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SANTA CRUZ

**OTHER TRANSITIONS:
COLOMBIAN AESTHETICS IN THE WAKE OF MODERNITY**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

HISTORY OF CONSCIOUSNESS
with an emphasis in FEMINIST STUDIES

by

Cindy Rose Bello

December 2012

The Dissertation of Cindy Rose Bello
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ABSTRACT

Other Transitions: Colombian Aesthetics in the Wake of Modernity

Cindy Rose Bello

This dissertation examines the images, imaginaries, and aesthetic principles through which Colombian art and monumentalization practices have come to grips with the nation's internal armed conflict over the past three decades. This period witnessed an orchestrated and hitherto unparalleled mobilization of national and international tools of liberal governance in the interest of bringing the conflict to a halt. In spite of such efforts, massacres, human rights abuses, and forced displacements reached unprecedented levels by the late 1990s, intensified by a deepened alliance of armed violence and economic enterprise that accompanied post-Cold War neoliberal capitalist expansion. Analyzing art, museum cultures, architectural forms, and urban development practices from this period, the dissertation explores the tension between the political investment in modern technologies of rights and the palpable exhaustion of modern frameworks for resolving the nation's crisis of violence.

As elsewhere, the discourse of human rights has been invoked in Colombia as a primary regulative technology for restoring the humanity of social body, and "reordering the disorder" of the political body. *Other Transitions* reads aesthetic productions against a range of human rights policies and practices—international humanitarian law, transitional justice measures, human rights protest genres, and urban renewal policies aimed at "humanizing" the city—in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the fashioning of this "crisis of the human." Through a confrontation with the aesthetic, affective, and epistemological forms that comprise the scaffolding of the normative

imaginaries of human rights, each of the works examined analyzes the limits of the emancipatory promise of rights, with a focus on representations of victimhood and available strategies for empathy, solidarity, and identification.

“Other transitions,” I argue, are political transitions that are elusive, deferred, and impossible to realize within the existing regime of modern globality. If the post-dictatorship shifts of the 1980s and 1990s marked a turning point in the convergence of neoliberalism and democracy in Latin America, Colombia’s suspended transition to “peace” necessitates a return to discussions of “transitions” beyond modern frameworks. Reading cultural texts as an archive of this political impasse, my project thus reopens the question of what kinds of transitions are possible and necessary in this historical moment.

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INTRODUCTION

Other Transitions: Colombian Aesthetics in the Wake of Modernity

Other Transitions examines the images, imaginaries, and aesthetic principles through which Colombian art and monumentalization practices have come to grips with the nation's internal armed conflict over the past three decades. This period witnessed the implementation of diverse strategies for diffusing the nation's protracted violence: the initiation of the first formal peace talks; the institution of electoral and constitutional reforms to strengthen democratic participation and expand human rights protections; and the collaboration of state and civil society institutions in the establishment of the nation's first truth commission, all of which reflected an orchestrated and hitherto unparalleled mobilization of national and international tools of liberal governance in the interest of bringing the conflict to a halt. In spite of these measures, massacres, human rights abuses, and forced displacements reached unprecedented levels by the late 90s, intensified by a deepened alliance of armed violence and economic enterprise that accompanied post-Cold War neoliberal capitalist expansion. Analyzing art, museum cultures, architectural forms, and urban development practices from this period, I argue that this tension—between the political investment in modern technologies of rights and resolution as a means of achieving peace, and the palpable exhaustion of modern frameworks for resolving the nation's crisis of violence—undergirds the concerns of politically engaged cultural producers, who are less preoccupied with creating a historical “memory” of the conflict, than finding modes of representation adequate to the

emergent forms of sovereign violence and ontologies of in/humanity manifest in this latest phase of war.

The Colombian conflict has followed a trajectory of violence unique among Latin American states. Whereas the last three decades ushered in official transitions to democracy for former dictatorships throughout the region, the long-running conflict in Colombia assumed new and increasingly complex forms. Coming to resemble what has been termed the “new wars” of the post-Cold War era, the nature of the conflict shifted from a contest for political power between state and insurgent groups, to a battle for the protection and acquisition of resource-rich territories among privatized “war machines” exceeding, but also implicating, state military forms.¹ These territories, sought after for their revenue-generating ties to formal and informal global markets, are sites of sustenance and income for armed groups, and terror for their inhabitants, who live under the threat of violence, displacement, and death.

The ontologically precarious status of life in conflict zones has stood at the center of recent theorizations of power and sovereignty as the paragon of the negated, excluded forms of life upon which democratic political orders are constituted. In these theories, figures of displacement and violence occupy the underside of modern sovereignty’s biopolitical body as the “bare life” barred from the “politically qualified life” of the polis (Agamben 1998); the exterminable “waste life” rendered surplus by capitalist expansion (Bauman 2004); and the necropolitical “living dead” inscribed within

¹ Arturo Escobar, "Beyond the Third World: Imperial Globality, Global Coloniality and Anti-Globalization Social Movements," *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (2004): 215. See also Christian Wlaschütz, "New Wars and their Consequences for Human Security Case Study: Colombia," *Human Security Perspectives* (European Training- and Research Centre for Human Rights and Democracy) 1, no. 2 (2004).

the “maximal economy... represented by the ‘massacre’” in the “new wars” of globalization (Mbembe 2003).² Recognizing that the cultural and the political occupy continuous discursive terrains, my project reads aesthetic productions within the context of a range of human rights policies and practices—international humanitarian law, transitional justice measures, human rights protest genres, and urban renewal policies aimed at “humanizing” the city—in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the fashioning of this “crisis of the human.” Art, policy, and protest conventions all rely on processes of translation in order to make tangible experiences that elude the normative, developmentalist narratives of human flourishing which underwrite the promises of modernity. These acts of translation—which attempt to define and diagnose the ontological condition of liminal humanity—are critical to the ways in which possibilities for the transcendence of inhuman precarity are imagined. Giving equal analytical weight to the cultural artifacts produced by art, policy, and protest, this project examines how the interpretive practices of these spheres converge and conflict in their representations of the subject of violence.

Since the end of the Cold War, human rights has emerged as the privileged epistemological frame for understanding, and mapping solutions to, problems of political violence in the advanced capitalist era.³ Arguing that the discourse of human rights has been invoked in Colombia as a regulative technology for restoring the humanity of social

² Themes of “bare life” and the failure of democracy have served as focal points for a number of large-scale exhibitions in recent years. See Documenta 11 (2002); the 9th Annual Istanbul Biennial (2005); the 2nd Seville Biennial (2006); and Documenta 12 (2007).

³ Randall Williams, *A Divided World: Human Rights and Its Violence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xx.

body, and “reordering the disorder”⁴ of the political body, my project examines its objects of analysis with particular attention to the ways in which cultural producers have fashioned the problem of rights in their works. In doing this, my research seeks to identify the figures, tropes, and analytical lenses that provide meaning and coherence to hegemonic narratives of violence, peace, and political justice; both within the space of the nation and as a part of the larger global milieu of human rights praxes in which they circulate. At the same time, I attend to the modes of rupture and discontinuity manifest in aesthetic practices that call into question the very conceptual foundations of the current episteme of rights, and allow for creative reimaginings of their limits.

Theoretical Focus

This project contributes to a small but growing body of scholarship in the humanities examining the development of human rights as an ideological and political project. Analyses of the relationship between narrative structure and articulations of rights have been particularly crucial to formulating my approach. Recent works by Hunt (2007) and Slaughter (2007) illustrate the narrative continuities between the discursive technologies of the modern novel and the image of human personality in human rights law, revealing the collusion of legal and literary forms in “codifying the normative imaginary” through which rights and the human rights subject may be imagined.⁵ It is this relationship that Joseph Slaughter terms the “cooperative social work” of rights and

⁴ Nelly Richard, “The Reconfigurations of Post-Dictatorship Critical Thought,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 9 (2000): 273-282.

⁵ Joseph R. Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: World Novel, Narrative Form and International Law* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2007).

genre—that is, the social function of aesthetic forms in facilitating a popular “literacy” in the ideals and conventions of rights, and in providing a model for how its subjects should be conceived.⁶

Following these works, my project considers how the spheres of the legal and the aesthetic collaborate to regulate and delimit political imaginaries of rights and justice, and what the pedagogical implications of this collaboration are for the (re)production and dissemination of hegemonic models of freedom, citizenship, and ethical globality. But, rather than limit my focus to the novel, I have chosen objects of analysis which hail the subject on multiple sensorial levels, allowing me to articulate a fuller theory of subjectivity as produced not only through cognitive and affective modes of interpellation, but also through relations of power which shape embodied experience. Moreover, by locating my work in the geopolitical margins of modernity, I aim to shed light on the ways in which Third World aesthetics both assimilates and reconfigures the discursive parameters drawn by the collusion of form and rights at the global “core.” Studying the visual cultures of protest and commemoration in Colombia, my project opens up understandings of how transnational discourses of human rights work to fashion and order subjects and subjectivities in contemporary sites of neoimperial violence, where such discourses have political salience on the everyday level.

My concern with aesthetics is informed by a rich and expansive body of literature theorizing the constitutive relationship between the shaping of human perception and the formation of political, economic, and governmental regimes in modernity. Reading across an historical continuum spanning from the bourgeois political revolutions of the

⁶ Ibid, 7.

18th century to the development of industrial modes of labor in the 19th and 20th centuries, these inquiries examine the ways in which modernization, liberal governance and philosophical discourses of Enlightenment humanism colluded in the formation of new operations of discursive and institutional power that modified “the productive, cognitive, and desiring capacities of the human subject.”⁷ Taken collectively, the narratives produced by these theoretical discourses provide valuable accounts of the transformations of embodied experience wrought by the demands of new institutional and economic mechanisms of power, revealing the processes by which individual and collective subjectivities were “made adequate to” the multivalent requirements of an emergent “modernity.”⁸ For these authors, the making of modernity comprised a “re-mapping” of the coordinates of human perception to conform to the needs of new political and economic formations, resulting in the delimitation of the modes of seeing, feeling, doing, making, and thinking accessible to the “normative” modern subject.⁹ This literature, as such, not only illuminates the ways in which the subject comes to *inhabit* the social arrangements particular to modernity, but also how s/he comes to *desire* them, investing in the utopic visions seemingly obtained in the forward-moving transience and constant change of modern life.¹⁰

Over the past twenty years, amidst the intensification of globalization prompted by the declaration of a “new world order,” the forward look of the utopias of

⁷ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century* (Boston: The MIT Press, 1990), 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9

⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. G. Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2007), 13.

¹⁰ My understanding of Enlightenment aesthetics and modern subjectivity draws largely from the work of Susan Buck-Morss, Jonathan Crary, David Lloyd, and Martin Jay, as well as the early writings of Karl Marx.

modernization and liberal modernity seems to have been replaced by a backwards glance. The progressive temporality undergirding identity-based claims to civil rights¹¹ now shares the political stage with retrogressive demands for truth, reconciliation and reparation staged by globalized movements for human rights.¹² In these new formulations of rights and justice, the act of mourning, and the claim to the right to mourn, constitute critical vehicles for civic participation and the construction of political subjects. The fact that this turn has been particularly pronounced in the global south and postcommunist states¹³ points to a need to examine the aesthetic and affective dimensions of what Lisa Rofel terms “other modernities”—modernities marked by a relationship of deferral and/or alterity to Euro-American modernity.¹⁴ Insofar as they have sought to distinguish themselves from the political unrest, civil war, dictatorships, and stunted development patterns of “weaker” political regimes, the advanced capitalist states of the global north have maintained their role as the civilized leaders of this new world order—the “inside” against which other, wayward modernities have been constituted as “marginal.” As institutionalized processes of mourning are increasingly viewed as the means by which “transitional” states can recover from violent lapses in

¹¹ Wendy Brown, "Suffering the Paradoxes of Rights," in *Left Legalism/Left Critique*, ed. Wendy Brown and Janet Halley, 420-434 (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002).

¹² The explosion of transitional justice movements has been widely attributed to the post-Cold War political climate, in which a significant number of authoritarian, oppressive, and violent nation-states began to transition towards peace and procedural democracy (see Laplante and Theidon, 2007).

¹³ These include: Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, Fiji, Ghana, Guatemala, Liberia, Morocco, Panama, Peru, Sierra Leone, the Solomon Islands, South Africa, South Korea, and East Timor. Movements for reconciliation and reparation have also been a cornerstone of demands for racial justice within Third World and historically colonized communities in the United States and Australia.

¹⁴ Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China After Socialism* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

democratic liberalism, and enter the sphere of economic globality as ethically “modern” nations,¹⁵ mourning itself has emerged as a structure of feeling, and a way of inhabiting legal subjectivity, that is closely aligned with those who occupy what Enrique Dussel terms “modernity’s underside”¹⁶—the space of colonial alterity that is constitutive of Euro-centered conceptions of the modern, the human, and the universal.¹⁷ This inversion of the progressive temporality of Euro-American modernity begs the revisiting of the following questions: what new institutional and economic mechanisms of power are these collective subjectivities being made adequate to? What modes of seeing, feeling, doing, making and thinking are available to the individual and collective subjects of marginal modernities, and how do they translate into the formation of political desires? And, finally, how are the mass utopic visions of modernity’s earlier stages being revised in response to the emergent political and economic cosmopolitanisms reflected in practices of human rights and neoliberal globalization?

¹⁵ Sally Engle Merry, *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law Into Local Justice* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

¹⁶ Escobar, "Beyond the Third World," 217.

¹⁷ My intent here is not to reduce all expressions of political trauma to the status of state-co-opted “structures of feeling” as such. As Neferti Tadiar argues in her work on the place of “divine sorrow” in Philippine revolutionary movements, “[T]he poverty of our analytical language should not be mistaken for the simple identity of our objects. It should not lead us to conclude that all sorrow is the same and that difference lies only in the ends to which it is put, or to view emotion as mere raw material of political mobilization and strategy” (see Tadiar, 2009: 363). Following the work of Fassin and Rechtman (2009), I am interested, however, in thinking critically about why the trauma has garnered such institutional and political salience in recent decades, and what experiences and analyses are left out in the privileging of trauma as an analytical paradigm for reckoning with histories of violence.

Historical Contexts

These are the operative questions of my dissertation as it examines the relationship between cultural production and human rights in the contemporary context of the Colombian armed conflict. Since the 1990s, Colombia, like numerous other states marked by a history of internal violence and state-sanctioned abuses, has embraced the language of rights as a means of reviving narratives of national progress lost to decades of conflict and social fragmentation. According to Winifred Tate, the state's investment in the adoption of this language was made evident in its involvement in two major initiatives, which inaugurated a series of related measures over the subsequent two decades: 1) the 1991 rewriting of the Constitution, which, in its revised instantiation, featured a significant expansion of civic, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, and 2) the Trujillo Commission, an investigative body of state and civil society members organized by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission to determine responsibility for the torture and murder of over 100 people between 1988 and 1990 in the town of Trujillo.¹⁸ The government's endorsement of these two projects signaled an official shift in its orientation towards the language of rights, which it had hitherto denounced as "subversive."¹⁹

The impetus behind the initiatives themselves, however, were radical and progressive movements for democratic reform, mobilized throughout the 1980s in response to the state of siege legislation which was in effect in Colombia, almost

¹⁸ Winifred Tate, *Counting the Dead: The Culture and Politics of Human Rights Activism in Colombia*

¹⁹ Gustavo Gallón, "Human Rights: A Path to Democracy and Peace in Colombia," in *Peace, Democracy, and Human Rights in Colombia*, ed. Christopher Welna and Gustavo Gallón, 353-411 (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

continually, between 1958 and 1991. The 1980s saw an escalation in the mobilization of human rights discourse as “solidarity groups” formed to draw attention to the political killings, torture, and arbitrary detentions of urban leftists carried out by the state during these years. After political reforms opened local offices to democratic election in 1986, these activists increasingly channeled their energies into local civic movements in the hopes bringing a leftist alternative to the traditional party structure. The urban guerrilla group M-19 was once such organization, which, in the aftermath of a dramatic episode of state repression, transformed itself into a legal political party, enjoying popular support for many years until paramilitary and military violence destroyed much of its leadership in the ‘90s. This leftist turn to civic engagement was visible in the formation of the popular movement that culminated in the 1991 rewriting of the Constitution, a process in which the M-19 played an active role. This document stressed the centrality of rights and democratic reform to achieving a “culture of peace” in Colombia, and codified the language of international human rights into domestic law.

Human rights activism became even further institutionalized with the growth of international funding and training networks in the 1990s, which provided once-grassroots militant and solidarity organizations the resources to transform themselves into NGOs. The Trujillo Commission was an early project of this newly professionalized human rights NGO community. In addition, the local institutionalization of the global discourse of human rights had other long-term, far-reaching effects, including the unprecedented political mobilization of disenfranchised

groups based on ethnicity²⁰—a result of language in the 1991 Constitution which granted cultural and territorial rights to ethnic minorities—and, more recently, the state implementation of transitional justice frameworks with the expressed intent of effecting a national transition to “peace” (which I discuss in Chapter 3).

The competing agendas of these discrepant trajectories is less relevant to my research than the points of agreement undergirding their differences, reflected in their shared investment in human rights as a primary vehicle of social transformation. The adoption of human rights frameworks heralded a major paradigm shift for both leftist and mainstream nationalist discourses, resulting in a discursive continuity between previously antagonistic forces which, I contend, speaks to broader shifts in hegemonic notions of subjectivity, agency, and social progress accompanying the expansion of neoliberal economic policies. Wendy Brown argues that, within the context of the United States, this turn to rights is a symptom of a neoliberal rationality which promotes, across the political spectrum, individualized models of political autonomy over collective ones, resulting in an abandonment of radical visions of self-determination, as well more modest liberal democratic ideals of shared power and governance.²¹ Following this observation, this dissertation considers what the hegemony of rights discourse in Colombia reveals about the transformation of both the radical imagination and the

²⁰ Arturo Escobar’s ethnography of social movements in Colombia’s Pacific region discusses how Afro-Colombian groups appropriated the new constitution’s language around cultural and identity-based rights as a strategy for defending their territories against the incursion of transnational corporations and state seizure of their lands in the name of “development.” His reading of identity-based rights movements differs significantly from Brown’s analysis of such movements in the United States, which understands the turn to rights as reflective of a “neoliberal rationality” promoting individualized models of political autonomy over collective ones. See Arturo Escobar, *Territories of Difference : Place, Movements, Life, Redes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

²¹ Wendy Brown, "Suffering the Paradoxes of Rights."

national imaginary in the wake of the Cold War. What hegemonic models of the subject are legitimated in this broadened invocation of rights and how do they circumscribe the possibilities for speech, action, and affect accessible to subalternized communities? What conceptions of personhood are rendered legible by this discourse, which are foreclosed, and what is the role of cultural forms in facilitating this legibility of the “human” subject?

Interventions and Contributions

Despite a growing interest in the Colombian conflict, and the United States’ relationship to its escalation since the 1999 passage of Plan Colombia, there has been a paucity of scholarly research on this topic over the past decade.²² Existing scholarship—largely written from the perspectives of political science, conflict resolution, and public policy—reveals an overwhelming concern with political reform, the survival of the democratic state, and the strengthening of “weak” political systems as a means of achieving stable peace. While such studies convey important understandings of the conflict, their analyses tend to leave unexamined the epistemological premises of their interpretive rubrics, which often presume an ameliorative relationship between modern

²² Welna identifies a handful of book-length studies produced by scholars based in the United States between 2001 and 2007. Among these are Crandall’s (2002) critique of U.S. drug policy toward Colombia, Taussig’s (2003) ethnography of local rural violence, and Richani’s (2002) modeling of a stable war system equilibrium to explain the ongoing violence. He also cites the following studies by journalists: Dudley (2004) on the demobilization and extermination of guerrillas in the 1980s and early 1990s, and Kirk (2003) on the personal courage of Colombians facing violent abuses. To these I would add Tate’s (2007) ethnography of human rights activism. Welna also laments the dearth of in-depth analyses by Colombian scholars made available in the United States. Here, he lists texts by Thoumi (2003); Berquist, Peñaranda, and Gonzalo Sanchez (2001); and Stafford and Palacios (2001) as notable exceptions.

problems of violence and modern apparatuses of liberal democracy and capitalism. As such, these analyses not only foreclose the possibility that violence may be intrinsic to modernity, they also foreclose the possibility of a transition to peace outside of its mechanisms.

Seeking to complicate these assumptions, I argue that aesthetic productions, unbound by the disciplinary conventions of the social sciences, have the potential to reveal unspoken, suppressed, and fledgling aspects of political structures presumed to be fixed and universal, inviting ways of knowing the conflict that social scientific methods often preclude. Examining the Colombian conflict from the vantage point of its cultural productions, I contend, yields insights into experiences of violence that exceed instrumentalist understandings of human rights, inspiring critical reckonings with the contradictions of neoliberal models of peace and profit stirring current crises of humanity.

My approach is indebted to the work of Latin American Cultural Studies scholars who, in the wake of Southern Cone dictatorships, turned to analyses of art, literature, and performance to unsettle the narratives of transition produced by “efficient discourses” of “scientific rationality” that worked to consolidate the new democratic orders, and rationalize the violences of previous regimes.²³ To this body of scholarship, my project contributes approaches to theorizing what I call “other transitions”—political transitions that are elusive, deferred, and impossible to realize within the existing regime of modern globality. Colombia’s hopes for a “transition” to peace are tied to the vicissitudes of globalization, the demands of which serve to propel the conflict’s ongoing

²³ Nelly Richard, “The Reconfigurations of Post-Dictatorship Critical Thought,” 275.

contests for resources and territories. The growing untenability of peace in this context thus reopens the question of what kinds of transitions are possible and necessary in this historical moment.²⁴ If the post-dictatorship transitions of the Southern Cone marked a turning point in the convergence of neoliberalism and democracy in Latin America, Colombia's suspended transition to "peace" marks yet another, one which necessitates a return to discussions of "transitions" beyond modern frameworks. This project therefore expands the geographical and temporal scope of existing scholarship on the aesthetics of transition in Latin America, while also contributing to analyses of the aesthetics of violence in other territories mired in the crises of global war.

Chapter Narratives

The cultural productions I examine in this dissertation share an engagement with the "common sense" status accorded to human rights discourse in the post-Cold War era, problematizing, in particular, its claims to political transcendence and social emancipation—the very claims which, Arturo Escobar argues, have come to be folded into the regulatory functions of neoliberal democracy, and depleted of their interventionist potential.²⁵ Through a confrontation with the aesthetic, affective, and epistemological forms which comprise the scaffolding of the normative imaginaries of human rights, each of these works explores the limits of its emancipatory promises,

²⁴ Escobar, *Territories of Difference*, 21.

²⁵ See Escobar, "Beyond the Third World." Citing recent anti-capitalist scholarship and Latin American theories of "global coloniality," Escobar argues that neoliberal globalization has occasioned a deepening of the contradictions of modernity's functions of social regulation (the "set of norms, institutions, and practices" through which social expectations are stabilized) and social emancipation ("challenges to the order created by regulation"), resulting in a situation wherein the claims of emancipation, now increasingly subject to scientific rationality, have collapsed into a paradigm of regulation ceded to the expectations of the market.

particularly as they are manifest in representations of victimhood, and the schemas available for empathizing, communing, and identifying with the victim therein.

Chapter One lays the groundwork for questions and theoretical engagements that recur throughout the dissertation as a whole. I take Fernando Botero's paintings of the torture at Abu Ghraib as a point of departure for considering the relationship between Enlightenment aesthetics, contemporary global human rights imaginaries, and the politics of representing atrocity and trauma within the context of evolving "fields of representability" enabled by an increasingly globalized media culture. Resurrecting the Kantian aesthetics of beauty, Botero's portraits, I argue, provoke a reflection upon the calculative rationality underpinning post-war international human rights instruments, and the logic of sublime "unrepresentability" which, over the latter half of the twentieth century, provided the normative frame for representing historical trauma. Insofar as it arises from the desire to liberate the aesthetic from the exploitative force field of market commodification, artistic sublimity colludes with, and makes legible, the transcendent aspirations of international human rights doctrine, which aims to protect the human body from its instrumental treatment in times of war. Botero's rejection of the imperative of unrepresentability, I argue, disarticulates the regulatory relationship between aesthetic norms for representing atrocity, and the legal frames for its recognition, allowing for an interrogation of the law's distinctions between "humane" and "inhumane" acts of violence, and sublime art's distinctions between exploitative and non-exploitative representation of human suffering, revealing their mutual imbrication in the inhuman technologies that sustain the everyday violences of global capitalism.

Chapter Two examines the political impasses of Colombian modernity through interpretations of two series of artworks that were first launched in the mid-1990s—Oscar Muñoz’s *Aliento* and Juan Manuel Echavarría’s *Corte de Florero*. These series turn to the medium of photography to undertake a “productive undoing” of inherited epistemological frames for apprehending political violence, human subjectivity, and possibilities for democratic emancipation in modernity. Attempting to capture a new, intensified phase of violence as it is in the process of unfolding, these works engage closely with the psychoanalytic and philosophical epistemologies undergirding contemporary conceptions of sovereignty and “political agency” to reveal the inadequacies of human rights as a disciplinary formation for understanding emergent ontologies of violence, and the potential for their transformation and transcendence, under current conditions of imperial globality.

This chapter reads Oscar Muñoz’s experiments with the photographic medium against the deployment of the identification photograph in increasingly globalized genres of protest calling attention to state violence and political disappearances. I argue that, if the political claims of the identification photo rest on its archival permanence and its ability to certify the historical presence, social identity, and civil status of the referent, Muñoz’s suspension of the portrait’s indexicality animates a reconsideration of the social and epistemological infrastructures through which political subjects are formed and become legible within current arrangements of democratic modernity. The transience and instability of the image in Muñoz’s portraits suggests the inadequacy of these infrastructures to “contain” the particularities of Colombian violence, and to provide a framework for manifesting the humanity of its victims. Through a close reading of

Aliento, this chapter examines the ways in which Muñoz's works stage a relationship between the (viewing) witness and the (photographed) victim that undermines the ontological stability of both, contesting the telos of emancipation and narrative of human development that defines the normative subject of rights.

In a similar vein Echavarría's use of the photograph creates "illustrations" of the natural world which re-narrate the "planetary consciousness" of the Enlightenment through a sinister aestheticization of death. In doing this, his photos rewrite the story of modernity from its colonial "underside"—from the vantage point of the repressed colonialist, neocolonialist, and imperialist violences that are constitutive of modernity itself. Making visible the silenced, but formative, "fault lines" of the Enlightenment, Echavarría rehearses anew the practice of making the "global narratable" by providing an alternative image of modern world-making that provokes a rethinking of the founding epistemologies of democracy and commerce.

Chapter Three explores the politics of truth and reconciliation in Colombia through a discussion of recent transformations made to Bogotá's Central Cemetery. Since 2008, the cemetery has been the focus of an extensive exhumation process in preparation for the construction of El Centro del Bicentenario: Memoria, Paz, y Reconciliación, the first museum in Bogotá dedicated to memorializing the history of Colombia's political violence. As a project conceived out of the transitional justice mandate to enact "symbolic reparations" directed towards victims groups and the general public seeking to preserve collective memory, I examine how legal, aesthetic, and narrative forms collude in this site to regulate the normative imaginaries through which the subject of reparation and reconciliation may be conceived. Reading the architectural

plans of the museum against the ruinscape produced by the disinterment of corpses, I position this project within the broader trajectory of urban renewal policies to consider the relationship between the rhetoric and practice of transitional justice in Colombia and the city as a representational project.

This chapter contains a brief discussion of Beatriz González's public art installation *Auras Anónimas*. Emerging from a confluence of a *political* practice demanding historical presence and preservation amidst urban renewal's erasures of history, and an *aesthetic* practice which counters the progressive temporality of the state's "redemocratization" narrative, *Auras Anónimas* offers an interventionist aesthetic which contradicts the therapeutic pretensions of the city's cemetery excavation project. As it rewrites the epitaphs of the anonymous dead, *Auras Anónimas* presents an alternative iconography of exhumation which underscores the persistence of the social relations undergirding the production of human superfluity in Colombia, calling into question the city's symbolic attempts at recognizing, and affirming the human value of, victims of political violence.

CHAPTER ONE

Unrepresentability and the Claim of Beauty in Botero's Abu Ghraib Portraits



Figure 1: Abu Ghraib #43, 2005

In the winter of 2006, the Williams College Art Museum staged the exhibition “Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain.” Organized with the intent of raising difficult questions around the politics of aestheticizing human trauma, the exhibition brought together a provocative assemblage of pictures categorized under rubrics of “art” and “photojournalism”—corpses, recently bereft of life, awaiting recovery in the wake of conflict and massacre; bodies ravaged by famine, disease, and domestic battery; as well as more familiar images drawn from the annals of modern war photography. Taken collectively, the photographs situated the viewer in a relationship of intimate proximity to the graphic details of their subjects’ suffering, capturing the disquieting tension between evocative portraiture and callous spectacle the curators aimed to orchestrate.

Notable, however, was editorial restraint exercised in one case among the lot—the display of photographs documenting prisoner torture at Abu Ghraib. Here, the spate of pictures released by the media in its coverage of the scandal found perfect expression in one encapsulating image: a figure that came to be known simply as the “Hooded Man.” In a thoughtful and complex discussion of the motives behind this curatorial decision, Mark Reinhardt names several concerns which inspired this act of visual reticence: a commitment to granting Iraqi victims the same respect paid to American soldiers, whose images in states of death and dying had been banned from public circulation; the desire to negate the disregard for prisoner privacy performed by an American media more concerned with concealing the victims’ genitals than their faces; and a refusal to reiterate and prolong the rituals of degradation set in motion by the prison guards’ use of the camera as a torture device.¹ While these reasons were no doubt well founded, the contrast between the sharply restrained treatment of detainee torture and the explicit depictions of pain comprising the rest of the exhibition bespoke the underlying sentiment that when it came to Abu Ghraib, there was a representational threshold that could not be crossed. The ethical experiment occasioned through “Beautiful Suffering” had encountered its limit case.

Scholars, activists and artists concerned with questions of representational ethics have embraced the figure of the hooded man as an apt metonym for the unspeakable and unrepresentable transgressions of empire. The list of those who have used this image to mobilize a critique of the US presence in Iraq is long and continues to grow,

¹ Mark Reinhardt, "Picturing Violence: Aesthetics and the Anxiety of Critique," ed. Holly Edwards, and Erina Duganne Mark Reinhardt, *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain* (The University of Chicago Press), 2006: 16.

encompassing not only internationally recognized artists, but also protestors confronting the war on a local scale. Perhaps the most widely disseminated deployment of this figure is a lithocrayon drawing by Richard Serra [figure 2], which translates the original image into a chaotic inkblot-silhouette framed by the boldly scrawled words “Stop Bush.” In a Baghdad mural, Iraqi artist Sallah Edine Sallat [figure 3] contrasts the dark and heavy figure of the hooded man with a more lightly sketched Lady Liberty, her head shrouded in the white hood of an executioner or torturer, and her right hand raised to activate an electrical switch connected to wires on the hooded man’s body—the switch here replacing the torch as the new conduit of enlightenment and liberty. Other noteworthy adaptations include the iRaq poster series by the New York City collective Copper Greene [figure 4]; as well as Guy Colwell’s painting *The Abuse* [figure 5].



Figure 2: Richard Serra, *Stop Bush*, 2004



Figure 3: Salah Edine Sallat, *Untitled*, 2004

Reviewing the above-cited works, visual culture theorist W.J.T Mitchell attributes the proliferation of this image to its powerful resonances with the “devotional

overtones” of Christian iconography—the figure of the hooded man assuming not only the same outstretched pose as the Christ in Passion, but also affecting the same state of grace in the midst of terror and suffering. For Mitchell, the exceptional poise expressed in the mere posture of the body invites a certain ease of viewing, a “prolonged contemplation” of the image, which gives way to a sympathetic identification with the rendered figure.² For these reasons, he argues, the image of the hooded man stands out as a “particularly eloquent” form for making visible acts that have been rendered “unspeakable” and “unimaginable” through the discursive turns of the war.³ Yet this interpretation begs the question: who or what determines the frontiers of the unimaginable and the unspeakable as “the place where words and images fail” to reverentially capture the horrors of modern warfare, the place where the very attempt of their usage is refused as an obscenity inadequate to the singularity of the traumatic event? In the case of Abu Ghraib, in other words, why does the image of the hooded man mark the site at which violation stops and ethical witnessing begins?

