning that, with the passage of this law, "los violentos [están] buscando cómo se apoderan, cómo concentran el poder territorial de la tierra, cómo se apropian cada vez de más tierras. Colombia es el cuarto país más desigual del mundo con un coeficiente Gini de 0.58. Las nefastas consecuencias las podemos ver en el siguiente, en el siguiente, cuadro, que en cualquier otro país nos haría colocar muchísimas alarmas y colocarnos todos, todos, al lado de las víctimas" (4:44-5:16). Ultimately, this senator is incensed that more urgency has not been given to the victims of land injustice. In any other place in the world, he asserts, this would be unfathomable. Yet, such apathy has been the status quo in Colombia.

Meanwhile, as he is firmly reprimanding and also urging his fellow senators to vote in the affirmative, Ayala manages some of the most shocking shots of the films. First, we see a man browsing what appears to be a women's lingerie magazine on his screen, another man distractedly talking on his cell phone, and finally another man enjoying his catered lunch and paying no mind to the proceedings. The greatest visual irony of all? As Colombian senators are arguing over restoring land to the country's millions of displaced people, a berry cheesecake is being served by waiters-in-white as a third course to their catered meal in these hallowed law-

making halls. One film reviewer described it in the following way: “La directora entonces se metió al Congreso y nos permite observar (con imágenes que generan estupor e indignación) el “ritual” (casi circense) con el que finalmente se aprueba esta ley” (Ríos, Cinevista Blog). By locating herself high-above in the mezzanine during the senate vote, she documents the contradictions that define Colombia. Inequity (as represented by this contentious vote to restore justice to millions of impoverished rural farmers) confronting luxury (as symbolized by the white-coat waiters serving the dessert course in the midst of voting one of greatest historic laws in the country’s history).

While Ayala’s film is about land in Colombia, land is rarely visually featured in the film. The film is mostly set in municipal offices and in official governmental halls and venues. The scenes consist mostly of community members from Las Palmas following up on their official request for land title restoration or government officials giving speeches and holding conferences to discuss the law and its implementation. Many scenes detail community members being questioned by officials—being prodded with benign questions about their family structure, asked whether they have an official title to the land, and being requested to give their fingerprints, over and over, on many different documents. They are also probed in a more incendiary fashion about the day of the paramilitary attack on Las Palmas and the subsequent displacement. They are asked whether this group identified themselves (and if so, how), about whose cars they lit on fire and destroyed, about the names of each of the people who were in the plaza the day of the attack. This all occurs as a government employee furiously types these specifics into an official web form the spectator suspects (or maybe even supposes) will never see the light of day. As a spectator, this cycle of questions, form-filling out, and fingerprinting feels like a maddening circus—like a cruel groundhog day for those who are desperately seeking information about

when (if ever) they will return to their land and ending right back where they started, each time they inquire. The film ends, ordinarily and tragically, as one of the community leaders follows up about her petition, only to hear from the government official that they are "working on it." Ultimately, Ayala's film reveals that making a film about land is much less about showcasing Colombia's landscape and much more about exposing the landscape of injustice that has been a bane to Colombians for decades.

3.3 Branding Colombia through Mike Slee's *Colombia magia salvaje*

Considering landscape, in 2015, *Colombia magia salvaje* captivated Colombian audiences with a story of a landscape unexplored by most of Colombia's citizens. The film was one of the top ten grossing films in 2015 and is the top-grossing national film in the country's cinematic history.[40] Directed by English director Mike Slee, the film's production is divided amongst three entities: Grupo Éxito, Fundación Ecoplanet, and British production company, OFF the Fence. The film utilized cutting-edge approaches in the genre of wildlife film, and by national audiences, it was heralded as a welcome departure from the type of media that promotes a violent image of Colombia. ProColombia—a government agency responsible for promoting tourism and foreign investment (whose campaign hinged on that catchy one-liner 'Colombia: el único riesgo es que te quieras quedar')—published a review of the film's reception, asserting the following claims about its scope and impact:

[40]As *Colombia magia salvaje* is a recent production, most of the sources available are currently limited to newspaper articles, reviews, and blog entries about the film. Juliana Martinez's "Competing Visions and Contested Spaces in *La sirga* and *Colombia magia salvaje"* is the first scholarly publication to analyze this film. *El Espectador* released a review of the top 10 box-office hits of 2015, and *Colombia magia salvaje* ranked in the top three. For more information, see: https://www.elespectador.com/entretenimiento/agenda/cine/10-peliculas-de-2015-mas-taquilleras-colombia-galeria-607422

> The production crew visited 85 locations encompassing 20 different ecosystems to disclose that unknown in a country blessed for its biodiversity and geographical setting; 'the jewel in the crown,' as Francisco Forero, co-producer and director of the Ecoplanet Foundation, which led the project, puts it. For Forero, this film 'is genuine proof that Colombians believe in conserving our environment, learning from it, and preserving it for the future' (*Colombia.co).*

Is *Colombia magia salvaje* an answer to hyper-violent films of the past? Is it finally showing an unseen and unsullied Colombia? I argue that if *Colombia magia salvaje* is "genuine proof" of anything, it proves that corporate entities like Grupo Éxito are invested in an "open for business" image of Colombia. It proves that film-going Colombians would like to be defined as being learned conservators of an incomparable nation. In fact, I argue that *Colombia magia salvaje* is a film produced with a single objective: to promote foreign investment and convince non-Colombians and Colombians alike that violence is a thing of the past and offer "Colombia" as a brand worth buying.

Predictably, the main producer, Grupo Éxito, had quite a lot to gain by helping this project make it to the big screen. As the owner of Almacenes S.A. (Colombia's largest supermarket chain), it behooves the company to back a project that helps Colombians rewrite their own image. As the subsidiary of chains like Carulla, Pomona, Disco, and Surtimax (with stores in Colombia, Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay), both the film and its ensuing promotion offer a way for the company to be defined by and responsible for "revealing" the biodiverse gem that is Colombia amongst other South American neighbors. Moreover, the project's success stood to be a boon to Grupo Éxito: towards the end of 2015, the stock was trading at a ten-year low, at 10,500 pesos/share. (MarketWatch).[41] As well, ProColombia played a large role in

[41] General Information on the New York Mets. *NYCData*, The Weissman Center for International Business Baruch College/CUNY, www.baruch.cuny.edu/nycdata/sports/nymets.htm.

promoting the film because, after all, it is a governmental agency whose mission includes "el posicionamiento del país como destino turístico de vacaciones y reuniones y Marca País" (ProColombia). *Colombia magia salvaje* proves that Colombia is a brand under construction. In what follows, I examine how the film offers a new branding of Colombia that simultaneously emphasizes the wildlife landscape and erases the human life and land that has borne the brunt of the land-grabbing, dispossession and displacement previously discussed in this chapter.

Colombia magia salvaje is an epic visual journey through some of the country's most remote, pristine, and geographically diverse areas. In the nature documentary, the landscape is depicted as picturesque and uninhabited, a redemptive metaphor to Colombia's endemic pattern of civil conflict. The way the rural territory of Colombia is mapped in *Colombia magia salvaje* is exemplary of what Margarita Serje terms as Colombia's "foundational myth of exuberant nature" explained by Maria Ospina as "the discourse through which specific rural spaces of the nation have been historically represented as premodern, empty and uninhabited, lands rich in exploitable resources that await proper incorporation into the nation" (Ospina 251). Indeed, the scenes abound with flora and fauna at their best and are filled with panoramic shots of mountains, jungles, and wildlife. The film has a National Geographic air to it—as the close-ups emphasize camera angles and shots only available through skilled wildlife camera work and drone use. According to this depiction, land is the antithesis of conflict. The film is entirely guided by a dramatic narrator voice, "the voice-over of Julio Sánchez Cristo, one of the most prominent and powerful media personalities in Colombia" (Martínez 137). He opens the film with a glowing pronouncement: "Esto es un país con algunas de las criaturas más insólitas y los hábitats más contrastantes del planeta. Esto es Colombia, tierra de Colombia magia salvaje"

(3:25-3:30). The film's title shows how it engages the literary legacy in Colombia—that is, the well-touted adage of "magic" in association with Colombia.

In addition to magic, the film uses the term "exotic" numerous times to describe its wildlife and its landscapes. As one example, the film launches into one of the many laments of how natural forests are suffering from degradation. "Hacia el noroccidental de Colombia, solo se conserva el 5% del bosque primario. Un hermoso pero triste símbolo de esta pérdida es un emblema de la exótica Colombia, and it goes on to describe the "grandes palma de cera de Quindió."[42] (36:07-36:32) Throughout the nature documentary, there is a sense that the remote habitats are "beyond knowledge," (taking Kapferer's reading of the exotic) insofar as they sustain wildlife that are beyond the imagination. The exotic "deviates from expectations" because Colombia is expectantly a place of violence, not an unsullied land filled with superlatives of flora and fauna. By emphasizing the exotic, the film attempts to forge a "radical new understanding" about Colombia's land.

In the film, urban life is cast as the villain. Moving from slow-camera shots in the serene and remote jungle habitats to fast-paced and frenetic camera movements (complete with aurally overwhelming horn beeping and truck exhaust) in cities, the scenes in Colombia's urban centers are infrequent in the film. When they do appear, the city's role is that of the antagonist to the innocent protagonist of nature and its mythical landscape. Unlike narco-realist depictions of the

[42] Writing about the problematic concept of the exotic and its historical underpinnings in the field of anthropology, Bruce Kapferer, in "How anthropologists think: configurations of the exotic" explains the terms' genealogy, offering the Darwinian version as follows: "Darwin's work exemplifies what could be called, for want of a better phrase, the scientific exotic. By this I refer to the exotic as the appearance of a previously unknown phenomenon of existence or else a perturbation in the behavior, creation, or formation of phenomena that deviates from expectations or predictions based in current knowledge, opinion or theory. In this sense the exotic is at the edge of or beyond knowledge and, further, is active in its generation. It is both new or original information and is itself either active in the revision of conceptual or theoretical understanding or else instrumental to the formation of a radical new understanding" (818).

past, the new Colombia is at odds with urbanity, and the flora and fauna are fighting to reclaim their role as the messiahs of metropolitan decay. Nevertheless, idyllic countrysides are historically inaccurate depictions of Colombia—given the histories of violence that rural areas have experienced. Moreover, to consider the emphasis on the jungle terrain while purposefully avoiding the conversations around the firefights that have occurred in the jungle (as a result of structural inequities that the government has failed to address for decades) is to dehistoricize the complexity of land in Colombia.

Moreover, these scenic landscapes make it seem as though nature *can* exist without human interference—independent and free from the strictures of nation-state creation. These kinds of spaces are either too remote, too difficult to maneuver, or too tenuous to reach by road or air. Otherwise, as has been proven over decades of in-fighting between insurgent groups and private armies, rich landowners *will* seek to profit from the land. What is ignored in this vision is that the magic of Colombia's landscapes sets it up to be subject to power-grubbing and land-grabbing, as well to leave remote areas alone. If logging, forestation, and mining practices have affected these landscapes, it is from the consequence those practices have broadly on the land.

