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Creative agency in resistance processes to militarized sexual violence in the Colombian armed conflict

Agencja kreatywna w procesach oporu wobec zmilitaryzowanej przemocy seksualnej podczas kolumbijskiego konfliktu zbrojnego

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Abstract

This article considers the dynamics of resistance against the militarization of sexual violence in the context of the Colombian Armed Conflict, spotlighting the creative agency inherent in the struggles of those who resist, specifically women and LGBTQI+ people. The study explores power geographies and the militarization of daily life, emphasizing how sexual violence is weaponized in war. Drawing on the concepts of agency and power in Foucault, Narrative Identity in Ricoeur, and Critical Pedagogy in Paulo Freire, the research examines testimonies and examples of resistance processes from the interactive project *Lives in Re-Existence*, created by the Colombian Truth Commission. The essay investigates how power dynamics and the militarization of daily life structure sexual violence as a weapon of war, while highlighting the creative resistance efforts of women and LGBTQI+ people in their pursuit of justice. By shedding light on the body as a contested territory and the intersections of race, class, and gender, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding sexual violence in the Colombian Armed Conflict.

Keywords: creative agency, resistance processes, sexual violence, Colombian Armed Conflict, power geographies

Streszczenie

Artykuł zgłębia temat oporu przeciwko militarnej przemocy seksualnej w kontekście kolumbijskiego konfliktu zbrojeniowego, a także naświetla rolę podmiotu kreatywnego włączanego w problemy ludzi oporu, w szczególności kobiet i osób ze społeczności LGBTQI+. Badanie eksploruje geografie władzy i militarne aspekty codziennego życia, akcentując sposób, w jaki przemoc seksualna jest używana jako broń wojenna. Opierając się na koncepcji władzy i podmiotu Foucaulta, koncepcji tożsamości narracyjnej Ricoeura i pedagogice krytycznej Paula Freire'a artykuł analizuje zeznania i przykłady procesów oporu z interaktywnego projektu „Życie w Re-Egzystencji” stworzonego przez kolumbijską Komisję Prawdy. Analizie zostaje poddane, w jaki sposób dynamika władzy i militaryzacja życia codziennego strukturyzują przemoc seksualną jako broń wojenną. W artykule podkreślono również kreatywne wysiłki oporu kobiet i osób ze społeczności LGBTQI+ w dążeniu do sprawiedliwości. Rzucając światło na ciało jako teren sporny oraz na przecięcia ras, klas społecznych i płci, niniejsze badanie ma na celu przyczynienie się do głębszego zrozumienia złożoności zagadnienia przemocy seksualnej w kolumbijskim konflikcie zbrojnym.

Słowa kluczowe: podmiot kreatywny, procesy oporu, przemoc seksualna, konflikt zbrojny w Kolumbii, geografie władzy

Introduction

The Colombian Armed Conflict has taken place since 1954, and it is deep-rooted in a complex geopolitical and historical context. The main involved actors are the Colombian government, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), among other guerrilla groups, the paramilitary (as the United-self Defense Forces of Colombia AUC) and other organized armed groups. With the demobilization of the paramilitary structures of the AUC and the FARC-EP guerrilla, the intensity of the conflict has decreased. Nevertheless, other groups remain active, such as the ELN guerrilla, Criminal Gangs (Bacrim), dissidents of the FARC-EP, and the EPL guerrilla, among others. As the main causes of the Armed Conflict, we could talk about the weakness of the State and its absence in the peripheric and rural areas of the country, land disputes, social and economic gaps, polarization, and persecution of the civil population due to their political orientation, lack of democratic spaces and political representation of diverse social groups, among others. In that sense, it is impossible to deny that the main reasons of the conflict have been structural causes related to inequality and social, economic, and political exclusion, that deeply affect an important part of the population. In this setting, sexual violence has been used as a weapon of war within the militarization of daily life in certain regions of the country, affecting mainly women and LGBTQI+ people (around 30,086 registered victims).¹

This article aims to explore which dynamics of resistance exist against the militarization of sexual violence, spotlighting the creative agency inherent in the struggles of those