² W.J.T. Mitchell, "The Unspeakable and the Unimaginable: Word and Image in a Time of Terror," ed. Robert J. Griffin, *ELH* (The Johns Hopkins University Press) 72, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 305.

³ *Ibid.*



Figure 4: Copper Green, iRaq, 2004



Figure 5: Guy Colwell, The Abuse, 2004

Law and Cultural Memory

My first encounter with Fernando Botero's paintings of the torture at Abu Ghraib was in 2005, at a talk by Patricia Viseur Sellers on the influence of feminist critique on the prosecution of sex-related crimes in the International Criminal Tribunals of Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. As the Tribunals' legal advisor on gender-related issues, Sellers recounted her participation in the prosecutions' efforts to push the understanding of rape in international law beyond its historical treatment as a spoil of war, an affront to the honor and modesty of womanhood, and towards its rightful recognition as a Crime Against Humanity, one of the modalities through which grave breaches of torture, genocide, and enslavement are executed in times of conflict. Prosecuted for the first time as serious violations of humanitarian law, the Tribunal extricated rape and other forms of sexual violence from their status as private, isolated injuries pertaining solely to the domain of the feminine body and redefined them as expressions of relations of power, made manifest through violations to the bodies of

both women and men. As noted by Katherine M. Franke, this reframing of rape and sexual assault placed at the center of legal practice substantive discussions of the role played by sexual violence in collective racial, ethnic, and religious persecution, expanding the courts' engagement with these crimes from the individual case to a broader focus on "how sex is *put to work* to construct men, masculinity and nations, and to destroy women, men and a people."⁴ It was a radical reimagining of both sex and law which took the body as a starting point for reading and interpreting systemic operations of terror in the historical moment of their articulation, releasing from legal categorizations of rape their inherited bonding to the logic of masculinist protection, which has typically construed the offense as interpersonal, ahistorical, and inconsequential to questions of collective redress.



Figure 6: Botero, Abu Ghraib, 2005

⁴ Katherine M. Franke, "Putting Sex to Work," ed. Wendy Brown and Janet Halley, *Left Legalism/Left Critique* (Duke University Press), 2002: 321. Emphasis mine.

At the conclusion of her talk, Sellers punctuated her remarks with an image from Botero's Abu Ghraib series—a painting of a detainee, bound, blindfolded, and clothed in women's undergarments [figure 6]. She encouraged artists in the audience to follow suit, produce more paintings and sculptures of survivors of sexual violence in war, and display their creations as public monuments. It was a rhetorical flourish not unfamiliar to the conventions of academic talks, yet the image stayed with me, imploring me to examine my discomfort and ambivalence towards this visualization of sexual violence and her plea for its proliferation. What lessons, ethical or otherwise, are we to take away from this image in the context of her lecture? In what ways do Botero's paintings embody the creative rethinking of human rights and sexual violence advanced through the Tribunal, and what is the power of the image to further shape, inspire, and enable innovations in our visions of justice? And, finally, what is the relationship of aesthetics to human rights? How does the image make visible not only the substance of the offense, but also the substance of the legal structures and political imaginaries set in place for rectifying it?

Sellers' comments underscore the tangled genealogies of the juridical practice of human rights and the cultural practice of monumentalization as dominant means through which historical traumas are preserved, remembered, and publicly healed in the global sphere of contemporary politics. As Andreas Huyssen mentions in his study of the "surfeit of memory" saturating late 20th century culture, any discussion of films, sculptures, memorials or museums produced in tribute to the atrocities of the past is incomplete without a consideration of their legal counterpart—truth commissions and

juridical proceedings in the name of human rights.⁵ As they make public and permanent the ghosted voices of history, the demands and approaches of human rights activism, he argues, take shape within an expanded field of discourses and debates over how to commemorate, and make visible, the effaced realities of state terror. But beyond a few passing observations, Huyssen does little to explicate the continuities between the cultural and legal realms of memory-production—their shared forms of articulation, the collusions of their aesthetic-pedagogical strategies, the co-constitution of their respective political projects, etc. The stakes in identifying these continuities are significant, I would argue, for these points of overlap, imbrication, and interdependency simultaneously constitute sites of potential rupture, where the “common sense” of our political worldings can be revealed and called into question.

Debuted in 2005 with the stated intention of “restoring dignity” to the tortured subject, Botero’s paintings of the torture at Abu Ghraib exhibit this drive to memorialize, freezing on canvas a moment of exposure and shock which came and went with the rapid cycle of presencing and erasure characteristic of new media practices. Seeking to “burn the images [of torture] onto the world’s consciousness the same way that Pablo Picasso’s “Guernica” did for the Spanish Civil War,” Botero offered to donate works from the series to any American institution willing to make the paintings part of its permanent collection. None came forward,⁶ nor did a single major museum

⁵ Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 95.

⁶ The paintings, valued at 10 to 15 million dollars, were ultimately donated to UC Berkeley.

agree to open its doors for a temporary exhibition of the works, in spite of the Botero's widely acknowledged status as Latin America's most famous living artist.⁷

The failure of this attempt at memorialization can be explained only in part by such factors as the restrictions of federal funding, the controversial nature of the subject matter, or the conservatism of the museum establishment. I argue, rather, that the unexhibitability of these paintings rests in the formal qualities of their presentation, which transgress the conventions of museum historicism and their visual vocabularies for representing scenes of trauma and suffering. Here, the “negative aesthetics” of Lyotardian philosophy—characterized by visual practices of absence, metonym, and ellipsis—dominates the representational field, reflecting a sweeping curatorial adherence to the oft-cited (and as Huyssen points out, reductively interpreted) Adornean dictum of the “barbarity” of writing poetry after Auschwitz. In their concern with the sensuous materiality of the traumatized body, Botero's paintings resist the logic of “unrepresentability” which overwhelmingly guides the formal choices of artists shouldering the responsibility of representing historical episodes of terror thought to be incommensurable or exceptional. In doing this, the works activate processes of affective response and identification which throw into crisis dominant models of spectatorship, witnessing, and political action mobilized by the collaborative work of rights discourse and popular genres of remembrance.

⁷ New York City's Marlboro Gallery (2006), The Center for Latin American Studies at UC Berkeley (2007), and the American University Museum (2007) were the first institutions to host the exhibition. More recently, the works have been shown at the Delaware Art Museum, The New Orleans Museum of Art, and the Brooks Museum of Art in Memphis, all in 2008.

Taking Botero's transgression of the "unrepresentability" of trauma as a point of departure for theorizing the relationship between aesthetic "limit cases" and the reification of "humane" and "inhumane" distinctions of violence in international human rights doctrine, I conclude my analysis with the suggestion that aesthetic interventions such as Botero's play a pivotal role in critiquing the calculative rationality of international human rights instruments.

Sense, Otherness, and Aesthetic Responsibility

Sun Tzu was brought before Ho Lu, the King of Wu, who had read all of Sun Tzu's thirteen chapters on war and proposed a test of Sun's military skills. Ho asked if the rules applied to women. When the answer was yes, the king challenged Sun Tzu to turn the royal concubines into a marching troop. The concubines merely laughed at Sun Tzu until he had the head cut off of the head concubine. The ladies still could not bring themselves to take the master's orders seriously. So, Sun Tzu had the head cut off a second concubine. From that point on, so the story goes, the ladies learned to march with the precision of a drill team.⁸

The original context for this quote is the 1996 publication *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance*, co-authored by Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade, military analysts with the National Defense University in Washington D.C. Credited with inspiring the "Operation Iraqi Freedom" military strategy by the same name, Shock and Awe assumed as its project the design of a post-Cold War defense posture for a nation that found itself in the unprecedented position of unparalleled global dominance, at risk of becoming "its own worst enemy" due to the "inertia of [its] success."⁹ Lamenting the receding defense budget and waning public support for military spending that

⁸ Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade Jr., *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance* (Washington D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1996), 27.

⁹ *Ibid.*, xix.

accompanied the sudden lack of a “clear and present danger,” Shock and Awe was a plea for a reinvigorated commitment to military expansion beyond the “conventional” systems over which the United States enjoyed insurmountable command. The 2,500 year old tale of Sun Tzu’s triumph was one of several historical examples used by the authors to illustrate the warfare tactics collectively comprising this innovation in military strategy, which they termed “Rapid Dominance.”

Sun Tzu’s tale, of course, serves as more than inspiration for the creation of a defensive stance for maintaining the unfettered exercise of U.S. global dominance. The fate of the concubine is instructive of a necropolitical ethos of late modern sovereignty in which the insolent, feminized body is disciplined by means of the instrumentalization and destruction of its life. The central intervention of “Rapid Dominance” is, in fact, its insistence that effective warfare is less a game of prevailing militarily over an opponent’s forces as it is matter of controlling the adversary’s “will, perceptions and understanding,” so as to render it “impotent to act or react.”¹⁰ Shock and Awe abounds with examples of how this paralysis of will should be achieved, not only amongst military targets, but also amongst society writ large. Subsumed within these examples are the “long-term corrosive effects” of economic embargoes; the “deprivation of senses” accompanying the incapacitation of the enemy’s means of communication, transportation, food production, and water supply; and the “instant, nearly incomprehensible levels of massive destruction” characterizing the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.¹¹ As such, the “life” of the opponent—comprising its affect as much as the infrastructures that provide

¹⁰ Ibid., xxviii.

¹¹ Ibid., 23.

the means of bodily survival and sensorial capacity—ascends to a new level of importance. For a nation whose sheer military power is unrivaled (and, indeed, unsurpassable), life, in its most tactile sense, becomes the privileged terrain upon which sovereignty is asserted and secured.

On March 21, 2003, the viewing body of Western news media received this tactile exercise of sovereign power by means of a spectacular fetish, watching as the release of more than 1500 bombs and missiles illumed the night sky over the city's horizon. The panoramic vision made available by the media formed an illusory topography of warfare, eclipsing and suppressing the crude calculus of life and death that lay behind the irradiating parade of explosions. This aesthetics of disavowal is central to what Judith Butler refers to as the production of "fields of representability," or as she explains, the fields of perceptible reality structured by state permission that shape "how we respond to the suffering of others, how we formulate moral criticisms, [and] how we articulate political analyses." It is through the production of such fields of perceptible reality, Butler argues, that "the notion of the recognizable human is formed and maintained over and against what cannot be named or regarded as human, a figure of the nonhuman that holds the place of the human in its unrecognizability."¹² The strategic framing that delivered the introductory images of the war to the homes of American viewers positioned the only traces of Iraqi life—buildings comprising the silhouette of the Baghdad skyline – along the floor of the television screen, shrouded by continuous

¹² Judith Butler, "Torture and the Ethics of Photography," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25, no. 6 (2007), 951.

streams of scrolling text relaying the progress of the bombing campaign.¹³ The “field of perceptible reality” thus formed placed the question of Iraqi suffering off-stage, leaving the viewer to identify with the “transcendent aspirations of the self”¹⁴ contained in the magnificent display of excessive weaponry. Notwithstanding the distant blare of detonating bombs, the broadcasters left the scene of attack otherwise mute, inviting a moment of contemplation for the viewer to weigh the perceptible reality of his own humanity against the imperceptible being of the besieged and faceless Other.

It was a moment of contemplation made possible by the mentality of modern sublimity, in which the security of the viewer, his safety and detachment from the sublime violence he beholds, affords him the opportunity to measure his emotional strength, and his powers of sentience, against the incorrigibility of a trauma and suffering that knows no bounds.¹⁵ But in contrast to Kant’s 18th century rendering of the sublime experience, which places the subject at odds with the “almightiness of nature,” the 21st century subject is invited to affirm his capacity for human transcendence in confrontation with a spectacular image of destruction generated and discursively managed by a militarized media. The mass transmission of this visual event assured the multiplication of this sublime apprehension of “self” by the millions, producing an

¹³ These “news tickers” weren’t used regularly on US news broadcasts until 9/11. See James Poniewozik, *The Tick, Tick, Tick of the Times*, http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2032304_2032745_2032850,00.html.

¹⁴ Rey Chow, *Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 38.

¹⁵ Describing different elements of the sublime in nature, Kant writes, “But the sight of them is the more attractive, the more fearful it is, provided only that we are in security; and we willingly call these objects sublime, because they raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height and discover in us a faculty of resistance of a quite different kind, which gives us courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature.” (390)

imagined community of spectators for whom the reach of the subjective extended far beyond the boundaries of the body, encompassing the hegemonic nation's supreme mastery of science and technology in its exercise of the instrumentalization of life.

David Lloyd turns to the philosophies of Kant and Schiller to argue that modern ideas of race were produced, and continue to be regulated, by the narrative of the subject developed in and through 18th century aesthetic theory.¹⁶ Central to this narrative, he claims, is a hierarchization of the senses wherein the development of the faculty of sight as the primary mode of sense perception becomes the defining feature of a properly human identity. Allowing for an increasing distance between the subject and the object of contemplation, vision divorced *sense* from individual *sensation*, enabling a universal communicability of taste and judgment resulting from shared experiences of discernment. This *sensus communis*, in turn, constituted the foundation for the development of public culture and a public sphere necessary to the cultivation of a civilization. The “savage” was figured as that being confined to the tactile, incapable of accessing the aesthetic freedom furnished by the “play” of vision and, thus, lacking the capacity for autonomy and culture essential to the ability to self-govern.

By this account, otherness – in this case, racial otherness – is less a result of the ascription of negative qualities to particular marked bodies than it is a matter of *disposition*, with the subject's *relationship to* the world of sensory perception determining his access to full, developed, transcendent humanity. In its assimilation of the sublime, Shock and Awe military doctrine, as well as media representations of its implementation,

¹⁶ David Lloyd, "Race Under Representation," ed. E. Valentine Daniel and Jeffrey M. Peck, *Culture/Contexture: Explorations in Anthropology and Literary Studies* (University of California Press), 1995.

replays these divisions of human and inhuman, narrating sovereignty as a process of establishing sensorial command over an adversary deprived of his senses. Through tactics encompassing the “shutting down of an adversary’s ability to ‘see,’” the exposure of the enemy to “blinding light and deafening noise” in order to confuse him into senselessness, and the stripping of the enemy’s “ability to communicate, observe, and interact” so as to instill in him a feeling of “impotence,” the fundamental goal of “controlling the enemy’s sense perception,” is achieved.¹⁷ Sovereign subjectivity is realized through the subjection of the other to the tactile through acts of force that delimit perception for some and endlessly expand it for others.

Reflecting on the visual event of the release of atomic bombs on Japan at the end of World War II, Rey Chow explores the “epistemic consequences” of that moment of “epochal destruction” on the production and organization of knowledge in the latter half of the 20th century. My inquiry into the persistence of the sublime in military doctrine and media coverage of the Shock and Awe campaign picks up similar questions, asking how such arresting displays of technological dominance, occurring in “a global culture in which everything has become (or is mediated by) visual representation and virtual reality,”¹⁸ serve to condition ways of knowing and apprehending human destruction, suffering, and alterity on one hand, and the politics of sovereignty, freedom, and reason on the other. But rather than link the image of sublime military dominance to the post-war developments of institutionalized fields of knowledge such as comparative literature, area studies, and post structuralist theory, as Chow does, I am interested in thinking

¹⁷ Harlan and Wade, *Shock and Awe*, 28-29.

¹⁸ Chow, *Age of the World Target*, 27.

through its ramifications as a practice of *aesthetic education*, differentially transforming currents of human sensation into formalized “dispositions” which correlate to ontologies of savagery and civilization, and shape the epistemic frames through which the subject develops an ethical relation to the world.

Yet, in thinking through the relationship of aesthetic beholding to subject-formation, one would be remiss not to acknowledge that much has changed since the Second World War, that images of sublime military violence now meet the gaze of the observer in an aesthetic environment which Fredric Jameson has referred to as the “new life of postmodern sensation,” where the “market society” of late capitalism has transformed the status of the image into an object of continuous consumption, one of thousands bombarding human subjects in relentless progression, saturating the social spaces of everyday life.¹⁹ According to Nicholas Mirzoeff, the militarized media has used this state of affairs to its advantage in its coverage of the invasion, inundating visual subjects with a mass of carefully edited war images so transient and excessive as to become banal, leaving little impact on the affect or memory of the viewer.²⁰ Faced with the “modern anti-spectacle” as the primary pedagogical apparatus of war, the relationship of contemplation which once organized the human subject’s engagement with the visual object gives way to a relationship of “vernacular watching,” in which the subject’s identifications, disidentifications, and dispositions are configured through alternating moments of drift and focus, rendering the body (to quote Jameson) a

¹⁹ Fredric Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity," in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London, New York: Verso, 1998), 111.

²⁰ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture* (New York, Oxford: Routledge, 2004), 14.

“passive and mobile field of ‘enregrement’ in which tangible portions of the world are taken up and dropped again in the permanent inconsistency of a mesmerizing sensorium.”²¹ Aesthetic contemplation gives way to amnesia-producing rhythms of unceasing media dispatches. Images which once shocked are bereft of their force, becoming mundane fixtures of affective life.

If I have discussed the media treatment of the Iraq invasion at some length, it is to account for the complexity of the representational field into which Botero attempts to stage his intervention. Here, the images which form the “fields of perceptible reality” available for grasping the dynamics of U.S. military action are at once sublime and elusive, spectacular and fleeting, exposing and obscuring. It is a field in which the cinematic artifice of the war image and the calculated framings of embedded reporting can be unraveled globally by the inadvertent “exposures” yielded by vernacular tools of remembrance and communication; a field in which the intangible, traveling image serves as the mask for an exercise of warfare that has become increasingly “tactile, anatomical, and sensorial.”²² The complexities of this representational terrain do not lead to any easy conclusions to the question of “how” to represent this visual event. How does one represent the tortured body when it is the subject of both spectacle and disappearance? How does one do this without reiterating the indignities of hypervisibility and invisibility to which this body has been subjected? How does one create an indelible public memory of acts of cruelty that are very much still alive and active in the present? In short, given our entrenchment in the “image society” of postmodernity, which has

²¹ Jameson, “Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity,” 112.

²² Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003), 34.

managed both to avert our gaze from the brutalities of war and create the conditions for their spectacular disclosure, what is the capacity of the image to communicate the weight of what Elaine Scarry has called the “inexpressibility” of torture?²³ What *kind* of image could have the power to interrupt the postmodern subject’s experience of space, time, sensation, and affect which has come to serve as the scaffolding for its apprehension of the self and other in relationship to the “spectacle of distant suffering?”²⁴

Since the avant-garde movements of the 1960s, modernist art and its postmodern derivations have been defined by conceptually-based practices deploying techniques of media hybridity and anti-aestheticism as a means of negating the perceived market commodifiability of more traditional artistic forms typified by aesthetic beauty, visual pleasure, and formal purity. Invoking the language of Kant’s Third Critique, Jameson, among others, has characterized this trajectory of modern aesthetics as a movement from beauty to sublimity, with the sublime marking an advancement from a “merely decorative” mode of visual engagement to one which is critical, politically committed, and, like the Kantian sublime, extra-aesthetic, delivering the subjectivity of the viewer beyond the limits of intelligibility established by beauty’s conventions.²⁵ Such sublime experiments of anti-aestheticism continue to permeate modes of artistic production in the West but also throughout the globe, particularly in works concerned with representing events or situations thought to be “unrepresentable.”

²³ Elaine Scarry, *The Body In Pain* (New York, London: Oxford University Press, 1985).

²⁴ Wendy Hesford, "Documenting Violations: Rhetorical Witnessing and the Spectacle of Distant Suffering," *Biography* 27, no. 1 (2004): 104-144.

²⁵ Toni Ross, "Art in the Post-Medium Era: Aesthetics and Conceptualism in the Art of Jeff Wall," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 3 (2002): 555-572.

Yet, out of the current moment of late-capitalist consumption, in which the image is rendered simultaneously excessive (saturating every aspect of daily life) and enfeebled (having lost its force due to its boundless proliferation), Jameson identifies certain “revivals” of the aesthetic which entail attempts at “the recovery of great modernism itself.”²⁶ In contemporary artistic practice, he argues, this “new aestheticism” expresses itself through a return to traditional conceptions of the Kantian beautiful, which seeks to displace the “sublimity” characterizing modernist modes of artistic production with more “modest and decorative practices in which sensory beauty is once again the heart of the matter.”²⁷ Considered within the late-capitalist context of their emergence, in which the purportedly self-evident “triumph” of capitalism has rendered the image wholly coterminous with market society, these “returns,” he concludes, reflect a nostalgic desire for an “authentic” aesthetic purified of the radical avant-garde polemics of a later modernist moment, as well as a bourgeois political theory cleansed of the history of a “failed” Marxist economic critique. Shorn of the critical and political contributions of the avant-garde, as well as of the utopian (and what Jameson terms “protopolitical”) sentiments undergirding the theories of the “great modernists” themselves, this postmodern “return” to beauty reveals itself as possessing nothing more than the very decorative, space-filling aesthetic qualities held by the image in postmodernity that it aims to subvert. According to Jameson’s logic, the late-capitalist moment is unparalleled in the degree to which the art and the image have been

²⁶ Jameson, “Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity,” 113

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 123. Jameson links this “return” of the aesthetic to other disciplinary “returns” occurring simultaneously, namely, the academic revival of the classical texts of ethics, aesthetics, and political theory which hark back to the intellectual thought of the first bourgeois revolutions.

assimilated into commodity production. There is no image or art form that exists beyond the reach of commodification. For this reason, Jameson insists, any attempt to isolate the “eternal, changeless realm of form” amidst the transience and formlessness of postmodern image society does so in vain. Beauty is incapable of negating the now all-pervasive logic of commodity production and, therefore, “the appeal to it by contemporary pseudo-aestheticism is an ideological manoeuvre and not a creative resource.”

With the invention of photography, Benjamin argues, came the enormous acceleration of processes of pictorial reproduction, resulting in images that could now keep up with the pace of speech.²⁸ Add to this development the breakthrough of mediatic technology, Jameson suggests, and the once “silent object” is itself “transformed into a whole new speech,” its visibility the true bearer of the epistemological function in postmodern culture.²⁹ The intervention of Botero’s Abu Ghraib paintings lay in their return to silence and stillness, their reconstitution of the autonomy of the image, and their restoration of the conditions of modern contemplation amidst postmodern image inundation. As such, I would situate these works within the movement of “aesthetic revival” Jameson identifies, yet I am less inclined than he is to dismiss such an approach as “meretricious,” for the subject of bodily torture is one which remains stubbornly resistant to representation by way of beauty. Attempts at its visual translation, as I will elaborate later, more often than not reflect a faithful

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 102.

²⁹ Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity," 110.

adherence to the anti-aestheticism of high modernism, revealing the enduring connection between strategies of aesthetic “sublimity” and what are thought to be “proper” representations of atrocity. I am interested in what such a “return” to the beautiful accomplishes in this historical conjuncture, where the globalized technologies of the media and the monument have become central to the articulation of competing claims regarding the distribution of human rights and human value. How might a return to the beautiful work to reconfigure the modes of spectatorship conditioned by a long history of aesthetic education that has come to define the “human” disposition of the modern visual subject?

Beauty, Nation, and the Human

I grew up with the idea that art is beauty. All my life I've been trying to produce art that's beautiful, to discover all the elements that go to make up visual perfection. When you come from my background you can't be spoiled by beauty, because you've never really seen it. If you're born in Paris, say, you can see art everywhere, so by the time you come to create art yourself you're spoiled – you're tired of beauty as such and want to do something else. With me it was quite different. I wasn't tired of beauty; I was hungering for it.³⁰

Portraits of the body constitute the bulk of Botero's work. His paintings for decades have reflected his signature tendency to depict his subjects, whether they are his family members or the *Mona Lisa*, as rotund and voluptuous distortions of themselves. Over the years, his works have encompassed a broad sweep of subjects – from Latin American military dictators to landscapes, bishops to bullfights—yet the heaviness and volume of his form endures, reliably, from painting to painting. While a review of his

³⁰ Fernando Botero, interview by Peter Stepan, ““I am the most Colombian of Colombian artists”: A Conversation with Fernando Botero,” *Fernando Botero: Paintings and Drawings*, ed. Werner Spies, Munich: Prestel-Verlag (1992), 157.

oeuvre reveals the occasional political inflection, his paintings by and large have been less concerned with *message* than with *style*,³¹ and it is through the abundance and weight of this style that he has sought to create an “imaginary Colombia”—an idyllic Colombia of beauty and stability, where the precarious status of the national body is overwritten by a body anchored, present, and tranquil.

Daniel Pécaut diagnoses public perceptions of Colombia’s internal war as “kaleidoscopic,” registering the nation’s history of violence through a lens which turns in step with the succession of catastrophic events. In the absence of an institutional history capable of incorporating the ongoing traumas of war within a narrative of national progress, he argues, each turning point in the conflict—each assassination, paramilitary massacre, and high-profile drug arrest—invites a kaleidoscopic rewriting of the imaginaries ascribing meaning and coherence to the phenomena of violence, yielding subjectivities as fragmented as the circumstances out of which they are produced.³² Botero’s paintings rein in the transitory hues and shapes of the protracted war, transforming the errant reflections of the fractured nation into mirror images of wholeness, consolidated into forms dense and impenetrable, with colors smooth, ordered and compact. In the Colombian imaginary of Botero’s world, the body is the locus of this aesthetic reordering of the nation’s fragments, and it is in his figuration of the body—expanding, unmoving, and almost always close to home—that the ontological desires of a nation whose bodies have been subjected to an unending saga of disappearance, displacement, and slaughter are epitomized. In spite of the refractions of

³¹ Ibid.

³² Daniel Pécaut, "Configurations of Space, Time, and Subjectivity in a Context of Terror: the Colombian Example," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 14, no. 1 (2000), 143.

political critique that have seeped through the seemingly impermeable buoyancy of his body of work—from his early paintings criticizing the Catholic church’s role in La Violencia to his recent works depicting the more spectacularized moments of Colombia’s war—his project has always been fundamentally nationalist in spirit, providing bounded, if elastic, form to a people whose fantasies of unity have long been undermined by the vicissitudes of multiple and proliferating modalities of terror.

It makes sense that Botero should turn to beauty as a means of carrying out this project. Since the Enlightenment, the subjective experience of beauty has been seen as critically linked to the constitution of the modern nation form. As conceived in the foundational discourses of modernist aesthetic theory, sensory beauty was thought to be key in affirming and facilitating the existence of a human subject whose sensible and rational faculties bespoke his natural capacity for both freedom and governability within the fledgling liberal political regimes of the 18th century.³³ For thinkers such as Kant, the beautiful was first and foremost an experience of *affective* response, a sensation of pleasure inspired by the subject’s encounter with the aesthetic object. The “feeling of the subject, and not a concept of the object” was thought to be the “determining ground” for this aesthetic experience, and the object of beauty was considered that which facilitated sensations of “restful contemplation,” “furtherance of life,” and “play of imagination” by means of its form and delineation. As many scholars have noted, Kant’s narration of this affective process developed a template of human subjectivity that dovetailed easily with accounts of the liberal citizen found in enlightenment

³³ Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, "Sentimental Aesthetics," *American Literature* (Duke University Press) 76, no. 3 (September 2004), 497.

philosophies of governance and social contract. The free “play” of the imagination enabled by the aesthetic judgment of beauty served as a fitting analogue for liberal models of freedom that sought to reconcile the constraints of law with the human right to autonomous agency. Kant established the freedom enabled by the apprehension of beauty as a bounded freedom, delimited by the form of the object. The morals produced through the aesthetic encounter were themselves thought to be regulated by certain preexisting norms—the rational subject in the act of “freedom” created ideas about the proper ordering of conduct in the world that were paradoxically circumscribed by ideals and standards. As Dieter Henrich notes, this Kantian coupling of “freedom” with norms provided the philosophical grounding for the emergence of concepts of human rights, human nature, and human liberty which underpinned the formation of modern notions of citizenry and the nation-state.

From these lines of thought, the modern idea of an “autonomy” of reason and of the rational human essence emerged. Not only actions, but also the norms for action, were thought to issue from this self-relation, self-organization, and self-development of reason. Moreover, the basis for the legitimacy of norms was claimed to reside in reason. It followed from this that the natural world is subject to the imposition of an order that has been rationally derived through technological transformations and constitutional social organization.³⁴

For Henrich, the norms of human rights and liberal constitutionality are the inheritances of Kantian images of freedom, which regard the autonomous agent’s harmonious encounter with beauty as illustrative of the existence of eternal laws consonant with the moral law residing within the individual. Beauty, as the sensuous embodiment of freedom, held the claim that “humans could fulfill themselves through the imposition of spontaneous, self-created form on the chaos found in the worlds of nature and

³⁴ Dieter Henrich, *Aesthetic Judgment and the Moral Image of the World: Studies in Kant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 67

thought.”³⁵ Such an act of ordering was, in fact, viewed as evidence of the continuity between the self and the world in freedom, a reflection of the existence of an essential world-image, the norms of which were grounded not in the sphere of the ego, but in the orders of nature.

By the nineteenth century, Henrich maintains, the *polis* was thought to be the appropriate form for this ordering of nature and thought. As Ban Wang explains:

Terry Eagleton observes that in bourgeois aesthetics the sublime, no less than the beautiful, serves the ideological purpose of forming a subject in the phallic law of social order. The beautiful centers the ‘subject in an imaginary relation to a pliable, purposive reality,’ thereby granting it a sense of its inner coherence that extends to an illusive outer harmony. The sublime, on the other hand, functions to ‘discipline and chastise the subject,’ recalling it traumatically and violently to a higher law, which is then found to be inscribed in its very being.³⁶

Kantian philosophy hence yielded an image of the *polis* that was resonant with the image of ordering represented in Kantian aesthetics, in which the experience of aesthetical judgment is transcendent of individual sensations of pleasure and pain. The moral vision which arises from a judgment of beauty, according to Kant, contains the “possibility” of consensus, for its communicability is so strong that the pleasure it produces in the beholding subject can be presumed to be universal, a *sensus communis*.³⁷ One’s reckoning with beauty can be understood as a presumption of a collective moral desire and vision. The gaze of the Kantian subject is seen as the force which apprehends the norms of

³⁵ Ibid, 67.

³⁶ Ban Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 191.

³⁷ Kant 379: “We may see now that in the judgment of taste nothing is postulated but such a *universal voice*, in respect of the satisfaction without the intervention of concepts, and thus the *possibility* of an aesthetical judgment that can, at the same time, be regarded as valid for everyone. The judgment of taste itself does not *postulate* the agreement of everyone... it only *imputes* this agreement to everyone.

beauty, then proceeds to create with them an ideal world-image embodying principles assumed to be universally valid. What follows is the construction of superstructural institutions and practices thought to constitute the rational form of this gaze – institutions and practices, which as Eagleton (via Wang) asserts, are undergirded by the experiences of norm-adherence and disciplining which characterize the Kantian aesthetic encounter. The concept of “humanity” from which modern notions of normative “rights” emerges, Pheng Cheah contends, at once constitutes, and is constituted by these superstructural technologies of freedom-production operating at every level, stretching from “global political negotiations, diplomatic relations, and even military deployment in the name of global security to policies and technologies of global competition and economic development, as well as those techniques for the management and enhancement of populations and the disciplining of individual bodies as human capital which are indispensable to capitalist development – what Michel Foucault has called bio-power.”³⁸ In other words, the disciplining gaze of technologies of “freedom” and the ordering gaze of Kantian aesthetics reveal kindred genealogies. The operations of bio-power and governmentality, which work to consolidate the sovereignty of the polis, resound echoes of beauty’s performance of Enlightened design.