Depictions of land like the one in *Colombia magia salvaje* underscore that Colombia is geographically divided betwixt metropolitan hubs and mystical mountains. The violence and land-grabbing, characteristic of rural life, is completely absent from the film, thus erasing the long history of illegal land appropriation. Moreover, the conflicts amongst creatures in the majestic terrain are subject to a classically dramatic soundtrack and slow-motion camera footage. As one example, two hummingbirds are pictured in an epic battle over a flower, mid-way through the film. This kind of slow-motion effect creates the illusion of abstracted drama, and spectators are drawn into the non-existent plot into a reality where the birds are embattled over

access to floral food. In *Colombia magia salvaje,* the constant scopic gaze—both through panoramas and aerial views—exposes how the film casts land, as Donna Haraway puts it, as "resource[s] for instrumentalist projects and the production of institutional knowledge" (592). By feeling like a voyeur unto this aerial scene between two of nature's most unique birds, the film risks commodifying the birds into a resource and knowledge to be known and ultimately subdued by humans.

Additionally, by rarely displaying humans in the film, *Colombia magia salvaje* manages to transform its audiences into a world bereft of the brand that has long accompanied the country: drug-ridden, urban dystopias. Instead, it is really a war between land and people, between the unsullied wild world and the hyper-urban enemy. This kind of film obscures the very real class warfare amongst actors around land use and ownership. The way in which land wields power is ignored in this depiction. There is no mention of the displacement and dispossession that has characterized the geography of citizenship in Colombia, and as a result, the film delivers equally reductive depictions of Colombia, bereft of explicit visual violence and yet filled with the semantic violence of erasure. Instead, the wondrous wildlife is front-and-center to show audiences the unseen and peaceful Colombia.

Yet, Colombia has a reputation as a superlative violent haven. In the 1990s, Medellín consistently ranked as the most dangerous city in the world—with homicide rates upwards of 250 for every 100,000 inhabitants.[43] Knowing the way in which Colombia's "mosts" have defined the country's image, *Colombia magia salvaje* wants its viewers to walk away with a new understanding of Colombia's "mosts." In one instance, the narrator cites statistics about the

[43] These kinds of statistics, while harrowing, are particularly jarring when seen in referent to the region's current geopolitical landscape. As a particular germane reference, even with the collapse of its currency, governance, and staggering diaspora, Venezuela's 2018 homicide rate was 81.4/100,000 (Dalby and Carranza, "InSight Crime's 2018 Homicide Round-Up").

coastal regions of El Cauca and El Chocó as "el lugar más húmedo del planeta" (21:22). Additionally, at the beginning of the film, the narrator indicates that in Colombia reside "tres creatúras legendarias"—and the scene pans towards the condor (el ave más agrande), the anaconda (la más formidable serpiente) and the jaguar (el felino más fuerte), which are the largest flying bird in the world, the largest snake in the world and the largest cat native to the Americas, respectively (4:56-5:15). Colombia's animal kingdom boasts some of the rarest and superlative creatures, all in one place. By emphasizing this kind of exceptionality, *Colombia magia salvaje* does so without mentioning that which is exceptionally violent or exceptionally corrupt—both of which unfortunately also characterize Colombia's unique exceptionalism.

One of the most effective branding strategies used in *Colombia magia salvaje's* narration is to use myth-like anthropomorphic language to describe its flora. On the one hand, the film uses human actions to describe the "behaviors" of the plant life. In one instance, the film chronicles "Los bosques y plantas respiran el rocío del páramo" (13:23-13:26). Anthropomorphizing the forest and plants with the language of breathing means that a threat to that "Rocío del páramo" is literally to suffocate this natural life. The film creates a sense that the real villain—if such an antagonist exists in this kind of idyllic portrayal—is anything that would negatively impact the thriving of the bio-wonder of Colombia. Ironically, the history of its biodiversity is inseparable from the history of the ways in which that biodiversity has been manipulated and utilized by multinational companies, paramilitary forces, narcotraffickers, and the government. By refocusing the conversation around the protagonism of the natural world, the film functions to wash over the materially antagonistic conditions that have led to violence over land. It works to help Colombians be able to tell a story that is less about violence and more about the wondrous exceptionalism of the land. In that way, the viewer is left with the sense that

if Colombia's history is riddled with such complexity and violence, it is justifiably so because this land is such a unique wonder.

At another point, towards the end of the film, the narrator says "Las rocas de Chiribiquetes nos hablan" (1:28:22-1:28:23) and the camera pans to hieroglyphs, painted on the side of mountainous caverns by early indigenous people. By indicating that these "rocas" are speaking into the future, the film manages to imbue a conservationist message with an edge of mysticism—persuading the Colombian viewer (the film's primary audience) to consider their ancient (albeit appropriated) connection with the original inhabitants of Colombia's land. This tactic not only erases the difference forged by indigenous groups in Colombia—over years of politically asserting themselves and their rights to land—but also draws audiences into a false narrative about the greatest threat to these ancient rocks: land injustice. Conservation efforts cannot be successful against the backdrop of multinational palm-oil production, aerial spraying for coca eradication, or urban overcrowding. Moreover, by anthropormophizing the "rocas," the effect that land-grabbing and dispossession has had on the exclusion of redistribution efforts for indigenous groups is glaringly absent from this mystical warning from the mountains. As Juliana Martinez writes, "*Colombia magia salvaje* uses the benevolent rhetoric of environmental awareness to spark national pride and legitimize the role of economic conglomerates and foreign capital in the current process of national re-building, but its gaze remains exoticizing and predatory" (Martínez 137). Indeed, the predatory practices of multinational conglomerates are completely ignored in the film, and what remains is a gaze that stokes national pride about a superlatively stunning territory.

The film ends with a message—begging the viewer to remember that "aún tenemos tiempo para actuar" (1:29:47). It suggests that if Colombians were to pay better attention to

conservation efforts, Colombia would live into its full potential as the second most biodiverse country in the world. In fact, the film tenders a list at the end, filled with small-to-large-scale conservation ideas—a symbolically unique take on the traditional rolling of credits. *Colombia magia salvaje* offers what it deems as recommendations for the film's beauty to become a total reality. The "credits" are suggested actions to be taken by the audience, to save this "magic" land. Yet, what if films past, filled with depictions of urban violence or impoverished, vagrant, protagonist(s), had taken up a similar approach? Instead of rolling credits, the film would have broadcasted ways in which the government had stepped up efforts to make sure that the violence seen in the film remains fiction, not reality? It would be impossible to do this, of course, given that the government has failed to act in many ways (and has been complicit in others) to avoid harmful violence to its people. If the recommendation of "todavía tenemos tiempo de actuar" should be leveled at any one entity, it is the government. The government *does* have time to act: to fully enact the peace accords and to dismantle the ways in which large-scale land ownership has harmed the majority of its citizens. While these rolling "credits" encourage conservation, this message can result in making invisible the ways in which conversation efforts, spearheaded by corporate giants, actually sustain decades of dispossession and displacement.

In the end, *Colombia magia salvaje* functions as a kind of infomercial, on par with the aggressive tourism campaigns that function to entice travelers by offering a vision of Colombia as a "twenty-first-century global marketplace, as a peaceful land that is ripe for leisurely travel, consumption, and investment" (Ospina 250). These campaigns picture a kind of nature unscathed by human forces through "numerous images of pristine and seemingly unpopulated natural destinations that serve to reinforce the myth of exuberant nature already entrenched in the national imagination" (Ospina 250). By casting the national imaginary as "exuberant" and

seemingly exotic, the film manages to feed into the legacies—both real and imagined—of a magical Colombia and erase the histories of struggle of ordinary Colombians.

3.4 The Wreckage of Land-Grabbing

In Colombia, the long-durée of civil conflict has been repeatedly (and justifiably) connected to land inequality. However, as Thomas Edward Flores points out in "Vertical Inequality, Land Reform, and Insurgency in Colombia," there has been no empirical consensus on how significant its role, causation or correlation. As a result, the following enigma emerges:

> …the answer might lie more in the social relations within which economic inequality is embedded, the relations that produce outwardly visible signs likely to be captured in household survey data, Gini coefficients, and the like. Here the precise score is less relevant than the precise and historically evolving characteristics of those social relations (Flores 43).

Indeed, it is precisely the *strength* of these embedded social relations that ensconce inequality. That inequality has led to the insistence of leftist insurgency and peasant community organizing. Nowhere is that inequality more manifested than through land injustice. However, as the beginning of this chapter demonstrates, above all is a necessary concern for "Marca País." Flores also convincingly argues for understanding land inequality as foundational to the history of violence, which thereby leads to a reconsideration of the pathway to peace in Colombia. He explains the following:

> Understanding land inequality as the origin of Colombia's civil war identifies different preconditions for its resolution than the feasibility model, which focuses primarily on Collier et al's (2003) advice to 'cut the rebel financial jugular.' The land reforms agreed to in Havana in May 2013 represent an excellent first step, but without third-party enforcement, an about-face in rich landowners' disposition towards reform, and confidence-building measures, the impact of such reforms may be minimal at best and conflict-producing at worst (Flores 7).

Since the 2013 land reforms to which Flores refers, the Colombia government has signed peace accords with the FARC. In September 2016, a years-long arbitration concluded, and an accord

was reached—between the government and rebel FARC fighters—that would prove as daunting and arduous to implement as it had been to negotiate. The peace agreement's focus is primarily two-fold. First, it ultimately calls for an overall transformation of the lives of rural Colombians—through access to universal education, redistribution of land, and an investment in infrastructure to improve welfare and economic conditions for rural peasants. Second, the plan calls for Colombians to peacefully embrace the integration of FARC fighters into the mainline political fold, through access to funding, representation, and meaningful security guarantees. Additionally, the peace accord calls for a ceasefire, attends to the illicit drug trade, and implements a series of mechanisms towards the aim of truth and reconciliation.

Nevertheless, the accords are coming up short in correcting the copious quantity of injustice they are meant to reconcile. In 2018, Kroc Institute for Peace published a report on the progress of the agreement. This report "which tracks implementation progress from Dec. 1, 2016, to May 31, 2018" shows signs of "significant progress in areas related to the ceasefire, cantonment (cantonments are temporary camps for processing ex-combatants), laying down of arms and the transformation of the FARC into a political party with representation in Congress" (Kroc Institute). While disarming is an important and symbolic step, the main issues that the accords were meant to address—concerning the inequality experienced by many rural peasants—have fallen, it seems, by the wayside. The Institute reported the following:

> The report identifies three key areas of concern: inadequate guarantees of security and protection for human rights advocates and social leaders; the slow processes of long-term political, social and economic reincorporation for ex-combatants; and pending legislative and regulatory adjustments needed in order to promote broad participation in democratic processes. The report also emphasizes the difficulties faced in implementing the gender, ethnic and territorial approaches that are key features of the Colombian peace agreement (Kroc Institute).

Fundamentally, the peace accords have fallen short in their own efforts at conservation. conservation. They have failed to better conserve human lives—especially those who are rural and impoverished whom have so often lacked protections of all kinds. In fact, since the accords were signed, homicide is on the rise. Which group has suffered the most from a "post-conflict" Colombia? Activists. According to INDEPAZ (Colombia's Institute of Studies for Peace and Development), 252 activists were killed in 2018, up from 191 in 2017.

For Colombia, a difficult reckoning has arrived. Jacobo Grajales offers a scathing affirmation of how, sadly, dispossession is in fact quintessential to the project of branding Colombia:

> Land grabbing in Colombia is not only an example of violent dispossession in a country at war, but more generally a reconfiguration of the relations between the state, national territories, legal and illegal economic actors and the market. Rather than concluding that changes in the balance of power signify the weakness of the state or the market, this contribution demonstrates that violent practices of dispossession and accumulation are integral to liberal democracy and the capitalist market (229).