¹ Corporación Sisma Mujer, *En 2021 no es hora de callar: por la erradicación de la violencia sexual contra las mujeres en el marco del conflicto armado*, “Boletín” 2021, No. 26, p. 2, <https://www.sismamujer.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Boletin-25M-2021.pdf> [access: 15.10.2024].

who resist, specifically women and LGBTQI+ people. It examines how power geographies, the concept of the body as a territory, and the militarization of daily life operate to structure sexual violence as a weapon of war, while groups of women and LGBTQI+ people resist creatively in a continuous struggle for justice. On the one hand, the concept of the creative agency is supported by the idea of agency and power in Foucault, Narrative Identity in Ricoeur, and Critical Pedagogy in Paulo Freire. On the other, the testimonies and examples of resistance processes will be extracted from different narratives of the conflict developed by the Truth Commission such as the Graphic Novel *My Body Says the Truth*, the interactive project titled: “Lives in Re-Existence”² and their report on sexual violence: “The War Inscribed in the Body.”³

Power geographies and the militarization of daily life

Power geographies within the Colombian Armed Conflict are very important for understanding the militarization of daily life and its impact on the body as a contested territory. According to Grosz, power is a substrate of forces in play within a given socio-personal constellation in which the body is its primary object.⁴ The body is, therefore, a territory; it is the stage for multiple relationships of power and knowledges. In Grosz’s words, the body is the strategic target of systems of codification, supervision and constraint. What makes it the target, she explains, are its energies and capacities which exert an “uncontrollable and unpredictable threat to a regular systematic node of social organization.”⁵ As well as being the site of knowledge-power, the body is thus also a site of resistance, because it entails, according to Grosz, the possibility of creating counter-strategic re-inscriptions, being self-marked, self-constructed and self-represented in alternative ways.⁶

The war in the Colombian Armed Conflict is not against an “external enemy of the nation” but against an “internal enemy of the State.” Contrary to World Power logics, in Latin American countries the consolidation of the nations has been weak, they lack a strong national identity, and the State has always been first. According to Rodríguez-Hernández, “for no expert in Latin America, the scarce national identity with which Latin American countries were consolidated is a secret. Historically, the lack of a properly formed national sense has been seen as one of the greatest obstacles for the entire population of each of these countries to march along a common path of collective well-being and prosperity, regardless of socioeconomic differences.”⁷ The Army was built as an institution that was responsible for defending the State and, since the beginning, there were the poorest

² Original title in Spanish, translated by the author: *Vidas en Re-Existencia*.

³ Original title in Spanish, translated by the author: *La Guerra Inscrita en el Cuerpo*.

⁴ Grosz E. *Inscriptions and body-maps: representations and the corporeal*, [in:] T. Threadgold, A. Cranny-Francis (eds.), *Feminine, Masculine, and Representation*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney–London 1990. p. 64.

⁵ Ibidem

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Quote originally in Spanish, translated by the author for this article. S.M. Rodríguez-Hernández, *Fuerzas Armadas y Derechos Humanos en Colombia: Algunas reflexiones sobre el tema*, “Revista Latinoamericana de Derechos Humanos” 2013, Vol. 24(1–2), p. 147.

citizens, the ones for whom serving in the military was mandatory. Under this structure, in Colombia, it was established that the enemies of the State were not outside the Nation's borders, but within it. This is how the military must fight against the insurgent groups and the paramilitary do what in theory the State cannot do in a "legit" way. The setting of the conflict is always in rural and peripheral areas, inhabited by peasants, indigenous peoples, and Afro-descendant communities, which not by coincidence are the poorest of the country. These are the main targeted bodies of this war. In these regions the civil population coexists with the armed groups. Many times, trying to survive in a violent context in which the lack of resources and opportunities is constant, people are forced to be part of one group or another, otherwise they are displaced or assassinated. Ironically, there is no armed group that publicly does not condemn sexual violence and yet, all of them use it strategically to assert power and discipline bodies that go against "the norm."