Following the work of Kant, Schiller similarly views the moment of aesthetic judgment as productive of a liberal subjectivity defined by its simultaneous capacity for freedom and lawfulness. Yet, unlike Kant, Schiller locates the potentially collective nature of this subjectivity not in the communicability of sentiment inherent in the

³⁸ Pheng Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 7.

individual judgment of beauty, but in the aesthetic object itself, which he understood as possessing a pedagogical quality capable of educating humanity in an awareness of its shared proclivity to both freedom and self-governance. As Elizabeth Maddock Dillon explains: “The result of this concretization of beauty and aesthetics in the object is the possibility of a didactic program attached to the aesthetic through which subjects can not only discover their own freedom but also be taught to do so.”³⁹ Writing in the aftermath of the French Revolution, Schiller regarded beauty as a key component in the production of a national citizenry capable of sustaining the moral character of its fraternal ethos. Beauty, for Schiller, served as a critical bridge that moved man from his “natural” state of base sensuality and material need to an exalted state of reason and autonomy. The work of the intermediate “aesthetic” state was to refine the senses, elevate them from their “animalistic” dependence on touch (the enjoyment of which was limited to individual and private sensibility) and, by means of the beautiful object, cultivate a visual and aural mode of perception that would enable collective and universal enjoyment, thus fostering a common sense which would unify society: “Though need may drive Man into security, and Reason implant social principles in him, Beauty alone can confer on him a social character.”⁴⁰ Art was thought to be instrumental in this process, for the individual and communal experience of taste it engendered served as a powerful analogue and training ground for a consciousness of a freedom of self in political community necessary to the exercise of liberal government.

³⁹ Dillon, “Sentimental Aesthetics,” 503.

⁴⁰ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004), 138.

Accordingly, the capacity to *produce* the beautiful object, as much as the capacity to judge or behold it at a distance, was also viewed as a significant measure of a society's aptitude for autonomy, civility, and universality. Lloyd explains: "The inadequacy of the native to self-government [was] demonstrated by 'his' lack of aesthetic productions or by 'his' subordination to immediate sensual gratification: the capacity for autonomy [was] either as yet undeveloped or absent in the savage and require[d] to be developed or supplied by external force."⁴¹ If aesthetic theory presumed a human subject capable of accessing a *sensus communis* through an encounter with the beautiful, then the creation of beautiful objects was thought to be evidence of a people's capacity to bring this community of sense into being. For these post-Enlightenment thinkers, acts of aesthetic creation were inextricable from the political creation of a liberal citizenry. The universal communicability intrinsic to both became the very definition of civilization, serving as the criterion for distinguishing sovereign populations from those in need of external rule.

The schema of human development and experience narrated by these founding texts of philosophical modernity provided the grounding for ideas of common sense, the public sphere, and public culture which underwrote visions of liberal governance, served to legitimate the dominations of imperial polity, and continue to regulate contemporary understandings of human rights and globalization.⁴² As such, these foundational discourses of aesthetic theory continue to bear relevance on the ways in which the world picture of international politics is conceived, and how its subjects are shaped and interpellated by its representational practices. At stake in a nation's (or people's) claim to

⁴¹ Lloyd, "Race Under Representation," 254.

⁴² Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions*, 7.

beauty is, therefore, its claim of belonging to the modern world of culture and politics, as well as its claim of belonging to the class of “humanity” worthy of this inclusion.

If Botero’s quote at the beginning of this section reveals anything, it is his intimate awareness of Colombia’s status as beauty’s Other. He counts himself among the artists “desperately trying to escape from [the] poverty” of the nation’s “extremely poor artistic tradition” of colonial and folk art.⁴³ His own attempts at beauty have been motivated by the desire to create parochial representations of Colombia that achieve a sense of “universality,” to be true to his roots as a means of “reach[ing] people all over the world.”⁴⁴ His strategy, to this end, has been to “adopt things from elsewhere,” to borrow forms and methods from artistic genres considered timeless in their iconic beauty. Recalling his formation as a young artist, he traces his early notions of artistic beauty to the “chinalike perfection” of the Madonnas depicted in the Baroque paintings of the cathedrals he visited as a child. His influences, he imparts, are painters of the Trecento and Quattrocento – Giotto, Masaccio, Uccello and Piero della Francesca – from whom he learned geometric serenity in spatial organization, an abstention from shadows, the creation of volume without perspective and a tendency towards the grandiose and monumental. In interviews, Botero has spoken at length about his practice of painting the body as a still life, furthermore stating that his primary concern as an artist is with the “decorative aspects of painting.”⁴⁵ In his refusal to follow the modernist trajectory towards abstraction characteristic of the work of so many of his

⁴³ Fernando Botero, interview by Peter Stepan, ““I am the most Colombian of Colombian artists”: A Conversation with Fernando Botero,” 157

⁴⁴ Ibid., 158

⁴⁵ Ibid., 154

European and American contemporaries, one can see in his paintings a nostalgic reverence for the aura of civilization and humanism that accompanied the spread of classical and modern visual forms in the conquest of the New World, as well as an urgent desire to paint his native Colombia into the history of their universal reach.

And, to some degree, he has achieved this ambition. He has called himself “the most Colombian of Colombian artists” and, if his immense popularity in the nation’s popular culture is any indication, this self-description quite accurately captures the prevailing sentiment about his work, both nationally and globally. From the two museums devoted exclusively to his art in Medellín and Bogotá, to the prints of his paintings sold alongside “typical” souvenirs at local markets and tourist shops, it is clear that cultures both “high” and “low” have embraced Botero as one of Colombia’s greatest cultural exports. In this sense, the universal appeal of Botero’s aesthetic has indeed served as a force of unity in Colombia, bringing a semblance of form to a nation rendered formless in contemporary narratives of the state. Yet, despite this achievement of “universal communicability,” the eclecticism and distortion of Botero’s beautiful figures remind us that this is modernism, and modernity, with a difference. Though he draws from the great European masters in both form and content (often producing reproductions of their most distinguished paintings), the dysmorphia of his inflated figures underscores the mimetic quality of his relationship to the modern as an artist and Third World subject, thus registering, in the words of Taussig, “both sameness and difference, of being alike and being Other.”⁴⁶ If his weighty figures bring a solidity and

⁴⁶ Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 129.

cohesiveness to the national body, their near-bursting corpulence also signals a Colombia in excess of the image of the state rationalized through Western aesthetics and its signifying traditions – a Colombia where modernity’s promises of freedom and rights have been exceeded by unceasing waves of state, civilian, and neoimperial violence.



Figure 7: Alejandro Obregón, Masacre 10 de abril, 1948

In the years succeeding La Violencia, a great many Colombian artists of Botero’s generation sought to give expression to the savagery of this violence, most often turning to techniques of figurative abstraction and expressionism to capture the chaos and horror of the nation’s rampant bloodshed. The emotive paint strokes and evocative lineatures found in the works of Alejandro Obregón, Alipio Jaramillo, and Débora Arango [figures 7, 8, 9] are illustrative in this regard.⁴⁷ Notably, Botero refrained from this tendency, gravitating instead towards tranquil and tidily composed scenes of domestic routine and everyday pleasure. In contrast to the mangled, writhing bodies

⁴⁷ Álvaro Medina, "El arte y la violencia colombiana en la segunda mitad del siglo XX," in *Arte y Violencia en Colombia desde 1948*, ed. directora Gloria Zea and curador Álvaro Medina (Bogotá: Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, Grupo Editorial Norma, 1999).

featured in the fervently rendered works of his peers, Botero's bodies are calm and impassive; their voluminous, fleshly sensuality tightly contained within taut, immobilizing contour lines. Color enters the picture through the controlled application of harmonious palettes, as opposed to impulsive, gestural brush strokes conveying lawless unrest in the works of the others. If the general trend of Colombian art in the latter half of the 20th century leaned towards articulating the disorder of war, Botero's paintings, providing an idealized vision of the polis, seem to be a literal enactment of the Kantian logic connecting the experience of beauty with the human potential for the imposition of order onto chaos. Beauty, for Kant, is "connected with the form of the object, which consists in having definite boundaries." Replicating what he describes as the balance of "control" and "sensuality" found in the works of Titian and Bellini, Botero's forms – bounded, yet voluptuous – seem to revive a didactic program in human rationality and dignity which can be traced back through the Enlightenment to the political and philosophical thought of Renaissance humanism and its corresponding artistic forms.

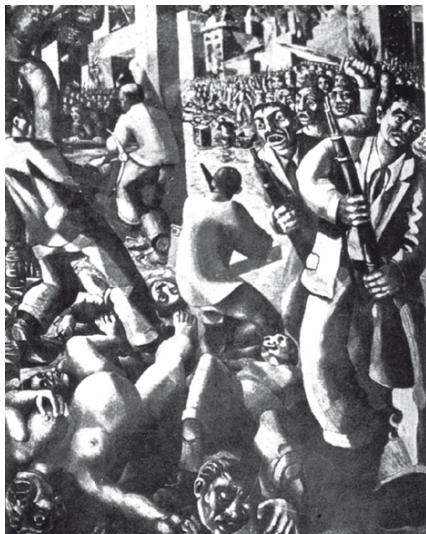


Figure 8: Alipio Jaramillo, 9 de abril, 1948



Figure 9: Débora Arango, La República, 1960

Yet it is in the aesthetic divergences of Botero's revival of beauty that one can detect a self-conscious distancing of Colombian modernity from the trajectory of Western modernity embodied in the citational practices of his work. While portraiture since the Renaissance has represented human rationality through the depth and intensity of the gaze of the depicted subject, Botero's figures stare into empty space with eyes that are crossed or vacant, deprived of the "intellectual dimension" that would permit them to meet the eyes of the viewer. He is less interested in providing commentary on the human condition, he says, than in producing forms that, like objects in a still life, contribute to the balance and geometric ordering of the composition as a whole. This translation of "being" into "object" is compounded by the temporality of his paintings, which push the serenity of Renaissance beauty to its limit, creating bodies so still and calm as to be inanimate. Dictators, oligarchs, and members of the leisure class, so often the protagonists of Botero's works, appear less as beings bestowed with the capacity for rational thought and action than as figurines, shaped and posed into a mimetic performance of Beauty's enlightened design. If these are the agents of modernity in Latin America, theirs is an agency that is arrested, dependent and, ultimately, derivative.

The mimetic alterity of Botero's modernity can be gleaned in other signature elements of his work as well: his rejection of aesthetic "progress" in favor of dwelling in an art historical "past"; his distortion of the scientific "truth" of Renaissance anatomy through a play on scale and proportion; and his transgression of canonical purity in the way he combines and collapses genres such as the still life, the nude, pre-Colombian forms and the colonial Baroque. While on the surface, his tendencies may appear to reflect the strategies of pastiche, temporal discontinuity, and even parody endemic to

postmodernism, I would argue that his style is less a break from the modern than it is a testimony to the “errant” turns modernism has taken in Latin America. Esther Gabara has referred to this “errant modernism” as the “simultaneous location in and distancing of Latin America from hegemonic discourses of modernism and modernity.”⁴⁸ For Latin Americans critical of hegemonic modernism/modernity, yet unable to disavow the dominance of its political, economic, and aesthetic modes of expression, postmodern practices have allowed for a simultaneous engagement with, and critique of, modernism, serving as a means for peripheral modernists to “define global modernity in their own terms.” Rather than functioning as a negation or overcoming of modernism, Gabara argues, postmodernism is the very form that modernism takes in Latin America. Thus, in spite of his fidelity to beautiful forms, Botero’s “return” to beauty is not an example of the aesthetic “revivals” seeking the “recovery of great modernism” which Jameson critiques for their ahistoricity and commitment to an impossible modernist “purity.” His work, on the contrary, is deeply historicist, as well as self-reflexive in its postmodern “errings.” When I refer to Botero’s “return” to beauty in his paintings of the torture at Abu Ghraib, I am referring, rather, to his return to figurative and mimetic modes of representing the human body found in older art historical genres, particularly renaissance iconography, which endeavored both to realistically portray the brutality of carnal suffering and sanctify it by means of making it beautiful. That this “return” takes place in a global contemporary art landscape inimical to the aestheticization of suffering and

⁴⁸ Esther Gabara, *Errant Modernism: The Ethos of Photography in Mexico and Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 15.

spectacularization of bodies-in-pain is what makes his approach seem all the more anachronistic and, potentially, politically regressive.

Following critiques of the “culture industry” articulated by a range of thinkers, notably Horkheimer and Adorno, in the wake of the Second World War, artists have wrestled with the question of how to produce representations of violence and trauma that resist the commodification of human suffering, and do justice to its “unrepresentability.” Holocaust memorials, in particular, have been especially influential in establishing an aesthetic vocabulary for achieving these goals, relying on strategies of minimalism and abstraction as a means of negating the spectacularization of abjection believed to accompany more graphic modes of representation. These strategies have endured, and, in recent decades, have become globalized in their application, serving as the visual lingua franca for memorializing victims of genocidal politics, state repression, and humanitarian crises throughout the world. Despite his dramatic shift from depicting moments of leisure and contentment to portraying scenes of terror and violence, Botero has chosen to retain the style of corporeal illustration found in his earlier works, resulting in representations of war and torture that run counter to the axioms of artistic practices typically considered ethical. Instead of minimalism, Botero gives us corporeal abundance; instead of abstraction, he gives us lucid figuration. Revived in the context of torture, the global familiarity of his forms, so commercially accessible as to be kitsch, seem to rebuff the imperative to resist commodification—the pleasure, delight, and humor that made his earlier works the easy subjects of postcards and souvenirs haunts these paintings, even as they strive to exalt and dignify the exploited prisoner. Expressing his preference for literary and poetic responses to Abu Ghraib which “refuse

to re-present the photographic evidence that extends the crime,” Philip Metres incisively describes the ethical quandary evoked by the paintings for so many viewers: “...it is difficult not to feel that the paintings somehow replicate the problem inherent in the photographs, that the Iraqis remain the exquisitely rendered objects of torment, beyond words.”⁴⁹ If, in the image society of late capitalism, the threat of torture lies not only in its veiled secrecy, but also, paradoxically, in its photographic replicability and potential for public dispersal, is it not the case that Botero’s paintings, recreating the infamous scenes of offense, effectively catalyze another turn in the circular repetition of violence already made possible by digital technologies of image production? If the image itself, particularly in its mimetic form, is a source of violence, wouldn’t an aesthetics of non-violence demand a rejection of the image entirely, instead turning to word or sound as alternative sites of critique?

These are some of the critical questions Metres raises in his misgivings of Botero’s work, but his concerns exceed a preoccupation with the ethical implications of mimetic figuration and positive imaging. Of even greater concern, perhaps, is the *exquisiteness* of Botero’s rendering—the repose of the bodies, the harmonious balance of color, the ordered presentation of a scene which the photographs themselves reveal to be harrowing and chaotic. The aesthetic transgressions of Botero’s works are not only formal, but also affective. While other artists have produced figurative renderings of the Abu Ghraib photographs, Botero’s depictions are unique in their placidity and elegance. Guy Colwell’s painting *The Abuse*, for example, deploys figuration to convey the

⁴⁹ Philip Metres, "Abu Ghraib and Poetry," *PMLA* (Modern Language Association of America) 123, no. 5 (2008), 1598-9.

structured systematization of torture, representing the victim's bodies as stony, spare, and undifferentiated. The facial expressions of the torturers are predatory and vicious; the image of Lady Liberty, entering the backdoor silent, restrained and blindfolded, further underscores the sinister air of the moment, punctuating the overall disquietude of the composition. In contrast, the relatively tranquil mood of Botero's works makes it difficult to pinpoint gestures of cynicism or critique. His bodies, more still than tense, mitigate the impact of the paintings' violent content. The flesh tones dominating the canvas bring warmth to the dull hues of the photographs. With the addition of windows, a delicate light enters the prison space which, to quote Thomas Laqueur, "suffuses the room and almost purifies what is contained within it."⁵⁰ The faces and postures of his subjects are more expressive than in his earlier works, but not dramatically so; the empty gazes and immobility of Botero's bodies persist despite the aggression they inflict or anguish they experience. And, above all, they are silent, or, as Botero puts it, "centripetal" rather than "centrifugal"—"quiet, looking for the center of things in order to stay close to them."⁵¹ They do not emit screams that hail the viewer; the energy of their pain and brutality remains confined to the canvas, muted by the thick and bounded contours of flesh that absorbs it. In form and in texture, the paintings effect a regulation of perception which enacts a sensorial detachment of the viewer from the image, forcing a response of disinterested contemplation to matter more appropriately thought of as sublime. The disorder and desolation of the tortured bodies,

⁵⁰ Thomas W. Laqueur, "Botero and the Art History of Suffering," *Center for Latin American Studies Working Papers Series*, no. 18 (Berkeley: University of California Berkeley, August 2007), 8.

⁵¹ Fernando Botero, interview by Peter Stepan, "'I am the most Colombian of Colombian artists': A Conversation with Fernando Botero," 155.

their bloodied abjection, their reduction to their own filth and waste, is effectively tidied and sanitized by the clean and smooth lines of Botero's figuration. If the sublime is that which stirs a "movement of the mind" and elicits emotion, the spectacle of corporeal disassembly that serves as raw material for this aesthetic experience is refined by the organization of bodily matter that reorders the scene, making it legible, composed, and even rational. What are the ethics of presenting the fleshly matter of torture in a form associated with the disinterested, rational ordering of the polis and the superstructural technologies of freedom and discipline it begets?

Unrepresentability and the Consensual Imperative

As Mitchell himself notes, the boundaries of the unspeakable and the unimaginable are constantly shifting, determined by the political demands of the historical time and space out of which they emerge.⁵² To begin to answer the questions above, it is necessary to interrogate the existing frames of intelligibility that enable the hooded man to surface as the foremost icon representing a modality of pain-infliction thought to be *unintelligible*, the ultimate limit of cruelty. The task here is to trace the operations of what Jacques Rancière terms the "distribution of the sensible," that is, the organization of sense-perception on the level of the collective, and how this organization determines the ways in which subjects are differentially called upon to share in what is thought to be the common experience of a community. Implied in this concept is a notion of *politics* as a contestation of the established delimitation of spaces and times, the

⁵² W.J.T. Mitchell, "The Unspeakable and the Unimaginable: Word and Image in a Time of Terror," 297.

visible and the invisible, the audible and the silent, the speakable and the unspeakable upon which the prevailing social and political order is founded.

For Rancière, the apportionment of narratives of suffering into categories of representable and unrepresentable is implicated in this communal process of sensorial organization. Motivated by a certain “intolerance for an inflated use of the notion of the unrepresentable” initiated by Theodor Adorno, and later developed by Jean-François Lyotard, Rancière, in a series of essays, traces the conditions of possibility for the construction of this concept, and its currency within prevailing regimes of artistic representation, to what he calls the “ethical turn” in global politics. Corresponding roughly to the “new international landscape” inaugurated by the collapse of the Soviet system, Rancière identifies the “ethical turn” as marked by a particular shift in political practice in which the idea of politics as a struggle between “fact” and “law,” or, “what is and what ought to be,” yields to the privileging of politics as *consensus* – the dissolution of the distinction between “law” and “fact” and, with it, the dissolution of an understanding of dissension as intrinsic to the anatomy of political community.⁵³ Under the regime of consensus, Rancière argues, the classical form of political conflict – characterized by the self-division of “the population” into distinct and opposing “moral” communities – comes to be supplanted by a model of conflict wherein “the people” are viewed as synonymous with “the population,” and dissent takes the form of a mere *divergence* of interests and opinions from an otherwise unified global political world. It is in this context that war can be rationalized as a *humanitarian* act, a mechanism for the

⁵³ Jacques Rancière, "The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics," *Critical Horizons* (Acumen Publishing) 7, no. 1 (2006), 2.

infinite protection of the global community against a “terror” that threatens its social bond. The absolute rights of the victim are invoked as the rationale behind the “infinite justice,” the “humanitarian” force, enacted to avenge the social trauma that appears civilizational in scope, a universal deficiency of “the everyday of our democracies and liberal existence.”⁵⁴ Emancipation, once envisaged as the end result of a revolution “to come,” undergoes a temporal reversal, resurfacing in the form of an unending exorcism of the catastrophes at the heart of humanity’s violent fissures. Justice resides not in the future materialization of “what ought to be,” but in the proper mourning of the irreparable traumas which betray the ideal order of universal ethical belonging.

Rancière regards the current state of the arts and aesthetic reflection as similarly afflicted by this ethical turn. Through detailed analyses of a range of film and political art works produced since the Vietnam War, Rancière tracks the departure from an art of dissonance, highlighting the contradictions of a world marked by exploitation and oppression, towards an art of consensus, devoted to mediating conflicts of the past by bearing witness to the catastrophes which splinter the landscape of collective memory in the present. Thus ensues the debate over how such catastrophes are to be represented, and what images constitute appropriate modalities of bearing witness. The “classical order of representation,” which presents the traumatic event as a clash of interests, personalities, and rationalities, proves to be inadequate to the task, following the logic of psychoanalysis a little too closely, attributing reason to a catastrophe, which, according to the principles of the new “reign of ethics,” should have no rational explanation. The ethical turn, argues Rancière, demands a new mode of representing tragedy, a form of

⁵⁴ Ibid, 9.

narration that can attest to the incomprehensibility, singularity, and irrationality of the traumatic event. The function of the notion of the “unrepresentable,” he contends, is to resolve this crisis of consciousness, to do justice to the irreconcilability of the unthinkability of the event with its status as having-occurred.

Claiming allegiance to Adorno’s condemnation of the “barbarity” of producing poetry after Auschwitz, contemporary invocations of the concept of the “unrepresentable” ascribe the following characteristics to the relationship between historical trauma and its imaging:

First, that it is impossible to make the essential character of the thing in question present. It cannot be brought before our eyes; nor can a representative commensurate with it be found. A form of material presentation that is adequate to its idea; or, conversely, a scheme of intelligibility equal to its material power – these are not to be found. The first impossibility thus posits an incapacity on the part of art.

The second, by contrast, challenges art’s exercise of its power. It says that a thing cannot be represented by artistic means on account of the very nature of those means, of three characteristic properties of artistic presentation. Firstly, the latter is characterized by its surplus of presence, which betrays the singularity of the event or situation, recalcitrant as it is to any plenary material representation. Secondly, this surplus of material presence has as its correlate a status of unreality, which removes from the thing represented its weight of existence. Finally, this interplay of surplus and subtraction operates according to a specific mode of address that delivers the thing represented over to the affects of pleasure, play, or distance which are incompatible with the gravity of the experience it contains. Some things, it is then said, fall outside the competence of art.⁵⁵

Rancière points to two representational forms that have emerged as acceptable antidotes to these reputed inadequacies of art: 1) the “Platonic plain tale,” a straightforward verbal narration of events bearing no trace of the artifice intrinsic to artistic translation, and 2) an art of the “sublime,” the task of which is not to produce a mimetic rendering of the scene of transgression, but simply to “record the trace of the unthinkable.” For Lyotard,

⁵⁵ Jacques Rancière, “Are Some Things Unrepresentable?,” in *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott, 109-138 (Brooklyn, London: Verso, 2007), 109-110.

the most vociferous champion of the latter form, the Kantian notion of the sublime provides a useful model for the type of subjective experience which, ideally, should be produced in the viewer's encounter with an art of the unrepresentable—a powerlessness of the imagination in the face of certain spectacles; the inability of the imagination to create a positive image of these spectacles, thus preserving the singular exceptionality of their nature; and the transcendence of the psyche beyond the sphere of pleasure and aesthetic “play” and into the sphere of morals, reflecting the gravity of the founding transgression. Yet there are several ironies contained in this idea—the identification of an art suitable to the representation of *incommensurable* horror, in fact, establishes a relationship of *commensurability* between the content of history and its form of portrayal. For Rancière, rather than attesting to the event's singularity, the notion of sublime art limitlessly multiplies the choice of representable subjects and the means of representing them, such that the representation of an “exceptional” event like the holocaust need not be limited to the depiction of henchmen, gas chambers or mounds of bodies, but can encompass a multiplicity of images, forms, and media, so long as their deployment resists the positive imaging of the unimaginable. The idea of sublime art thus renders “unintelligible” experiences of extreme human suffering entirely intelligible. As Rancière maintains, Lyotard's schema “tends towards more representation, not less: more possibilities for constructing equivalences, for rendering what is absent present, and for making a particular adjustment of the relationship between sense and non-sense coincide with an particular adjustment of the relationship between presentation and revocation.”⁵⁶ His attempt to conceptualize an artistic form adequate to the non-reason of inhuman

⁵⁶ Ibid., 137.

atrocities paradoxically posit a correspondence between the logic of art and the logic of the event, operating within the same model of dialectical reason such episodes are presumed to defy. Rather than providing a viable framework for the representation of exceptional violence, the concept of sublime art merely expresses an ethical wish – one which differs significantly from Adorno’s earlier avant-garde wish for an emancipatory art purified from any “compromise with cultural commerce.”⁵⁷

What is the *wish* that attaches itself to the image of the hooded man? By what “distribution of the sensible” can this image be thought to give form to unrepresentable and unspeakable horror and, as we encounter it in the scene of protest, what experience of “community” are we called upon to share in?

Though mimetic in its figuration, the Hooded Man serves the sublime purpose of “record[ing] the trace of the unthinkable” and “testify[ing] to the original gap,” to the original moment of rupture occasioned by the shock of the first confrontation with torture.⁵⁸ Functioning as a metonym “condens[ing] multiple narratives into a single gestalt,”⁵⁹ its minimalist presentation both *provides* and *resists* the positive imaging of torture, resurrecting from the archives of Abu Ghraib a figure that *evokes* more than it speaks. Operating under the sign of crucifixion, Mitchell avers, the Hooded Man’s sublimity enables the congealment of myriad abjections into one dignified pose – a pose, which, it is implied, not only encourages a “sympathetic imagination” and “identification” with the victim, but performs the iconographic function of acting as a

⁵⁷ Rancière, “The Ethical Turn,” 18.

⁵⁸ Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, 132.

⁵⁹ Mitchell, “The Unspeakable and the Unimaginable,” 305.

transfer point between the situated subjectivity of the viewer and his or her access to a world of redemption and divinity beyond the injustices of the here and now.

The echo of “consensus” politics rings clear. However, here, the work of aesthetic production and contemplation strives for more than a “restoration of the common social bond,” it seeks to return to the subject of suffering a stolen *dignity* confirmed and conferred by international human rights legislation and the Kantian philosophy from which it draws. The model of recognition idealized in Mitchell’s meditation on the Hooded Man thus unites the realm of the aesthetic, the subject of visuality, and the discourse of human rights in the same redemptive project – that of *extending dignity* to the pained and defiled victim. The confluence of sympathetic feeling and the act of “reckoning” with the image, it is presumed, constitutes a *political labor* on par with the force of law, ushering into legibility the “humanity” of the body made abject by the errors of a defective modernity.

Lauren Berlant has written extensively on the role of this confluence in the formation of political worlds. Focusing primarily on the cultural context of the United States, Berlant elucidates the ways in which images of suffering, and the painful feelings they evoke, have served to organize a shared sense of affective citizenry among a national populace splintered by structural inequities and differential access to legal personhood. This tradition of “national sentimentality,” as she defines it, works through a “rhetoric of promise that a nation can be built across fields of social difference through channels of affective identification and empathy.”⁶⁰ She elaborates:

⁶⁰ Lauren Berlant, “The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics,” *Left Legalism/Left Critique*, 2002: 107.

In the United States a particular form of liberal sentimentality that promotes individual acts of identification based on collective group memberships has been conventionally deployed to bind persons to the nation through a universalist rhetoric not of citizenship per se but of the capacity for suffering and trauma at the citizen's core; ...this structure has been deployed mainly by the culturally privileged to humanize those very subjects who are also, at the same time, reduced to cliché within the reigning regimes of entitlement or value... [Sentimental aesthetics] not only locate the desire to build pain alliances from all imaginable positions within U.S. hierarchies of value, but render scenes and stories of structural injustice in terms of a putatively preideological nexus of over-whelming feeling whose threat to the survival of individual lives is said also to exemplify conflicts in national life.⁶¹

In the recurrent staging of tableaux of subaltern pain, she argues, sentimental culture rouses affects of rage and incredulity towards ongoing practices and histories of institutionalized violence, while at the same time attenuating whatever potency for dissent such affects could inspire. The consumption of the suffering subaltern body becomes the site of action, with its attendant affects of empathy and identification constituting the ultimate gestures of solidarity. The individual emotional pain elicited through this particular experience of commodified witnessing comes to stand in for collective action, simply because it occurs in concert with the pain of fellow consumers. Sentimental aesthetics thus yield a “revolution in mass subjectivity” that falls short of proactive resistance, creating the *illusion* of redress through opportunities for collective therapeutic catharsis. Oft-repeated moments of shock become the means through which the fractures and wounds of a divided society are papered over, consolidated into a unified “nation.”

Extending Berlant's critique to the arena of international human rights law, Joseph Slaughter analyzes the role of the sentimental narrative form in enabling,

⁶¹ Lauren Berlant, "Poor Eliza," *American Literature* (Duke University Press) 70, no. 3 (September 1998), 636.

disseminating, and legitimating the commonly accepted “norms” of rights and the complex of social relations, which uphold them. Arguing that the technologies of the novel and the law are mutually imbricated in the formation of larger discourses of human emancipation and development, Slaughter discusses the ongoing social function of the sentimental genre in facilitating a “literacy” in the ideals and conventions of rights, and in providing a model for how its subjects are to be conceived. As the “first modern transnational ‘imagined community,’” the sentimental novel of the mid-eighteenth century “enabled individuals to grasp the abstract form of an appeal to universality upon which a document like the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen was based.”⁶² In its contemporary globalized manifestation, he maintains, this genre, and the international literary public sphere of which it is a part, has an “implicit regulatory relationship” to the global political order it projects and reflects, “codifying the normative imagery in which it and the human rights person may be imagined.”⁶³

It is the reading practices and modes of identification naturalized by the sentimentalist narrative, Slaughter argues, that supply the “common sense” behind perspectives such as those of philosopher Richard Rorty, who, in his 1993 Oxford-Amnesty lecture, proposed the circulation and repetition of “sad and sentimental stories” as the ideal vehicle for the realization of international human rights.⁶⁴ For Slaughter, Rorty’s words bespeak the power of what he calls the “cooperative social work” of rights and genre to delimit the terrain of possibilities available for imagining and enacting social

⁶² Joseph R. Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: World Novel, Narrative Form and International Law* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2007), 42.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 324.

transformation and humanitarian responsibility. The collusion of legal and literary forms revealed in Rorty's speech figures the "rightless" as he who regains his lost dignity, and develops into personhood, through the production and pronouncement of his story of struggle. This process finds completion in the exchange of these words for the empathetic attention of the "literate" humanitarian witness – whose "personhood" is posited as always already-developed. As Slaughter points out, the model of human emancipation offered by the discourse of rights proves itself entirely consonant with the dominant transition narrative of modernity, which presumes that the entry of a people, nation or geopolitical region into the ranks of the "developed" world depends upon its tutelage in the ways of modernity by those who are already seen to inhabit it. Ironically, the affective transaction extolled by Rorty and others as the essential motor of justice places the disenfranchised subject in a political "waiting room"⁶⁵ for participation in the very international order responsible for his differential access to dignity and humanity in the first place. The "literary feeling" of universality produced by the sentimental text paradoxically translates into bodies of law and approaches to political practice that extend and deny human rights unevenly across the globe.

Slaughter ends his book on this note of caution in order to leave his audience with a parting plea: to learn to inhabit differently the role of the implicated reader; and to cultivate a reading practice towards the text and the Other which, recognizing the "worlding" capacities of the imagination, works to undo the "sentimental education" naturalizing the paradoxes of the existing international political order. The question we

⁶⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

are left with, however, is what does this “reading practice” look like and what kinds of narrative forms are capable of revealing the contradictions between the universalist rhetoric of rights and the endemic exclusions of its practice? Indeed, when Mitchell lauds the iconographic resonances of the Hooded Man for encouraging a “prolonged contemplation of [the] image, [and] not just a quick ‘reading’ that gives the figure a proper name and places it in a narrative,”⁶⁶ it is clear that what is at stake in this relationship between *reading* and *form* is our ability to bring the rightless into legibility for the “beneficiaries of the social, economic and political dispensation of the world.”⁶⁷ If, as Slaughter contends, certain narrative forms promote ways of reading the world that endorse and reproduce existing social relations, how can an attention to issues of form enable new reading practices that call into question the common sense behind our definitions of human recognition and emancipation? What is the power of form to both denaturalize the paradoxes of rights and help us to radically reinvision the political strategies we use to address them?