As previously argued, seeing paramilitarism as an anathema to governance makes invisible the way in which it has actually *co-opted* governance. Similarly, seeing land-grabbing as resolvable through policy implementation ignores how dispossession has become structurally embedded into the economic and political system. Given this history, it is no surprise that, as of 2018, Colombia has the largest internally displaced population in the world, with a staggering statistic of 7.7 million (UNCHR 2018).

Un asunto de tierras puts that displacement in full relief and illustrates the human toll of land injustice. For these rural farmers, land is as much tied to survival as it is to identity. In one of the scenes of the documentary, the Las Palmas community goes to Bogotá on the 13th anniversary of their dispossession—to commemorate this dark day where some community members were assassinated and all were driven from their farms. The scene documents this

reunion, and in Bogotá's central Plaza Bolívar, they gather to sing and be present to the years of struggle. One of the members leads the group in the following song:

> Hoy por culpa de la guerra
> Toco venirnos un día
> Hoy por culpa de la guerra
> Toco venirnos un día
> Dejando sola la tierra
> la que nos dió nacer un día
> Porque allá fue que nací
> Y ese es la tierra que quiero
> Porque allá fue que nací
> Y ese es la tierra que quiero
> Allí es que quiero morir
> y que me entierren en mi pueblo
> Allí es que quiero morir
> y que me entierren en mi pueblo (55:24-56:02)

This farmer functions as a symbol for all the members of the community, whose only desire is to live and die on their land. The placelessness they experience is a form of emotional exile. For displaced Colombians, returning to their lands and is not merely about subsistence, but integrally tied to existence—especially for communities that can trace their livelihoods and generational histories to a certain place. Restoring land to these millions of displaced Colombians is a matter of action and urgency, and Ayala's film poignantly captures this vision.

Conversely, *Colombia magia salvaje* shows us the depth of the Colombian obsession with national branding and with re-writing this narrative of violence and displacement by sending a profoundly moral yet abstracted message about the natural beauty of its topography. The trouble, of course, is that this film erases histories of land built on struggle, activist organizing, tragic displacement and illegal seizure—all material realities of its land history. The film fails to challenge Colombian viewers and ask them to rise to the occasion of embracing conservation in a holistic manner—for all Colombian's peoples, not just all of Colombia's land.

Green theorist Kenneth Burke asserts that "human beings are both a part of nature and apart from nature: the question is whether they can maintain an equilibrium. The problem of modernity is that the feeling predominates, leading to human alienation and natural degradation" (158). While *Colombia magia salvaje* does warn about the environmental degradation in Colombia, it ignores the ways in which natural conservation efforts fall short of preserving the lives and livelihoods of millions of Colombians for whom land represents a bonded identity, not a branded export.

Chapter 4
Diasporic Home in Motion: The Becoming and Belonging of U.S. Colombians

What is home? The place I was born? Where I grew up? Where my parents live? Where I live and work as an adult? Where I locate my community, my people? Who are 'my people'? Is home a geographical space, a historical space, an emotional, sensory space?

-Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders* (2003)

People flee war, and Colombians are no exception. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Colombia has over 7 million intra-displaced people. Further, 11% of Colombians live outside of Colombia, and a large percentage of that diaspora has come to the United States. It is no surprise that Colombia's history of violence has had the effect of forcing many Colombians to see themselves out of the country. The 1980s brought the first significant wave of U.S. emigrating Colombians. After all, kidnappings, bombings in urban hubs, and the political assassinations of members of the upper echelon found many seeking socio-political asylum in the United States. Then, the 1990s witnessed a sharp increase in emigration also due to the economic crisis associated with a steep decline in coffee prices and the increasing violence of the armed civil conflict—fueled precisely by the vacuum of power left in the wake of the collapse of the large-scale drug cartels (Silva and Massey 165). According to the Pew Research Center, U.S. Colombian immigration has increased by 93% since 2000. In my exploration of the many facets of Colombia's cultural exportation, I contend for examining the impact of U.S. Colombians upon this cultural imaginary—as they write and rewrite their own versions of a migratory identity. Many must contend with the implicit assumptions made about Colombians (often portrayed in

media and movies as either lawless narcolords, youth assassins, or audaciously sexualized women). Others in the community face the collapsing of their political, economic, and social identities into a catch-all for the immigration status: Latinx. Either way, given the percentage of diasporic Colombians and shifting global patterns of South to North migration, U.S. Colombians form a critical voice in shaping a global study of colombianidad, as it too is formed by transnational migratory flows that have come to define much of Latin America.

This chapter is dedicated to exploring what it means to be a U.S. Colombian and how these diasporic subjects create a home, elsewhere. In an era of growing xenophobia in U.S. geopolitical discourse, increasingly reductive understandings of Latinx populations, and collapsed definitions of Latinx immigration, the U.S. diaspora of Latinxs, broadly, are contending with the inevitable need for a complex re-imagining of home.[44] Despite social trends that have at times totalized Latinx peoples, there continues to be a growing interest in the cultural consumerism of Colombia and Latin America more generally. However, this cultural consumerism often ignores the intersectional realities with which Latinx communities grapple when attempting to forge a sense of belonging in the U.S.

For U.S. Colombians, belonging *within* their diasporic communities comes at the cost of a tense negotiation of explicit and implicit acts of exclusion from the fullest iteration of their U.S. citizenship. Ana Ribero's chapter "Citizenship," in *Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition*

[44] Latinx studies volumes—such as *Imagined Transnationalism: U.S. Latino/a Literature, Culture* and *Identity* (2009) and *Global Latin(o) Americanos: Transoceanic Diasporas and Regional Migrations* (2018)—have considered the transnational shifts in studies on Latinx migration by de-privileging the exclusive study on U.S.-centered migratory patterns, ultimately interrogating how Latinx migration has distinctive effects among its varied diasporic subjects. While these studies resist the ways in which U.S. Latinx migrations have been at times simplified, neither fully unpacks how intraregional (that is, inter-Latin American) identities affect the formation of diasporic solidarities and communities. As a chapter, this study is concerned with centering Colombian migration to the U.S., grounding their migratory patterns and demonstrating how they discursively shape the history of U.S. Latinx immigration.

Studies: New Latinx Keywords for Theory and Pedagogy (2016) addresses how DREAMers—as one corollary example—expose that U.S. constructs of belonging are predicated upon strictly defining belonging as a binary between inclusion and exclusion:

> As the building block of the nation-state—itself a requisite for the workings of neocolonialism and neoliberalism—citizenship helps to delineate and reinforce national borders that constitute global hierarchies of social, political, military and economic power, hierarchies that disproportionately benefit the Global North at the expense of the racialized peoples of the Global South (33).

When defining the non-belonging of Latinx communities, the hierarchy of us vs. them is often created through a categorical criminal distancing or even through defining the Latinx migratory community as a drain on the resources of the nation state—politically, socially and economically. Moreover, in an effort to dehumanize these "racialized peoples of the Global South," Latinx (and U.S. Colombian) communities are often excluded from belonging within their surrounding labor, social, and political spaces. Interrogating the very idea of belonging, then, must be understood as navigating the tensions between the intersectional expressions of Latinx identities. In terms of significant U.S. Latinx diasporas, Colombians factored as the single largest group of immigrants to the United States from 1998-2010. In fact, Colombians made up 30% of all immigrants from South America during this period (Massey 4) and studies evidence that Colombia remains one of the major contributors of migrants from Latin America in the world.[45] Considering, then, that Colombians make up such a significant part of the recent history of U.S. immigration, what does it mean for U.S. Colombians to re-define the idea of homeland and to do that through writing?

[45] According to Colombia's National Administrative Department of Statistics, 3.3 million Colombians are living outside Colombia, and some statistics put that figure closer to 4 million, which amounts to about 10% of the population. For more information on these statistics, see David Bushnell and Rex A. Hudson "Emigration" section in *Colombia: A Country Study*.

Better understanding how the U.S. Colombian community navigates belonging is important, given this community's role as a major Latinx group and the significance of their cultural diaspora. Ricardo L. Ortíz, in *Keywords for Latina/o Studies* (2017) offers an astute definition for "diaspora" and reflects how, in his view, "Calling oneself a 'diasporic' … necessarily suggests identification with a group, however scattered, committed to the same work of cultural retention, reproduction, and revival of a home culture in an alien, foreign, 'host' setting" (93). Ortíz also points out that the nature of diaspora is a way of categorizing "living human practices," rather than legal frameworks around related terms such as exile, immigrant, ex-pat, or even refugee (93). How, then, do the "living human practices" of diaspora manifest themselves in the U.S. Colombian community? More generally, how is the idea of homeland necessarily important to an understanding of whether Latinx immigrants internalize (or not) their intranational U.S. belonging? Comprehending the unique experiences of the U.S. Colombian diaspora furthers a more thorough understanding of other diasporic Latinx communities in the United States. U.S. Colombians face racialized stereotypes like other Latinx groups, yet many upper-class U.S. Colombians either see their home country as having transcended racism or claim that racism is not real; there is only classism in Colombia. Arriving in the U.S., "white" Colombians may be negatively racialized for the first time in their lives, having an identity of color (and all the bias, suspicion and discrimination that identity carries in the United States) thrust upon them. Having likely experienced and benefited from being racialized as "white" subjects in Colombia, this experience is often an identitarian shock and proves seminal to how they are produced as diasporic subject. Moreover, Colombians often face criminal prejudices, as a result of the grisly drug violence of the 1980s and 1990s, back when Colombia's cities had the highest murder rates in the world. Given the media landscape rife with Pablo Escobar-ian

references, it is no surprise that then U.S. Colombians face social injustices, even amongst other Latinx counterparts. Yet, U.S. Colombians are not, for the most part, responsible for the successful production, trade, and consumption of the illegal drug market. In fact, ignoring the ways the transnational capital of globalized economies sustains the drug trade means U.S. Colombians alone end up bear the brunt of the "cocaine country" reputation and all that entails. Ultimately, then, better understanding experiences of U.S. Colombians offers new ways of theorizing, more broadly, transnational Latinx cultural production, as each of these groups have their own prejudices to overcome upon emigrating to the U.S.

As a result, this chapter explores how Patricia Engel's debut work, *Vida* (2010) offers readers a way to re-examine the stakes of the U.S. Colombian diasporic experience, as it highlights the importance of this group's place in the U.S. immigrant imaginary. The novel also unpacks the complex and contradictory cultural, literary and political inheritances that come with claiming Colombianness. *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* (2010) defines the field of Latinx writing (and I extend this definition to help explicate *Vida)* in the following manner: "At its core, Latino literature is about the tension between double attachments to place, to language and to identity" (Evans liv-lv). Engel's *Vida* is precisely about this push-pull of attachment, as the work serves to complicate the notion of home, since "for many migrants, a sense of home is no longer neat or easy to define as they live or interact with more than one spatial and cultural location, thus undermining the sense of one nation" (Concannon, Lomelí, and Priewe 4). The novel attends to this lack of "neat or easy" through a structure of short-story sections that renders it choppy yet appropriately allegorical of the experience of migration.