To understand rather than justify the logic behind sexual violence against women and LGBTQI+ bodies in the Colombian Armed Conflict, we can take as a starting point the fact that they are subordinated as spoils of war and territories to be controlled, taken, besieged, and destroyed. This occurs as a consequence of a cultural, political, and economic model of a patriarchal society, that exalts the normative masculine values usually associated with war. In the hegemonic narratives of wars, women and female bodies are invisible. As Jennifer Turpin states, women also "...do remain invisible in the military-policy making, reflecting taken-for-granted international assumptions about the maleness of the war."⁸ In the Colombian case, Consuegra Peña explains that this kind of cultural framework inherently brings a series of micropolitics and technologies of power that place women and feminized bodies in a place of subordination to men, in which tasks of care and domestic work are assigned to them.⁹ Apparently, sexual availability is assumed as part of these tasks, but it is more a matter of control and power than a matter of affording male sexual needs.

My Body Says The Truth: the body as a territory

We can see how this framework is the perfect setting for the militarization of sexual violence and how factors such as race, class, and gender are intertwined in a testimony based on a real story in the graphic novel titled *My Body Says the Truth*.¹⁰ The main character and narrative voice of this story is a black 22-year-old woman who used to live with her family in a rural area. She narrates that in her town they started to get used to the guerrillas' presence and coexisted with them. One day, flyers and graffiti with threats from the AUC started to appear on the streets and the walls of the houses of the people. Each day their

⁸ L.A. Lorentzen, J.E. Turpin (eds.), *The Women and War Reader*, NYU, New York 1998, p. 3.

⁹ C.L. Consuegra Peña, *La violencia sexual como una estrategia de guerra en el marco del conflicto armado colombiano: una aproximación a los mecanismos político-jurídicos de atención y reparación de las mujeres víctimas*, Universidad Católica De Colombia – Università Degli Studi Di Salerno, Bogotá 2021, p. 47.

¹⁰ Original title: *Mi cuerpo dice la verdad*. Produced at the First Meeting for Truth that recognized the dignity of women and LGBTQI+ people who are victims of sexual violence. It is based on testimonies offered on June 26, 2019 to the Truth Commission in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia.

presence was more visible. There was no place where they did not make everyone notice them. They demanded the people not to support the guerrillas in any way. Eventually, they settled down permanently in the town and asked for women who could serve them via cooking and washing their clothes and offering a good amount of money as payment. Her family was big, and they needed the money, so she started to work for them.

After a while, the paramilitaries started to harass her and one day they raped her. When her 15-year-old brother learned the truth, he went to face them, and they killed him in the central town square as an act of terror to scare the population and show their power. She could not stop working for them because the life of her family was compromised, so they kept raping her systematically for 10 years. She and her family could not mourn the brother, she got depressed, her mom was in a constant state of fear and the town condemned her and blamed her for the rape and her brother's death. She thought nothing could be worse until she survived an impalement, and she could not even report that because the positions in the health centers and the mayor's office were set up by the paramilitaries. No place was safe. She had to leave her land with the rest of her family to save their lives and they never could come back. She was terrified and was constantly struggling with her mental health until she found an organization of women that survived similar experiences, and she could start to transform her pain. That is how she offered her testimony to the project *My Body Says the Truth*, because she believed that telling her experience was good not for changing the past, but for transforming the future, and because today she can yell that she is alive and that her body says the truth.¹¹

In many cases, sexual violence does not come only from armed groups, but it is naturalized in the core of the families. This naturalization is somehow transferred to the public sphere in the Armed Conflict, where every male actor normalizes, due to their military training, but also their education, the ownership of the female bodies. There is a generalized assumption that men can subordinate not only the female bodies, but also their behaviors, feelings, and thoughts.¹² According to Consuegra Peña, in different regions, it is possible to observe how the presence of armed groups shapes the behavior and the existence of the people. For instance, young women, around 25 years old, must follow strict norms that determine the way they dress, the kind of relationships they are allowed to have, the places they can inhabit and the places they cannot, and even schedules for all their activities, among other control measures. If they do not follow these rules, the consequences can be torture, public scandal, sexual violence, or death. Therefore, this author affirms that “those women who, in contexts of war, assume roles different from those hegemonically assigned by patriarchal culture as political and community leaders, are transgressors of their bodies, or those who join or belong to opposing legal and illegal armed groups, as well as those feminized bodies that perform sex work, are precisely the