Botero’s Dissensus

On the face of it, Botero’s Abu Ghraib paintings appear to have an investment in staging a relationship of empathic identification between viewer and image. His referencing of Renaissance iconography is the most remarked upon and easily identifiable formal quality at work in his portraits. Arthur Danto interprets this citational practice as effecting a “visceral sense of identification with the victim, whose suffering

⁶⁶ Mitchell, “The Unspeakable and the Unimaginable,” 305

⁶⁷ Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.*, 347

we are compelled to internalize and make our own.” Viewers versed in the historical significance of the genre understand its role in humanizing the suffering body, and providing the subject of worship an image of Christ which, in its anatomical correctness and earthly realism, promised to provoke a sense of human connection between the embodied viewer and spirit-made-flesh. It was, in fact, the meticulous realism of the Renaissance figure, with its power to inspire an awareness of the viewer’s own anatomical constitution and bodily movements, which was thought to fulfill its pedagogical function of not only cultivating a widespread literacy in the teachings of the Bible, but also cultivating a literacy in reverent affect and identification which was supposed to mediate the relationship between man and tortured martyr.

Transfigured from abjection into monumentality, it would seem that Botero’s figures aim to reproduce the rituals of viewing sedimented through centuries of sanctified display. In their move from the globally disseminated photograph to the gallery-bound canvas, they perform a restoration of the “aura” that, as Walter Benjamin argues, has withered with the technological reproducibility of the image,⁶⁸ imploring the viewer to substitute the reverent, contemplative intimacy of more traditional modes of spectatorship for the violent subjection wrought by the global circulation of the image in its digital form. Botero’s expressed intention of “giv[ing] back dignity” to the tortured subject calls upon the aura’s reliability to inspire these well-worn performances of intimacy, which have functioned, over time and space, to exalt images of base human suffering into parables of venerable sacrifice. The recognition of the detainee’s “dignity”

⁶⁸ Benjamin Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

relies upon a reading practice which, like the sentimental narrative form, returns to prescribed routines of violent display and empathic response to make legible the humanity, and eventual redemption, of these bodies in pain.

Yet, if identification is the conduit through which dignity finds its way back to the aggrieved, its restitution here remains an unfinished project. The entangled narratives of becoming which converge upon this site of mourning—from biblical redemption, to the rights of the man, to modern sentimentality—turn upon the promise that there exists a subjectivity beyond the subjection of the image, and that the communicability of this subjectivity holds the key to transforming the persecuted from object into person, and from thing into human. The subjectivization of the oppressed, as Rey Chow notes, has often served as the method by which humanistic projects have sought to combat a “politics of the image” which has rendered the Other defiled and degraded, and the act of regarding her pornographic and aggressive.⁶⁹ To retrieve subjectivity is to reveal the “depth, hidden truths, and inner voices” of the silent Other, thus releasing her from her status as passive object. The language of rights embodies this logic, as it prioritizes the protection, recognition, and expression of speech as the means through which self-determination can be achieved over and against the mandated silences of violent political regimes.⁷⁰

Botero, however, withholds from his figures the subjective depth that betrays the true humanity of objectified life. Though clearly informed by a studied familiarity of the

⁶⁹ Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics and Interventions in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 31

⁷⁰ Joseph Slaughter, "A Question of Narration: The Voice in International Human Rights Law," *Human Rights Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1997): 406-430.

human anatomy, the comic inflation of his figures eschews the anatomical realism that has traditionally functioned as a point of relation between viewer and icon. The careful attention to human physiognomy, which enabled the Renaissance masters to register the intensity of their subjects' emotional states, appears absent from these bodies. Their expanding heft constricts the gestural potential of their joints and limbs, and flattens the furrows of facial expression that could relate the affective fullness of their subjective experience. The corporeal density which critics such as David Ebony insist "suggest[s] an ability to overcome intensely adverse circumstances,"⁷¹ paradoxically constrains the figures' animate qualities, and the tortured remain—like the subjects of Botero's earlier works—objects, emptied of the agency of thought and action, much less voice.

Botero's divergences from the formal conventions of Renaissance iconography thus undermine the sentimental narrative formula in which "suffering... becomes answered by survival, which is then recoded as freedom."⁷² His stultified attempt at sanctifying the tortured victim disrupts the social contract of the Renaissance genre, which promises to deliver redemption for the aggrieved and transcendence for the witness by means of an identification that bonds. Faced with a subject that eludes resemblance, the spectator is refused the satisfaction of empathic intimacy that normally accompanies the fulfillment of the Renaissance form. The pleasures of beholding built into the genre's conventions are forestalled, as its formal expectations are rendered unpredictable.

⁷¹ David Ebony, "Botero and Abu Ghraib," in *Botero: Abu Ghraib* (Munich: Prestel, 2006), 10.

⁷² Berlant, "Poor Eliza," 641.

For Berlant this “refusal to reproduce the sublimation of subaltern struggles into conventions of narrative satisfaction and redemptive fantasy” constitutes a “postsentimental” mode of narration—a mode of narration that resists the fabrication of feelings of ameliorative identification through the repetition of scenes of suffering. But if Botero’s paintings effectively withhold the “pleasure-in-violence so spectacularly hardwired” into U.S.-based ways of remembering histories of subjection, they do not do so by erasing the scene, or rendering it “unrepresentable.” Rather, they achieve this through a re-wiring of the aesthetic machinery that allows for the unconflicted consumption of the pain of the Other.



Figure 10: Botero, Abu Ghraib #66, 2005

Abu Ghraib #66 [figure 10] illustrates the resistance of Botero’s figures to the universalized scripts of subjectivity that attempt to bring their psychic lives into legibility. Referencing the imagery of the “Man of Sorrows,” Botero provides us with a headshot of a prisoner, whose blood streams not from a crown of thorns, but from a blindfold

covering his eyes. The pained gaze of martyrdom, which, for centuries, has served as the focal point of the devotional icon, is removed from the figure, divesting the victim of the power of sight that, according to modern philosophies of aesthetics, facilitates one's ascent into the ranks of humanity, and guarantees his ability to commune with civilization. As we spectate using the full faculty of our vision, the role of sight and touch in the uneven distribution of humanity, as well as our complicity as spectators in enacting that division, becomes clear. Botero's tortured subjects are blindfolded, hooded, or depicted with closed eyes in all but a handful of the 86 portraits produced for this series. In contrast to Christ's penetrating stare, their obstructed gazes leave the spectator with little means by which to access the victim's grief or suffering. The face, which, according to Levinas, invites one into ethical relation with the Other, remains unexposed to the viewer, and the "imaginary identification,"⁷³ which establishes a connection between self and Other on the level of mutual resemblance, reveals itself as a sentimental fantasy. Botero does not take the route of deploying the canvas in the service of granting "voice" or "subjectivity" to the represented victims. The narrative of pain and redemption that speaks through the sentience of the Renaissance body is stifled, as the figure reveals itself intractable to the extraction of interiority that would complete its humanizing process.

In contrast to the "politics of depth" so often invoked in projects attempting to resurrect the dignity of the silent Other, this series conducts its critique on the level of style and surface. Laqueur points out that the sensuality characteristic of Botero's work

⁷³ Lacan quoted in Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics and Interventions in Contemporary Cultural Studies*, 36.

was compromised in the rapid production of these paintings. “Pigments applied in thin layers” comprise the flesh of the depicted, “with even the wounds and patches of blood indicated only by a deepening of color and not of paint itself.” The volume and plasticity of his figures, in addition to the life-size of their display, have always provided Botero’s work with a quality of tactility, which, as he explains, gives the viewer “the feeling that he or she could touch the things in his paintings.” He cites Bernard Berenson's analysis of the "tactile values" of Renaissance portraiture as a major source of inspiration for his pursuit of a form which foregrounds touch. But if Berenson's observations provide an account of Renaissance tactility as enabling an intimate knowledge of the breath, movement, and "muscular strains and pressures"⁷⁴ experienced by the depicted body, Botero gives us "tactility" of an entirely different order.

While Florentine figuration, according to Berenson, emphasizes the dynamism of the human body—the “stretching and relaxing” of muscles in motion and the “rippings of skin” accompanying the articulation of gesture—the expansive musculature of Botero’s figures appears tensed into a constant, unyielding state of contraction. The skin of these bodies is rigid, not supple. Splatters of blood rest *on top of* relatively flatly rendered flesh, as though propelled from a canvas refusing to absorb the shocks of injury. The tactile quality of Botero’s earlier works—which invited the eye to enter the painting and hold, weigh, and grasp the rendered figure—undergoes a reversal here. The points of touch between viewer and detainee are exteriorized, pushed to the surface, replacing the *visual* tactility of the Renaissance body with a more literal expression of

⁷⁴ Berenson, *Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* Bernard Berenson, *Florentine Painters of the Renaissance: with an index to their works* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1909).

physical tactility. The streaks of blood—fresh, intact, and hitherto undisturbed – appeal to the viewer to wipe clean and tend to the wounds. Unlike the Renaissance figure, whose intricate depiction calls our attention to the *internalized* response of the body to violent trauma, Botero’s *externalization* of the signs of injury redirects our attention to the response of the spectator, which must be revised and reordered to adapt to the series’ formal instabilities.

Discussing the interplay of texture and affect, Eve Sedgwick writes, “To perceive texture is never only to ask or know What is it like? nor even just How does it impinge on *me*? Textural perception always explores two other questions as well: How did it get that way? and What could I do with it?”⁷⁵ While the tactility of Botero’s portraits may elicit reactions of care, it, even more critically, works to implicate its viewer in the violence depicted. The relatively rough drawings Botero presents alongside the glossier sheen of the oil paintings illustrate most pointedly the series’ power of indictment, which demands not only a *response to* the tragedy of Abu Ghraib, but an apprehension of *responsibility for* the suffering inflicted. *Abu Ghraib #33* [figure 11], for example, features two prisoners, one prone on the floor, and the other hanging from his hands by a rope, naked except for a cloak covering his head. While the contours of their bodies are sketched in graphite, thick patches of reddish-brown sanguine chalk compose the blood staining their skin, hair, and the walls behind them. Faint smudges of this chalk overlay the drawing, soiling the composition, and suggesting a handling of the image by sullied fingers – fingers which, we might assume, are responsible for the bloodshed. While

⁷⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press), 13.

Botero's subjects lack the power to return the gaze of the viewer, the tactility of their representation adds to their "image" a different ability to "gaze." Following Chow, the "gaze" of the image created by Botero's tactility makes the spectator conscious of his own relationship to what the image projects, "leading to his need to turn this gaze around and look at himself, henceforth 'reflected' in the [victim]-object."⁷⁶ Though the fingerprints may not belong to the viewer, they, at the very least, imply that he or she occupies the same space, time, and relationship to the victim as the aggressor. The traces of complicity revealed through the tactile surface close the space of distance and passivity from which the spectator observes the offense, troubling the impulse to disinterested contemplation that the formal beauty of the paintings initially seem to invite.



Figure 11: Botero, Abu Ghraib #33, 2005

This crossing of form and tactility unsettles the experience of aesthetic beholding which, according to Enlightenment thought, both produces and confirms the human

⁷⁶ Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 49

subject's compatibility with liberal orders of freedom and governance. By the logic of this narrative, the physical and psychic distance the subject maintains in relation to the aesthetic object consolidates the integrity and rationality of his humanity. In the experience of the beautiful, the feeling of restful contemplation with which the subject apprehends the object affirms his continuity with the orders of nature: the bounded unity of the object's form allows for the "free play" of its enjoyment while at once regulating the boundary between self and other. The experience of the sublime tests this equilibrium, presenting the subject with sensory matter which pushes the limits of this boundary, but over which the coherence of the subject ultimately prevails. Botero's translation of abjection into beauty stages a conflict between beautiful form and the sublime content, interrupting this process of creating a unified viewing subject – as the beautiful becomes tactile, and the sublime becomes serene and contemplative, the viewer's conditioned response to the aesthetic object proves inadequate to the task of "reading" the relationship of this object to his own subject-formation. The habitual gaze that reduces the other to a "symptom" in Lacanian terms—"something that gives the subject its ontological consistency and fundamental structure"⁷⁷—is disturbed in this aesthetic encounter, making it difficult to establish one's own subjectivity in a way consistent with the project of liberalism.

The formal divergences of these works similarly upsets the experience of intersubjective agreement which both defines the Kantian aesthetic encounter, and serves as the basis for the ideal of the liberal public sphere imagined by contemporary international law. If the aesthetic is one site in which "democratic practices are

⁷⁷ Ibid., 36.

cultivated through rehearsal and repetition,⁷⁸ the cycle of liberal socialization that relies upon the predictability of form and aesthetic response is broken here. As visual translations of prisoner testimony, Botero's paintings present us with a kind of "truth," but without reconciliation. Instead of fostering a public sphere that can be united by common sense and the performance of sympathy, the experience of aesthetic beholding erodes the consensus that works to unify and strengthen the collective democratic body.

Botero's project thus responds to the following questions posed by Chow in *Writing Diaspora*: How does one represent the degraded, objectified, silenced Other without merely *inverting* this violent construction, and *replacing* it with something more noble? How does one write the space of the Other in such a way as to "refuse the facile turn of sanctifying the defiled image with pieties and thus enriching ourselves precisely with what can be called the *surplus value* of the oppressed?"⁷⁹ In our search for an alternative to the Manichean process that constitutes the self as the Other's *negation*, why has it come to be that the subjectivity of the Other is only legible to the degree to which it is made to resemble the self's own liberal-humanist formation as an agent of speech and rationality?

It is this desire for resemblance, I argue, that links the "high" art of the sublime and the "low" art of popular sentimentality. In spite of the radically different ways in which each approaches the formal representation of structural violence – one espousing a *refusal* to represent, the other availing itself of highly *explicit*, often melodramatic, expressive forms – both share a faith in the power of identification to restore the

⁷⁸ Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*, 145.

⁷⁹ Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 30, emphasis mine

ruptured universality of the social body. In both cases, the representation (or non-representation) of subaltern suffering acts as a fetish object, projecting the illusion of reparative possibilities while repressing and disavowing the political exclusions intrinsic to liberalism's universalist framework.⁸⁰ Despite the ambitions of anti-aesthetic sublimity to create representations of Otherness extrinsic to the symbolic and economic exchanges of the commercial sphere, the fetish object it yields enacts the same performance of social mediation as the mass-produced commodity of sentimental entertainment, revealing a shared complicity with the institutional and market interests of a global order which benefits from the ideal of a consensual public sphere and its diffusion of social antagonisms. By presenting us with a beauty that chafes, Botero neither adheres to nor fully abandons the conventions of consensus embodied in sublime unrepresentability, sublime sentimentality, or even sublime warfare. Instead, he creates a dissensual aesthetics which holds on to egalitarian democratic ideals embedded in the beautiful, while simultaneously highlighting their perversion, and the impossibility of a harmonious union with the other.

Object Beauty and the Making of Deviance

While Jameson argues that the logic of commodity production has become all-pervasive, and that it is "vain to expect a negation" of it through a return to beauty, Chow asks us how we might re-fashion the image in such a way so as to not to negate this logic, but to reveal its operations. She argues that such a move demands the

⁸⁰ see Uday Mehta, "Liberal Strategies of Exclusion," in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

development of representational practices that do not reduce the subjectivity of the Other to its experiences of domination (or, its flip side, redemption), but that provide evidence of the historical processes that created the conditions for its defilement and consequent desires for sanctification in the first place. This is precisely the task of beauty in Botero's portraits – to bear witness not only to the isolated event of the Abu Ghraib scandal, but to the broader historical trajectory that has made possible the rationalization of sexualized torture in contemporary wars of Empire.

Botero does this through a confluence of forms and performative gazes that sobers the exaltation of the Renaissance body, interrupting its sanctifying mission. In his figures, one can read echoes of other artistic traditions to which he has attended consistently in his larger body of work – in particular, the still life and the nude. While these forms have maintained a ubiquitous presence throughout history, they take on specific meanings, functions and interpretations in the context of Western modernity, providing an aesthetic education in how to conceive of the self, the human, and what makes for life and living within liberal mentalities of rule. At the center of these genres, perhaps most critically, are questions of gender, and the role and regulation of sexual difference in these emerging orders of governmentality.

Lynda Nead has noted that in modernity, the Western tradition of the female nude, and the critical discourse surrounding it, has performed the function of not only regulating the female body, but setting in place norms of viewing and viewers that work to establish the unity, rationality, and coherence of the visual subject. The transmutation of the female body into the female nude, she argues, serves the purpose of symbolically

containing the threat of female sexuality to masculine subjectivity.⁸¹ By shoring up the marginal matter and orifices of the female body, and sublimating them into the ideals of Kantian beauty, the nude works to preserve the distinction between the self and other, assuring the coherence and integrity of the (male-gendered) viewing subject. The containment of abjection – signified by the “leaky boundaries” of bodies gendered as non-masculine—protects the subject from the wayward matter that threatens to transgress or dissolve the unity of his body, while simultaneously consolidating the masculine symbolic order that his body represents.

The narrative of the subject embodied in the nude’s gendering process mirrors the disciplinary logic of liberal forms of rule, which orders society through the self-mastery, self-regulation, and self-control of a free and “civilized” citizenry.⁸² In this expression of Kantian aesthetics, the gaze that establishes its inner coherence through the ordering of the female body is continuous with the gaze that manifests its sovereignty through the ordering of the polis. The imposition of form onto the feminine body and the ordering of the political body thus constitute two connected moments in a broader project of civilizing the self and the world in accordance with the norms of liberal reason. The aesthetic experience of beauty occasioned by the nude consolidates this imaginary, enabling a perception of self and society adequate to ideals of modern governance.

The female nude looms large in Botero’s painterly obsession with the human

⁸¹ Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁸² Nikolas Rose, "Governing 'Advanced' Liberal Democracies," in *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neoliberalism, and Rationalities of Government*, ed. Thomas Osborne, Nikolas Rose and Andrew Barry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

form. Women's bodies have figured so prominently in his portraits that a collection of his works focused exclusively on this subject was published in 2003. The portraits in this collection reveal a steadfast respect for the conventions of the genre. Though the fleshly excess of his bodies seems to verge on exploding the nude's formal boundaries, the stiff contour lines demarcating their limits ultimately restrain the momentum of this inflation, disciplining the figures' expansionist impulses. The skin on these bodies is smooth and unbroken; their comportment, modest and subdued. Crossed legs and tightly restrained postures effectively inhibit the sight of female obscenity from entering the viewer's field of vision. Beauty, form, and containment are of primary concern in these portraits, which he describes as trying to evoke "sensuality with precision."⁸³

But Botero's figures are rarely *merely* nudes. Most often they appear as bodies in the midst of human activity, everyday acts of bio-political self-care that, under liberal logics of rule, demonstrate the human capacity for freedom and self-governance. Images of women bathing, grooming, sleeping, and reading in domestic space represents this acculturation of nature into nation, chronicling a making of self, family, and home that enables integration of individuals into a broader democratic form. [figures 12 and 13]

⁸³ Fernando Botero, interview by Ana María Escallón, , *From the Inside Out: An Interview with Fernando Botero* trans. Asa Zatz, Rizzoli (1997), 52



Figure 12: Botero, *The Bathroom*, 1989

His stated method of painting the body as a still life underscores this concern with gendering, domestic space and social order. A genre associated with the “everyday world of routine and repetition,” the still life presents the feminized space of domestic reproduction through the gaze of male authority, serving as a reflection of the changing relationship between human need, ways of living, and larger systems of power and value. The life of the table is the field of signification for this semiotic exercise, de-centering the human form as it focuses instead on the objects that enable its “small-scale, trivial, forgettable acts of bodily survival and self-maintenance.” If the nude tells a story of the civilization of *subjects*, the still life documents the civilization of the *worlds* in which these subjects live. As Norman Bryson explains, the rational ordering of goods and worldly possessions featured in 17th century European still life worked to make legible the phenomenon of surplus that accompanied the establishment of the capitalist mode of

production.⁸⁴ Expressions of wealth that had, in pre-industrial societies, signified the vices of “luxury” were purified of their associations with waste and extravagance, and re-signified to represent the rewards of Calvinist “prosperity.” Providing “general models for managing the superabundance of goods,” the still life was a reflection of a changing world where the pleasures of luxury consumption displaced a civilizational preoccupation with subsistence need, making expenditure less a matter of communal ethics than individual style. An “overlooked” genre dealing with quotidian existence and mundane human habit, the still life naturalized the incorporation of abundance into domestic space, as well as the colonial violence of primitive accumulation that set in motion this production of surplus and privatization of wealth.



Figure 13: Botero, *La Colombiana*, 1991

Painting the tortured body in a form reserved for the depiction of everyday objects, Botero compromises the human-centered dignity of the Renaissance icon, and his subjects become, as he puts it, elements, holding together a larger composition. The citational logic of this series is less concerned with capturing the subjective depth of

⁸⁴ Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990).

human suffering than the social ordering that prepares the landscape of its production. As he merges the forms of the nude, the still life, and the Renaissance icon, the gaze of disinterested “world-making” tempers the anticipated gaze of empathic devotion, shifting the viewer’s perspective to one of male wealth, social power, and the ordering of gendered bodies and gendered space that shaped the vision of liberal democracy and capital accumulation.

This perspective is unsettled, though not entirely displaced, when the viewer confronts the formal transformations of Botero’s nudes as they move from spaces of “free world” domesticity to the space of the prison. The abject bodily attributes carefully edited out of his earlier portraits of women are foregrounded here, mimetically illustrating the experiences of sexualized torture documented by the photographs and testimonies brought to light by the scandal. In contrast to the containment of matter which organizes the composition of the Western nude, matter here is uncontained, yet form is not sacrificed. Bodies are abject, disordered, obscene, but not sublime. The coherence of, and division between, the self and other is jeopardized by the expulsion and projection of bodily matter from the form and the canvas, but the figure itself retains the bounded solidity of Botero’s more conventional nudes. Rather than effecting a sublime realization of the provisional nature of identity and selfhood, the beauty of these figures reveals that the security of the paradigm of the modern self is achieved not only by the removal of the threat of abjection, but through its performative staging as well.

Shock and Awe doctrine, and its sublime media visualization, fashioned the body politic of US imperialism as masculine, punitive, sexually potent, technologically precise,

and ontologically transcendent. The parable of the concubine, discussed earlier in this essay, illustrates this process of sublime self-making, but also reveals its dependence upon a repressed, but equally vigorous “making” of another kind – the “making” of the enemy body. As Anne McClintock explains, the invisibility of the 9/11 attackers presented the US state with a “trauma in the realm of vision,” forcing a relinquishing of the knowledge and authority gained through centuries of hegemonic control over the gaze and the image.⁸⁵ Central to the state’s attempts at the restitution of this lost power, she argues, was the visual production of an adversary that could mask the traumatic sight of this enemy absence and stand in as the phantasmatic object of retribution. As she, and a number of others,⁸⁶ point out, the Abu Ghraib photographs reveal that this process of turning ordinary people into enemy bodies drew upon deep-rooted and enduring colonialist discourses of raced, gendered, and sexualized “degeneration” that have long justified the exclusion of dominated subjects from the realm of the “human.”

[T]he specific techniques used at Abu Ghraib are not new... they are continuous with a long imperial archive of colonial and racist cruelty. They belong to a well-established, imperial regime of discipline and punishment in which colonized people were for centuries depicted by the West as historically “primitive,” as animalized, as sexually deviant: the men feminized, homosexualized, or hypersexualized; and the women figured as sexually lascivious...⁸⁷

The self-representation of US imperial democracy as an exemplar of order, precision,

⁸⁵ Anne McClintock, “Paranoid Empire: Spectres from Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib,” *Small Axe*, no. 28 (March 2009): 50-74.

⁸⁶ See: Jasbir K. Puar, “On Torture: Abu Ghraib,” *Radical History Review* (Duke University Press), no. 93 (Fall 2005): 13-38; Malini Johar Schueller, “Techno-dominance and Torturegate: The Making of US Imperialism,” in *Exceptional State: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the New Imperialism*, ed. Ashley Dawson and Malini Johar Schueller, 162-187 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Avery Gordon, “Abu Ghraib: Imprisonment and the War on Terror,” *Race and Class* (SAGE Publications) 48, no. 1 (2006): 42-59; and Angela Y. Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005).

⁸⁷ McClintock, “Paranoid Empire,” 63.

and control thus depends not only on spectacular displays of military might, but upon the construction of an enemy that, like the concubine, is figured as Orientalized, effeminate, sexually available, and open to limitless penetration – in a word, abject.

Rendering the torture at Abu Ghraib through the forms of the still life and the nude, Botero adds another dimension to the logic of gender construction and normative sexuality consolidated through the modern forms of these genres. Here, the colonialist abjection of the nonhuman Other is revealed as intimately connected to the histories of modern civilization, culture, and democratic ordering asserted through the aesthetic production of feminine bodies and private, domesticated space. As he folds the image of the tortured body into the genres of the still life and nude, Botero calls into question the taken for granted rationale that the sexualized torture at Abu Ghraib was merely a tactical exploitation of Islam's so-called "taboo" against nudity and homosexuality, and situates it within a longer historical trajectory, allowing us to understand the abuse as implicated in the development of liberal rationality. Like the Tribunal Sellers associated with these paintings, Botero's series rejects an understanding of the sexual torture at Abu Ghraib as aberrant, individualized, or ahistorical; revealing it as one element in an ongoing imperialist process in which sex is "put to work to construct men, masculinities, and nations and to destroy women, men, and a people."



Figure 14: Botero, Abu Ghraib #60, 2005

Against the Limit Case

In his act of giving form to the experience of detainee torture, Botero rejects an understanding of prisoner abuse as exceptional, sublime or unrepresentable. The suffering of his subjects is not boundless and immeasurable. Pain here has a form that can be traced, named, and identified. Disinterested rationality, rather than egregious malevolence, is the mentality out of which torture is produced and justified, and his citation of the still life – a genre devoted to representing the quotidian world of mundane routine – represents torture as an integral part of the everyday rules of modern existence rather than an exception.

The visual event of Abu Ghraib activated a proliferation of discourses that revealed the power of the image to shape the terms upon which the rights of the victim could be claimed and defended. Materializing out of the context of a resolutely undemocratic visual culture of war, in which images of dead and suffering bodies on

both sides of the invasion were vigorously policed,⁸⁸ the photos in and of themselves constituted a visual limit case of media representation. The exceptionality of these images was reflected in the rhetoric of outrage that accompanied their release, with humanitarian voices citing the Bush administration's breach of the Geneva Conventions and the Convention Against Torture as objective evidence of the severity of the photographed acts.⁸⁹ Notably, it was not the universal humanity of the victim, but rather, the extralegality of military conduct that was mobilized as the primary leverage point in the ensuing campaigns against torture. The narrative frame out of which the "exposure" of torture was brought to popular attention facilitated this discourse, establishing as "exceptional" that which was considered beyond the pale of "acceptability" as determined by media representational practice and the dictates of international law.

Torture, we are told by the law and the media, is extreme and incommensurate. Yet the very distinctions between "human" and "inhumane," and "necessary" and "excessive" forms of punishment rely upon the logic of a calculative rationality which views disparate experiences of pain as comparable, measurable, and quantifiable. The Geneva Convention, in fact, implements this logic of calculation and measure in its regulatory relationship to the "necessary evil" of modern warfare—creating taxonomies of "cruel," "inhuman," and "degrading" behavior which have the effect of legalizing

⁸⁸ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture* (New York, Oxford: Routledge, 2004).

⁸⁹ Susan Sontag, "Regarding the Torture of Others," *New York Times Magazine*, May 23, 2004.

most forms of suffering inflicted by contemporary technologies of battle.⁹⁰ As Diana Taylor states, “The lines between endemic violations and the exceptional case of torture are... porous.”⁹¹ By what logic can one argue that the suffering caused by aerial bombardments, US sanctions against Iraq, or the devastations wrought by the failures of coerced economic restructuring are of a wholly different order than the trauma of torture?

International human rights and the notion of the “unrepresentable” emerged from the wreckage of World War II as vehicles of transcendence—human rights allowing for the transcendence of the human from its instrumental use, and the “unrepresentable” promising the transcendence of the aesthetic from the exploitative force field of institutional and market forces. In refusing the viewer this sublime gaze of transcendence, Botero reveals the collusion of the un/representable in the rational logic of ordering that determines the distinction between the operative categories of the “humane” and “inhumane,” and the “legal” and “extralegal” in human rights law. The claim of Beauty in Botero’s Abu Ghraib portraits is thus not, as Jameson feared, to assert a new art form “that exists beyond the reach of commodification,” but to reveal international human rights law, and the narrative logics of sublime overcoming that serve as its motor of incorporation for the globally disenfranchised, as always already implicated in the inhuman technologies that sustain global capitalism—the campaigns of militarized “security,” the domestic prison, the policies of economic

⁹⁰ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁹¹ Diana Taylor, "Double-Blind: The Torture Case," *Critical Inquiry* (University of Chicago Press) 33, no. 4 (Summer 2007), 711.

(under)development, and the everyday biopolitical discipline and management of bodies.⁹² The idea of the limit case—in both law and aesthetics—is merely a sublime fiction that upholds the myth of an impossible transcendence over the global capitalism’s technologies of reason.

⁹² Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions*, 7

CHAPTER TWO

The Aesthetics of Impasse: Oscar Muñoz and Juan Manuel Echavarría



Figure 1: Guerra y Pá, Juan Manuel Echavarría, 2001

In preparation for a video project in 2001, Juan Manuel Echavarría asked his friend, a bird trainer from the Colombian Caribbean, to teach two parrots to speak. One bird was to learn to say the word "guerra" (war), and the other, "paz" (peace). Upon their return to him eight months later, Echavarría noticed a peculiar thing—the bird that was trained to say "paz" was incapable of saying it without dropping the "s" sound at the end of the word. Its speech, he discovered, had taken on the syncopated inflection of the Caribbean accent, leaving the word "paz" in a state of suspension with every repetition. The video itself documents these two birds sharing a perch, negotiating their limited space to rest and move. For the bird taught to say "paz," each motion, gesture, and bodily shift is met with territorial jostling by the other bird, who, it becomes clear, has learned how to say "guerra" with a protracted drawl, articulating each syllable slowly,

resolutely, and insistently. Overwhelmed, vocally and physically, by her companion, the "paz"-trained parrot struggles to remain on the perch. Throughout the duration of the eight-minute video, she is pushed and pecked, as she reiterates the only word she knows with a clipped enunciation: "pá."¹ [figure 1]

This video illustrates what I argue has been a common concern undergirding the works of Colombian artists and cultural producers since the 1980s—the impasse of violence and the endless suspension of "peace" for a country mired in decades of conflict. The parrots, Echavarría explains, are intended to evoke the tedious rhetoric of politicians who, throughout the peace talks of 1990s, repeated the words "war" and "peace" with such frequency as to render them meaningless.² Alluding to the stalemate and ultimate failure of the peace process to occasion an end to the conflict, the birds' antagonistic exchanges reflect the limits of modern political frameworks to bring a democratic ideal of "peace" to fruition. Here, the elaboration and realization of the "peace" is not achieved by means of dialogue and negotiation—it is, rather, foreshortened, evacuated of significance, and reduced to the mimetic invocation of an utterance which originated elsewhere, in a different time, under different conditions.

Literary scholars have long noted the recurrence of the trope of mimicry in postcolonial discourses and aesthetic productions. In an early exploration of this concept, Frantz Fanon characterizes mimicry as the coercive process through which the colonized gain their authority as sovereign historical subjects through identification with,

¹ Juan Manuel Echavarría, "Guerra y Pá," 2001. This video can be viewed at http://jmechavarría.com/gallery/video/gallery_video_guerra_pa.html (accessed 12 12, 2012).