By engaging a short-story form, *Vida* puts itself in conversation with other Latinx writers and this sub-genre's rich history. Defining the field of Latinx literature can prove to be

controversial task. Some scholars define Latinx writing as all Spanish writers—either U.S. born or foreign-born—while others specifically define the field as pertaining to those whose identity bridges nationalities and origins. Latinx literature is often relegated to a post-1960s field of study—coinciding with the civil rights movement and the minority groups political activism that accompanied that movement. However, Harold Augenbraum's introduction to *Latino and Latina Writers* (2004) not only challenges that claim in his essay "Historical Origins of U.S. Latino Literature" but, in it, he unpacks the challenge in defining Latinx literature's "multifaceted nature" where "Mexican American and Chicano literature, Puerto Rican literature on the mainland, Cuban American literature, and Dominican American literature each had its own cultural production and subsequently developed its own U.S.-based literature, research and criticism" (41). Meanwhile, Alan West-Durán names the tension of the moniker "Latino/a" plainly, writing "To speak of Latino and Latina literature is, of course, a gross simplification" (21). No doubt, the Latinx literary terrain for U.S Colombian writers has a rich and polemic genealogy, despite their absence from many mainstream Latinx secondary source studies.

As well, considering the history of the Latinx short-story collection— that spans from Tomás Rivera's *…y no se lo tragó la tierra/And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (1987), to Chicana Sandra Cisneros's ground-breaking *The House on Mango Street* (1984), to U.S. Dominican Junot Díaz's *Drown* (1996) and his latest collection *This is How You Lose Her* (2012) and Puerto Rican Justin Torres's *We the Animals* (2011) (and these are but a few)—Engel's text is informed by and arises out of ways in which these authors harnessed the symbolic interpretations available through the short-story form.[46] Understanding *Vida* as an interlinked

[46] In her book, *Killing Spanish: literary essays on ambivalent U.S. Latino/a identity* Lyn Di Iorio Sandin examines allegory as the "trope par excellence for the fragmented identity of U.S. Latino/a Caribbean subjects, Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, constantly traveling back and forth—literally and metaphorically—the short distances between the U.S. mainland and the island" (13). While not directly engaging U.S. Colombian fiction,

short story novel is critical to understanding how this structure offers a formal reading open to problematizing chronology, singular plot line, and closure in a traditional sense. Ultimately, Engel's *Vida* is informed by the autobiographical and political praxis of Chicanx and U.S. Carribean fields, while also forging a path for U.S. Colombian writers to engage in these debates.

In what follows, I argue for *Vida's* content and form serving as a metaphor for the diasporic experience. That is, the work is structurally dependent on its disperse and scattered parts that serve to upend a narrative that could offer a neat beginning and end to the protagonist's (Sabina) tale. Sabina's interspersed, non-chronological search for home is symbolized precisely *by* the work's form and structure. By examining the work's resistance to a single fixed setting, I contend that *Vida* first offers the idea of home as motion, destabilizing the idea of a static homeland. Using Avtar Brah's *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996), I extend her term "diasporic space" to argue that *Vida* is a narration of what I call "diasporic home." As Brah posits, "The concept of diaspora places the discourse of 'home' and 'dispersion' in creative tension, inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins" (193). The non-chronological stories in *Vida* function to show how the work's protagonist, Sabina, practices this "homing desire" while becoming a subject who pushes against fixed-origin belonging by living through a dispersed identity. Far from being *home-less*, Sabina creates her own diasporic home.

Given the aforementioned significant diaspora of Colombians, it is no surprise that U.S. Colombian authors have been fast increasing. One example, Julianne Pachicho's *The Lucky Ones*

Sandin asserts that that one of the binding characteristics of the authors in her study are "protagonists who are driven by the "nostalgia for lost origins" and yet are sobered by the awareness that complete identification with lost origins can also legitimize the mainstream, individualist master narrative" (4). I agree with Sandin's claim and put forth an exploration of *Vida* as a way to examine that tense nostalgia she outlines in her text.

(2017), also explores the idea of Colombian-ness—traversed through and by intersecting racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic identities. In terms of setting, *The Lucky Ones* also skates amongst stops like *Vida*—going from Cali to New York with references to Washington D.C. and Bogotá and jumping around in time. Similar to *Vida,* the fragmented short-story form (framed and marketed as a novel, but with each story able to function independently) is also employed by Pachico—indicating perhaps that one can *only* fictionalize a place as surreal as Colombia in a piecemeal fashion. Like Engel, Pachicho's debut work also engages classist portrayals of Colombia's ultra-elite (as the work's setting vacillates from chic expat homes in Manhattan to lavish luxury farmsteads on the outskirts of Cali). Finally, Similar to *Vida,* narrations vary, from first-person, second-person, and third-person—making it a frenetic and alluring read.

However, unlike *Vida*, much of Pachico's narration has a dark, suspenseful tone, much more like a thriller than a coming-of-age Latinx short-story collection. In one section, titled "The Tourists," the work sets itself in a garden party, at the home of a wealthy businessman (seemingly a member of the narco-bourgeoisie) and follows the coming-and-goings of that businessman through the preparations, party and aftermath of him hosting this event. In "The Tourists," Pachico employs a narrative shift, dispensing of a quite eerie transition away from third-person—with a one-liner that stops the reader in their tracks: "He doesn't see us, but we're watching" (Pachico 135). The story's shift means that all the events go from being narrated by a seemingly ubiquitous narrator to an omniscient stalker, or group of stalkers (indicated by the "we") whose tone reveals that the protagonist "he" is in trouble. That is, "there's a new fear now lurking beneath everyone's low-volume conversations. It's not just extradition to Miami prisons or undercover DEA agents or stash house security guards secretly wearing wires beneath their collared shirts" (Pachico 137). This fast-paced descriptive passage reveals not only the extent to

which the "we" knows the innermost intimate concerns of the "he," but also gestures towards their role in contributing to that fear. "The Tourists" ends with the protagonist party host looking for a quiet corner "against a wall...the kind of place where he could stay forever. Stay secret. Stay safe" (Pachico 147). Unfortunately, the reader knows that the narrative "we" will "be watching, though. We don't mind. We're not in a hurry. We're not going anywhere" (147). Some reviewers have suggested that the "we" are members of the FARC, poised to execute a kidnap and heist of this member of the narco-bourgeosie (Nathans-Kelly). In this way, Pachico uses an age-old motif (in terms of Colombian fiction) by grounding the narco-trade throughout her novel. Unlike *Vida's* sections, many of the parts of *The Lucky Ones* are contextualized by and through the spanning eras of drug, insurgency, and paramilitaristic violence, as well as the fear and threats of kidnapping and coercion historically faced by Colombia's upper echelon. Contrastingly, Engel's *Vida* is narrating the U.S. Colombian experience beyond the narco-experience and outside of the borders of Colombia without relying on the graphic undertones of a grisly thriller. In this way, Engel avoids being part of the swath of Colombian fiction that works always-in-referent to the drug trade and risks collapsing all fiction as narco-fiction.

Additionally, *The Lucky Ones* utilizes elements of literary surrealism that contrast to *Vida's* realist language. For instance, one of the stories, "Junkie Rabbit" describes a dystopic, post-apocalyptic burrow of rabbits (one reviewer called it a "a kind of Watership Down on crack"). *The Lucky Ones* connects across stories, in unexpected ways, and "Junkie Rabbit" is a perfect example. Following the garden party of "The Tourists," the rabbit narrator of "Junkie Rabbit" describes how his father (the former leader of the burrow) "always mentioned the Party: the day that the Other Men came, carrying long black sticks. There were fires and explosions, and holes appeared in the walls, and the water in the swimming pool turned red from blood"

(Pachico 151). Here, the reader discovers that the garden party becomes a bloodbath, once the "we" engaged full-scale guerrilla warfare. When the carnage subsides, the pet rabbits escape from their metal hutch and take over the abandoned mansion and farmstead belonging to the former narco-baron of "The Tourists." What is left behind, much to their pleasure and surprise? Stores of coca leaves.

"Junkie Rabbit" describes the rabbits in quite coarse language, such as "a sea of furry white bodies sleeping, scratching, staring vacantly into space, mechanically cleaning themselves" as the protagonist rabbit is forced to "crawl over a giant pile of shit left behind by rabbits who can't even be bothered to go outside anymore" (Pachico 150). Our hero rabbit decides that the time has come to go above ground to see if there are any other leaves to be found, despite the "pastor" of the rabbit herd asserting "it's gone now. The storerooms are empty" (Pachico 155). His trip outside the warren yields a most vulgar encounter with a lone rabbit who seems to have stayed behind above ground, whose words reveal a coming in and out of consciousness between drags of a crack pipe. During this utterly grotesque scene of two rabbits, "a sweet and musty smell fills the air" and the narrator-hero rabbit shamefully sees "...it, a creamy white liquid leaking between his legs. I'm about to open my mouth and ask if he's all right when I realize that he's ejaculated" (161). While surrealist, hypersexual, and bizarre, this metaphorical section serves up a reflection on the devastation left behind in the wake of the constant firefights amongst the armed actors that have become familiar to those who know the history of Colombia. FARC, paramilitary, military, and narco-bourgeoisie are all involved and yet none are fully responsible. By utilizing this cryptic and anachronistic rabbit fantasy world, Pachico's writing puts a dark twist on the literary inheritance of "magical realism." Yet, her work is above all preoccupied with a looking-back upon Colombia's violent past, rather than a

looking-forward to how that past shapes the experiences of those marked—in situ or otherwise—by the never-ending war in Colombia. Meanwhile, Engel's *Vida* narrates how meaning, home and belonging are forged with the violence Pachico dramatically (and fantastically) describes, without resorting to its graphic narration. Ultimately, *The Lucky Ones* chronicles the psycho-emotional effects of the seventy-year civil conflict in Colombia, whilst *Vida* is a novel about how to forge a U.S. Colombian diasporic identity with that difficult history percolating in the proverbial background. After all, *Vida* is a work preoccupied with life, elsewhere.

Finally, *The Lucky Ones* cannot help itself and again take up a magical realist tone in another one of its sections ("Lemon Pie"). In this story, the reader is dropped into a FARC encampment with a front-row seat to the stir-crazy musings of a hostage high school English professor, who holds class daily for an audience collection of twigs, trees, and leaves. Mr. B (as indicated from another section in the novel) has been in captivity for "five years, eight months, two weeks, and five days (today counts, even though it's still unfolding, even though it technically hasn't happened yet; today always counts)" (Pachico 24). Mr. B begins class by warmly greeting all his "students" and calmly asking "Late again?" to the "flattened out leaves on the ground," followed by a request for them to "grab some hand sanitizer before we break for lunch" in order to avoid the flu that has been going around. The lecture on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and a Socratic-structured seminar that follow read so naturally that the pages seamlessly blend the real and the unimaginable. The lecture begins as the "the students wait with baited breath" and when "one of the stones volunteers that it's ironic that Hamlet say this (*in my mind's eye, Horatio)* without realizing that Horatio really *has* not seen his father" (Pachico 25), the reader may not even flinch—as the subject "stone" is introduced so smoothly into the narrative and Mr. B is a seemingly persuasive orator. In addition to analyzing *Hamlet* with his students, Mr. B

engages in classroom management and discipline, chastising his "students" when they are less-than-engaged.

> 'Pay attention,' he says sharply to the river stones, who are getting distracted by a shiny black beetle crawling across the sand 'to the motifs of rank and grossness...some of you might even want to consider it as a potential essay topic. Yes, there will be essays,' he says, voice rising over the chorus of moans from the leaves, who are inevitably the most inclined to complain (Pachico 38).