¹¹ Complete story in the short film with the same title: “*Mi cuerpo es la verdad*”, *el capítulo del Informe Final de la Comisión de la Verdad que evidencia los crímenes sexuales durante el conflicto*, Infobae, 4.07.2022, <https://www.infobae.com/america/colombia/2022/07/04/mi-cuerpo-es-la-verdad-el-capitulo-del-informe-final-de-la-comision-de-la-verdad-que-evidencia-los-crimenes-sexuales-durante-el-conflicto/?outputType=amp-type> [access: 20.12.2023].

¹² C.L. Consuegra Peña, *La violencia sexual como una estrategia...*, op. cit., p. 47.

reproducers of specific identities and social imaginaries, targeted by body terror technologies that execute and discipline through this economy of punishment.”¹³

Speaking of behaviors, thoughts, bodies and feelings’ control, Frye (1983) poses a parable about anger, domain and respect. The parable takes place in the space of a house, apparently inhabited by a traditional heteronormative marriage, and tells how one woman realizes that the only place for the viability of her anger would work effectively and take uptake in the kitchen but would not work in the bedroom.¹⁴ This parable evinces how, depending on who we are, we are allowed, or not, to feel anger about certain things and in certain places. Gillian Rose (2002) quotes this parable to highlight how feminism, through its awareness of the politics of the everyday geography of kitchens, bedrooms, streets, workplaces, and neighborhoods, has led us to the realization of the intersection of space, power and knowledge.¹⁵ Space, therefore, is a power structure. Rage, on the other hand, as shown in the parable, draws the borders of who we are and what do we want and what we do not. As shown, in the Colombian Armed Conflict there are territories in which certain bodies are not allowed to decide who they are, what they want and what they do not, because if they do, they are risking their lives or the lives of their loved ones. Hence, rage could be understood as an instrument of cartography, as it can delimit and shape bodies’ behaviors and interactions in space.

In rape culture, rage is not a feeling socially allowed to survivors, and this is part of the reason why it is silenced. In the Armed Conflict, the silence is bigger. Battering and rape, according to Crenshaw (1991), once seen as something that happened indoors, inside the home, in the private sphere, and that was considered as an errant sexual aggression, are now largely recognized as part of a broad-scale system of domination that affects women as a class.¹⁶ Politicizing the space of the home transformed the way in which we understand violence against women. The fact of recognizing as social and systemic what was conceived as isolated and individual has also taken a big role in characterizing the identity politics of people of color in general, as well as queer people, among others, which is crucial for analyzing sexual violence in the Colombian Armed Conflict. This has been possible in part thanks to movements of women organized against daily violences that shape their lives, as Crenshaw contends, drawing from the strength of shared experiences and the realization that the political demands of millions speak more powerfully than the pleas of a few isolated voices.¹⁷ This is what many survivors of the conflict as the ones of the stories narrated in this article are doing right now.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 48.

¹⁴ M. Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*, NY: Crossing Press, Trumansburg 1983, pp. 93–94.

¹⁵ Rose G., *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*, [in:] *The Spaces of Postmodernity*, Blackwell, Oxford 2002, p. 215.

¹⁶ K. Crenshaw, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color*, “Stanford Law Review” 1991, Vol. 43, No. 6, p. 1241, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1229039> [access: 20.12.2023].

¹⁷ Ibidem.