² Juan Manuel Echavarría, interview by Hans-Michael Herzog, "Juan Manuel Echavarría," *Cantos Cuentos Colombianos: Arte Colombiano Contemporáneo*, ed. Hans-Michael Herzog, trans. Camilla Flecha, Zurich: Daros (February 5, 2004): 184.

and imitation of, Western modes of living and governance.³ Complicating this notion, Homi Bhabha views mimicry as an operation which reveals the differences as much as the resemblances between colonizer and the colonized. As a result of their status as "almost the same, but not quite," the cultures and subjectivities produced through the mimetic process, he argues, carry the potential to undermine and destabilize the authority of colonial discourses by exposing the incompleteness of their regulatory power.⁴ Echavarría's video, *Guerra y Pá*, revisits this discussion of mimicry not to reclaim agency for mimetic subject, nor merely to identify the points of rupture which call into question the inevitability of existing relations of rule, but to provide a reflection on the incapacity of Colombian modernity to live out the familiar scripts which posit the mechanisms of liberal democracy as the rational vehicles through which to resolve the problem of political violence in the neoliberal era. Since the 1980s, these scripts have been performed through various means—peace negotiations; electoral reforms; the adoption of a new constitution in 1991 (which stressed the centrality of rights and democratic reform to achieving a "culture of peace" in Colombia); and, most recently, the implementation of transitional justice mechanisms intended to bring about a resolution to the conflict. Yet the violence continued to escalate unabated. The mimetic relationship explored in this video, then, is not between the colonizer and the postcolonial subject, but of the nation-state to a liberal political ideal that has proven increasingly elusive in recent decades. Metonymically standing in for the state, the

³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

⁴ Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* (The MIT Press) 28 (Spring 1984): 125-133.

parrots enact a mimetic performance of democracy which exposes the promise of peace as an exercise in impossible fulfillment.

In its constrained and incomplete articulation of "pá," the parrot in Echavarría's video echoes Alain Joxe's description of Colombia's current impasse of one of "frozen peace," where violence escalates and war machines proliferate despite government efforts towards resolution.⁵ For Joxe, this condition is largely attributable to a global shift from the "binary logic" of Cold War conflicts towards a model of "imperial globality" in which empire operates through "the management of asymmetrical and spatialized violence, territorial control, contracted massacre, and 'cruel little wars,' all of which are aimed at imposing the neoliberal capitalist project."⁶ If peace in Colombia has not been attainable by traditional means, it is in part because the violence has witnessed a shift from a "bipolar" political conflict between the state military and insurgent groups, to a conflict between a multiplicity of armed actors whose interests and activities are intimately tied to the vicissitudes of the global market. Far from reflecting problems which are "internal" to the state, the violence in Colombia functions, to a great extent, as a "surrogate for global (especially US) interests," creating local conditions amenable to the encroachment of empire by opening up regions and resources to transnational capital.⁷ War, in this context, takes on a self-perpetuating logic not only because of its connections to a deregulated global market, but because it works in concert with a U.S.-

⁵ Alain Joxe, *The Empire of Disorder* (Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e), 2002), 80.

⁶ Quoted in Arturo Escobar, "Beyond the Third World: Imperial Globality, Global Coloniality and Anti-Globalization Social Movements," *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (2004), 216.

⁷ Ibid.

based imperial globality which flourishes through the global organization of violence and human insecurity.

At the center of this dissertation is therefore the question of how Colombian cultural productions contend with the impasses of modernity in times of imperial globality when the collusion of militarism and market logics have rendered anachronistic liberal political solutions to new configurations of violence and human disposability. If, as Neferti Tadiar argues, Third World literatures served the project of decolonization by providing an "enabling means of reclaiming subjective agency and sovereignty in the face of subjugation, dependency, and marginalization on the world stage of history,"⁸ how do contemporary cultural productions reconfigure the subject to reflect its constrained relationship to the neocolonial circuits which have made the possibilities of achieving a clearly articulated vision of sovereignty ever more elusive?

The first chapter of this dissertation considered these questions through a close reading of Botero's Abu Ghraib series, revealing the ways in which his unorthodox renderings of the subject of torture pose a challenge to the calculative rationality of human rights instruments and their implicit sanctioning of the everyday technologies of violence that sustain global capitalism. Continuing this exploration of the relationship between representation and global human rights discourses, the third chapter examines the Colombian government's recent turn to transitional justice measures through the reorganization of public space in Bogotá, analyzing how urban renewal practices symbolically recast the nation as a subject "in recovery" from its ongoing violence, and

⁸ Neferti X.M. Tadiar, *Things Fall Away: Philippine Historical Experience and the Makings of Globalization* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 4.

present urban renewal as the therapeutic vehicle for “working through” the failures of Colombian modernity. The current chapter examines the impasses of Colombian modernity through interpretations of two series of artworks that were first launched in the mid-1990s—Oscar Muñoz’s *Aliento* and Juan Manuel Echavarría’s *Corte de Florero*. These series turn to the medium of photography to undertake a “productive undoing” of inherited epistemological frames for apprehending political violence, human subjectivity, and possibilities for democratic emancipation in modernity. Attempting to capture a new, intensified phase of violence as it is in the process of unfolding, these works engage closely with the psychoanalytic and philosophical epistemologies undergirding contemporary conceptions of sovereignty and “political agency” to reveal the inadequacies of human rights as a disciplinary formation for understanding emergent ontologies of violence and the potential for their transformation and transcendence, under current conditions of imperial globality.



Figure 2: “Where are they? Living Memory. Women in the Public Square, Patricia Ariza, 2009, Photo by Cindy Bello

Oscar Munoz: Ephemeral Subjects

Bogotá, Colombia, August 29th, 2009. I am standing along the perimeter of Plaza Bolívar, a public square in the heart of the city's downtown. Bordering the Plaza are the capital's oldest and most historic buildings, some of which function as icons of national sovereignty, tradition, and religion, and others, such as the Palace of Justice,⁹ which operate more explicitly as evolving creatures, palimpsestic structures whose architectural histories contain the erasures, disavowals, and ongoing resignifications of the traumatic life of the nation. The expanse of space framed by these buildings performs, too, as a palimpsest, bearing traces of histories of protest, urban violence, and the everyday encounters of the city's inhabitants. I am watching as another layer of this story is written. On this day, over 300 women, most of whom are victims, witnesses, and survivors of the violence of the conflict, have filled the square, carrying out a performance protest invoking the memory of the thousands of *falsos positivos*¹⁰ murdered and disappeared by the police and state military in the past decade, as well as of the executed and disappeared political leaders of the Unión Patriótica, the leftist political party formed out of peace negotiations between the guerrillas and the government in

⁹ In 1985, the Palace of Justice was the site of a tragic confrontation between the Colombian military and M-19 guerrillas, who invaded the building and held hostage 300 civilians (including most of the country's Supreme Court justices and members of the of Council of State), demanding that the justices put the civilian government on trial. The altercation that ensued left over 100 people dead, and close to a dozen more disappeared. See Ana Carrigan, *The Palace of Justice: A Colombian Tragedy* (New York: Four Walls, Eight Windows, 1993).

¹⁰ Colombia's "false positives" scandal revealed the widespread practice of extrajudicial killing by the members of the Colombian military, who would execute civilians, dress them up in rebel uniforms, and present them as guerrillas killed in combat in order to inflate the "body count" of military personnel. Investigations into this practice revealed that the victims, referred to as "false positives," numbered in the thousands, with the most recent estimates reaching over 3,000 murdered. The practice dates back to the early 90s, but registered a sharp increase beginning in 2002. The scandal broke in 2008.

1985. As their bodies variously dance, perform, sing, and chant their intimate encounters with atrocity, displacement, and loss, their voices speak their accompanying demand, posed as a question, and repeated as an interrogation: “¿Dónde están?” or, “Where are they?”¹¹

The “they” to which these women refer are signified through various means—blank cardboard cutouts stand in for the missing bodies of the *falsos positivos*, while placards with identification photographs conjure up the lives of the Unión Patriótica leaders. [figure 2] The deployment of identification photos in this scene of protest draws from the accumulated histories of three decades of protest practices bringing attention to the problem of the disappeared in Latin America. Popularized as an accompaniment to the silent demands of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, the identification photo has developed over the years into an icon of political repression, becoming a fixture of the performative techniques through which human rights organizations stage their political claims.¹² Tied, as it is, to the biopolitical technologies through which states track, administer, and recognize the lives of their subjects, the identification photo enacts a performative “proof” attesting to the existence of those whose histories have undergone political erasure.

Recalling Hannah Arendt’s observation in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the concept of the “inalienable” Rights of Man—created in the 18th century with the

¹¹ This performance protest was the result of a collaboration between playwright, director, and actor Patricia Ariza and women displaced by violence.

¹² Andrea Giunta, “Politics of Representation: Art and Human Rights,” *E-misférica 7.2 After Truth*, Winter 2010, <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/e-misferica-72/giunta> (accessed July 15, 2012). See also Diana Taylor, ““You Are Here”: The DNA of Performance,” *The Drama Review* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 149-169.

intention of protecting individuals from the “new arbitrariness” of the sovereign state—has always relied, somewhat perversely, on the authority of the state for its recognition and enforcement.¹³ As visual evidence of this recognition, the identification photo is one register through which the abstract being is made into a juridical person. The standardization of the image performs a dual function. It enables states to discern physical distinctions between members of its citizenry, to break down the mass into surveillable, governable modules. At the same time, it allows those who wield it in protest to assert the singularity of the being in question, their positive identification with the state, and their entitlement to the rights it is supposed to confer.

The “proof” provided by the identification photograph, Diana Taylor argues, is so compelling that its use in protest remains an indispensable complement to movements that have turned to DNA testing to confirm genetic lineages between those disappeared under military rule, and the children, parents and grandparents who have survived them. The continued use of the photograph by such groups suggests that the “proof” these images furnish carries an epistemological force on par with scientific evidence. More importantly, it suggests that the performative invocation of such photographs in scenes of protest achieves something that scientific evidence alone cannot—the ability to publicly transmit historical knowledge and traumatic memory over multiple generations. This fusion of archival proof with what Taylor calls “the repertoire”—the embodied and performed acts that “generate, record, and transmit” knowledges that exceed the “truth” of the archive—has transformed and expanded the signifying potential of the photograph, creating a performative practice that, in its global proliferation, now

¹³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1968).

constitutes a recognizable “family” or genre of protest.¹⁴ The repetition of the photograph attests to the once-recognized institutional life of the person depicted and, like DNA’s ability to confirm genetic relation, proves that this person was once part of the imagined community that is the nation-as-family. The political efficacy of this practice, Taylor contends, resides in the power of performance to extricate the images of the dead and missing from their association with the past, activate their physical presence, and “provoke recognition and reaction in the here and now.”¹⁵

For much of his career, Oscar Muñoz has dedicated his work to the task of unsettling this status of the photograph as bearer of truth, transmitter of historical knowledge, and evidence of lives lived. Starting from Barthes’ insight that “the photograph acquires a power, all its power, when the referent disappears,”¹⁶ Muñoz’s oeuvre provides an extended meditation on the performance of mourning and the political ontology of the image that implicitly calls into question certain presumptions about the making and unmaking of social death, and the possibilities for world historical agency, undergirding the emergent protest genres of its time. Over the past three decades, Muñoz has produced an extensive body of work taking the portrait photograph as a point of departure for reflecting upon the relationship between the image, memory, and the politics of subjectivity and political recognition. His conceptual explorations revolve around experiments with the indexicality of the photograph—“the moment at which contact is made with reality, in which reality touches the photographic paper,” and

¹⁴ Taylor, ““You Are Here”: The DNA of Performance,” 157.

¹⁵ Ibid., 166

¹⁶ Barthes, paraphrased by Muñoz. In Oscar Muñoz, “Oscar Muñoz,” *Guerra y Pá: Symposium on the Social, Political, and Artistic Situation in Colombia*, ed. Eugenio Valdés Figueroa, trans. Peter Mason (Zurich: Daros-Latinamerica AG, 2006), 111.

the continuity between the image and its referent is established.¹⁷ Transmuting the portrait into media such as charcoal pigment printed on water, or water painted on stone, Muñoz subjects his images to processes of “development” which elude the moment of index, denying them the permanence typically associated with the photographic form. For the depicted subjects of his works—which include individuals who have been touched, directly and indirectly, by the violence in Colombia—“development” does not have a teleological endpoint but remains, rather, an ongoing process with an uncertain outcome, marked by “fluidity and constant change,” and shaped through a dynamic relationship with the elements and human interaction. Underscoring the ontological vulnerability of life in conflict zones, the instability of these images encourage a consideration of the social and epistemological infrastructures through which political subjects are formed and become legible within current arrangements of democratic modernity. If the political claims of the photograph rely on its ability to certify the historical presence, social identity, and civil status of its referent, Muñoz’s work, through an unraveling of the physical processes through which the image “fixes” itself as a photographic object, suggests the inadequacy of these infrastructures to account for the particularities of Colombian violence, and to provide a framework for manifesting the humanity of its subjects and victims.

In what follows, I explore this argument through a close reading of one series of works entitled *Aliento (Breath)* (1996-2002). Throughout my analysis, I use Taylor’s essay, “The DNA of Performance,” as a touchstone for contemplating Muñoz’s contributions

¹⁷ Oscar Muñoz, interview by Hans-Michael Herzog, "Oscar Muñoz," *Cantos Cuentos Colombianos: Arte Colombiano Contemporáneo*, ed. Hans-Michael Herzog, trans. Michele Faguet, Zurich: Daros-Latinamerica (January 29, 2004): 240

to theories of memory, the archive, and political recognition. Examining three generations of protest practices calling attention to the Argentinean dictatorship's practice of disappearing political dissidents, Taylor reflects upon the persistence of the identification photo in activist strategies aiming to make such disappearances visible. She argues that the performance of the identification photo not only brings the archival truth of repressed historical memories into the public sphere, it also enables a productive channeling of collective political trauma into an "engine for cultural change."¹⁸ Taylor's discussion of the identification photo offers an insightful interpretation of the historical processes informing the continued invocation of this image in political campaigns demanding justice for the disappeared and their relatives, as well as a nuanced analysis of its power to subvert the state's historical disavowals. Her illumination of the resistant potential of the identification photo does not, however, consider the discursive and epistemological norms that serve as the enabling conditions for the political visibility of this image and its recognition as interventionist political speech within the global theater of human rights activism. I argue that Muñoz's complication of this icon questions the telos of emancipation and normative ideals of subjectivity and political agency presumed by Taylor's concept of trauma-driven performance, and gestures towards the limits of trauma as a performative frame for exposing the condition of victimhood in Colombia, and imagining possibilities for social transformation.

¹⁸ Taylor, "'You Are Here': The DNA of Performance," 154.



Figure 3: Aliento, Oscar Muñoz, 1996

Embodied Witnessing and the Political Ontology of the Image

Central to Muñoz’s work with photography is a suspension of stillness, a refusal to provide a “home” for the image in a medium defined by its capacity to domesticate the vicissitudes of life and memory. *Aliento*, for example, stages the antagonism between the photographic image and its mode of containment characteristic of so many of his works. Here, a series of steel disks, polished to form circular mirrors, are mounted in a horizontal row at roughly eye-level. As the viewer is invited to breathe on the mirrors, the steam from their exhalation materializes a portrait, which Muñoz screened onto the steel using a photo-serigraphic process. [figure 3] These images are photographs of deceased individuals taken from the obituaries section of Colombian newspapers. Like the identification photographs used in the performance protests described above, these portraits provide a relatively straightforward depiction of their subjects. They are close-up shots, the framing of which allows for a certain intimate engagement with the distinct

contours of their features, the idiosyncrasies of their bodily comportment, and their habits of affective expression. At the same time, the standardization of their poses serves as a persistent reminder of photography's regulatory function, its historical role in "defining and regulating" the citizen and criminal, and its role in the making of what Barthes' calls the body's "formality."¹⁹ Like the performance protests of the disappeared, Muñoz draws upon the "evidential force" of these photographs to imbue them with a "life" beyond their archival quality, but the repertoire he stages yields very different results.

In protest, the regulated image is granted new life through the movement of bodies. While ephemeral in nature, the organization of these bodies carry with them a specific intent: to incite an enduring, collective memory of the victimized subject and the collective experience their image represents. The intentionality and orchestration of these bodies-in-protest transforms the performance of the identification photo into an aesthetic event, one which creates apertures in the normative rhythms of public life, and disrupts the sensorial and affective habits delimited by the long history of the political shaping of its landscape. Taylor notes that such performances work in the service of transmitting traumatic memory from the individual to the social body, suggesting that public repetition of certain protest genres transpires as a "symptom" of the unresolved traumas of history.²⁰ Building off of this analysis, I would venture to say that these performances function less as an unconscious "return of the repressed" and more as a deliberate *sublimation* of historical traumas, one which finds expression in the creative

¹⁹ See Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 3-64.

²⁰ Diana Taylor, "'You Are Here': The DNA of Performance," 166.

reshaping of the psychic and physical landscape of the public sphere. In the act of externalizing their melancholic attachments to the dead and missing, the protestors transform their resistance to mourning the past into a collective process of political becoming.²¹

In *Aliento*, the repertoire of embodied witnessing turns inward. Instead of responding to the movements and vibrations of bodies in the public sphere, the Other becomes animated through the pulsations of the viewer's diaphragmatic contractions—breath becomes the substance through which the image is developed and released from its latency. While the protesting body functions to extend the temporality of the image, the performative impact of embodied witnessing in *Aliento* has the inverse effect. With each inhalation, the condensation produced by the viewer's breath evaporates, causing the image to recede from visibility.²² While the body's performance of the photograph in protest works towards an intensification of its indexicality, the body's engagement with the portrait in *Aliento* encounters the moment of index as something elusive, even impossible. The memorializing quality of the photograph faces an impasse: its ability to materialize the image as an icon depends upon the outcome of the viewer's attempts at its resuscitation, but these attempts are defined by their imminent failure. The viewer cannot exhale indefinitely—the breathing mechanism must, at some point, return to its mode of unconscious reflex. The witness and the image become, quite literally,

²¹ For an insightful reading of melancholia as “a production of becoming” in the recent contemporary art works, see Susette Min, “Remains to be Seen: Reading the Works of Dean Sameshime and Khahn Vo,” in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, 229-250 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

²² For a video of this process, see “Making of Aliento, Oscar Muñoz - No Es Neutral,” *YouTube*, [n.d.], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kRdh1uK4wXw> (accessed July 28, 2012).

dependent on each other for survival. The dialectic of breath and memory escapes resolution, and the process by which the referent comes to “adhere” to its image remains incomplete.

The viewer’s experience with the image finds an analogy in Freud’s discussion of children’s play in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Observing his grandson Ernst, Freud notices his curious repetition of a game Freud terms the “fort/da.” In this game, Ernst takes a toy—a spool attached to a string—and repeatedly tosses it over the edge of his cot until it disappears, only to retrieve it immediately. He accompanies these actions with the words “fort” (gone, absent) and “da” (here, present). Since Ernst plays this game only in the absence of his mother, Freud surmises that the spool acts as a substitution for her presence. He argues that Ernst’s mastery of this game serves to alleviate the anxieties he feels in response to his mother’s absence, providing him with a feeling of control over her loss and disappearance. Ernst’s compulsion to repeat the traumatic loss of his mother allows him to reestablish psychic unity in the wake of her absence, and ultimately affirms his desire to survive in spite of it.²³

In *Aliento*, Muñoz hails his viewer into a similar repertoire, inviting them to play a game of fort/da with the image of the being lost to death. The difference here is that in this rehearsal of the traumatic moment of loss, the “player” does not emerge as victor—their ability to achieve mastery over the experience is compromised by the limitations of their bodily processes. The symbolic repossession that enables Ernst to manage his fear of separation, and come to terms with an understanding of himself as a sovereign subject apart from his mother, is forever out of reach for the viewer, as mastery over the

²³ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1961).

dynamics of the appearance and disappearance of the lost object would require a constant, unsustainable expenditure of energy. The “rules” of the game, written to allow Ernst to exercise agency over his mother’s mercurial presence, take on an air of futility in *Aliento*. The viewer’s active relationship to loss proves short-lived, as the body surrenders to its necessarily passive relationship to its respiratory instinct. If we are to read the mirror here in the Lacanian sense—as a projection of the ego which allows for some semblance of a unified sense of selfhood—it becomes clear that the latent, repressed memory of loss cannot be retrieved without some resistance and distortion on the part of the ego. In the act of retrieval, the subject not only encounters a challenge in drawing the image out of its latency, and in maintaining its visibility, it also finds its own image displaced and obscured by the breath’s condensation, and the portrait of the other it yields. What results is a process that vacillates between something akin to the death drive (as the process of “giving life” to the image of the other involves an erasure of self and a depletion of one’s own vitality) and a narcissistic retreat into self-preservation (as the subject is forced to withdraw their libidinal energy from the external object and redirect it back onto the ego). The operation of the mirror, which, in Lacanian terms moves the subject away from an understanding of itself as a physically fragmented and dependent being, and towards a perception of itself as a unified and self-governing subject, is disrupted in the wake of this attempted retrieval of the image of the other. As the lost object returns, reflexively, to its previous state of repression, the subject is reunited with its own image, but this reunion takes on a different tenor than the initial encounter. The physical demands of spectatorship in *Aliento* bring to the viewer an awareness of their embodiment, but not in a way that provides them with a sense of

mastery over it; recovering their breath, they come up against, however fleetingly, the precarious nature of their existence, and the inevitable expiration of the corporeal processes that enable their survival. Moreover, in contrast to the ontology of the photograph, the temporality of the mirror does not provide a structure for the retention of memory, or the ongoing mourning of loss. Foregrounding the body in the here and now, the mirror is, rather, a witness to the slow passage of time. With each new glance, the self is rewritten and revised. The mirror is, as such, an accomplice to forgetting.

Performative Portraiture and the Time of Emancipation

The ephemerality which characterizes the viewer's brush with memory in *Aliento* is distinct from the ephemerality which Taylor and others identify as central to the concept of performance. Quoting Peggy Phelan, Taylor writes, "Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations... Performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance."²⁴ While it is indeed the case that the objects and processes that comprise "performance" (e.g. dance, theatre, ritual, political rallies and other embodied behaviors) are ephemeral, it bears noting that this ephemerality is less defined by its "disappearance" than by its presumed ability to accrete over time into something resembling knowledge or, as Taylor puts it, an "epistemology."

Civic obedience, resistance, citizenship, gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity, for example, are rehearsed and performed daily in the public sphere. To understand these as performance suggests that performance also functions as an

²⁴ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 5.

epistemology. Embodied practice, along with and bound up with other cultural practices, offers a way of knowing.²⁵

Performance, then, is always generative, it is always involved in a process of “becoming” an archive, however unstable or slippery its objects may be. Intrinsic to the concept of performance is thus a perpetual “overcoming” of its own epistemic marginality through the productive tasks of *transmission* (of repressed or embodied historical knowledges) and *disruption* (of conventional or received knowledges). The subject of performance emerges, time and again, as the transcendental liberal subject, whose desires and activities are located squarely within what Saba Mahmood terms the “teleology of emancipation.”²⁶ Behind the ephemerality of the performative act is a cumulative firming up of the agency of the citizen body, an agency that expresses itself through the capacity to subvert, resist, and engage with the epistemes yielded by established practices of knowledge production.

As Taylor writes, “To say something is a performance amounts to an ontological affirmation, though a thoroughly localized one.”²⁷ Memory, as embodied knowledge,

²⁵ Ibid., 3

²⁶ Saba Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival,” *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (May 2001): 191-192. Mahmood notes a similar tendency in Judith Butler’s work on performativity. She argues that, while Butler’s conceptions of feminist agency and gender performativity attempt to illuminate the constrained potential of all acts of “resistance,” her definition of “agency” retains the very logic she is attempting to critique, conceiving of “agency” in terms of “the capacity to subvert social norms.” This notion of “agency,” which accords a “natural status” to the “desire for freedom and/or subversion,” Mahmood argues, re-centers the transcendental liberal subject as the normative subject of political action and desire, foreclosing from the category of “agent” those whose “desire, affect, and will have been shaped by nonliberal traditions” (184). She suggests that, in order to fully apprehend the lives and agentic capacities of such subjects, feminist theory must rethink its a priori assumptions regarding the human desire for freedom and liberation, and begin looking at such desires as “historically situated,” and enabled by specific relations of subordination.

²⁷ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 3.

bears a privileged relationship to the constitution of the subject's affirmative ontology. While, on the one hand, Taylor ascribes an analogous relationship between trauma and performance, stating that "trauma, [like] performance protest, intrudes unexpected and unwelcome in the social body,"²⁸ she also creates a schema wherein the performance of memory brings order to the psychic economy disordered by trauma, enabling the subject to exercise a degree of control over trauma's pathological returns and repetitions. In response to the psychoanalytic concept of trauma, which views trauma as effecting an eruption of pathological symptoms which emerge from the unconscious to disorder the ego unawares, Taylor offers a notion of performance as that which sutures the ruptures of trauma to bring coherence and agency to the ego. Through performance, the collective ego of the citizen body is empowered to transmit traumatic memory as knowledge, rather than remain overwhelmed by its residual excitations. This act of transmission allows for a recasting of traumatic memory into political claims and demands which in turn work to reshape the public sphere, converting "personal pain into an engine for cultural change."²⁹ This image of the subject of performance is consistent with the ontological constitution of the human in Kantian moral philosophy as a being endowed with a rational will, who realizes transcendental freedom through the "imprinting and impressing of an ideational form onto the sensible world."³⁰ While unconscious, embodied behaviors and rituals serve as the raw material of the performative act, the subject of performance, as it is presented here, is constituted by its

²⁸ Ibid., 188

²⁹ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 168.

³⁰ Pheng Cheah, *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 71

ability to harness these unconscious eruptions, and channel them into a reorganization of the surrounding world through rational action.³¹ The ontology of the subject established through this paradigm of performance thus reveals itself as the rational, self-possessed, emancipatory subject of liberal political modernity, capable of incarnating ethical ideals over and against the forces that inhibit the full realization of its humanity. The performance of memory enables an exercise of political agency that is both transcendent and ameliorative, healing the wounds of history through the epistemic productivity of the repertoire.

Barthes, in his meditations on photography, famously explores the ontology of the portrait-photograph as a “wound.” This association of the photography with trauma emerges from his linking of photography with death—as that which prematurely stages the death of the living subject, and also literalizes the role of the “spectator” as one who mediates the return of the dead.³² Exploring the photo’s essence as a “wound” allows him to contemplate this role through a series of reactions that proceed from the moment of injury, provoking questions which move him from the embodied sensations that come from the apprehension of the image towards a consideration of the knowledges those sensations generate: “I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think.”³³ Uncovering a photograph of his mother that captures her living essence in the wake of her death, Barthes finds himself unable to transform his grief for her loss into mourning. Out of this experience of the photograph as an open, incurable wound, he is able to

³¹ in this footnote, maybe talk about other things she says in archive that lead me to this analysis

³² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 9.

³³ *Ibid.*, 21.

ascertain the portrait's ontology as not merely a *representation* of the missing referent, but as an *emanation* of its very existence.

But if this emanation, and the grief it sustains, presents itself as enduring, it is only because the “chemical revelation” of the image itself assumes an enduring physical form that allows for reflection. Mobilizing portraits of the dead and missing, performance protest harnesses this extended temporality of the photo to buttress the accretive temporality of its epistemological interventions and political claims. The temporality of the portrait—as an irremediable wound which testifies to past injuries, but also generates knowledges about those injuries which can be carried into the future—makes it an appropriate medium for the genre's dual exercise of political remembrance, and articulation of future-oriented demands. Photography, manifesting an ongoing emanation of the missing referent that transcends the passage of time, fortifies the protestor's performance of a political agency that transcends the social arrangements of the present moment, engendering a vision of future justice through a rational remobilization of the evidence held in archives of the past.

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud writes, “Sublimation of instinct is an especially conspicuous feature of cultural development; it is what makes it possible for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic, or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life.”³⁴ I have been arguing that Taylor's account of performance-protest sublimates the repressed memories of historical trauma into a collective process of political becoming. Through a concept of performance that resonates strongly with the

³⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 84.

experience of the Kantian sublime, the marginal, negated subjects of post-dictatorship democracy confront and transcend their historical encounters with physical and political extinction and disappearance, reemerging as psychically sovereign, rational agents of political modernity. The ontology of the portrait-photograph provides a vehicle for the cultivation of this subjectivity, allowing the unhealed wounds of the past to remain open, while producing new understandings of history that can be directed toward the incarnation of a more just political future.

In contrast, the ephemerality of the portrait in *Aliento* circumvents the process of “fixing” which, for Barthes, establishes the photograph’s capacity to immortalize the subject, and bring its past into the present. In *Aliento*, the failure of the surface to retain the image of loss divests the portrait of its physical longevity and, consequently, the protracted temporality it requires to sustain its power to “wound” over time. Through its imperative to repeat the expenditure of breath necessary to momentarily materialize the Other, *Aliento* sets up a relationship between the spectator and the image that can best be characterized as a *rehearsal* rather than as a performance. The viewer repeatedly endures the injury, but the quality of photographic permanence that transforms the originary trauma into a visible, archivable “wound” that generates knowledge, is perpetually withheld. The repertoire of actions demanded by the work unfolds in a series of repetitions that are not accretive, but exhausting. Mastery over the process of becoming is consistently deferred, as each attempt to breath life into the portrait is met with its immediate erasure. In contrast to the event of performance, this experience does not contain the satisfaction of a forward-moving teleological time. Since action does not yield a realization of the image, the image cannot be mobilized towards the

fulfillment of a justice to come. In this rehearsal of becoming, it is not only the performance, but the archive that is fleeting, compromising the power of the subject to bring new knowledge of political violence, and the condition of victimhood, to fruition.

Melancholic Suspensions

While *Aliento* undermines the solidity of the archive, and the capacity of the portrait to outwardly immortalize the lost object, it is important to note that the image of the Other does not merely disappear; it is literally ingested by the viewer with every inhalation. In Freudian terms, this act of consumption orchestrates a relationship between the viewer and the image that takes the form of a melancholic incorporation of loss. As articulated in his essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” mourning, for Freud, describes a process in which the ego gradually withdraws its libidinal investments in a lost object, detaching itself to the point at which the mourner can come to terms with its loss, and move on to invest in new objects.³⁵ Melancholia, the pathological counterpart to this process, refers to the inability of the ego to de-cathect from the lost object, and bring grief to closure. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler notes that Freud later revises these distinctions, ascribing a generative quality to the melancholic process to argue that the “setting of the object inside the ego, as it occurs in melancholia,” may be the “sole condition under which the id can give up its objects.”³⁶ Here, the ego’s

³⁵ David L Eng and David Kazanjian, "Introduction: Mourning Remains," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, 1-28 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

³⁶ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 133.

identification with the lost object—evident in its refusal to let go, or de-cathect from its attachment—facilitates the process of closure that allows the ego to resolve its grief.

There is, rather, the incorporation of the attachment as identification, where identification becomes a magical, psychic form of preserving the object. Insofar as identification is the psychic preserve of the object and such identifications come to form the ego, the lost object continues to haunt and inhabit the ego as one of its constitutive identifications. The lost object is, in that sense, made coextensive with the ego itself. Indeed, one might conclude that melancholic identification permits the loss of the object in the external world precisely because it provides a way to *preserve* the object as part of the ego and, hence, to avert the loss as a complete loss. Here we see that letting the object go means, paradoxically, not full abandonment of the object but transferring the status of the object from external to internal. Giving up the object becomes possible only on the condition of a melancholic internalization or, what might for our purposes turn out to be even more important, a melancholic *incorporation*.