Mr. B has anthropomorphized his surroundings with such detail that the section manages to draw the reader in, despite the madness of the whole operation. No doubt, Mr. B's selection of *Hamlet* (where the protagonist, Prince Hamlet, hallucinates his dead father and goes on a revenge rampage to avenge him) functions as an ironic symbol for his own descent into lunacy—given the effects solitude and desperation have had on his mental state. In "Lemon Pie," Mr. B is suffering the mundane and meager conditions of his captivity. His daily lunches consist of rice, lentils, and potatoes, and after his morning "classes," his afternoon activities include such mind-numbing routines as "Toucan Watching or Facial and Vocal Exercises (these are especially important during the weeks of randomly enforced silence, when his cheek muscles start to droop and his voice transforms into an old man's creak from lack of use)" (Pachico 27). Pachico engages a magical realist tone and style for this section of her novel. While powerful, "Lemon Pie" also reveals how the legacy of magical realism can produce a reductive vision of Colombia to outside audiences. Considering the novel is in English, Pachico's book can risk Anglo-readers believing that Colombia is exclusively a violent tropical paradise, filled with insane hostages, armed actors or rich narco-bourgeoisie—where many must flee and find a new place to call "home."

On the other hand, a novel like *Vida* is an invitation to consider how home itself functions as an elusive and fictional construct—denaturalizing the expectation of home as fixed

and stable and challenging the idea that Latinx communities exist in some nostalgic referent to their homeland. In fact, the novel pushes for its interrogation as a power-laden fabrication that serves to marginalize Latinxs from articulating their own sense of transnational belonging. Engel's *Vida* disrupts the idea that belonging is somehow the pinnacle of a diasporic subject's desire and serves to dispel this myth for U.S. understandings of the Latinx diaspora. Engel's *Vida* shows how belonging—as traced among U.S. Colombian and other Latinx identities—must consider the dialectical push-pull that Latinxs navigate in re-defining home, belonging, and intranational citizenship. Through Sabina's self-exploration, the novel calls attention to belonging as an always-incomplete journey and problematizes the idea that any diasporic subject fully belongs to any former homeland—instead creating for themselves a diasporic home. Ultimately, this chapter argues for *Vida* as a way to acknowledge the significance of U.S. Colombians as a meaningful part of diaspora studies and to affirm the role of U.S. Colombians as part of the transnational Latinx cultural imaginary.

4.1 Home: A Condition in Process

Reconceptualizing the concept of home means reconceptualizing the very notion of national identity—understanding it instead as a process in movement among the networks and affiliations that come to make up the life of the diasporic subject. This framing word (diaspora) and the novel's breakdown are indivisibly bound. The word diaspora originates from the Latin *dia*, meaning "across" and *speirein*, meaning to "scatter." Certainly, structurally, the novel does disperse its details across the nine stories —four of which are titled after main characters in Sabina's life ("Lucho," "Paloma," "Vida," "Día"), and four of which are in Spanish ("Desaliento," "Cielito" "Lindo," "Madre Patria"). The section titles are in both Spanish and

English, with some of the titles having a double-entendre. For instance, "Green" is the section where Sabina narrates a confessional encounter with a former high-school peer (Maureen), who is actually a mean-girl nemesis of sorts. Here, the title "Green" is not only the color of Sabina's sweater during their diner date, but also a masterful play on "green with envy." Each story *can* function independently, but I propose reading them together, as a cohesive novel, made of vignettes. The work does not follow any chronological order—vacillating between adolescence, the present, and the protagonist's childhood. There are many different settings, as the protagonist has residences or at least access to those whom have residences in four different locations—New York, Miami, Bogotá, and New Jersey. Finally, the novel uses first-person and second-person narration, the latter being a rare stylistic choice, in sections "Green" and "Cielito Lindo." Some stories narrate a prominent sentiment that catalyzes Sabina's journey to self-knowledge ("Refuge" and "Desaliento"). Overall, the nine different stories within this piecemeal-structured novel emphasize the ordinary rather than the extraordinary, as the loosely-connected plot unfolds around themes like love, loss, and self-exploration. Read holistically, these sections contribute to the symbolism of the fluidity of home and belonging by emphasizing the bite-size ways in which identity itself ebbs, flows, and is ultimately formed.

As a book preoccupied with the entangled process of identity forging—through place and time—*Vida* is also a reflection on what it means to exist as diaspora subject re-mapping the notion of home. In "Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World," Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D.G. Kelley provide an illuminating definition of diaspora:

> Diaspora is both a process and a condition. As a process, it is constantly being remade through movement, migration, and travel, as well as imagined through cultural production, and political struggle. Yet, as a condition, it is directly tied to the process by which it is being made and remade (20).

The very essence of Sabina and the very structure of the novel beautifully illustrate how diaspora can straddle these seemingly disparate intangibles—as process and condition. Sabina is in the process of discovering where, how, and to what extent she belongs anywhere or to anyone — given how she moves among cities, loyalties, and languages in *Vida*. Engel's novel offers a fresh portrayal of the U.S. Colombian experience of diaspora, chronicling one woman's journey of grappling with her identity, as it expresses itself in terms of belonging, place-lessness and home. *Vida* demonstrates an effort to narrate the interstitial home-lessness that U.S. Colombians may experience.

Returning to Brah's text, she points to the composite nature of diasporic identity, "constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories, we tell ourselves individually and collectively" (183). In the same way, *Vida* is constituted of a collection of stories, so Sabina becomes a subject whose belonging is constituted by and through the characters in each of the novels' sections. For Sabina, home is a mutable condition, not a static place. She is a protagonist who articulates herself *as* disarticulated, constantly being made and remade through her hybrid existence of being in U.S. and also Colombian; being neither of these identities and at the same time, both. In many ways, her story (and the constellatory structure through which it unfolds in Engel's work) reflects how one becomes a subject that belongs over time and yet one who never fully stops working at belonging.

In *Vida,* Sabina is a well-off daughter of upper-class and thoroughly elitist Colombian parents. They live in New Jersey, travel semi-regularly to Bogotá, and Sabina goes back and forth between their home, life in New York and life in Miami. She has no coherent career and her narration can come off as petulant. She possesses a profound lack of awareness about her privileged positionality. Indeed, Engel's characterization of Sabina suggests that Sabina may

exist to both intrigue and disturb the reader. Throughout *Vida,* Sabina's narration disavows sympathy—despite the many tragedies she experiences throughout the novel (e.g. death of both family members and friends and romantic catastrophes). In one such narration, she details a trip to Miami as a frequently-completed, effortless jaunt, both in terms of time and money. In the back-and-forth between stints in Miami and New York, Sabina reveals her economic privilege. She has little regard or need (it seems) for a steady job, and at no point does money for plane tickets or rent seem to be an issue:

> I was back in Miami for two weeks, on a date with some other son of a family friend, set up through the Colombian Diaspora dating network. He was a few years older than me, some kind of Brickell banker and he seemed potentially cool, not uptight like the other Colombian guys around. I was always getting set up with these super lame hijos de papi. I rejected all of them, earning me a rep as a failed Colombiana, or possibly a lesbian, and my mom pretended this didn't worry her (Engel 70).

Sabina's name-dropping of this "Brickell banker's" employment (Brickell Avenue being the upper-class financial district of Miami) and her affront to the "hijos de papi," (a term especially used to describe silver-spooned children of wealthy upper-class Latin Americans), point to Sabina's privileged rebuff of her upper-class identity. Additionally, this excerpt points to Sabina's exceptional set of failures. Failing as a "Colombiana" has a layered meaning: it means both failing as financially upward-looking member of the upper-class and failing as an elite heteronormative woman. First, she fails to abide by the standards set forth by her family's social class, since she rejects seeking improving her financial station, so to speak, made possible through the economic status of a male partner. Implicitly, then, a good "Colombiana" would be downright thrilled to have an "hijo de papi" by her side. Exposed as a desire which categorizes Sabina's social class, she has thus failed her membership in said class. Second, Sabina falls short of the standards set before her as an elite heteronormative woman. Her mother's worry seems

spread across a disappointment about her daughter's failure to share the values inherent to her family and failure to meet the bar set for femininity. Sabina comes from prestigious U.S. Colombian social circles, whose norms are dictated by wealthy immigrant parents trying to maintain the perfect balance of being assimilated Americans yet nostalgically Colombian.

Considering Ortíz's definition of "diaspora," he distinguishes diasporic subjects from their other foreign counterparts by this work of originary "cultural retention." "Diasporic communities evince their lack of choice in migrating precisely by at least resisting if not entirely rejecting the often common, and for some understandable, 'immigrant' impulse to assimilate fully into the host country and culture" (Ortíz 93). Sabina's parents teeter the line of assimilation, holding fast to their upper-class identities as Colombians who are able to make the annual figurative pilgrimage to Colombia, given their economic status, while still successfully existing as diasporic subjects.

Returning to Sabina's feminist disavowal, by rejecting "all of them," Sabina puts into question her normative femininity; after all, an implicitly desirable quality of a "good Colombiana" is compulsory heterosexism. Moreover, Sabina's renounced femininity is meant to disassociate her from her social circles, but to which she has never truly belonged. At one point, Sabina says to herself "Your mom was always saying a woman should cherish her femininity but you wanted to destroy yours—never wore makeup, always bit your nails, and knotted your long hair into a bun" (Engel 51) Essentially, Sabina rejects the soc ial rigidity, hyper-feminine gender performance, and normative scripts that sustainthese elite circles, and in that way, rejects her identity as a prized daughter of upper-class Colombians. The irony, of course, is that in repudiating her femininity, she actually shows herself to be *more* like her mother, exposing that each of them has in no small part rejected these norms. Her mother's disappointment actually

reveals itself as self-internalized shame. That is, she herself became a "cualquiera [translated as "a nobody"] in New Jersey," constantly questioned by her Colombian family of origin, who desperately implore "How can you be happy when you're invisible?" (Engel 169-170). In *Vida*, successful femininity is equated with being seen, being straight, being desired, and being on display. Sabina's mother navigates her discomfort with her failed femininity, having given up a position in which she was prominently on display and instead embracing an under-the-radar, middle-class U.S. identity. As such, she projects onto Sabina her loss by pushing *her* towards an up-and-up marriage with a "proper" diasporic subject. Even though Sabina's statement functions as an act of rebellion, destroying her feminine edge may paradoxically function to bond, rather than break, the tenuous relationship between mother and daughter.

4.2 Home as Relation

In reading *Vida*, chronology is not a priority—as the book moves among narrations of past and present, starting with a recounting of Sabina's adolescent first-love ("Lucho") and ending with a childhood trip to Bogotá ("Madre Patria"). Rather, home is about relationship. Re-imagined, the structure reveals that Sabina's journey is about much more about the "whos" than tracking the timeline of "whats." Four of the stories—titled with the namesakes of some of the most salient people to Sabina's journey ("Lucho," "Paloma," "Vida," and "Día")—demonstrate that Sabina's articulation of identity is in direct reference to the ways in which others see her and themselves. Sabina is exposed to her own self *through* the relationship she has with each of these characters, giving the novel a kind of *Bildungsroman* character. Like *Vida,* work by Cisneros, Díaz, and Torres have also been interpreted within this tradition—as each grapple with some form of coming-of-age. In "Crossing the Borders of Genre: Revisions of the "Bildungsroman" in

Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*," Maria Karafilis points out the contradictory ways in which this genre is both critiqued and utilized. Her reading provides a helpful point of departure, in terms of situating *Vida* within the rich history of the Caribbean *Bildungsroman*:

> Discussion of this particular genre continues because what we really mean, as critics, when we refuse to abandon the *Bildungsroman*, is that we are interested in how texts negotiate the development/education of their protagonists and how these protagonists negotiate themselves in a larger social context, whether it be within the dominant Anglo-American culture, a local community, ethnic group, nation, or combination of the above…Many women writers of color, both ethnic American and postcolonial, use the Bildungsroman precisely to 'affirm and assert' the complex subjectivities of their characters and, by extension, themselves (63).