Sexual violence as a weapon of war

One of the effects of sexual violence is that it breaks almost all the borders that are possible to draw. Sohaila Abdulali¹⁸ illustrates it in her book *What We Talk About When We Talk About Rape*. She explains that a boundary is like a border, which is a place where you stop, and the other person starts. But when boundaries are invaded, she states, a person has entered a territory belonging to the other person. In that sense, she concludes, sexual abuse is a power exercise which violates almost all conceivable boundaries of a human being.¹⁹ According to the national report published by the National Center of Historical Memory, titled *The Inscribed War in the Body*,²⁰ sexual violence in the context of the Armed Conflict has been always indistinctly strategical among all the armed groups, which implemented it as a practice of appropriation of the bodies and populations, that contributed to reaffirm their authority in the territories.²¹ The report states that “sexual violence in the Armed Conflict as an expression of gender inequalities has constituted one of the fundamental mechanisms to maintain, on the one hand, a masculine position of domination and power on the part of the armed actors, and, on the other, a subrogated and subjugated female position on the side of the victims and the civilian population.”²² This statement reflects how the dynamics of the Armed Conflict have been developed within an unequal and hierarchical gender structure that is endorsed by sexual violence, and that marks an asymmetric relationship between the armed actors and the population. Therefore, it is concluded that, whenever sexual violence has been exerted, it has been fundamental to draw the power geographies that determine the control of the territories, the sovereignty of the populations, and the discipline of the bodies. Based on Rita Segato,²³ the report shows how sexual violence has worked here to expropriate the control of the people over their own body and space, in an exercise of territorialization through a practice of domination. For Segato, this is the key to the message of sexual violence: The possibility of holding absolute and sovereign control (both as an exercise of physical and moral power) over the body of people who are victims of sexual violence and their territories. In the report, it is stated that from the cases in which the contexts could be identified, 44 correspond to sexual violence exercised by all armed actors in scenarios of territorial dispute, and most of them occurred between 2000 and 2006, a period of profound transformations in the dynamics of the conflict. During this period, several armed groups generated territorial expansion strategies that formed geographical corridors that

¹⁸ Mumbai-based writer, activist and counselor to rape survivors, who made of her survival a creative act, manifested in her thesis, her book, and her activism.

¹⁹ S. Abdulali, *What We Talk about when We Talk about Rape*, New Press, New York 2018, p. 155.

²⁰ Original title: *La guerra inscrita en el cuerpo*.

²¹ *La guerra inscrita en el cuerpo: informe nacional de violencia sexual en el conflicto armado*, Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, Bogotá 2017, p 35.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ R.L. Segato, *Territorio, soberanía y crímenes de segundo Estado: la escritura en el cuerpo de las mujeres asesinadas en Ciudad Juárez*, “*Série Antropología (Brasília, Distrito Federal, Brazil)*” 2004, No. 362, p. 21.

were central to the military and economic dynamics of the conflict, some connected to the control of coca-growing and drug trafficking areas.²⁴

Resignifying the body as a setting for resistance

Consuegra Peña concludes in her work that it is in the bodies where the pain is inscribed, processed, and daily experienced. Following a similar idea, in the report, they quote Butler's (2010) statement that the body is not only a material or biological reality, but the product of different norms and regulatory practices that shape it, mark it, classify it, and give it meaning. Butler understands the body as a material and symbolic space in which processes of meaning, construction, creation, and resistance occur.²⁵ If we have this understanding of the body, then we can comprehend what other authors (García, 2000; Nahoum-Grappe, 2002; Blair, 2010) quoted in the report argue about the capacity of agency and resistance of the body: The reason why it is declared a target of power, a military objective, which from different expressions resists being controlled and annihilated, is precisely because there are these bodies the ones that misplace and transgress the social, political and economic order, unbalancing the force of fear and the threat of sexual violence. García let us understand this better while affirming that the body that is the object of violence "is always a body that is called to disappear but that always leaves a trace of its presence behind the surfaces that try to erase it [...]. If the body works as a surface where violence is inscribed, it also can return and be reborn again as living memory."²⁶