If in melancholia a loss is refused, it is not for that reason abolished. Internalization preserves loss in the psyche; more precisely, the internalization of loss is part of the mechanism of its refusal. If the object can no longer exist in the external world, it will then exist internally, and that internalization will be a way to disavow the loss, to keep it at bay, to stay or postpone the recognition and suffering of loss.³⁷

Through the process of incorporation, the melancholic subject establishes an identification with the lost object via fantasies of its consumption. In contrast to performance's outward sublimation of loss into acts of political agency, incorporation redirects the sublimation of loss inward, towards the development of the ego. The ego, as such, is revealed to be constituted through its narcissistic preservation of loved and lost objects, serving as the site where these objects are accreted or, as Butler puts it, "sedimented," to compose an "archaeological remainder... of unresolved grief."³⁸ According to Jonathan Boulter, Derrida reads incorporation as a process by which the ego is constituted as a kind of "cryptological archive" preserving the half-digested

³⁷ Ibid., 134

³⁸ Ibid., 133

remains of the lost object, and the subject is constituted as the living body through which the object's history is "ventrilocated."³⁹

In *Aliento*, the itinerant nature of the photograph renders this process of incorporation incomplete. As the image moves in and out of the viewer's body through a cycle of ingestion and expulsion, it fails to adhere to either the body's interiority or the mirror. The ego takes in the loss, but does not quite absorb it, immediately projecting it back onto a surface which can neither contain it nor testify to its existence. The internalized and externalized processes by which the ego is formed—through the incorporation of the lost object and the transcendent sublimation of loss into political agency—never come to fulfillment, leaving the viewer's subjectivity unstable, with nothing solid to anchor its development. The reliability of the archive, as well as the archival potential of the subject itself, both prove untenable, impeding the subject's ability to apprehend the experience of loss as well as perform as a witness to it.

Temporal Alterities, Epistemological Limits

Muñoz explains that his practice of unsettling the indexicality of the photograph comes from an interest in exploring the relationship between memory, subjectivity, and the archivability of history, particularly as it pertains to the temporality of the conflict in Colombia:

By reflecting on the fixing of time, the relationship to the moment, the passing of time—all key elements of photography—[I] have also been reflecting upon our own relationship to the past. How do people in Colombia create memories, construct their memory out of daily events? What is forgetting, how do

³⁹ Jonathan Boulter, *Melancholy and the Archive: Trauma, History and Memory in the Contemporary Novel* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 6-7

relationships to the past, which seem to me very particular in Colombia, function?

My own perception is that history is divided up into certain milestones produced by a society. We might say that after the French Revolution there was an important change; that the Second World War divided Western history in two. It is said that September 11th was another date that inaugurated a new century; and in Colombia there is a war, a peculiar phenomenon in relation to memory. The war began at the end of the 1940s. That is, even before I was born the war already existed. I don't know if it can be called a process, but it's a situation that has existed for fifty years, that has not been resolved and that will take much more time to resolve. It's as if we were living through an eternal present or in a past present.⁴⁰

For Muñoz, the Colombian conflict stands outside of the progressive temporality of Western historicism. In contrast to the examples he cites—the French Revolution, World War II, and September 11th—the violence in Colombia exists in a state of temporal ambiguity, lacking the historical markers that would typically indicate beginnings, endings, and turning points in a story moving towards the triumph of the modern nation-state. His work responds to this temporal alterity, investigating the day-to-day ways in which the Colombian subject comes to apprehend its own history, and position itself within the broader landscape of global events. He turns to photography, he explains, because of its association with memory, and its role in facilitating the creation of historical narratives out of images from the past: “The photograph, as we all know, becomes memory at the moment when it not only receives the light rays from the exterior, but is also capable of fixing them ... [T]he fixing of photography [is] what makes it a document that can be archived, what transforms it into the past.”⁴¹ In their encounters with the vagrant image, producing neither “archive nor past,” the viewer faces a visible testimony of the “eternal presence” Muñoz argues has come to define the

⁴⁰ Oscar Muñoz, interview by Hans-Michael Herzog, "Oscar Muñoz," 242

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 240

Colombian subject's experience of time and history. More importantly, however, it is through his staging of the production of this history, which is always contingent on the viewers' embodied relationship to the image, that Muñoz explores the question Veena Das asks in *Life and Words*, "What is the work that time does in the creation of the subject?"⁴²

Muñoz's comparison of his own work with that of artist Christian Boltanski gestures towards a response to this question.

Because of [the ongoing nature of the conflict] it's wrong to speak about a period of violence. Even the faces of the dead can never be determined. There is something very contaminated and confusing in all of that which is memory. The kind of situation, for example, in which Boltanski uses the photographs of Jewish children, is very different from what we have here, where people have no identity of particularities, where nobody remembers anyone else, where the deceased are not remembered because they do not have a face or a name. They do at least for their families but, in general, in the collective mind, there is a misty mass, confused, contaminated, obscure, that is not... resolved...⁴³

Boltanski, like Muñoz, complicates the connection between photography and historical truth. The photographs he uses to memorialize the Holocaust are often of anonymous children, who come to stand in metonymically for unnamed and unrepresented victims. Far from creating memorials that highlight the victim's identities, Boltanski's work abstracts these photographs from their real-life contexts, unyoking the image from the referent in order to address the effects of the Holocaust on a communal, rather than individual level.⁴⁴ As Marianne Hirsch explains, "Many of his images are, in fact, icons masquerading as indices or, more radically, symbols masquerading as icons and

⁴² Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent Into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 95 emphasis mine

⁴³ Oscar Muñoz, interview by Hans-Michael Herzog, "Oscar Muñoz," 242

⁴⁴ Marianne Hirsch, "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile," in *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman, 418-446 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

indices.”⁴⁵ One might argue that the works of Muñoz and Boltanski are motivated by a similar desire to address the impossibility of accessing the “truth” of historical trauma through the documentary claims of the photograph. But there are critical differences in their treatments of the image that, I believe, speak to the particularities of the respective political histories out of which their works emerge.

Hirsch, theorizing the “diasporic aesthetics” of second and third generation Holocaust survivors (whom she refers to as the “post-generation”), discusses Boltanski’s experiments with photography as a strategy of universalizing the experience of Holocaust victimhood. By withholding the “true” identity of the photographed subject, and using the portrait as a generalized “symbol” of traumas that defy representability, Boltanski, she argues, is able to “rebuild a lost world, but one that looks anonymous, requiring both a certain contextualization... and a certain investment by the viewer—his or her own memories and fears—to carry any meaning and power.”⁴⁶ She goes on to say, “The gaze that connects us to these images and installations is affiliative only in the most general sense: we recognize not the people or the world rebuilt, but the forms of memorialization and mourning, the technological shapes of Holocaust persecution and extermination, the names of a destroyed world and of the means of its destruction.”⁴⁷ Here, Hirsch attributes the power of Boltanski’s work to its unique interpellation of the viewing subject, who, faced with their inability to access an unmediated memory of the victim, must perform the work of reconstructing a history, and a life, for an image abstracted from its original context. The experience of spectatorship structured by the

⁴⁵ Ibid., 435.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 437

⁴⁷ Ibid., 438

photograph's indexical imprecision thus evokes the subject position of second and third generation survivors, who must piece together incomplete, provisional histories of the event using a combination of scattered bits of information and their imaginative faculties. The question we are left with, of course, is "what is the work that time does in the creation of *this* subject?" What are the historical conditions through which this subject—a subject equipped with the ability to "rebuild a lost world" through an anonymous portrait—can come into being, and how is it distinct from the subjective experience staged through *Aliento's* performance of witnessing?

Explaining his ongoing preoccupation with the photo-portrait, Muñoz says, "[T]he idea of the portrait... interests me because it extracts individuals from a formless universe."⁴⁸ Hirsch's reading of Boltanski's work assumes a somewhat different attitude towards the portrait, suggesting that the portrait is precisely what allows the spectator to construct the larger universe in which the individual resides. The portrait, in short, provides a means through which the viewer can give form to the universe. It is critical to note, however, that the viewing subject does not produce this form unassisted. Rather, the subject utilizes the resources at its disposal—the familiar "forms of memorialization and mourning," the already-recognized "shapes of Holocaust persecution and extermination"—to bring this world into being.⁴⁹ Insofar as the subject has access to such existing epistemological frameworks for making sense of the photograph's history, explanatory captions are unnecessary to constructing a narrative world out of the abstracted image—the image is already endowed with the infrastructure

⁴⁸ Oscar Muñoz, interview by Hans-Michael Herzog, "Oscar Muñoz," 243.

⁴⁹ Marianne Hirsch, "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile," 438.

to stand on its own. The belated temporality of the post-generations' encounter with the Holocaust furnishes its subjects with established historical frames with which to author the accompanying text, however tentatively. Amidst the ongoing revisions of the contents of this history, what remains constant is the subjective position of the post-generation, which always possesses the capacity to contextualize the remains of a universe beyond its immediate realm of experience.

Presenting the symbol in the guise of the index, Boltanski's use of children's portraits thus provides the viewer with a means of entry into the Symbolic order in the Lacanian sense. The Symbolic, according to Rosalind Krauss, refers to the stage of development in which the subject comes to understand itself, and its own history, through the full acquisition of language. As she explains, "[I]n joining himself to language, the child enters a world of conventions which he has had no role in shaping. Language presents him with an historical framework pre-existent to his own being."⁵⁰

Providing neither symbol, nor icon, nor stable index, Muñoz's use of the portrait seems to imply an absence of such an historical framework and, consequently, an incapacity on the part of the subject to know itself, and organize its own subjectivity, in relation to the archive. The portrait—self-cancelling and existing only in present tense—is unable to find an existing language or symbolic structure in which to anchor its meaning. In contrast to Boltanski's portraits, which can be installed in universe of explanatory language for understanding the Holocaust, Muñoz's photographs can be

⁵⁰ Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," *October* (The MIT Press) 3 (Spring 1977), 69-70.

viewed as suffering from a type of historical aphasia, with the instant and continual erosion of the image's content constituting its primary symptom.

Daniel Pécaut uses this term, “aphasic,” to describe the difficulty of accessing a “symbolic framework” to give meaning to the violence in Colombia.⁵¹

Everyday, the newspapers carry routine accounts of murders that have taken place in different parts of the country... The memory of the extraordinary events soon fades. None of them serves to decisively reorient experience, all of them eventually blend with one another as they accumulate. Each one leaves only a trace, like the tail of a comet, but that trace does not detail a history that can be expressed. The banal and extraordinary manifestations of the violence quickly confound with one another in an indistinct texture of experience. In an uninterrupted passage of events, all reference points are erased and obliviousness of the past determines ones relationship to the present. “Immediatism” prevails, enfolded in a time deprived of a “horizon of expectation” as well as stable points of reference rooted in the past.

Muñoz, discussing his use of the obituary photo in *Aliento*, echoes many of these sentiments. The obituary photo, he explains, allows him to address the role of the newspaper's periodicity in the mystification of violence.

[I]t's difficult to establish memories or distinct moments from the past and to relate them to the present, to identify or distinguish them. And another issue is the repetition of daily events that are similar but not identical... They're like the serial prints of Andy Warhol; those repeated automobile accidents of the same image but in a different ink color. Every event annuls the next.

We can't say: “The war changed society, but that's over now and today we're living out another stage of history.” ... I am responding to a process that has to do with my life and my environment. [I]t's my way of trying to understand this malaise.⁵²

⁵¹ He specifically uses this term in reference to the subjectivity of youth combatants, whom he argues no longer have access to ideological frameworks through which to situate their actions. These frameworks, which provided a syntax of meaning for earlier phases of the conflict, have since receded, leaving youth combatants to develop their identities through the reenactment of established routines of violence. As Pécaut explains, “The formula of the linguistic philosopher John Austin has been turned on its head. Instead of ‘to speak is to act,’ it is now ‘to act is to speak.’” I have taken liberties to abstract this use of “aphasic” somewhat from its original context because I believe it relates to the larger epistemological concerns Pécaut addresses in his analysis.

⁵² Oscar Muñoz, interview by Hans-Michael Herzog, "Oscar Muñoz," 241-242

In these quotations, the relentless immediacy of the news media's treatment of episodes of violence, and their attendant losses, becomes the exemplar for a larger problem theorized by their respective projects—the incompatibility of the temporality of the conflict with existing epistemic frames for making sense of political violence. When Muñoz claims that Boltanski's representational practices are not transferable to the Colombian context, he is not simply stating that Colombia deaths are viewed as less significant than the deaths of the Holocaust, he is drawing attention to the difficulty of situating Colombian loss within existing frames of reference for understanding the relationship between modernity and violence. Unlike the violence of the French Revolution, World War II, and 9/11, the violence in Colombia cannot be viewed as a momentary aberration from the peace-dealing mechanisms of a normative modernity. It cannot be rationalized as an engine of historical progress, nor can it be invoked as that which imparts a narrative form to world history. Its apprehension demands an epistemic syntax which has not yet been formed. In *Aliento*, reckoning with transient image of Colombian loss means reckoning with a picture of death and victimization that cannot be contained or accommodated by existing logics of political violence.

One of the most oft-cited misconceptions about *Aliento* is that the portraits it features are of victims of the war in Colombia, specifically those who have been disappeared. Muñoz, however, has admitted that, when choosing his subjects, he was “not necessarily interested in their relationship to political violence,” he was primarily concerned with their relationship to death in general.⁵³ Far from being icons of political erasure, the obituary photos he works with correlate to lives that have made it into the

⁵³ Ibid., 246.

historical record, whose existences have been institutionally recognized and publicly commemorated. These are portraits of subjects that, in their original presentation, are supplied with a narrative, a name, and an identity that, by journalistic standards, should be adequate to the one they had in life. In this abstraction of the portrait from its biographical frame, Muñoz moves the photo's signifying potential from the particular to the general, expanding the category of "victim" beyond its received definitions. Supplementing the question *¿Dónde están?* with *¿Quiénes son?*, *Aliento's* implicit political demand is not for state recognition of those whose deaths and disappearances are in suspension. Rather, it demands a consideration of the very conditions of what constitutes life, living, and recognition under neoliberal violence. While Muñoz's work may be inspired by the failure of memory in the Colombian context, its goal is not to create a scene of counter-forgetting, nor is it to keep memory alive amidst the social tendency towards its erasure. It is to theorize the psychic, epistemological, and environmental conditions of possibility for the creation of lives that can be mourned, remembered, and valued.

Juan Manuel Echavarría: Inhuman Arrangements

As I have shown, Muñoz's ephemeral portraits of loss depict Colombian death as an aphasic presence in the historical landscape of global atrocity, incapable of being accommodated by neither the verbal nor the visual languages available for interpreting its recurrence. Taking a different approach to addressing the same problematic, Juan Manuel Echavarría inscribes the phenomenon of Colombian killings upon the taxonomic and diagrammatic frames developed in modernity for apprehending life and

the living organism. His series *Corte de Florero*, for example, reworks the aesthetics of botanical illustrations to project the history of La Violencia upon a didactic genre typically associated with the peaceful side of colonial conquest, and the epistemic self-fashioning of the newly independent Colombian state.

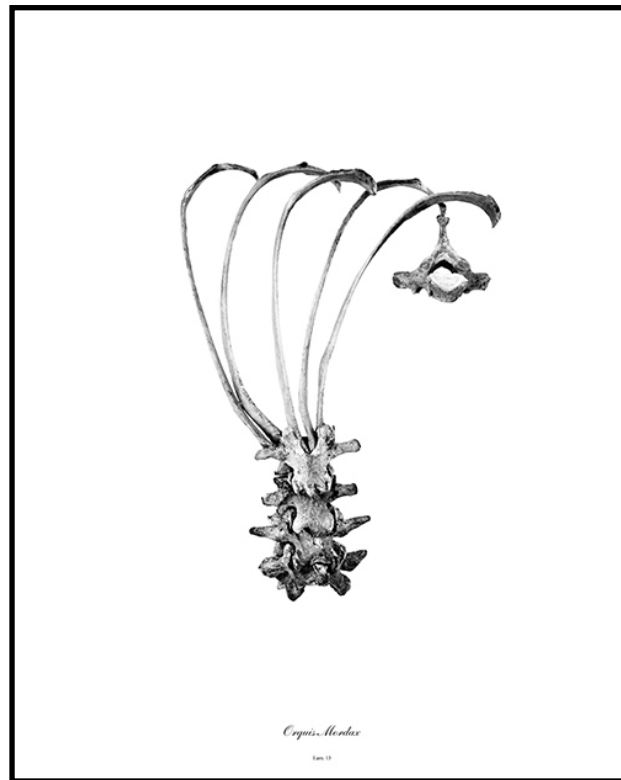


Figure 4: Corte de Florero, Orquis Mordax, Juan Manuel Echavarría, 1997

Popular narratives of the Colombian conflict view La Violencia as the mythical “origin point” of the contemporary violence. Itself an outgrowth of decades of confrontations between the Liberal and Conservative parties, La Violencia marked a turning point at which these antagonisms hit a crescendo, leaving more than two

hundred thousand⁵⁴ Colombians dead between 1948 and 1953. Sparked by the assassination of Liberal presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948, this intensification of violence took the form of a generalized terror in the Colombian countryside, with the tensions between Liberals and Conservatives commonly exploding in massacres and assassinations, the primary victims of which were peasants.

In “Dismembering and Expelling: Semantics of Political Terror in Colombia,” anthropologist Maria Victoria Uribe analyzes the ways in which these large-scale acts played out symbolically and physically on the level of the individual body.⁵⁵ In a radical resignification of the victim’s corporeality, armed *bandoleros*⁵⁶ developed a lexicon of mutilation which replaced the terms used to describe human body parts with those used to describe corresponding parts in pigs, cows, and chickens.⁵⁷ Domestic hunting and butchery techniques were transferred to the human victim, and used to manipulate and reconfigure its anatomy in death. Once killed, the victim’s corpse was dismembered, reorganized, and publicly displayed as a means of intimidating the local community into

⁵⁴ Some scholars put this number at 300,000. See Alfredo Molano, “Colombia: A Country Made Violence,” in *Cantos Cuentos Colombianos: Arte Colombiano Contemporáneo*, ed. Hans-Michael Herzog, trans. Santiago Giraldo, 339-348 (Zurich: Daros-Latinamerica).

⁵⁵ Maria Victoria Uribe, “Dismembering and Expelling: Semantics of Political Terror in Colombia,” *Public Culture* (Duke University Press) 16, no. 1 (2004), 7.

⁵⁶ The term “bandoleros” refers to armed bands of peasants, specifically those who were mobile and frequently unfamiliar with local populations.

⁵⁷ Uribe, “Dismembering and Expelling,” 88. According to Uribe, “The neck was called by the two terms used to refer to the craw and gullet (*guarguero* and *guacharaco*) in birds, especially chickens... All of the terms used for the entrails also came from the animal world. The abdomen had the same name as the stomach in quadrupeds (*el buche*) and contained the bowels, bladder, and liver—organs thought to be similar to those of a pig. All these organs were housed within a bone structure called the *cuadril*, which is the term for the homologous bone structure in quadrupeds. In general, peasants established associations between an essential organ for balance called the *cuajo* (the abomasum in ruminants), the bladder, and the testicles. Finally, the human knee was called by the same term that butchers used for bovine knees (which are much appreciated for their flavor).

relocating to other areas. Out of this culture of killing emerged taxonomies of mutilation which often collapsed these practices into the world of domesticity, assigning names to the “cuts” which evoked food preparation techniques and household objects. In one such cut—the *Corte de Florero*—the corpse’s head and limbs were dismembered and stuffed into its thorax to elicit the image of flowers in a vase. Echavarría titled his series after this practice. [figure 4]

Uribe explains that her research on the aesthetics of violence is motivated by the desire to reveal how semantic operations of dehumanization have historically served to transform human beings into killable animals and inhuman creatures. Attending to such representations, she argues, can illuminate how the production of discursive worlds can work to rationalize collective killings, creating “enemies” and “strangers” out of what she calls, citing Freud, “the narcissism of minor differences.”

When trying to understand collective killings, it is necessary to attend to the persons who are killed and the representations of them that make them Other. If these persons reduced to formless bodies are ignored, it is easy to reduce social contexts and bodies to doubt and uncertainty. Massive human annihilation dilutes alterities and deforms culture. Identities, traditions, beliefs, and a sense of belonging disappear from view, leaving only the bodies of abominable strangers. In these contexts, it doesn’t matter whether war is between true alterities or between equals, because the question of Otherness or selfness has lost most of its meaning.⁵⁸

Emphasizing the confounding nature of the current violence in Colombia—a violence which “does not follow linguistic, religious, or ethnic lines of difference”—Uribe comes close to arguing that an understanding of the role of metaphor in the production of Colombian difference can work to unravel the social fissures fabricated over the years by

⁵⁸ Uribe, “Dismembering and Expelling,” 95.

the myth-making power of language.⁵⁹ At the very least, she implies, this understanding can begin to defetishize the operations of Othering that facilitate the ongoing perpetuation of violence, and expose the everyday social complexities that get dissolved in the reduction of living communities into lifeless bodies.

Though inspired by Uribe's scholarship, Echavarría's work avoids such redemptive impulses. Evoking and experimenting with pedagogical genres that have shaped how the subject has come to "know" the world and the body in modernity, Echavarría troubles the humanizing pretensions of knowledge itself. The visual worlds he creates urge us to situate the practices of bodily mutilation Uribe discusses within more expansive structural, historical, and epistemological frames, encouraging a philosophical exploration of the relationship between political sovereignty and the work of violence that resists resolution. Michael Taussig has described the *Corte de Florero* series as a project of "humanizing flowers."⁶⁰ I see this series, somewhat differently, as a visual perversion of flowers that reveals the dehumanizing underside of modernity's world-building ventures.

⁵⁹ Throughout the article, Uribe undertakes a very detailed interpretation of the discursive production of social difference during La Violencia. Undergirding this analysis, however, is the assertion that "there were almost no social and cultural differences between opposing parties, and the political differences between them were ultimately quite trivial." The category of social "sameness" is something that remains relatively unelaborated, save for a brief discussion about how the thousands killed during La Violencia were "mostly poor Catholic peasants who went to the same schools, shared the same social spaces, recognized common national symbols, and, more importantly, belonged to the same social class."

⁶⁰ Michael Taussig, "The Language of Flowers," *Critical Inquiry* (The University of Chicago Press), Autumn 2003: 98-131.

Calcified Flourishings

Echavarría's images in the *Corte de Florero* series bring together flowers and skeletons in a fusion that defies the organizational logic of both. At first glance, the elegance of these creations is striking—petals, made from scapulas or pelvic bones, seem to grow seamlessly from the longer bones of the arms and legs. Thin, curved ribs extending upwards from dense vertebrae provide the illusion of movement, but upon closer inspection, do not suggest growth as much as bones resting on top of bones in a precarious balance, poised to fall or collapse at any moment. Mismatched joints collide uncomfortably in disconcerting friction, conspiring against motion or mobility. [figure 5] In their weathered, faded graininess, it would not be too far a stretch to compare these images to archival portraits, perhaps 19th century photo documentations of criminals and paupers used to measure and classify the morphology of human deviance. Like those subjects, the photographed bones in *Corte de Florero* are arrested, taxonomized, and diagnostic of societal ills and pathologies.⁶¹

The more immediate association that comes to mind, however, is of 18th century botanical drawings, a reference that was intentional on the part of the artist. Removed of any shadows that would situate the object in three-dimensional space, the images bring to mind the labor of drawing more than the mechanical work of the camera. The Latin name inscribed at the bottom of each portrait confirms their relationship to these illustrations, retaining the classificatory nomenclatures for the specimens' genus

⁶¹ The full *Corte de Florero* series can be viewed at http://jmechavarria.com/chapter_cortedeflorero.html

(e.g. “passiflora” “orquis,” “fungus”), while inventing new species names to reflect their morbid subject matter (“foetid,” “severa,” “tortuosa”).

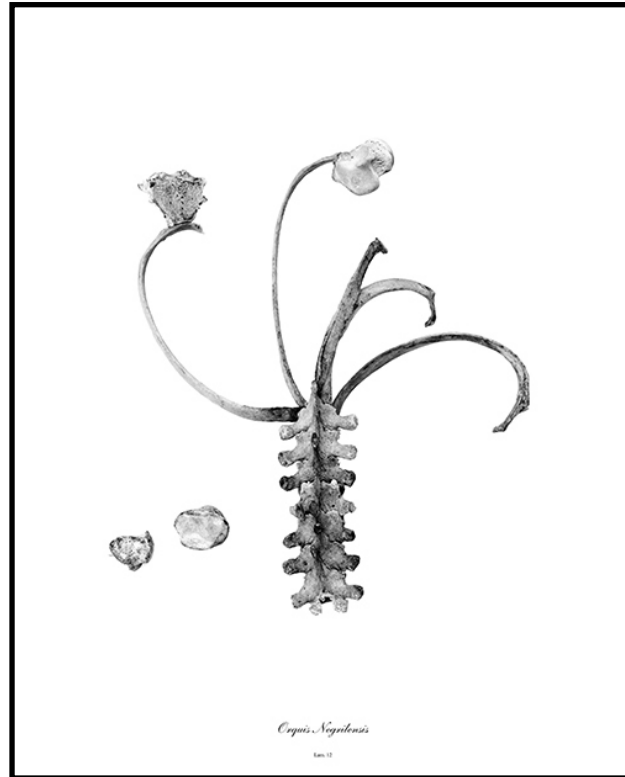


Figure 5: Corte de Florero, Orquis Negrilensis, Juan Manuel Echavarría, 1997

Focusing on the legacy of eighteenth century naturalist Carl Linné, Mary Louise Pratt describes the historical role of plant classification in the development of what she calls a European “planetary consciousness.”⁶² According to Pratt, the publication of Linné’s *Systema Naturae* (*The System of Nature*)—a text which laid out a classificatory system for categorizing all plant life on earth—prompted a shift in how European elites began to conceive of themselves, and their activities, in relation to a “world” which was hitherto unimaginable. Linné’s “global classificatory project” opened up new vistas of

⁶² See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 2008), chapter 2.

understanding for Europeans, whose capacity to imagine the globe was delimited, up to that point, by navigational maps, which delineated the general relationship of water to land masses, but had not yet begun to plot their interior contents. Through practices of nomenclature and taxonomy, the descriptive apparatuses of natural history made the global narratable, producing a sense of order out of what was perceived to be the chaos of nature. The interior exploration and mapping that accompanied this systematizing of nature not only supported the work of identifying exploitable resources, markets, and lands to colonize, it also naturalized European rule, recasting the violence of territorial conquest as a benign practice of knowledge production.

According to Echavarría, the flowers in the *Corte de Florero* series are meant to aesthetically resurrect the botanical drawings of José Celestino Mutis, a Linnean botanist who led a Spanish expedition to Colombia in the late eighteenth century. As the visual counterpart to practices of botanical nomenclature, plant illustrations gave visible expression to the ordering logics of natural history. The previously blank expanses of territory found in navigational maps were replaced with detailed diagrams of their smallest life forms, establishing an intimacy, through knowledge, between the Enlightened European subject and a previously inscrutable world of nature.

One might also see in these drawings an analogue to the emergent formulations of the political that were on the rise in Europe during this period. As Pheng Cheah points out, the new scientific paradigms of the late 17th and 18th centuries were accompanied by a Kantian-inspired shift in the idea of the state, and the constitution of the political body, which renounced the mechanistic models of earlier political philosophies in favor of organismic frameworks. Informing nationalist trends “from

Russia to India, from Spain to Latin America,” the German idealist adoption of the organism as a metaphor for social organization and political life posited the political body as a unified living being capable of rational self-organization and self-recursivity. In this view, the mechanism of nature was not just arational and in need of cultural taming, but also thought to be evidence of the “purposive causality” driving the development of all living beings.⁶³ “Freedom” in this schema, was the process through which the human subject actualized rational ethical ideals in accordance with the orders of nature, but also over and against the forces that confronted it with its own mortality.

In their contained abundance, Mutis’ botanical drawings incarnate the idealist conception of freedom as “rational purposive activity” which reshapes and transcends the sublime disorder of the larger world. [figure 6] Plants and leaves, disentangled from their habitats, bear the imprint of the botanists’ ordering, taxonomizing eye, distilling the indistinct mass of “nature” into knowable, manageable “specimens.” The white backdrop against which they lay simultaneously serves to accentuate the profuse florescence of the petals and foliage, while emphasizing the impermeable precision of their contours, abstracting the organism from a natural environment which, in its overwhelming totality, diminished the sovereignty of the human subject. Rendered in vibrant, but flat, colors, and free of shadows or errant lines, the aesthetics of these illustrations subordinate realism to didactic clarity—the chaos of nature, now restrained, is able to reflect back to the viewer a harmonious image of the self and, by extension, the

⁶³ Pheng Cheah, *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

collective, as continuous with, but also in control of, the flourishing organism's telos of becoming.



Figure 6: *Heliconia*, José Celestino Mutis, cir. 1738-1816

Invoking the drawings' clinical frame, *Corte de Florero* overwrites Mutis' topographical mapping of New World life with a topography of death that inspires a "planetary consciousness" of a different sort. If the removal of the flower from its environment betrayed the illustrator's rational imposition of order onto the natural world, Echavarría's flowers take this ordering to another level. Here, the harmonious abundance of the botanical drawing recedes from view, revealing instead flora and fauna subjected to a clear horticultural pruning, or, more aptly put, violent horticultural severing from the body that once contained them. Reconstructed and suspended in

radical isolation, the classificatory logic yielded by their presentation becomes primarily self-referential, frustrating the viewer's ability to glean a systematized world picture of their exterior.

In botanical drawings, the illustrator's careful attention to scale performs important diagrammatical work, enabling the viewer to understand the relationship of each part to the totality of the plant's anatomy. Coupled with the classificatory language of plant taxonomy, the single botanical illustration makes visible the universal logic structuring all plant life, allowing the viewer to approach each drawing with the ability to draw equivalencies between the represented specimen and the world of plant life beyond it.

In *Corte de Florero*, however, representation yields a more tenuous logic. If, in botanical drawings, the eye is drawn to the work of *reading* the relational configurations of stamens, pistils, petals, and stems, in *Corte de Florero*, it is called to the work of *weighing* these different components in comparison to one another. Attributes such as the contrasting stiffness and densities of different bones, and the capacity of one bone to bear the weight of another, indicate their comparative heft, but such assessments only make sense in the context of the individual portrait. An errant tooth in one photo may appear as large and as substantial as a coccyx or cluster of vertebral bodies in another. In nearly every image, fragments of bone fall to the side, suggesting their unassimilable excess, but also the incompleteness of the organism. At other times, these errant fragments exhibit a wholeness greater than the flower itself, resembling the decapitated heads of cattle, or even humans. [figure 7] The measuring eye errs, and proves unable to situate each element within a larger system of signification. In these plates, the labor of

classification does not produce stable meanings that allow one to “know” the organization of one species against another.

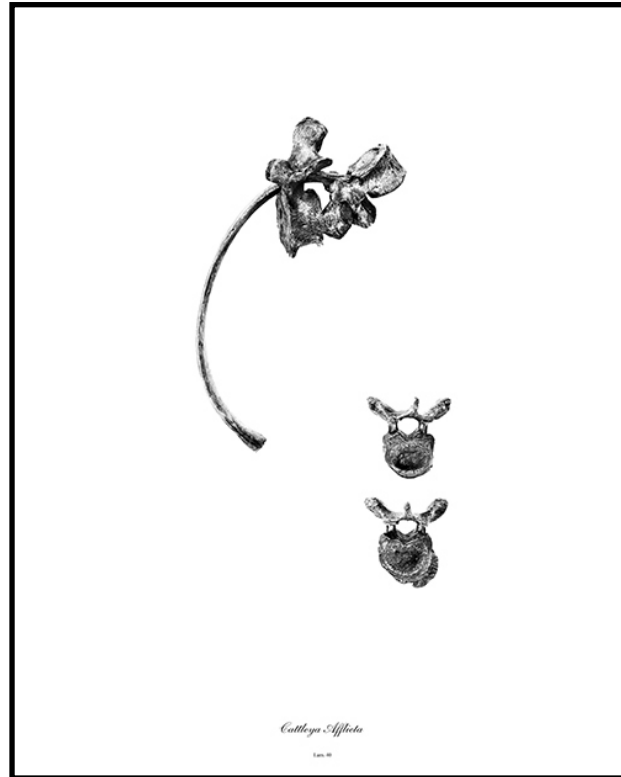


Figure 7: Corte de Florero, *Cattleya Afflicta*, Juan Manuel Echavarría, 2007

Despite their legacy as a product of Spanish colonial rule, the Colombian state has embraced Mutis’ botanical drawings as icons of its own sovereignty. Once didactic accomplices to colonial resource extraction, these drawings now signify the rich biodiversity of Colombia’s landscape, and the state’s ability, through this bounty, to sustain and reproduce itself. In this respect, the link between botanical illustrations and the “organismic ontology” of the Enlightened polis is not merely metaphoric, but literal, uniting human and plant life in a shared telos of freedom and becoming. Mutis himself was renowned for his illustrations delineating all the stages of plant growth and

reproduction on a single plate—a format that underscored the natural mechanisms through which rational human activity and its attendant achievement of “freedom” was thought to unfold—self-recursivity, self-organization, and teleological time.