Indeed, *Vida* is nothing if not a work about negotiation—of what it means to be a woman, of what it means to be a U.S. Colombian, and of what it means to create for oneself home in the diaspora. Sabina's subjectivity is complexly forged and in constant evolution, and her journey is about understanding herself through being understood by others.

In the section "Lucho," Sabina's obsession with being fully known and fully seen by others is first made evident—due in part because of the profound disconnect she feels towards herself and her role within her family. Lucho may be Sabina's teenage crush, but written as "luchó" in Spanish, the word means "to have fought." Considering that this section marks the beginning of the novel, it may indicate that to narrate this journey, Sabina must have had to fight. Undoubtedly, she first fought to be understood by Lucho. At the beginning of "Lucho," Sabina establishes how people came to define her and her family in those adolescent years, saying "we were foreigners, spics, in a town of blancos" (Engel 3). The derogatory phrase "spics" is often used to offensively label the Spanish-speaking community in the U.S. and Sabina internalizes that her family is seen as just another bunch of Latinx "foreigner[s]." Nevertheless, her family also has a distinctive relationship to social class (revealed later in the novel) which serves to

nuance Sabina's specific Colombian experiences of U.S. marginalization. They hail from an upper-class stratum, yet they are reduced to homogeneity with all the other "foreigners, spics." They are scripted, relationally speaking, as having more in common with "spics" than any other neighbors. As for the section's main character, Lucho (her unconsummated high school love), he dies tragically in a car accident at the end of this first section. In him and through him, Sabina gets a first and brief taste of what it might feel like to be recognized and to figuratively belong. She longingly concludes this section, saying, "He came looking for me when I was invisible. And when he was with me, he acted like I was the only thing he could see" (Engel 22). The notion of invisibility is not just germane to the characters in Engel's novel, but also point to an experience shared by many U.S.-Latinxs, whose livelihoods are made invisible by the obstacles faced in their efforts to truly belong within their U.S. intra-national communities. Moreover, the homogenizing gesture present in "Lucho"—that is, derogatorily lumping all Spanish-origin peoples as "spics"—characterizes a frequent iteration of the U.S. cultural imaginary around Latinx immigrants, whose humanity is stripped as they are reduced to being solely defined by their otherness.

In the section, "Paloma," Sabina dissects the depth of family ties, kinship and bonds through her mother's half-sister, Paloma. Meaning "dove" in Spanish, Paloma's namesake may be symbolic of the peace she seeks, in spite of her conflicted identity. The section is book-ended with Paloma's death, and readers are reminded that Sabina's journey through and with people is frequently pot-holed with death. Nevertheless, for Sabina, it is the way in which Paloma *lives* that intrigues and inspires her. At one point, Sabina narrates the ways in which her mother and Paloma navigate their experiences of diaspora. "They clung together like schoolgirls, linking elbows as they walked, talking for hours about people I didn't know, about the world they left

behind in South America, in a way that made it sound like a miniseries" (Engel 88). Through her family's performance of relationality, Sabina tries to figure out belonging *to* them. Her push-pull relationship with belonging is articulated around other people's way of identifying how they belong and how they meaning-make home through relationship. In seeing the relationship between her mother and Paloma, Sabina regards their bond as symbolic of their struggle to rearticulate home *outside* of Colombia. According to her, what binds these women is a shared (albeit constructed) memory for a place that neither has completely left behind nor remember with accurate detail. Yet, through their relationship, they find for themselves a new home—not through place, but through relationship.

Moreover, the way Sabina uses "miniseries," when describing the life and loves Paloma and her mother left behind makes their experiences seem highly dramatic and caricatured—gesturing towards a telenovela-quality of their interactions. In a sense, Sabina intuits their nostalgia as fictitious, closer to a fantasy than reality. Likewise, it is telling that these women continue to ruminate about missing a life in South America when, in fact, each has spent more than two decades (in Paloma's case, three) in the U.S. Somehow, who they were in Colombia and the cultural associations that formed them are more potent than the realities they have lived for so long in the United States. Their linked-elbows-walk suggests that no amount of time living in the U.S. can truly create belonging for them, but perhaps out of their relation, they can together reconceive of home. In this same section, Sabina also takes clues from Paloma not only in how she comes to understand her Colombian-ness but also in how she comes to understand her U.S. identity. Sabina details Paloma's reticence to assimilation and her aggressive stances toward her own bilingual status, commenting the following:

Paloma had been in New York for thirty years, but she spoke English as if she had

> arrived last week. She recklessly spliced her two languages, but she wrote perfectly in English, and was skilled at dictation. Her voice, though, carried more than an accent, constantly cracking as if a thousand years of tears slept under every breath (Engel 83).

Paloma's undercurrent of profound sadness is understood by Sabina as part of this push-and-pull identity. It remains unclear whether Sabina critiques Paloma's resistance to a more assimilated accent, (evidenced by her describing her language mixing as "reckless") or whether she admires the act of defiant aggression (invoked by the usage of "splicing") that Paloma displays towards her bilingualism. Either way, Sabina's own identity is clearly framed by the journeys she travels through and with her aunt, recognizing that Paloma's friction with identity parallels her feelings of internal discord.

Finally, in the section "Vida," we encounter the character for whom the broader work is named and has the greatest impact on Sabina's journey of self-discovery. Sabina meets Vida through a shared network of Hungarian immigrants, two of whom are the women's boyfriends. Sabina narrates, "Vida raised an eyebrow at me the first time she heard I was Colombian. The boyfriend said it when he introduced us, as if that's all we needed to become like sisters" (Engel 120). From the onset, both of the characters are painted onto a canvas where nationality (in their case, Colombian) is the prominent and defining color. Most assuredly, this reveals that the Hungarian group of men do take their shared nationality as sacrosanct. Therefore, they expect that somehow this should instantly connect Vida and Sabina. Yet, the novel exposes that what defines them may be their nationality, but not because both of them experience it in the same way. Rather, they both experience their nationality as a complicated identity, and that is why they immediately bond.

As both women negotiate their differing relationship to diasporic Colombian-ness, each of them is bound by that defining complexity, even as it manifests itself differently in their lives.

Vida (whose full name is Davida) has this nickname as a result of "the plane ride over the Caribbean [that] broke her life in two" (Engel 119). Indeed, Davida becomes Vida (translated as "life" in Spanish) precisely by *losing* hers, when she leaves Colombia. Previously a beauty pageant queen, Vida was brought over to the U.S. under the auspices of a modeling career and was later sold into sexual slavery. In "Bellas por naturaleza: Mapping National Identity on US Colombian Beauty Queens," Michelle Rocío Nasser discusses the cultural creation of beauty and belonging in the diaspora through Houston's annual *Concurso Señorita Independencia de Colombia*. Engel's inclusion of Vida's background as a pageant queen engages the U.S Colombian imagined community around this industry and showcases the social capital of Colombian beauty pageants. Nasser writes:

> Beauty pageants are more than just contests that judge arbitrary beauty standards. In Colombia they have become career launchers, escape valves and pastimes. Government and non-government organizations charge beauty pageants and their queens with the creation of the "new image" by which Colombia will be recognized internationally in the twenty-first century (295).

Indeed, Vida must have envisioned her pageant status as an escape valve to the U.S., never anticipating that she would be trafficked. Luckily, her Hungarian boyfriend, Sacha, worked as a bodyguard for the brothel and ultimately helped Vida flee. For Vida, Colombia remains her homeland—a place frozen in time, which she mourns almost daily. In contrast, for Sabina, Colombia is a conflicted place, wrapped up in associations of family, loss, and self-loathing. As a result, there is a sense that Sabina's attachment to Vida comes from a desire to absorb the kind of wistfulness and hope towards her Colombian identity that Vida feels for hers. She goes so far as to say, "I just wanted to drink her up like everyone else" (Engel 134). Sabina recognizes that Vida's emotive and nostalgic desperation for Colombia, and more generally for the possibility of home itself, is incoherent with her own inability to connect with her muddled feelings around

belonging. Sabina's embroiled and negotiated identity finds its place in Vida, whose ironic namesake leaves the reader unsure whether she is fully alive in her diaspora or desperate to be so, in spite of it. Sabina's intense connection to Vida is wrapped up in seeing in her a "parallel life, one that my mother always imagined aloud: the What if we had stayed to live in Colombia? narrative" (Engel 133). Sabina mitigates her own self-estrangement to her Colombian-ness by drinking in Vida, and their friendship opens Sabina up to finding peace with her inner conflict, and perhaps, more life.

4.3 Home in Motion

In *Vida,* Sabina's socioemotional journey of self-enlightenment is carried out through a shifting of setting. I read the flows through the different sites (Miami, Bogotá, New Jersey and New York) as a purposeful symbolism around the idea of a fluid conceptualization of homeland.[47] *Vida* works to deconstruct the static iteration of home and the ways in which Sabina is a subject defined by her dynamism across borders. The fragmentary novel is composed of a constellation of flashes of Sabina's life, revealing the contradictory amalgam that have formed Sabina's familial and cultural identity, as a subject finding what it might mean to create "home." For example, in the novel's final section, "Madre Patria," Sabina narrates her family's visit to Bogotá as a child. During the visit, Sabina becomes keenly aware of her parents' disparate

[47] The U.S. settings in the book are meaningful and statistically significant. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, New York-Northern New Jersey-Long Island and the Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach regions ranked first and second for the largest populations of Colombians (229,803 and 195,419, respectively). Together, these places situate almost half a million Colombians. Additionally, the top 25 communities top 25 U.S. communities with the highest percentages of U.S.-residing Colombians are *all* located in either New Jersey or Florida. In *Vida,* these sites function as motile homes for Sabina—no doubt in large part because of the familiar, albeit charged-at-times, sense of shared origin.

relationships to their emigration to the United States. Sabina's insight into one of the semi-frequent visits invokes a push-pull imagery around her family's Colombian roots:

> 'This country is a giant cemetery,' Papi said. In a way, it was true, most everyone Mami has ever loved was dead. Every visit to Bogotá was marked by a full day of leaving flowers at the tombstones of relatives I never met, including Mami's parents. Mami got mad when he talked like that, said they were both born of Andean earth and we should honor it. 'Es que no entiendes, María. This country doesn't want us back' (Engel 160).

Sabina's father has internalized a feeling of rejection from his *madre patria,* translated literally as "maternal homeland" e.g. Colombia. Undeniably, her family seems split between the real and the symbolic, using James Clifford's terms when he writes, "The transnational connections linking diasporas need not be articulated primarily through a real or symbolic homeland...decentered lateral connections may be as important as those formed around a teleology of origin/return" (249-250). Clifford deconstructs the way homeland is articulated through the literal and figurative, as a result of a diasporic self-development. In the excerpt above, Sabina's mother appeals to the "symbolic," with her appropriated notion of belonging to the earth—an appropriated imagery that most certainly does not encompass her and her Colombian upper-class peers when referring to their shared birthplace. Further, this imagery gestures towards a kind of reductively simplistic mysticism which her mother seems to have internalized about her national identity. Meanwhile, her father functions in the "real," and is therefore averse to any nationality myth. He is attuned to the real sociopolitical situation in the country, so much so that he is unable to see this motherland as anything other than a "crime-ridden cemetery." Both her parents have self-expelled from Colombia, and in this prolonged separation, they can no longer understand what it might mean to have a neatly conceived relationship to a birthplace origin. In different ways, each of them is forced to grapple with what

it may mean to live banished from the possibility of completely inhabiting one single expression of identity.