From the body, individuals and communities can resist the militarization of sexual violence. There exist various forms of resistance ranging from grassroots activism to community-building initiatives, where creative expression, art, and cultural practices become powerful tools for resistance, challenging the oppressive forces that seek to marginalize, silence, and, therefore, oppress and suppress the bodies. Here is where creative agency appears: We can understand it as the ability of individuals or groups to actively shape and transform their realities through innovative and critical thinking, expression, and action. Based on Foucault (1980) and his theory on power dynamics, we could state that creative agency involves the strategic use of power and knowledge to challenge and transform existing systems, resisting dominant norms and structures. On the other hand, Paul Ricoeur's (1992) work on narrative identity suggests that individuals build their identities through storytelling. In that sense, for him, creative agency involves the capacity to build one's narrative, shaping and reshaping it in the retelling of personal stories, in ways that reflect the autonomy and the ability to transcend the circumstances. Finally, Paulo Freire's (1993) critical pedagogy emphasizes the role of education in fostering critical consciousness and transformative action through creative agency, which involves individuals critically engaging with their social realities, questioning oppressive structures, and actively participating in the process of social change. These perspectives help

²⁴ *La guerra inscrita en el cuerpo...*, op. cit., p. 39.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 50.

us understand creative agency as a game between individual actions, societal structures, and the potential for transformative change, letting us challenge, reimagine, and grow from individual and collective experiences in several contexts.

Lives in Re-Existence analysis

This is what several initiatives and women and LGBTIQ+ people have managed to accomplish throughout the country. In the National Centre of Historical Memory report, we can identify 8 resistance strategies that imply creative agency. They are: Actively deciding to forget as a mechanism of survival to keep going; facing the aggressors and defending the territory; implementing traditional knowledge and spirituality as a mechanism to face pain and build solidarity; resisting within the family; abortion as a way of facing the aggressions; rebuilding sexuality and erotism as a facing strategy; retelling the testimonies beyond the category of victims; different forms of solidarity that contribute to the survival and resistance within the Armed Conflict. *Lives in Re-Existence*²⁷ is an interactive project established by the Truth Commission, with testimonies in different formats (animation, documentary, oral stories), as diverse as the Colombian territory and its people, where all these strategies can be found.

*Water Plants, Bodies and Gardens*²⁸: Luz Mary documentary portrait

I will analyze this short documentary as a representative example of this non-fiction project, where the concept of creative agency can be applied. I chose it because it depicts the body as a contested territory, illustrating the intersections of race, class, and gender. It is a portrait in which Luz Mary is the main character. She was born in Alto Baudó, Chocó, and she tells the story of how she survived forced displacement, child labour, and domestic and sexual violence. Through her storytelling, we can see how these three forms of violence are entangled and embedded within structural issues that go beyond the Armed Conflict and are perpetuated not only by the aggressors that provoked them, but also are intrinsic to the core of the family, the judicial system, and even the State. Therefore, institutions that are meant to protect us, instead, are part of the source of the violence and at the same time they feed it, naturalize it, marginalize it and perpetuate it.

Judith Herman, an important feminist expert on trauma, contends that it was not until the women's liberation movement of the 1970s was it recognized that the most common posttraumatic stress disorders were not those of men in war, but of women in civilian life, meaning that the real conditions of women's lives are always hidden in the sphere of the

²⁷ Original Title: *Vidas en Re-existencia*. Available in: <https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/mujeres-y-personas-lgbtqi#> [access: 20.12.2023].

²⁸ Original Title: *Regar las plantas, cuerpos y los jardines*.

personal, in private life.²⁹ The cited testimonies in this article reveal how, in the Colombian Armed Conflict, we can see a clear intersection between the sphere of war and the private sphere, and how there is a correlation between both, which allows the violence through its normalization and marginalization.

Besides Luz Mary, the secondary characters of this short film are Akim, her grandson, and Doña Nelly, leader of a collective of women survivors of which she is part nowadays. So, her story starts when she was seven years old and one day a woman who saw her commented she was “cute”. Her dad answered: “Take her” and she started to work cleaning her house until she was 15 years old. She comments that when she said that she wanted to study, she always got the answer: “Black people don’t study.” Every time she said she wanted to be a TV Model, she was told: “Black people cannot do that.” Being allowed to dream who she wanted to be was a privilege she did not have and instead, she was kind of trapped in this crossroad of oppressions.