One plate in the *Corte de Florero* series, entitled “Dionaea Misera,” [figure 8] directly references this style of illustration, presenting a single flower in four different stages of growth. These stages, however, do not seem to correspond to a linear telos of maturation—interspersed between two flowers in different stages of bloom are disordered fragments of bone interfering with the narrative continuity of the specimen’s flourishing. The genus of this plant—the *Dionaea*, also known as the Venus flytrap—only underscores this fragmentation and reproductive failure with its associations with consumption and castration.

Fragmentation, of course, permeates every image in this series. Bones, abstracted from their body of origin, as well as the entirety of their skeleton, are always already defined by their fragmented state of being. German idealism conceived of the modern political body as a “rationally organized totality, or living organic whole.” *Corte de Florero*, on the other hand, represents it in the form of organisms whose very substance is comprised of dead matter and broken remnants—an organism whose temporality is not the forward-moving telos of flourishing but the suspended calcification of death. Here, bones do not organize themselves to form the foundation of a living, thriving totality; they are ends in themselves, building blocks of an inert image of life. In this iteration of Enlightenment world-making, disorder is endemic to the rational act of ordering. The organismic ontology of the sovereign subject and political body is structured by the disorganized indices of death itself.

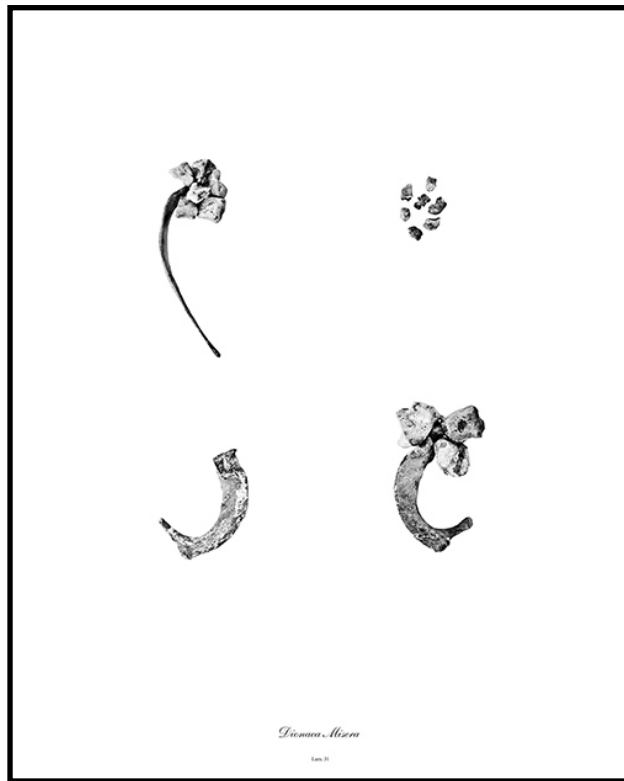


Figure 8: Corte de Florero, *Dionaea Misera*, Juan Manuel Echavarría, 1997

As he reworks the vitalist aesthetic of modern natural history, Echavarría displaces the image of sovereignty they embody, replacing it with something more akin to Mbembe’s reading of sovereignty as a practice of “upholding the work of death.”⁶⁴ Supplementing what he deems the “strongly normative reading” of politics as the exercise of reason and moral agency in the public sphere, Mbembe draws from a range of philosophical thinkers to trace the relationship of death to the exercise of sovereignty in modernity, arguing that the idea of sovereignty is structured less by the transcendent pursuit of autonomy and freedom than by the production of death as the negation of

⁶⁴ Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003), 14.

life. He illustrates this logic through an interpretation of Hegel, whom, he argues, presents a narrative of human becoming as a continual confrontation with death as one's own negativity. He also turns to the work of Bataille as an example of a theory of sovereignty that conceives of life as the violation of the prohibition on killing, and the "refusal to accept the limits that the fear of death would have the subject respect."⁶⁵ More concretely, he explores the constitutive relationship between life and death through a range of historical examples in which the exercise of sovereignty takes the form of the "generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations"—slavery, colonial occupation, and late modern warfare, to name a few. Most relevant to our understanding of the theoretical contributions of the *Corte de Florero* series, however, is his discussion of "war machines" as a contemporary expression of the "subjugation of life to the power of death."⁶⁶

Using Africa as an example, Mbembe's definition of "war machines" refers to the proliferation of armed groups—urban militias, private armies, armies of regional lords, private security forms, and state armies—that emerged during the last quarter of the twentieth century "in direct relation to the erosion of the postcolonial state's capacity to build the economic underpinnings of political authority and order."⁶⁷ As the state's ability to command and regulate access to its natural resources began to deteriorate with the monetary instability of the 1970s, these groups became implicated in the development of "highly transnational" local and regional "militia economies," which sustain themselves through the extraction and sale of valuable resources on the global

⁶⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 39.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 33.

market. The resultant form of governmentality in these contested geographies, he explains,

...consists in the management of the multitudes. The extraction and looting of natural resources by war machines goes hand in hand with brutal attempts to immobilize and spatially fix whole categories of people or, paradoxically, to unleash them, to force them to scatter over broad areas no longer contained by the boundaries of a territorial state...

The techniques of policing and discipline and the choice between obedience and simulation that characterized the colonial and postcolonial potentate are gradually being replaced by an alternative that is more tragic because more extreme. Technologies of destruction have become more tactile, more anatomical and sensorial, in a context in which the choice is between life and death. If power still depends on tight control over bodies (or on concentrating them in camps), the new technologies of destruction are less concerned with inscribing bodies within disciplinary apparatuses as inscribing them, when the time comes, within the order of the maximal economy now represented by the "massacre." In turn, the generalization of insecurity has deepened the societal distinction between those who bear weapons and those who do not... Increasingly, war is no longer waged between armies of two sovereign states. It is waged by armed groups acting behind the mask of the state against armed groups that have no state but control very distinct territories; both sides having as their main targets civilian populations that are unarmed or organized into militias.⁶⁸

Although referring a different geopolitical context, this description resonates strongly with newer formations of violence that have come to characterize the Colombian conflict over the past 30 years. In recent decades, the violence in Colombia has been fueled by an emergent political economy of war which has succeeded the "low intensity" models of the Cold War conflicts. Preceded by the growth of the narcotics trade and the establishment of influential drug mafias from the late 1970s onward, the 1990s saw the expansion of a globalized "war economy" which strengthened connections between armed groups, international arms markets and the global demand for goods and resources such as cocaine, heroin, and palm oil. As the end of the Cold War occasioned

⁶⁸ Ibid., 35.

the abatement of the ideological and political motives that had previously defined the conflict between the guerrillas, paramilitaries, and state military, these groups began to reorient themselves in relationship to a newly globalized world economy and the possibilities for profit it held, channeling their activities towards securing their power in an expanding war system.

It is out of this context that Echavarría revises the "planetary consciousness" disseminated by 18th century scientific expeditions to the New World, and engages in a "productive undoing" of its legacies. Such a "productive undoing" of the Enlightenment, Spivak maintains, is a difficult task, as it "must look carefully at the fault lines of the doing, without accusation, without excuse, with a view to use."⁶⁹ Assuming the position of the "peaceful botanist," Echavarría creates photographic "illustrations" of the natural world that re-narrate the "planetary consciousness" of the Enlightenment through a sinister aestheticization of death. In doing this, these photos rewrite the story of modernity from its colonial "underside"—from the vantage point of the repressed colonialist, neocolonialist, and imperialist violences that are constitutive of modernity itself.⁷⁰ His photographs, as such, refract modernity's icons of freedom, sovereignty, and reason through a radiographic lens, exposing, like an x-ray, the perversely-formed skeleton of the modern political body. Making visible the silenced, but formative, "fault lines" of the Enlightenment, Echavarría rehearses anew the practice of making the

⁶⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1.

⁷⁰ See Arturo Escobar, "Beyond the Third World" for a discussion of Enrique Dussel's theory of "transmodernity."

"global narratable" by providing an alternative image of modern world-making that provokes a rethinking of the founding epistemologies of democracy and commerce.

Echavarría makes this critique relevant to the contemporary moment through his choice of the multiply-resemanticized flower as the icon of this exercise of reworlding. Echavarría's flowers are at once visual citations of Enlightenment-era botanical plates, illustrations of bodily mutilations practiced during La Violencia, and references to the flower's most recent incarnation as Colombia's benign hero of free trade and one of its principle exports. Post-scripting the significance of the flower two hundred years after it represented colonial knowledge and national sovereignty, Echavarría's portraits disarticulate the current image of the flower as a fetish of progress—a commodity purer and more innocent than Colombia's less legal exports, and a peaceful "alternative" to the production of cocaine. If the bounty of nature depicted in Mutis' botanical drawings conveyed the "inexhaustibility of nature and the human spirit," Echavarría's "illustrations" of flowers reveal their ultimate exhaustion, their violent depletion, and the exploitation and instrumentalization of human life and labor which has transpired as a result of their commodification (as well as from the broader institution of free trade it represents).

The image of the self reflected back from Echavarría's imposition of ordering is not the organismic subject of freedom, autonomy, and rational ethical ideals, but, rather, a subject that inhabits a position of precarity and otherness in relation to this normative ontology of personhood—a position Escobar terms the "problem-space" defined by imperial globality (the "new global link between economic and military power") and global coloniality ("the emergent classificatory orders and forms of alterisation that are

replacing the cold war order").⁷¹ In this respect, his work shares with Muñoz's a staging of a subjective experience at odds with the "normative" reading of politics as "exercise of agency and moral reason in the public sphere," replacing it with an experience of the political in which the presence of death, disappearance, and absence is more constitutive of modernity than a deferred ideal of "emancipation."⁷²

⁷¹ Escobar, "Beyond the Third World," 225.

⁷² Both of these artists achieve this through the use of the photograph, a medium which itself straddles the physical divide between life and death, which has the power to pose the living subject into a performance of death-to-come, while also transforming the corpse into a "living image of a dead thing." Notably, the theme of ghosting does not appear anywhere in these works—in both cases the negotiation between the balance of life and death takes on more tactile and embodied forms. In *Aliento*, this negotiation is experienced as an unsteadiness of breath and body, and a cyclical capture and erasure of the photograph's physical index of life. *Corte de Florero* creates its drawings through a careful rearrangement of human bones that bear an indexical relationship to the body in both life and death. If, as Cheah's careful reading of postcolonial literatures has shown, the decolonizing nation is commonly represented as a specter of a once-revolutionary dream killed by the neocolonial state and its collusion with global capital (but which also continues to stubbornly haunt the state with its threats of resurgence), it seems worthwhile to ask how the fixation on bones and the presence of the body in the Colombian cultural productions creates an epistemology of the nation distinct from that of other postcolonial contexts. I plan to explore this in future iterations of this project.

CHAPTER THREE

Contested Transitions:

Bogotá's Central Cemetery and the Ruinscapes of Memory



Figure 1: Auras Anónimas, Beatriz González, 2009

In the late 90s, as conflict-related violence surged in Colombia, Bogotá began developing an unlikely reputation as an international model of urban renewal. This reputation was established over three mayoral administrations (Antanus Mockus 1995-1997, Enrique Peñalosa 1998-2000, and Antanus Mockus 2001-2003) which focused on reversing Bogotá's "dystopian" image as an over-populated, disordered, and dangerous "megacity" through the recuperation and development of public space. Intended to promote interaction and a shared sense of civic identity across class and cultural divides, these reforms connected previously disconnected neighborhoods through the institution of the Transmilenio Bus Rapid Transit System, an extensive *cicloruta* (bicycle route, now the longest in Latin America), and pedestrian *alamedas* (avenues), all of which were

themselves connected to newly established networks of public parks, plazas, and metropolitan libraries. Collectively, these reforms have been credited with the dramatic decline in Bogotá's murder rate, and are increasingly lauded as a kind of "blueprint" for other developing cities to follow, earning Bogotá international acclaim as a paragon of sustainable development.¹

Key to the transformative impact of Bogotá's infrastructural changes was their implicit pedagogical program, the intent of which was to create an active, self-regulating citizen body educated in the protocols of community-oriented public behavior and the proper use of public space. This program was implemented through familiar strategies such as amplified policing, criminalizing public vending and homelessness, and the installing of signage instructing residents how to care for and maintain public parks and city spaces.² It also operated through more innovative approaches that engaged residents on an interactive level, interpellating them as civic agents empowered to shape collective conduct in the public sphere. Antanus Mockus' mayoral terms produced the most famous examples of this approach. Mockus' offbeat civic education programs included hiring professional mimes to act as traffic police, who would educate pedestrians and motorists on the rules of the road through theatrical antics.³ A related project involved printing out thousands of laminated cards with "thumbs up" and "thumbs down" icons,

¹ Rachel Berney, "Pedagogical Urbanism: Creating Citizen Space in Bogotá, Colombia," *Planning Theory* (Sage Publications) 10, no. 1 (2011): 16-34.

² See Berney, "Pedagogical Urbanism," 16-34

³ Each of these mimes trained twenty amateur citizen mimes, who each trained twenty more, and so on, ultimately producing a civilian mime-force which spread throughout the city, drawing renewed awareness to long-flouted traffic laws.

which pedestrians were then invited to wield to communicate their approval or disapproval for motorist behavior.

Citing these examples, Doris Sommers views Mockus' initiatives as promoting an "aesthetic education" in democratic agency through mediums of art and performance, creating "thick political subjects" equipped with the sensibilities and creative capacities to negotiate conflicts "before they reach a brink of either despair or aggression."⁴ In the case of Bogotá, she argues, Mockus' approach to the "aesthetic education" of the masses paved the way for safer streets and increased tax revenues, showing Bogotanos and the world that "despair is unrealistic, a failure of determination and creativity."⁵ What gets lost in this celebration of cultural agency, however, is the Foucauldian question of the larger conditions of possibility for the cultivation of this newly empowered citizen-subject. How was it that urban public space came to be viewed as a particularly critical training ground for the socialization of the democratic subject over the past two decades? What can Bogotá's urban renewal practices tell us about the ideal of "democracy" they were intended to manifest? And in what ways did the restructuring of urban space work to produce its attendant citizen ideal? What affects, habits, and sensibilities were viewed as integral to the constitution of this subject? How was space used as a mechanism for foregrounding these qualities, and for staving off the "despair" which, Sommers seems to suggest, is the Bogotano's default subjective experience?

This chapter explores these questions through a discussion of recent transformations made to Bogotá's Central Cemetery. Since 2008, the cemetery has been

⁴ Doris Sommers, "Art and Accountability," *Literature and Arts of the Americas* 38, no. 2 (2005): 261-276.

⁵ *Ibid.*, page 3

the focus of an extensive exhumation process in preparation for the construction of El Centro del Bicentenario: Memoria, Paz, y Reconciliación, the first museum in Bogotá dedicated to memorializing the history of Colombia's political violence. As a project conceived out of the transitional justice mandate to enact "symbolic reparations" directed towards victims groups and the general public seeking to preserve collective memory, I examine how legal, aesthetic, and narrative forms collude in this site to regulate the normative imaginaries through which the subject of reparation and reconciliation may be conceived. Reading the architectural plans of the museum against the ruinscape produced by the disinterment of corpses, I position this project within the broader trajectory of urban renewal policies to consider the relationship between the rhetoric and practice of transitional justice in Colombia and the city as a representational project.

Through this analysis I consider how, in the course of Bogotá's recent urban renewal practices, the Colombian urban subject was harnessed as a representational medium, enabling the city to project an image of the capital as a space of non-violence, humanitarianism and, thus, readiness for international aid and foreign investment. The institutionalization of sites of redress and reconciliation, and the orchestration of public rituals of collective mourning, symbolically redefined Colombia as a nation "in recovery" from its ongoing violence, presenting urban renewal as the vehicle for "working through" the failures of Colombian modernity. As it recasts the city as traumatic space, and the urban citizen as a traumatic subject, urban renewal transforms the capital's landscape into a theater for the processes of memory retrieval, moral redemption, and democratic reconstruction that comprise the normative curative trajectory of transitional

justice frameworks. In turn, this collective overcoming of “despair,” I argue, constitutes an aesthetic education in new performances of citizenship demanded by Colombia’s shifting position within post-Cold War economic and geopolitical rearrangements.

Humanizing Bogotá: The City as a Symbolic Practice

The PBS special *Bogotá: Building a Sustainable City* invokes this language of despair to introduce the viewer to the texture of everyday life in Colombia’s capital. A woman, sifting through trash on an unpaved road overlooking the city, provides the image against which actor Brad Pitt, the narrator of the program, speaks his first words: “Poverty and despair, like all things, are interconnected, especially in cities in developing nations. But could poverty be connected to hope, by way of design?”⁶ In these opening moments, Bogotá’s “despair” is given a face and identity belonging to the internal migrant, whose constant arrival, we learn, is responsible for the explosion of the city’s population from 100,000 people to over 7 million in the past century alone. Occupying the unincorporated fringes of the city, arriving in search of work or to escape the violence of the conflict, these migrant masses, and their ever-expanding settlements, have forced the city to develop in an “illegal way” over the years.⁷ Bogotá’s despair

⁶ Fetting, Tad, director. 2007. *Bogotá: Building a Sustainable City*. PBS, Series: Design e2, Season 2, Episode 3: Bogota’s transformation, 17 October. Video running time 25:17. <http://www.hulu.com/watch/67737/design-e2-bogotá-building-a-sustainable-city> (accessed 13 December 2012).

⁷ The “illegality” of Bogotá’s peripheral settlements has been questioned extensively in literature on global urbanization. In *Planet of Slums*, Mike Davis points out that Bogotá’s rapid growth has taken place largely through a process of “pirate urbanization” in which families purchase lots legally from entrepreneurs who “acquire tracts of undeveloped land and subdivide them without conforming to zoning laws, subdivision regulations, or service provision standards.” This type of development, he argues, could more accurately be considered “privatized squatting,” as it is

arises from this condition of “illegality” which, it seems, is the municipal government’s way of describing the incapacity of its modernizing aspirations to keep pace with this unceasing influx of bodies. The migrant’s way of life, sustained through means other than public infrastructure, serves as a constant reminder of the belatedness of the city’s modernity.

According to the program, it was this migrant population, and the vast communities living in “extreme poverty, extreme misery,” that the Peñalosa administration targeted in its efforts to “design” Bogotá into hope. Rejecting proposals to organize city traffic through the construction of seven elevated highways, Peñalosa decided instead to implement laws restricting car use and to devote resources to projects which focused on improving the quality of pedestrian life through public transportation, bicycle routes, walking paths, and green spaces. The impetus behind this decision was purportedly ethical. Instead of prioritizing the convenience of the small percentage of car-owners in the city, Peñalosa chose to invest resources in extending public infrastructure to poor communities and “informal” settlements—for to do otherwise would have been “immoral.” But behind this benevolent “opening up” of the city to Bogotá’s poor, one senses a desire to manage these multitudes, and to establish new forms of governmentality through the reorganization of urban space. Cruising through what was once the “most dangerous” neighborhood in Bogotá, Peñalosa extols the new sense of community enabled by the recently-built alameda and parks, but also credits these transformations with helping to bolster the city government’s legitimacy, which

most often the subdivision, rather than the acquisition and settlement of the land by migrants, that is illegal. See Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York: Verso, 2006).

inspired residents to “obey the law more,” “denounce more those who break the law,” and in turn, granted the city “more authority to be strict in law enforcement.” By regulating leisure time and public behavior, Peñalosa’s reforms sought to develop the kind of self-disciplining citizenry necessary for the transformation of Bogotá from of city of slums into a world-class metropolis—a safe, domesticated city amenable to tourism and foreign investment.

In other cases this disciplining was more overt. In its zeal to depict Peñalosa as a champion for the urban poor on the city’s fringes, the PBS program neglects to mention his policies aimed at violently effacing signs of poverty closer to the city’s center. Relying on familiar tropes of filth, contagion, and chaos, mayoral administrations throughout the 90s “recuperated” public space in Bogotá through massive campaigns to relocate and forcibly evict informal street vendors, a goal which they achieved through direct police repression and the enforcement of licensing requirements.⁸ They reconciled these policies with the constitutional right of the poor to use public space for income-generating activities by underscoring the “illegality” of their informal economic participation, and making their legalization contingent on “voluntary” participation in educational programs aimed at standardizing and regulating their entrepreneurial behaviors.⁹ This rhetoric of illegality and chaos was also invoked as a rationale behind Peñalosa’s efforts to “reclaim” the dangerous El Cartucho neighborhood “for the

⁸ Stacey Hunt, "Citizenship's place: the state's creation of public space and street vendors' culture of informality in Bogota, Colombia," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* (Pion) 27 (2009): 331-351.

⁹ Ibid.

public”—a goal which was achieved by razing the entire community, displacing tens of thousands of residents without compensation, and installing a public park in its place.¹⁰

In Bogotá, the contradictions between the seeming democratization of city space and the repressive erasure of poverty comprise the “metropolitan form”¹¹ assumed by neoliberal reform and its enabling mechanism, the 1991 Constitution. The objective of the 1991 constitution, in the words of former President César Gaviria, was to “revitalize the legitimacy of [Colombia’s] institutions, to modernize and strengthen them” and to “construct a new, comprehensive democracy, extending citizen participation to new scenes in all aspects of national life.”¹² To this end, the new constitution formalized existing neoliberal policies; facilitated citizen participation in legislative, judicial, electoral, and fiscal initiatives; and consolidated earlier reforms that opened up local offices to democratic election. These reforms not only decentralized the state’s administrative activities, but also its development, shifting the design and implementation of development programs to local authorities. In Colombia, as in other parts of Latin America, public space came to be viewed as central to the exercise of participatory politics and democratic citizenship, and this was expressed in numerous laws, constitutional articles, and government programs which promoted the “protection and regulation” of public space for democratic use.¹³ On the face of it, Bogotá’s attention to

¹⁰ Karen Till, "Wounded Cities: Memory-work and a Place-Based Ethics of Care," *Political Geography* 31 (2012), 4.

¹¹ Neferti X.M. Tadiar, *Things Fall Away: Philippine Historical Experience and the Makings of Globalization* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 217.

¹² Hunt, "Citizenship's place," 332-333

¹³ Ibid, 333-334. Providing examples, Hunt explains, “In the capital city of Bogota”, where both the image and practice of the state are concentrated, this led to the creation of a spate of new agencies, policies, and institutions meant to ensure the provision of public space necessary for democracy. The city adopted the Territorial Ordering Plan [Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial

developing the city through public works may seem at odds with the privatizing thrust of neoliberal reform. But it is precisely through the creation of the spectacle of the harmonious-yet-disciplined public that Bogotá casts off Colombia's image as a lawless, repressive, and "weak" state, and announces its sovereign legitimacy on the world stage of neoliberalism.

For this argument, I find it instructive to turn to Neferti Tadiar's discussions of the "representational" and "mediatic" functions of aesthetic forms. Citing Timothy Mitchell's definition of representation as a "[form] of social practice that set[s] up in the social architecture and lived experience of the world... a distinctive imagination of the real," Tadiar considers the ways in which the "symbolic practices" of capitalist modernity have created the effect of an "original, material reality" that has become the "object of replication and reproduction" in developing nations such as the Philippines.¹⁴ In the case of Manila, such representations of modernity prescribed the horizons of possibility for the Marcos state's developmentalist projects, including its restructuring of urban capital. But, as Tadiar points out, Manila itself also became a representational project,

(POT) in 2000 and the Master Plan of Public Space [Plan Maestro de Espacio Público (PMEP)] in 2005. These policies sought to increase the amount and quality of public space for democratic-neoliberal citizens and laid out the guidelines for the "orderly, regulated, and democratic" use of public space. A wealth of new agencies were created in order to assist in the implementation of these plans. The Workshop on Public Space (Taller del Espacio Público) was established in 1990 to produce a blueprint for the recovery and maintenance of public space. The Public Space Defender's Office (Defensoría del Espacio Público) was created in 1999 and staffed with 84 employees who were to protect and regulate existing public spaces. The Police Brigade for Urban Space was created within the municipal police force and assigned 87 permanent officers charged with enforcing the proper use of public space. Two telephone lines were established to receive citizens' complaints regarding invasions of public space. An 'inventory' of recovered public space was compiled; it currently spans nearly 50 pages and requires constant updating as sites are reinvaded and newly recovered. In addition, the Popular Sales Fund (Fondo de Ventas Populares), created in 1972 in order to administer informal vendors, opened Vendor House (Casa Vendedor) in 2003 to oversee the relocation of street vendors to 'analogous sites.'"

¹⁴ Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*, 153.

“geared not simply toward the expansion of global capital, but also toward the transformation of the state into the central means of the system of extractive accumulation.”¹⁵ In the post-Marcos era, this representational project was embodied in the construction of highway overpasses, which, Tadiar argues, functioned as a “mode of symbolic and material production that image[d] and support[ed] the deregulated, decentralized, and flexible modes of postindustrial production.” The flyover, as a technology of deterritorialization and mobility, operated symbolically and materially to signal Manila’s departure from the “rigid territorial control... deployed by the dictatorship to maintain its monopolistic regime of accumulation,” registering its compatibility with the infrastructural mobility necessary for the workings of global capital.

In addition to its symbolic role, the new “metropolitan form” engendered by Manila’s flyover network also functioned as a *medium* through which the humanity of the transnational subject was produced over and against the human surplus embodied in the city’s territorialized masses. As a mediatic technology, the highway overpass facilitated a new means of aesthetically experiencing Manila, shaping the subjective capacities of aspiring transnationals to imagine their own transcendence and removal from the inhuman excesses of Third World modernization. At the same time, Tadiar argues, these mediums also provided the enabling conditions for subjective experiences exceeding the normative social relations they were intended to foster and regulate, becoming

¹⁵ Ibid., 154.

“important sites of life-enabling, self-consolidating, and self-valorizing experience for the very social strata they were meant to bypass.”¹⁶

Working off of Tadiar’s definition of representation as a “symbolic practice” through which imaginaries of the real are lived and produced in capitalist modernity, I am interested in how Bogotá’s urban renewal functions representationally, not only as a construction of its own national image, but also as an “object of replication and reproduction” for other developing cities in the global south. As of 2008, 26 cities have built public transit systems inspired by Bogotá’s TransMilenio; several cities have initiated projects modeled after Bogotá’s car-free days and its *cicloruta*, *ciclovía*, and *alameda* systems; and over 300 studies have examined Bogotá’s development successes.¹⁷ Over the past decade, the city has won numerous international awards recognizing its transformation, including major awards from the United Nations Development Program, the Gates Foundation, and UNESCO, which awarded Bogotá its “City of Peace” prize in 2004.¹⁸ Peñalosa himself has been widely recognized for his role in making Bogotá a “sustainable city,” and was invited to give the Plenary Lecture at the World Urban Forum 2006.¹⁹ How did the capital city of a country regularly referred to as having “the worst human rights record in the western hemisphere” become a global exemplar of peace and sustainable development? Instead of attributing this achievement to the virtues of decentralization, we might ask, following Tadiar and

¹⁶ Ibid., 218.

¹⁷ Berney, “Pedagogical Urbanism,” 28.

¹⁸ Luis Eslava, “Decentralization of Development and Nation-Building Today: Reconstructing Colombia from the Margins of Bogotá,” *The Law and Development Review* (The Berkeley Electronic Press) 2, no. 1 (2009): 283-366.

¹⁹ Karen Till, ““Greening” the City? Artistic Re-Visions of Sustainability in Bogotá,” *E-misférica* 7.1 *Unsettling Visuality*, Summer 2010, <http://hemi.nyu.edu/hemi/en/e-misferica-71/till> (accessed August 12, 2012).

Mitchell, how the normative ideals and images embodied in Bogotá's representational practices reflect the ways in which the universal project of modernity is lived and imagined today. If Bogotá serves as a paradigm for urban development in a globalized world, how does it function, as a medium, to consolidate the kinds of affects, subjectivities, and politics that are thought to "make globalization possible?"²⁰

Manila, according to Tadiar, symbolically and materially indicates its willingness to participate in globalization through a centering of infrastructures facilitating the operations of global capitalism—infrastructures which, she argues, underscore the stratifications between the city's mobile transnational capitalist class, and its surplused human lives. I would argue that Bogotá, in contrast, proclaims this commitment through representational practices that center the human, and emphasize the centrality of the human in the production of a purportedly egalitarian public sphere. Rather than align itself with migratory flows of capital and the production of elite transnational subjects, Bogotá identifies itself with the "softer side" of globalization embodied in the current language of development—particularly the idioms of "environmental sustainability, good local governance practices, the promotion of human rights and the rule of law."²¹ Invoking rhetoric that highlights its expansion of basic infrastructural services to unincorporated communities, and its construction of public spaces and modes of transport intended to equalize, rather than further stratify, social relations, Bogotá presents itself as a humanizing sanctuary for those escaping rural poverty and the violence of conflict, as well as a democratizing medium uniting all subjects in a

²⁰ Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*, 219.

²¹ Eslava, "Decentralization of Development and Nation-Building Today," 291.

consensual public sphere. These infrastructural developments, along with the expanded production of public schools, libraries, and archives, thus comprise a universalizing baseline of institutions and services through which a previously atomized, dehumanized citizenry can presumably be transformed into a collective body of rational human agents, possessing the resources and sensibilities necessary for participation in an evolving democratic order. Moreover, in their care to depict humanization as a process *encoded into* the very structures of the revitalized capital, city officials present the norms these structures produce, and the ideal public sphere they are thought to furnish, as not merely *effects of* a particular organization of public space, but rather *intrinsic to* it and, as such, enduring and self-recursive.

This logic permeates the entire narrative of the PBS program on Bogotá, but is most evident at one moment in particular. Discussing the attempts of small business owners to impeach Peñalosa for his policies restricting car use in the city, the documentary turns to an interview with a clothing vendor who complains that such policies have hurt his profits, as cyclists are far less likely than car-owners to stop and purchase suits from his store. In response, Mauricio Rodríguez, editor-in-chief of the Colombian finance magazine *Portafolio*, dismisses this shopkeeper as “pro-business as the most extreme capitalists,” and as an example of business owner who must “make sacrifices,” “respect the rules,” and recognize that “the public interest comes before their private interests.”²² What interests me in this questionable conflation of the small business owner with the “most extreme capitalist” is how the shopkeeper figures as an embodiment of capitalism’s most injurious logics, and a threat to a human-centered way

²² Fettig, *Bogotá: Building a Sustainable City*.

of life enabled by the city's policies and practices. Here, the city appears as the guardian of human dignity in the Kantian sense, as that which "exists outside of equivalence, exchange, and market price."²³ Bogota's urban renewal is thus represented as a rational confluence of law and design that not only affirms the pure dignity of the urban subject, but also functions as a self-modulating system of checks and balances ensuring that the power of the market does not impinge upon the freedom of the average citizen to realize their own humanity and agency through activity in the public sphere.

In short, if the human-centered city is presented as a medium for the self-regulation of the urban subject, human rights is figured as a medium for the self-regulation of the social and political body. In the case of Bogotá, this promise of human and political redemption plays out on both the local and national scale. As Pheng Cheah explains, under neoliberalism human rights and globalization are conjoined in a regulative relationship, with human rights seen as providing an instrument for the regulation and transcendence of the exploitative social relations produced by globalization.²⁴ Through its stated commitment to human rights, Bogotá represents itself as "self-purifying" municipality that secures the dignity of its residents, and transcends the "negative" expressions of globalization that have stirred the violence of the conflict. In what follows, I explore these speculations through a close reading of urban renewal practices and debates as they have evolved in one site in particular—Bogota's Central Cemetery.