Yet, despite their differing individual experiences of diaspora, Sabina's parents are committed to projecting a unified version of Colombian-ness onto Sabina. Through a combination of visits to Colombia and U.S.-located familial encounters with other Colombian expatriates, they project onto Sabina their own versions of what it means to be Colombian. To them, *colombianidad* is, first and foremost, mediated by their former upper-class existence clashing with their immigrant status. For Sabina's mother, Colombia as homeland represents a kind of nostalgia, as her mother makes sense of the country's history of violence by remembering how connected she feels to her family and to the belonging associated with childhood. As such, *colombianidad* is articulated as implicitly contradictory—an identity that one always strives to remember and painfully forget at the same time. On the other hand, Sabina's father's version of homeland is that of distance, as he is gratified to be able to reference himself as an exception to what he resents as Colombia's endemic characterization as an unruly land filled with a violent citizenry. To him, *colombiandad* is a burdensome identity, a social inheritance that is as wearisome and as it is inescapable. However, Sabina's version of homeland waxes and wanes, as she navigates this contradictory nostalgia and distance her parents feel for their country and how these feelings may exist within her, if at all. She embodies a *colombianidad* ever in motion, in flux, and under construction.

Chandra Mohanty's *Feminism without Borders* conveys the fabricated quality of the idea of "home," in an effort to demystify and desacralize it as a socially inevitable occurring phenomenon:

> 'Being home' refers to a place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; "not being home" is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of

> coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself. Because these locations acquire meaning and function as site of personal and historical struggle, they work against the notion of an unproblematic geographic location of home (90).

In this way, Engel's work represents a kind of counter-narrative that interrogates home as an "illusion of coherence." In the novel, Sabina's existence is at times incoherent—as she traverses through different settings and varied narrations. Nevertheless, her difficult journey leads her to the stark realization that home is illusory, and how she makes sense of that is precisely the emotional voyage to which readers are witness in *Vida. Vida* demonstrates that reifying home as inexorable desire for Latinx diasporic subjects fails to capture how this sustains the exclusion Latinxs face when asserting belonging to U.S. socio-cultural histories.

Additionally, through the shifting of setting, *Vida* offers a reimagining of the power and possibilities that are created through and by the borders one encounters—in cities, states, countries, and even inside one's own self. Jennifer Harford Vargas, in her essay "The Undocumented Subjects of *el Hueco:* Theorizing a Colombian Metaphor for Migration," problematizes border imaginaries in relation to U.S.-Latinx crossings from South to North. Harford Vargas invokes the Colombian expression of "el Hueco" in an effort to enact "critical shift in the discourse used to imagine the border" (34).[48] Most importantly, her essay points to the instability of borders — which I extend to mean an instability of homeland. "The trope of el Hueco thus works in tandem with the trope of the borderlands in fashioning an alternative national cartography demarcated not by natural, static, and stable boundaries but by gap-filled,

[48] In her essay, Vargas draws from Germán Castro Caycedo's journalistic accounting of Colombian immigration, in *El Hueco: La entrada ilegal de colombianos a Estados Unidos por México, Bahamas y Haití* (1990). She takes the term "el hueco," meaning gap or hole, and makes it a proper noun, "el Hueco," asserting a uniquely Colombian experience to the figurative gap through which one passes upon entering life and living in the United States.

fissured, and porous margins" (Vargas 34). Considering the layered structure of *Vida,* Sabina is undoubtedly building for herself a life that dispenses with any nostalgic referents to homeland — as many U.S. Colombians and Latinx subjects have had to do when fleeing from their own "giant cemetery" of homeland. Instead, Sabina attempts to embrace the "porous margins" of her existence through and among her many diasporic home-spaces in the novel.

The piecemeal sectioning of the work also leads us through a variety of styles of narration. Specifically, the use of second-person narration (in "Green" and "Cielito Lindo") inimitably add to the ways in which the novel narrates the self-estrangement that Sabina experiences, as a product of her diasporic self. The use of second-person narration is a rare choice in contemporary fiction. Most often used in persuasive writing, it serves to create an emotionally charged yet disquieting tone to the writing. Latinx writer Junot Díaz was interviewed about this use of second-person narration in "Miss Lora," a selection from his most recent collection of short stories, *This is How You Lose Her* (2012). Díaz asserts the following:

> I really needed distance from this story. Every time I wrote in the first person it was just too close. Tried third person, but that flopped as well. Second person ended up being the only way to get through. I guess I wanted my narrator to be 'in' the story, but also to be able to comment on his younger self a little. That was the plan, at least. Second person, I've always noticed, *has the distinction of being both intimate and repellent at the same time*. A quick way of drawing the reader close but also hard to sustain for any length of time. Only so much a person likes being addressed as 'you' by a complete stranger…I figured some people somewhere might connect with the tale even in second person (*New Yorker*, 2012, emphasis added).

I am most intrigued by Díaz's illustration of tension of this push-pull presented through the second-person narration. Meaning, the imagery of opposition in the "intimacy" vs "repellant" describes the contradictions present in many of Sabina's relationships. She is both close to her mother yet seeks to defy her through her non-performed classism and femininity. She holds Vida dear, yet cannot fathom how she exists in relationship to their shared homeland. Moreover, in the

section “Green,” we see her enact this “both intimate and repellant” feeling for her high school frenemy, Maureen.

In “Green,” the narrator (Sabina’s inner-conscience) seems to reprimand her, revealing a kind of heartless disappointment in Sabina’s lack of compassion. Her friend, Maureen, has passed away—yet Sabina seems unmoved. The narration begins by Sabina’s mother calling her to inform her that “Maureen, the girl who tortured you [Sabina] from kindergarten to high school, who single-handedly made it so that you [Sabina] were never welcome in Girl Scouts, soccer, or yearbook, is dead” (Engel 47). The narration continues with Sabina’s taking stock of her most recent run-ins with Maureen: at a midnight mass some years ago and then, later at a meeting for a meal at a local diner in their hometown. In the text, Sabina demonstrates both a repellant sense for Maureen alongside an evidenced intimacy to their interactions—a unsettling push-pull. Considering the previous exploration of home as relationship, Sabina’s friendship with Maureen further complicates things, as Maureen signifies a certain familiarity. Nevertheless, her past cruelty to Sabina make her both wary and repellant. Returning to the section, the narrator indicates how “you tried not to look at her decaying body” when Sabina sees her at the mass, and how—at the encounter at the diner—Maureen seemed to be sinisterly asking Sabina for dieting advice (Engel 49). Through this line of questioning that she mistook as a kind of catch-up, Sabina’s realizes that “all she [Maureen] really wanted were your diet secrets from eleventh grade when you decided to carve your soft caramel flesh down to its essence” (Engel 50). Maureen actually suffers from anorexia (the disorder that leads to her early death). By asking for dieting advice, she implicitly exposes how she is aware of Sabina’s disdain and self-loathing for her own body. By the end of the conversation, Sabina is both disgusted by Maureen’s malicious advice-seeking and by her own desire for connection *with* Maureen.

Given her own fraught relationship with her body, it is no surprise that Sabina both abhors and yet is drawn to Maureen. Maureen was a "monster in a short, tight gymnastics body" (Engel 48). Meanwhile, Sabina laments that "no matter how hard you starved, your mushy, unruly breasts refused to shrink" (Engel 50). As teenagers, both suffer from an obsessive attention to their size. Indeed, Sabina shares this dark intimacy with Maureen. Yet, she is also repelled by her former nemesis. Maureen essentially bullied Sabina during their high school days (telling Sabina "that your skin was the color of diarrhea, that your Colombian dad dealt drugs, that boys didn't like you because you looked like their maids") and Sabina "never knew why Maureen picked you [Sabina] to hate" (Engel 47). The burden of U.S. Colombian stereotypes is thrust upon Sabina. As well, she faces the toxic inheritance of bias, racism, and classism frequently leveled at the wider Latinx community. Despite this cruelty, the narrator reveals that at Maureen's funeral, "you even felt pity for Maureen" and "your plan was to forget. But you did think of her, often, while wishing you could cull your memory to craft a provisional mercy" (Engel 58). Sabina holds repulsion *and* fondness in simultaneity. This push-pull is present throughout the section "Green," showcasing a desperation for connectedness that broadly permeates all of *Vida*. Sabina's journey—to find whether home and belonging are attainable—is narrated by a series of intense emotional connections and emotionally fraught disengagements. Nevertheless, I contend that the way in which Sabina interfaces with relationships—even one as burdensome as Maureen's—is grounded in her distrust of stability and her journey to interrogate whether stability itself is possible in the worlds in which she lives.

4.4 Life, But How Much?

For a book whose title means "life," there is a surprising lack of it in *Vida*. In the novel, the condition of diaspora is a constant encounter with loss, as each section in the work ends with heartbreak or death—an indicator of the depth of the intergenerational and historic trauma that follows U.S. Colombians. Upon reflection, Engel's work points to a certain understanding about the inescapable presence of tragedy. First, life ("vida") is in fact a delicately balanced tragedy—living is a dialectical encounter with the inevitability of death. In *Vida,* Sabina's life is marked by death, both on a personal level (as is the case with Lucho, Paloma, Maureen, and her babysitter Carla) and also by loss on a national level (as evidenced by her pilgrimages to family grave sites in Bogotá and conversations around Colombia as a "giant cemetery"). In *Vida,* Sabina often maneuvers her way through these losses by grasping at the indulgences of living—such as driving bullet-red Ferraris whilst having a salacious affair with an older man (Engel 108). In fact, it is only upon meeting Vida that she realizes that she is half-living—resisting an honest and vulnerable encounter with self-awareness because of her own conflicted preoccupations with her cultural identity. In order to live, Sabina must first *choose* that life, in whatever harried shape it may take.

A novel like *Vida* is an invitation to consider how the U.S. Colombian immigrant experience is positioned to understand home itself as a fluid construct, thereby resisting the limitations imposed by the conceptual frameworks that privilege the belonging that comes from origin to a homeland of any kind. *Vida* challenges conceptions of emigration in which inevitably migrants leave their homeland just to build a new home, in a new place. After all, Sabina's search for her identity and what it might mean to be "home" is ultimately a search for stability. By accepting instability as a necessary condition of diaspora, Sabina's story challenges the slippages present in the constructs of belonging and home. *Vida* depathologizes hybridity,

framing it instead as a constitutive condition of today's global transnationalism. Sabina's U.S. Colombian identity is neither inferior to an exclusively Colombian or U.S. identity; rather, her fusion is now the rule, not the exception.