She says that the woman hit her when she did not clean properly because she did not know how to. Of course she didn’t. She was a kid. It is not clear how she left, but she says that later she came back to her father for the second time, after escaping from her husband who also hit her repeatedly. Her dad rejected her and after that, the Águilas Negras³⁰ arrived in her town. She tells how she faced the boss, and she explains she was able to fight physically with him because she was somehow “trained” by the domestic violence she suffered before. After this confrontation, she was raped as a punishment, and she was not the only one. The same as in the testimony of *My Body Says the Truth*, here we can see how the armed forces used violence as a performative act to show and exert power. They also raped her stepmom, her sisters-in-law, and many other women around her to show everybody what would be the result if they tried to fight back again. Why did they do it? She asks. “Because the one that raped me said: This is sent by your government.”³¹

After this, she arrived in the capital city of Bogotá, displaced and with serious injuries in her uterus, seeking medical and legal help. She tells how her womb was going out of her body, and it was getting infected. It seems as a very evident and irrefutable proof of what happened to her, and yet she was told by the female officer who was taking her declaration if she was sure she did not do anything to provoke it. She defines this as the starting point of her deepest suffering. From the way she tells it, it seems all the violence she experienced until this moment of her story was part of her daily life and she got used to it. Yet, the moment in which she decides to denounce the sexual violence exerted by the paramilitary, as part of dealing with the aftermath of rape, is the point of her plot that she identifies as the beginning of a sort of grief. Not even the moment of the confrontation and the rape were described by her as a source of suffering.

She survived the surgery; she says she feels she died for some minutes but neither the Devil nor San Pedro wanted her in hell or heaven. Because of the forced displacement, her son lost the will to live. She explains he said he did not want to be alive because he was

²⁹ J.L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, New York 1992, Basic Books, p. 28.

³⁰ Narcoparamilitary organization.

³¹ Original sentence: “Porque el que me violó dijo: esto te lo mandó tu gobierno”.

alone, he did not have a mom or a dad, so he started to live on the streets and be involved with drug dealing. This situation was another layer of suffering, and it was at the same time a consequence of violence and another form of violence itself.

The narrative structure of this documentary short film is woven through the performative act of literally weaving protection amulets as an alternative for resisting daily the aftermath of war and sexual violence. While she tells this story, she is weaving a necklace and teaching her grandson how to do it. She tells him that through teaching him, she is giving him her knowledge so he can pass it on to other people. As in a sort of ritual, she explains that part of the process of weaving the necklace is to say out loud: "I do this to heal my body; I do this to heal my mind; I do this to heal my soul and for my own protection and the protection of my kids". Here, the act of weaving serves as a metaphor for breaking the silence while she tells her story, and, at the same time, is her way of resistance itself. The act of weaving and passing the knowledge and protection through these amulets can show how her story is not only hers but is interwoven with the stories of others who share it with her, and it is both a poetic and a political act.

The short ends with the women's collective of survivors where she found a community, a support network, and a kind of home. She says: "I'm not in my territory but I feel like if I was". This shows how through this community and her initiative of resisting and healing herself, her body becomes part of a collective body where all of them, displaced from their territories, create a new one for themselves and others that can come. The last scene is her hugging Akim, her grandson, in parallel with images of the scar from her surgery, and her collective singing an ancestral song about opening paths. In this narrative, the scarred wound is presented not as the end and consequence of violence, but as the beginning of a collective transformation through resistance. She shifts from being a hurt body that is meant to be the property of a father, a woman who exploited her, a husband, and an armed group, to own it and take care of it through ancestral knowledge and healing practices. At the same time, her body becomes part of a collective body that is constructed as a new territory. She owns her body in the owning of her story and her story is not only told by her words, but also by her body, legacy, and her amulets. In the end, she declares: "I say to these men that hurt me: I am alive to fight you back! Not with weapons but with my intelligence and my mind and what I've learned. I returned from death to live, because for me the fact of being alive one day more, is winning."³²

Conclusion

As Greta E. Angel Hernández contends in her autoðnographic³³ approach to self-managed justice alternatives, there is no single path to the aftermath of rape or sexual abuse, as

³² Original sentence: "Lo que yo le digo a los señores esos que me hicieron tanto daño: ¡Estoy viva para darles la pelea! Pero no con armas sino con mi inteligencia y mi mente y lo que he aprendido. Yo salí de la muerte a vivir. Porque yo el hecho de estar viva un día más, eso es una ganancia."