What is more, Engel's *Vida* is pushing the boundaries of what counts towards the creation of *colombianidad.* In 2018, Patricia Engel won the Biblioteca de Narrativa Colombiana Award in Medellín, Colombia, for the translated Spanish version of *Vida*—making her the first woman to ever win the award and the first book in translation to receive this honor. Interviewed by Astrid Loreno Ochoa Campo, Engel reflects on this momentous achievement:

> And what that said to me, that I found very moving, was that the judges or jury had arrived at the moment in which they considered that Colombian literature did not need to be confined to the borders of the country, that literature has managed to move past that. I think that's something that we all need to observe and understand in every type of literature, is that literature is not something that carries a passport. So, I think it was interesting to see how they saw that my stories, which describe the lives of Colombians abroad, still had something important to say to those who were still living in the country, and they felt it was a worthy citizen of their own literature (411-412).

With *Vida,* Patricia Engel positions herself among a corpus of Latinx writers, navigating multiple iterations of U.S. intranational inclusion and exclusion through their work. By deprivileging home as either static or stable, *Vida* offers its readers a new working articulation of this concept: diasporic home. Through *Vida*, Engel proves herself as a critical U.S. Colombian voice in broader Latinx literature and shows the work to be formidable in the growing field of U.S. Colombian fiction.

Afterword
Post-Conflict Colombia?: Continuing the Brand

Writing about the possibility of peace in Colombia is like chasing a mirage, like running after something which appears to be so real, so possible, and yet, when you get close enough, it is, in fact, a fantastical apparition. Arguably, the country has been at war for seven decades. In 2016, peace accords were signed, leaving many hoping that the mirage had apparated after all. Yet, like a mirage, it was just an illusion.

On August 28, a former FARC Commander Luciano Marín (alias Iván Márquez) and Jesús Santrich declared war on the government, after three years of relative peace. Right after his announcement, Current FARC party leaders (including Rodrigo Londoño, nom du Guerre Timochenko) disavowed Iván Márquez's decision—calling for renewed support of the peace process and a rallying behind current president Iván Duque (Emblin, Citypaperbogotá.org). Moreover, the faction in revolt signifies only about 2000 troops, many of which already turned in their weapons. The video was released through the FARC's YouTube channel, and it shows Márquez and Santrich flanked by camouflaged members of the FARC, in an unknown camp in the jungle. The declaration starts by stating that "la rebelión no es una bandera derrotada ni vencida," affirming that no peace process can quell the revolutionary spirit of this leftist movement (0:01-0:05) As a savvy rhetorical pronouncement, just as soon as

Even as Márquez declares his intent to re-declare war, he offers an olive branch: "Anunciamos nuestro desmarque total de las retenciones con fines económicos. Priorizaremos el diálogo con empresarios, ganaderos, comerciantes y la gente pudiente del país, para buscar, por

esa vía, su contribución al progreso de las comunidades rurales y urbanas" (0:35-0:52). No doubt that Márquez engages in kind of savvy rhetoric by distancing his declaration of war from the heavily critiqued practice of kidnap-for-ransom demonstrates a wry maneuver on Márquez's part. Both conservative and liberal politicians and leaders have leveled attacks at this odious practice. In fact, the legacy of kidnapping has left the FARC hated by some of very rural farmers that would benefit from the FARC's ideologies of just land distribution. By stating their new modus operandi (dialogue with business leadership), Márquez might very well be betting on greater support for his cause. That said, Márquez does state precisely whom stands to be threatened by his pronouncement: the oligarchy. The object of war "será la oligarquía. Esa oligarquía excluyente y corrupta, mafiosa y violenta que cree que puede seguir atrancando la puerta del futuro de un país" (1:03-1:15). Márquez does not mince words about how he perceives those who wield political, social and economic power in Colombia. Indeed, he is not wrong. The oligarchic nature of Colombia's politics has made parity near impossible. Additionally, if Márquez did not have enough reason to be suspicious of the oligarchic elite, the data does not lie. He states: "En dos años, más de 500 líderes y lideresas del movimiento social han sido asesinados y ya suman 150 los guerrilleros muertos en medio de la indiferencia y indolencia del estado" (1:26-1:41). According to Colombia's INDEPAZ, the death toll is even higher even higher: 627 leaders dead. How to trust a process that not only has failed to deliver on its promises of land restitution, but has also cost the lives of hundreds of activists, union leaders, and disarmed guerrilla members?

For good reason, Márquez has little hope that things will get better for many rural-residing Colombians. Current president Iván Duque has asserted that these peace accords do not apply to his presidency, "desconociendo así que el acuerdo se firmó con el Estado, no con un

Gobierno" (2:18-2:25). Hailing from Uribe's self-styled right-wing political party, President Dúque has no intention of honoring the commitments that remain to be implemented, nevermind correcting for those that have been ineffectively executed to date. As a result, Márquez predicts a reckoning: "El régimen imperante de políticas neoliberales, de corrupción y guerra del actual poder de clase, nos ha colocado frente a dos caminos" (2:26-2:36). Márquez presents one path forward, one that should include real political dialogue across partisan lines, a true institutionalization of changes, and open constitutional process for newly disarmed FARC members. Failure to do this, he says, will lead to a more painful path to change, forced by the "inconformidad de todo un pueblo en rebelión" (2:55-3:00). While Márquez's prophecy may not manifest, it is indeed inevitable that crime, delinquency, and impunity will rage on, if left unchecked.

In fact, like a phoenix from the ashes, criminality in Colombia always rises. It takes different shapes, takes up different (if any) ideologies, and takes up different settings, but it always rises. Two groups emerged from the remnants of the Cali Cartel of the 1990s: the Rastrojos and the Machos. Meanwhile, the vestiges of Pablo Escobar's people now call themselves the Oficina de Envigado, located in Medellín. Additionally, after the AUC officially disbanded in 2006, members unwilling to give up arms splintered into what the government calls *bandas criminales* (*BACRIM* for short). These groups include the Urabeños, Ejército Revolucionario Popular Antisubversivo (ERPAC), the Paisas, and the Águilas Negras. The groups continue to peddle in narcotrafficking operations by way of key shipment corridor access and protection services. These groups are lawless in the purest sense—engaging in bribery, extortion, and money laundering. They will even work as assasasins to the highest bidder, if it financially suits them. They are criminal guns-for-hire—working to gain access to intelligence in

order to launder their profits and operate unmolested. Hannah Stone even asserts "there is evidence that the BACRIM backed candidates in the 2014 Congress elections, but this took place on an ad hoc basis, region by region, rather than being coordinated on a national level" ("Colombia Elites and Organized Crime: Introduction," *InSight Crime)*.

These facts present a grim reality and an even bleaker vision for Colombia's peaceful future. Criminal enterprising seems to mutate, rather than dissipate, and the conditions are ripe for war to wage on. Indeed, in their video, the FARC justified their declaration by citing a number of failed promises in the peace agreement. They are not wrong. They have failed to reinstate land to millions of displaced Colombians. They have failed to safely help guerrilla fighters insert themselves into civil, public and political life. They have failed to implement transitional justice frameworks that will promote national reconciliation. The Colombian government has come up short to correct the issue that proves the greatest threat to peace in Colombia: inequality. Colombia's staggering inequality only keeps growing, even as the country has managed to pass landmark laws to restore land to victims, has a vibrant diasporic community that internationally promotes tourism in Colombia, and a cultural industry that rivals any other Latin American country. The country just cannot seem to shake its enigmatic reputation—those words that are at odds with one another (magic vs. real, exotic vs. everyday, peace vs. violence) and can only make sense in a place where contradictions abound. A place of superlatives, in both wildlife and human suffering. A place for peace, perhaps.

For a thorough and up-to-date consideration of Colombia's exploration of itself as a contradictory identity and imaginary, there are several recent products that would further the work of this project. Ingrid Rojas Contreras's *Fruit of a Drunken Tree* (2018) contributes well to an examination of the role of U.S. Colombian diasporic writing. The novel is narrated in

alternating first-person chapters, on the one hand by a young girl Chula (7 years old at the novel's start) and by Petrona, her live-in maid with who hails from a mountainous slum neighborhood. The narration is filled with the constant violent news reports that have run in the backgroup to many Colombian citizen's lives—ranging from the doomed electoral campaign of the presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán (who was assassinated by Pablo Escobar) and the waves of militant acronyms (FARC, ELN, AUC, etc.) that color Colombia's geopolitical landscape. The work focuses on the effects that violence has on Chula, and while it is a poignantly-written coming-of-age collection (that also manages to examine the role of classism and heteronormative anti-feminism embedded in social discourse for the upper echelon of Colombians), *Fruit of a Drunken Tree* cements how Pablo Escobar's aftermath remains an obsession, even for writers writing from a U.S. perspective. Read alongside Pachico's novel, it even more distinguishes Patricia Engel's *Vida* as a seminal and unique voice in U.S. Colombian fiction.

Ciro Guerra's newest film, *Pájaros de verano* (2019) is about the beginnings of the drug trade in Colombia, during the marijuana boom of the 1970s. Although it is yet another film about the drug trade in Colombia, Guerra and his co-director Cristina Gallego do manage to narrate this story with some distinctive elements, never before seen in Colombian cinema. Namely, the film is told from the perspective of the Wayúu indigenous group, the. Most critics have positively noted the production style and have applauded the production collaboration with the Wayúu. *Pajáros de verano* is an innovative film, given both its exclusive setting in a remote region of Colombia and much of the dialogue being in the Wayúu language, wayuunaiki.

Along with Guerra's film, Netflix's 2019 mini-series, *Frontera verde*, is also a remotely set film in the jungle of Colombia, and the camerawork co-mingles the supernatural with the

criminal. A female detective from Bogotá is assigned to a case of four murdered women, killed in a remote Amazon village. Along with the ominous plot and rich cinematography, Guerra's film and this series are works that add the necessary perspective of indigeneity in a project that investigates the many facets of the Colombian identity.

Considering the rural turn in Colombian cinema, *Monos* (2019) represents a film that exemplifies both the rural turn and a re-envisioning of childhood. The film features a group of young child guerrilla soldiers—tasked with keeping their hostage alive in the remote jungles of Colombia. Combining a kind of post-apocalyptic style, together with a Lord of the Flies style of moral compass-making, the film combines an imposing scenery together with child protagonists who manage to maintain their subjectivity as children, even in their games of war.

Finally, this study would not be complete without considering the role of militancy in Colombia's quest for peace—specifically considering the role of gender within the armed conflict. Patricia Lara's testimonial study *Las mujeres en la guerra* (2000) and Jose Luis Rugeles film *Alias María* (2015) facilitate one way to understand the ways in which extralegal militancy has enshrined itself as a forceful expression of Colombia's national identity, particular how it has woven itself into politics, governance, and social discourse.

This dissertation not only makes scholarly interventions by considering an assemblage of texts that span fields of media, film and literary studies, but also in how considers both scholarly texts and popular cultural products. In that way, I contend for exploring the frontiers of academic objects in contemporary cultural studies. The project fits within the realm of Latin American studies yet puts itself in dialogue with approaches used in Latinx Studies, asking for these fields to consider the impact of global transnationalism upon hemispheric study. It brings together features from a variety of disciplines, such as Transnational Studies, Film Studies, and Diaspora

Studies—in an effort to point to a need for a multi-pronged methodology when doing cultural work about Colombia. Finally, I believe it contributes to a timely consideration of the ways in which cultural exportation, in the age of media distribution, streaming services, and neo-globalization, frames our understanding of places and spaces. Whether writing or teaching about our sites or regions of study, today's cultural theorists must grapple with modes of immediate access and cultural exposure that may preemptively inform the stories and narratives that scholars like me seek to complicate, nuance and re-articulate.

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