³³ The author writes it like this intentionally.

well as there is no single path to justice.³⁴ In the cited cases, these women create their own paths in different ways. Anzaldúa talks in *Borderlands* about how in the ethnopoetics and performance of the shaman the Indians did not separate the artistic from the functional, the art from everyday life, and the sacred from the secular. For them, the religious, social, and aesthetic were intertwined in art. For this reason, she claims that “the ability of story (prose and poetry) to transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else is shamanistic. The writer, as shape-changer, is a *nahual*, shaman.”³⁵ Following this same line, she talks about silence as a tradition that needs to be overcome.

I want to relate this to Paul Ricoeur’s (1992) work on narrative identity, which suggests that individuals build their identities through storytelling. In that sense, for him, creative agency involves the capacity to build one’s narrative, shaping and reshaping it in the retelling of personal stories, in ways that reflect the autonomy and the ability to transcend the circumstances. On the other hand, Paulo Freire’s (1993) critical pedagogy emphasizes the role of education in fostering critical consciousness and transformative action through creative agency, which involves individuals critically engaging with their social realities, questioning oppressive structures, and actively participating in the process of social change. Borrowing these three concepts, I would like to highlight how *Lives in Re-Existence* is a non-fiction interactive storytelling project, that reflects in its materiality how this works. Through the composition of diverse formats, narratives, and narrators, who bravely decided to break the silence to share their resistance processes to sexual violence intertwining art, storytelling, and social activism, *Lives in Re-Existence* build plural counternarratives that dignify the particularity of each testimony and context, going against the erasure of their realities in History and hegemonic and universalizing narratives published in news and more conventional media. Cvetkovich understands trauma as an event that alters one’s perception and identity, and the disturbance that is provoked produces, at the same time, new knowledge about the self and the external world. According to her, in the reorientation of consciousness caused by traumatic events, an ambiguous referentiality as well as determinate meaning may coexist. This means that, when trauma is no longer universalized, and it is allowed to be variable in terms of causes and effects, as well as to have representative potential, it is possible to see the diversity of values accorded to a traumatic event and its remembrance.

In this research, I showed how power dynamics and the militarization of daily life structure sexual violence as a weapon of war while highlighting the creative resistance efforts of women and LGBTQI+ people in their pursuit of justice. By shedding light on the body as a contested territory and the intersections of race, class, and gender, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding sexual violence in the Colombian Armed Conflict. In many cases, sexual violence not only comes from armed groups, but it is naturalized in the core of the families. This naturalization is somehow transferred to the public sphere in the Armed Conflict, where every male actor

³⁴ G.E. Angel Hernández, *Life after rape: autoðnographic approach to self-managed justice alternatives for people who have suffered sexual violence in México*, thesis, University of Granada, Granada 2023. p. 75.

³⁵ G. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza*, Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco 1987, p. 66.

normalizes, due to their military training, but also their education, the ownership of the female bodies. These stories represent thousands of women and LGBTIQ+ people, as well as non-hegemonic masculinities that share their struggles and truths and show different ways in which they gave new meaning and transformed the pain. This paper tries to provide an understanding of sexual violence in the Armed Conflict as a structural and systematic power exercise, underscoring the significance of acknowledging and celebrating the resilience of those who resist, as well as resignifying, and placing the body and its creative agency in the center. As a general conclusion, we could say that recognizing and amplifying the voices of those affected by militarized sexual violence would be important to contribute to the continuation of processes of resistance and awareness related to the topic. This is why further and detailed analysis of war testimonies as the ones collected in *Lives in Re-Existence*, as well as related artistic projects, can be encouraged by this research.

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