²³ Pheng Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 161.

²⁴ Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions*.

The Central Cemetery's Contested Remains

Bogotá's Central Cemetery, like much of the city, is under construction. Located along Avenida 26, a major thoroughfare connecting El Dorado Airport to the city's center, the cemetery acts as a host to the capital, greeting visitors en route to the historic landmarks, museums, and downtown hotels that serve as Bogotá's main attractions. To those viewing it in passing, the cemetery would appear to be in a state of disturbance, perhaps unrecognizable as a resting place for the remains of the dead. Like the Transmilenio construction project down the road, much of the cemetery is encircled by a perimeter of green tarp, revealing little more than the towering tops of the diggers and cranes put to work in the site's current transformation. A closer look exposes a dual process of evacuation and construction, an excavation of corpses occurring in concert with the erection of new structures where bodies once laid. If the urban cemetery, as Foucault argues, functions as a heterotopic otherworld—a dedicated space of reverence and contemplation amidst the secularized space of the modern city—the chaotic activity of machinery and laborers would seem to suggest that a process of disenchantment is underway, and with it, the creation of new temporalities, new meanings, and new ritual enactments.²⁵

Not all corpses have been subject to exhumation, nor have all areas of the cemetery been targeted for reconstruction in such depth and severity. Historically, the Central Cemetery has been divided into three lots, each separated by a major road. Lot A, which holds the tombs of politicians and historical figures at its center, and vaults of

²⁵ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," in *Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff, 237-244 (New York: Routledge, 1998).

the middle and working classes along its peripheries, has been in the midst of what can best be described as a gentle refurbishment. Minor landscaping improvements are in progress, new bricks have been laid for the walkways, and repairs have been made to the tomb structures themselves, but these upgrades have been executed gingerly, with minimal disruption to the dead or their visitors. [figures 2 and 3] Lots B and C, on the other hand, have been subjected to significant clearances, relocations, and conversions since the early 90s. These sections, which traditionally have served as burial grounds for the city's poor and anonymous dead, are in the midst of a complete overhaul, the ultimate aim of which is the total disinterment of hundreds of years worth of corpses, and repurposing of these areas from their original function as cemeteries into new types of city spaces.



Figure 2: Lot A, Cementerio Central, 2011



Figure 3: Lot A, Cementerio Central, 2011

Lot C, directly northwest of the current construction, weathered its own conversion in the late 1990s under the Peñalosa administration, and no longer operates as cemetery, but rather, a park, bearing few traces of its former identity. Built with the intention of accommodating, and encouraging, anticipated population growth near the city's center, the stated objective of the project was to “offer residents and tourists another option for relaxation and recreation.”²⁶ To this end, the remains of about 1,500 bodies were transferred to a cemetery outside of the city,²⁷ existing vaults were demolished, and a “peaceful” green space was erected over a site formerly occupied by mass graves. This park, named El Parque de Renacimiento, or “Renaissance Park” (in reference to both its history as a cemetery, and as its role in the current urban renewal

²⁶ Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá D.C., *Parque Renacimiento*, 10 11, 2007, http://www.bogota.gov.co/portel/libreria/php/x_frame_detalle.php?id=22239 (accessed August 20, 2012).

²⁷ Margarita Martínez, "Bogota's Face-Lift Disturbs The Dead," *Associated Press News Archive*, July 1, 2000, <http://www.elspectador.com/impreso/bogota/articuloimpreso-al-parque-renacimiento-le-faltan-almas> (accessed August 2012). Based on the date of the article, I am inferring that these remains were transferred from Lot C, although the article itself does not specify this.

along Avenida 26), is underutilized, often empty, and has been widely criticized as sterile and unwelcoming, despite the city's attempts to promote it as a hub of artistic and cultural programming.²⁸ [figure 4]



Figure 4: El Parque de Renacimiento, 2011

The fate of Lot B has faced a more vexed and contested trajectory. Since 2008, this area has been the focus of an invasive exhumation process in preparation for the construction of El Centro del Bicentenario, the first museum in Bogotá dedicated to memorializing the history of Colombia's political violence. Significantly, the city government has been careful to keep the publicity of this project at a remove from the exuberant rhetoric of urban renewal surrounding the construction of the park, opting instead to couch the exhumation in the language of "respect for the dead" and "the

²⁸ Paolo Vignolo, "The Contested Cemetery: Political Cultures and Cultural Policies in Bogotá Centre" (paper presented at the annual meeting for the Research Committee 21 (RC21) on Sociology of Urban and Regional Development, International Sociological Association, Amsterdam, July 7-9, 2011), 10. See also Pedro Escudriñez, "Al Parque Renacimiento le faltan almas," *El Espectador.com*, July 11, 2008, <http://www.elespectador.com/impreso/bogota/articuloimpreso-al-parque-renacimiento-le-faltan-almas> (accessed August 2012).

defense of historical memory.”²⁹ Whereas the disinterment and relocation of the remains from Lot C occurred with little fanfare or justification, the removal of the corpses from Lot B has been laden with extensive compensatory discursive activity rationalizing the action, and assimilating it into the recuperative project of the museum itself. In contrast to the swift and disinterested exhumation that occurred in Lot C, the excavation process in Lot B has taken place over the course of several years, employing a team of 20 archaeologists to expertly examine the remains in order to collect historical information revealing “how Bogotanos lived over the past two centuries.”³⁰ This project, which Bogotá now boasts as the “largest archeological excavation in Latin America,” also had an important political dimension more directly tied into the objectives of the museum—to recover the hundreds of unidentified victims of the Bogotazo rumored to be buried in the Central Cemetery’s mass graves and, through a study of their corpses, discover some of the “truth” behind the acts of state violence that occurred on that day.³¹

The current project bears little resemblance to the original plans for the lot’s conversion proposed over 10 years ago. Hoping to transform this landscape of mourning into yet another landscape of recreation, the Peñalosa administration rezoned Lot B into a park/leisure land use space in the late 1990s, with the intention of building an in-line skating track and soccer field in its place. By 2002, the city had removed nearly all of the remains that were housed in the six vault structures (technically called

²⁹ Jaime Caicedo, et al., *Proyecto de Acuerdo No. 370 de 2008: "Por el cual dictan normas para la recuperación y defensa de la memoria histórica de Bogotá"*, June 10, 2008, <http://www.alcaldiabogota.gov.co/sisjur/normas/Norma1.jsp?i=31498> (accessed August 15, 2012).

³⁰ Viviana Londoño Calle, "El Mensaje de Los Muertos," *El Espectador.com*, July 7, 2011, <http://www.elespectador.com/impreso/bogota/articulo-282787-el-mensaje-de-los-muertos> (accessed August 2012).

³¹ Jaime Caicedo, et al., *Proyecto de Acuerdo No. 370 de 2008*.

“columbaria”), holding over 2200 collective crypts each. As the city was preparing for their demolition, public criticism of the plan began to build, sparking heated debate between city administrators and artists, academics, and patrimony professionals regarding the fate of the site, and its structures.³² Disturbed by what she considered to be an erasure of a critical facet of Bogotá’s history and collective memory, artist Doris Salcedo submitted a proposal to city officials in 2003 to halt the demolition, and preserve the cemetery and its vaults for site-specific projects by local artists. The proposal was successful, in part because Salcedo effectively pointed out that the East/West orientation of the soccer field would mean that the sun would always be in the players’ eyes.³³ Her intervention was the impetus for a seminar held by the municipal government later that year entitled “Art, Memory, and the City” at which future options for the lot were debated, and where Salcedo publicly presented her proposal.³⁴

An enthusiastic supporter of the project, Mayor Antanus Mockus placed the columbaria under temporary protection under national heritage legislation in 2003, and even used them for site-specific interventions of his own, promoting his policies to

³² Vignolo, "The Contested Cemetery," As Vignolo explains, citing an article by Dominique Rodríguez (2009), “city officials posited that the site should be looked at in terms of progress, and shared the view of renowned architect Rogelio Salmona that the vaults should be demolished in view of their weakness and low architectural value, leaving only the roofs inside the park. Artists and academics, on the other hand, argued that the columbarios were an important part of Bogotá’s history and claimed that reinforcing the structures was all that was needed to keep them standing.”

³³ Museo Casa de la Memória, "Charla ‘Memorias Anónimas’ con la artista Beatriz González," *livestream.com*, November 22, 2011, http://www.livestream.com/museocasadelamemoria/video?clipId=pla_4be08a93-b3b5-43f2-9690-5096deaef0a5 (accessed August 28, 2012). See also Karen Till, "Urban Remnants: Place, Memory, and Artistic Practice in Berlin and Bogotá," *Encounters* (Dokkyo University) 1 (2010): 75-87.

³⁴ Jaime Cerón, "Beatriz González: Anonymous Auras," *ArtNexus*, March-May 2010. Significant participants in this seminar included artist Beatriz González, and curator Carlos Basualdo.

lower Bogotá's homicide rate³⁵ and memorializing the victims of a FARC attack which took place at a city night club earlier that year.³⁶ Once Mockus' term was over, however, the initiative was abandoned and the columbaria were once again vulnerable to demolition. After two of the six structures were unexpectedly razed in 2006, Doris Salcedo and artist Beatriz González returned to the city government with a more specific plan to preserve the remaining columbaria, consisting of a proposal to install a public art project entitled *Auras Anónimas* (*Anonymous Auras*). This proposal was accepted and city officials commissioned González to execute the work, which was inaugurated in August 2009, and has been in effect ever since.

***Auras Anónimas*' Counter-Aesthetics of Urban Renewal**

The remaining columbaria, which are now being used for *Aura Anónimas*, are located at the south-east sector of Lot B. Between 1800 and 1970, this lot served as the primary burial site for Bogotá's underclasses, interring over 2000 bodies below ground, in unmarked plots, and thousands more in the crypt structures. Since 1970, the lot has

³⁵ See Vignolo, "The Contested Cemetery" and Museo Casa de la Memoria charla "Memorias Anónimas." Mockus' installation publicizing his anti-homicide policy reprised the aesthetics of a 1999 memorial by a group of artists including Salcedo, in which 5,000 roses were placed on a 150 meter stretch of wall, to honor Jaime Garzón, a comedian and political satirist who was murdered that year. (It has been alleged that Colombian military officials ordered the assassination.) For his installation, Mockus affixed roses to the facades of the columbarios, and painted the words "La Vida es Sagrada" ("Life is Sacred") on each of the structures. These words, while faded, remain visible.

³⁶ This attack occurred on February 7th, 2012, killing 36 people and wounding over 200. The FARC has denied responsibility for planting the bomb that caused the deaths, while the Colombian government claims to have evidence of the group's culpability from a computer belonging to a FARC member who allegedly claimed responsibility for the attack.

been largely neglected by the city, functioning, according to one newspaper article as more of a “rubbish dump” than as a place to pay respects to the dead.³⁷

By her own account, González was met with a scene of utter disarray when she first began her work on the vaults. The columbaria were crumbling, the grass was overgrown, and the site was occupied by swarms of animals—cats, snakes, pigeons—who had made homes for themselves in the recesses of the attics. Most disturbingly, the evacuation of the vaults had left open the spaces where remains were once held, confronting passersby with an unsettling reminder of the thousands of corpses that had cycled in and out of the structures over the decades. The main tasks for González became to return these itinerant souls to their proper resting places, seal the tombs, and restore a sense of peace to the community.³⁸

Through a painstaking process, González counted and measured the 8,957 open receptacles of the four remaining columbaria, and proceeded to create coverings for them from a polystyrene material resembling the granite used for tombstones.³⁹ On each of these each of these coverings, González screenprinted an image, drawn from eight different prototypes, using UV-resistant ink, and mounted them one-by-one over the exposed cavities of the vaults. [figure 1]

³⁷ Lina Sánchez Alvarado, *Exhumación de cuerpos revela cómo eran los bogotanos de hace 2 siglos*, July 7, 2011, http://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/bogota/ARTICULO-WEB-NEW_NOTA_INTERIOR-9837746.html (accessed August 20, 2012).

³⁸ Museo Casa de la Memoria, "Charla 'Memorias Anónimas' con La Artista Beatriz González."

³⁹ Beatriz González Aranda, "Cargueros guardianes de la memoria," *El Espectador*, August 29, 2009. <http://www.elespectador.com/impreso/articuloimpreso158563-cargueros-guardianes-de-memoria?q=impreso/articuloimpreso158563-cargueros-guardianes-de-memoria>

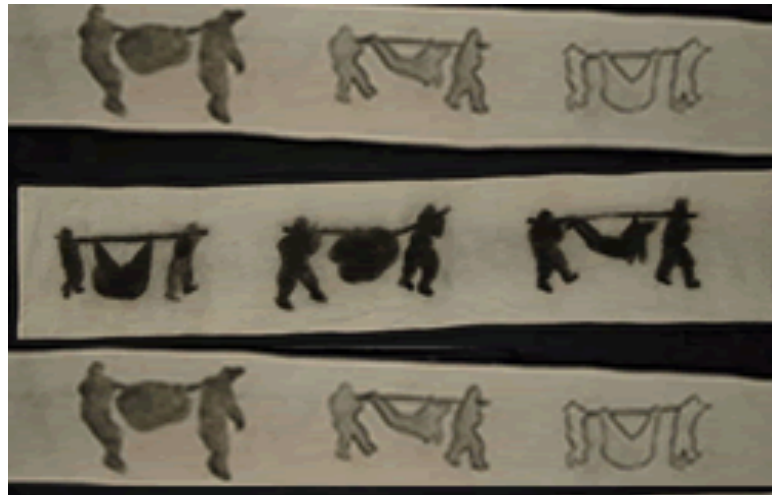


Figure 5: *Vistahermosa*, Beatriz González, 2006

The images themselves were derived from a series of paintings González completed in 2006 entitled *Vistahermosa*, named after a town in the department of Meta where guerrillas massacred workers employed by the government to manually eradicate coca plants. Associating this tragedy with everyday media images of violence, González visualized this event using newspaper photographs she found of volunteers emptying out a mass grave in the wake of a massacre near Medellín. Underscoring the contrast between the beauty of the town's name, *Vistahermosa*, and the darkness of the transgressions committed there, González abstracted the subjects of these photographs into backlit silhouettes revealing the contours of two people, working together to transport corpses using a stretcher and a hammock. She repeated these images on paper, marble, and long strips of cloth, creating the effect of an incessant procession of partners carrying the heavy burden of death. As the eye follows the sequence from left to right, these images increasingly fade until they are reduced to a precarious outline, only to return to their previous solidity, beginning the cycle anew [figure 5]. As Humberto Junca Casas points out, this repetition lends to the work a cinematic, narrative quality evoking

the seriality of print media, while working against its erasures.⁴⁰ Like the visual equivalent of a skipping record, the image recurs, impelling the viewer to ruminate upon an image of terror that, under normal circumstances, would recede into the unremitting flows of the media cycle. It is this “pause” made possible by the translation of the newspaper photograph into the work of art, González insists, that allows her to create an icon out of the attenuated image of death.⁴¹

Transferred to the columbaria, these images do not fade, but remain solid, robust, and consistent across all four walls of each structure [figures 6, 8, and 9]. Here, one follows their circular narrative of unceasing violence not with the reading eye, but with the totality of the moving body, returning to the structures a ritual function lost in their conversion from tombs to ruins. But while this physical engagement may activate the embodied memories of mourning shared by many of the viewers—the cleaning of the tombstone with water, the arrangement of flowers on the façade, the acts of prayer and intimate communication between the dead and their kin—the repetition and sheer quantity of images demand a more expansive mode of relating to the project. These images do not merely serve to acknowledge the value and sanctity of the lives held by each individual tomb, they also create a collective narrative thread unifying all four structures that must be read and deciphered by those who encounter them.

⁴⁰ Humberto Junca Casas, "A Contra Luz," *Beatriz González: Donde la misma claridad es sombra* (Bogotá: Alonso Garces Galería, 2006). González herself has likened them to “animated movies.”

⁴¹ Museo Casa de la Memória, “Charla ‘Memorias Anónimas’ con la artista Beatriz González.”



Figure 6: Auras Anónimas, Beatriz González, 2009

In this cemetery, the tombstones of the columbaria have always been blank, either because the families of the interred could not afford a proper burial, or because the anonymity of the dead rendered their lives unnarratable. The tombstone, and the critical information it conveys concerning the identity, life, and death of the deceased, typically serves as a point of translation between the silence of remains and the world-making language of the living. Tombstones, and their inscriptions, work to frame, order, and preserve, by means of language, that which has been lost, and to rescue it from the disintegration and potential vacuity of its meaning and value in death. In this sense, the lacuna of meaning resulting from the blank tombstone of the popular cemetery works to underscore what Foucault refers to as the “disturbing” quality of the heterotopia to “secretly undermine language,” to “shatter or tangle common names,” and to “destroy ‘syntax’... not only the syntax with which we construct words and sentences but also

that less apparent syntax which causes words and things... to ‘hold together.’” What is “held together” in the syntax of the tombstone is the link between the name and the body. The identifying markers of the tombstone recuperate the world-constructing syntax lost in death, maintaining a continuity between the embodied human and its soul in the afterlife. The inscription of the name immortalizes, locating the dead within a lineage of past and future generations of kin, while at the same time retaining its connection to a citizen-subject that lives on in the public record. The tombstone creates a means through which to navigate the inscrutable time-space of death, to reconcile it with the more familiar time-space of life, to overcome the finitude of the body through the endurance of the name [figure 7]. The name serves as evidence that these bodies, at the very least, belong to someone—their descendents, their communities, the state.



Figure 7: Tombstone, Cementerio Central, Lot A, 2011



Figure 8: *Auras Anónimas*, Beatriz González, 2011

As Foucault argues, cemeteries are spaces “connected with all the sites of the citystate or society or village,” since “each individual, each family, has relatives in the cemetery.” If this is the case, the popular cemetery unsettles precisely because its bodies belong to everyone and no one, existing in an ambiguous relationship to the world of the living and, as such, silently challenging the social relations and political orderings which organize it. Replacing the tedium of blank tombstones with the emphatic repetition of the media image of violence, *Auras Anónimas* heightens one’s attention to the incongruity between the unmarked tomb and the normative production of human value and political recognition in public sphere. In their anonymity in death, these bodies bear the trace of their superfluity in life, as evidenced by their poverty, and their susceptibility to historical erasure. This superfluity is compounded in the afterlife by their expulsion from the neoliberal city, and their determined incompatibility with its emergent landscapes. Wanting to bring an element of recognition to these superfluous souls, González imagined each stenciled image as providing an epitaph to the beings that once occupied

the emptied tombs.⁴² Yet, in contrast to the syntax of the tombstone, these images do not work to preserve the distinct identity of the body, or to rescue its memory from threatened effacement. Stripped of their particularities and reduced to their most basic contours, these images serve less to redeem the dead from their anonymity than to underscore it.

It is through the repetition of this icon that *Auras Anónimas* moves beyond the commemorative gesture to provoke a consideration of the structural logic behind the ongoing production of death in Colombia—not merely death in the physical sense, but also the kind of social death that renders human lives superfluous, expendable, and, in fact, redundant according to the dictates of global capitalism. By using an image of death from the war as an epitaph to the anonymous urban dead in Bogotá, *Auras Anónimas* encourages its viewers to draw connections between the emptying of mass graves resulting from massacre, and the clearance of corpses from the popular cemetery. Encountering the repetition of this particular image in this particular site, viewers are encouraged to develop an analysis of the conflict beyond the generalized refrains attributing the violence in Colombia to “self-perpetuating” or “senseless” phenomena and to examine the kindred operations of human surplussing that produce both the massacre victim and the displaceable urban body. And while the installation does not provide any ready-made frames for interpreting this connection, the continuity between the trace of the corpse and the naming function of the epitaph-image does suggest that the relationship it establishes between the violences of massacre and urban renewal should not be understood as merely metaphorical or analogous, but interconnected.

⁴² See González Aranda, "Cargueros guardianes de la memoria."

Moreover, in creating a communal engagement with the columbaria through installation practice, the project draws the viewer's attention to Bogotá's collective responsibility to the memory of these surplussed lives, and the social processes that produce them.



Figure 9: Auras Anónimas, Beatriz González, 2009

The work of the epitaph-image is one of the ways in which *Auras Anónimas* mounts a resistance to the terms of its inclusion in Bogotá's celebration of memory and human rights. In her proposal to preserve the columbaria through site-specific installations, Salcedo stipulated that the objective behind the idea was to create a dedicated space for "anti-monumental" expressions of memory.⁴³ Organized around installation works lasting no more than two years, Salcedo's columbaria project is "counter-monumental" in the sense articulated by James Young in that it "formaliz[es] its impermanence and even celebrat[es] its changing form over time and space."⁴⁴ Staging fleeting tributes to unspecified people and events, this project militates against

⁴³ Museo Casa de la Memoria, "Charla 'Memorias Anónimas' con la artista Beatriz González."

⁴⁴ James E Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 48.

the public function of the traditional monument to provide rigid, authoritative, and eternally-fixed representations of history. The planned obsolescence of each installation-homage recognizes the “contingency of all meaning and memory,” working with, rather than against, the mutability of time. More importantly, perhaps, *Auras Anónimas* instantiates another crucial function of the counter-monument: to “evince a reflection about it’s own occurrence.”⁴⁵ Referencing the disinterment of corpses, the stenciled images provide a visual citation of the events that precipitated the campaign to preserve the columbaria, exposing the artifice of its production as a patrimonial treasure of the city.

In her discussion of *Auras Anónimas*, Karen Till attributes the project’s interventionist value to its attention to what she calls the “interim spaces” of the city—the “seemingly empty or marginal settings” that contain the “unresolved remainders” of historical memory. By orchestrating new ritual, spatial, and embodied engagements with the “urban remnants” of the cemetery, *Auras Anónimas*, she argues, not only reinvigorates the memory traces of the past contained within the vaults, it also encourages a critical reckoning with the lingering social contradictions associated with their history which have yet to be resolved in the present. While I am in general agreement with Till’s perspective on this project, I feel compelled to examine more deeply her designation of the columbaria as “remnants” or “remainders” of the city’s past. Beyond viewing these structures as “unwanted matter” classified by municipal officials as “marginal and in need of removal,” a broader historicization of the site

⁴⁵ Jaime Cerón, “Beatriz González: Anonymous Auras.” This quote comes from the author paraphrasing the words of González.

reveals shifting and multivalent attitudes around their destruction and preservation which call for closer scrutiny. The columbaria of the Central Cemetery do not merely *exist* as remnants of a negated past, they have been *made to signify* ruins through a self-conscious series of decisions and actions which have been debated and contested at every turn. Once targeted for a program of “renewal” that could only be described as a wholesale erasure of cemetery’s history, these structures, and the mass graves upon which they sit, now constitute an urban ruinscape celebrated for its archival and historical value. What ideological work is accomplished through this reframing of space and objects, and what images of the city, the nation, and political body are consolidated in this valorization of the cemetery’s remains?

As Russell A. Berman states, “Modern ruins... enact a particular political representation, the ruin as the ruins of an ancien régime. [T]he destruction of that régime is the precondition for democracy: the path to the future is strewn with rubble. Democracy requires ruins.”⁴⁶ Speaking in reference to the aesthetic experience facilitated by ruins of wars, Berman illustrates the role of ruins in providing a screen upon which historical narratives of democratic progress can take hold in times of political transition. Ruins, he argues, not only hearken back to a prior way of life that saw its eventual demise, they also embody the historical agency of the civilization that superseded it and brought it to its end. Working simultaneously to “revive the past as memory” while establishing its passage, ruins foster an identification with the imaginary communities and political rhetorics resonant with the contemporary moment. Physically positioned as

⁴⁶ Russell A. Berman, "Democratic Destruction: Ruins and Emancipation in the American Tradition," in *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle, 104-117 (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 104.

the backdrop for the forthcoming museum memorializing the Colombian conflict, the columbaria seem to provide the necessary “shadow” against which the project can claim a new stage of democracy for the state. In the absence of ruins capable of signifying a “past” of a conflict still in progress, the city has recuperated the columbaria as a means of inscribing new spatial inscriptions of modernity and progress upon the urban landscape. Evacuated of their use-value as tombs of the dead, these structures have been transformed into objects of pure aesthetic contemplation, thus operating as a theater for the consumption and production of the kinds of affects, knowledges, and sensory experiences necessary for the consolidation of the emergent narratives of peace, reconciliation, and sovereignty put forth by the city and state. Far from occupying a “seemingly empty or marginal setting,” the columbaria, I argue, have been assimilated into the pedagogical program of the city as a museological object and scene of moral instruction intended to signal the inauguration of a new chapter in Colombian political history, and shape its ideal citizen-subject.

The Spatial Formations of Transitional Justice

The idea for Bogotá's memory museum emerged out of the Colombian government's recent and controversial turn to transitional justice frameworks as a means of resolving the country's conflict. The passage of the Justice and Peace Law (Law 975) in 2005 marked the official commencement of this process, resulting in the creation of a National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation (CNRR), as well as the establishment of special courts to hear the confessions of paramilitary leaders. Viewed within the ambit of global human rights movements, such initiatives are unique in that

they have been instituted in the midst of active conflict, with the stated intention of bringing about a transition to peace in the context of a long-standing democracy, rather than documenting and adjudicating the repression of prior regimes in a post-conflict scenario.⁴⁷ This, of course, raises questions regarding the capaciousness of the concept of “transition” itself. How does one define “reparations” when dispossession is attributable less to an “event” than to an ongoing process of violence which has not yet run its course? What image of future “peace” is operative here and how does it shape the contours of “transitional justice” measures in the present? And, considering that transitional justice typically targets government and military leaders, how is the Colombian state implicating itself in the country’s violent history?

Before delving further into the project of the museum, a brief overview of Colombia's transitional justice scheme is in order. Despite its contextual differences, Colombia's transitional justice framework encompasses measures familiar to those implemented in other countries, in particular, criminal prosecutions, truth seeking, and victims reparations programs. Emphasizing victim's rights and the demobilization of armed groups, Law 975 was instituted with a partial demobilization of the paramilitaries, whose participation in the process entailed compulsory confessions aimed at revealing the "truth" of their individual and collective participation in the conflict, and facilitating their reintegration into society either through amnesty or greatly reduced sentences for their crimes. The law also initiated a victim accreditation process, which opened up new judicial avenues for victims who could now participate in prosecutions and access full

⁴⁷ Jemima García-Godos and Knut Andreas O. Lid, "Transitional Justice and Victims' Rights before the End of a Conflict: The Unusual Case of Colombia," *Journal of Latin American Studies* (Cambridge University Press) 42 (2010): 487-516.

reparations from their victimizers. The debates and details related to this law are beyond the scope of this analysis, suffice it to say that it contains many aspects that have raised questions regarding its ability to secure rights and reparation for victims, ensure the continued demobilization of paramilitary groups, and provide a framework for recognizing the full scope of the state's responsibility in the conflict.⁴⁸

At the center of these questions is the law's definition of the categories of "victim" and "victimizer." Notably, the government limits its position to that of an arbiter between paramilitary units and victims seeking reparation. Victims can only access reparations from "illegal" armed actors or, in the event that the actor does not have adequate resources, their military unit. If neither the actor nor the unit is able to cover the agreed upon amount, the state may intervene with what it calls "solidarity compensation," thus aligning itself with the position of the victim, and foreclosing the possibility of its own implication in the violence. This disavowal of culpability is further underscored by the law's categorization of "victim," which excludes official state agents as potential victimizers.

Considering that the purpose of the judicial process is not merely to award reparations and prosecute criminals, but to uncover the historical "truth" of the conflict, the exemption of the state from mechanisms of accountability raises serious concerns about the law's ability to fully account for the complex historical conditions which have sustained the violence over the decades, and have worked to shape its current form. It

⁴⁸ Significantly, the law has come under severe and wide-ranging criticism from victim's groups, who question the efficacy of addressing the demobilization of armed groups and victim's rights under the same legal instrument. See García-Godos and Lid, "Transitional Justice and Victims Rights Before the End of a Conflict: The Unusual Case of Colombia."

has been widely noted that the illegality of the paramilitaries, and their distinction from the activities of the state military, is a relatively recent phenomenon. The formation of paramilitary groups was legally and materially supported by the government from 1965 until the late-1980s, and at various points throughout 1990s.⁴⁹ Moreover, paramilitary leaders have a long history of controlling public offices. As recently as 2002, the paramilitaries controlled 35 percent of Congress and one-third of Colombia's municipalities.⁵⁰ The "truth" recovered by Law 975's judicial mechanisms is thus premised upon strategic historical erasures which reify the state as a regulative, disciplinary entity which operates independently of the bodies it is responsible for prosecuting. This, of course has important implications for what kinds of violences become legible as "legal" and "illegal" as the transitional justice process develops in the future. If a core objective of the Law 975's judicial component is to begin to develop foundational truths upon which transitional justice can evolve in a "post-conflict" stage, it is likely that today's historical absences will shape future determinations of what kinds of experiences will count as "victimization," and who counts as a legitimate recipient of legal reparation and redress.

Other criticisms point to the ineffectiveness of the law in demobilizing the paramilitaries. After the demobilization process was officially completed in 2006, state and media reports claimed that 24,000 of the 29,000 paramilitaries had been demobilized as a result of the law. Evidence indicates, however, that paramilitary structures have not

⁴⁹ John C. Dugas, "The Colombian Nightmare: Human Rights Abuses and the Contradictory Effects of U.S. Foreign Policy," in *When States Kill: Latin America, the U.S., and Technologies of Terror*, ed. Cecilia Menjívar and Rodríguez Néstor, 227-251 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).

⁵⁰ Jasmin Hristov, "Legalizing the Illegal: Paramilitarism in Colombia's 'Post-Paramilitary' Era," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, July/August 2009: 12-39.

disbanded, but reorganized themselves. In the years following the demobilization, displacements increased by 25% and the murders of trade unionists increased by more than 71%.⁵¹ In hard numbers, this translates into hundreds of thousands of displaced people, and the murders of over 200 union members. Critics also point out that the amnesty and sentence reductions offered by the law have resulted in a limited amount of new information regarding the crimes of the paramilitaries. Although 90% of registered paramilitaries have been pardoned based on their compliance with the law's "compulsory confession" requirement, the information yielded by these confessions has been vague, focusing on "individuals who are already dead, imprisoned, whose whereabouts are unknown, or are no longer useful to the paramilitaries."^{52 53}

Recognizing the limitations of the judicial process to provide the kind of "truth" needed to usher in a new stage of peace for Colombia, some advocates of the government's transitional justice project have their hopes for justice staked on the longer-term investigative work of the commission. As part of its mandate to determine the "historical truth" of the conflict, Law 975 established El Grupo de Trabajo Memoria Histórica (Historical Memory Working Group), an investigative arm of the National Committee for Reconciliation and Reparation entrusted with the task of constructing an "integrated history of the conflict" primarily through academic research on cases considered to be emblematic of the violence. The group's approach to piecing together

⁵¹ Jasmin Hristov, "Legalizing the Illegal: Paramilitarism in Colombia's 'Post-Paramilitary' Era," 13.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Those who fully confess their crimes receive reduced prison sentences—a maximum of 8 years even for crimes such as massacre or torture. See Lesley Gill, "Durable Disorder: Parapolitics in Barrancabermeja," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, July/August 2009: 20-39.

this history has been comprehensive, acknowledging the contested nature of memory. As one member, anthropologist Maria Victoria Uribe, explains, the organization interprets its research as a “chance to construct an account taking into consideration the different memories of the actors involved in the conflict, alternative interpretations of victim organizations and resistance groups, and initiatives for preserving the memories of the communities besieged by the violence.”⁵⁴ Although the group’s mandate shows many similarities to truth commissions in the region, its work has not been framed as such. Rather, its activities have been geared toward assembling an archive of information intended to aid in the establishment and execution of a truth commission in the future, once Colombia transitions to a post-conflict stage. The hope is that one day the information gathered can “provide a framework for defining and addressing the expectations of different and opposed social groups, both in the search for solutions to the internal armed conflict and in the redemocratization that follows a peace agreement.”⁵⁵

Nevertheless, despite the preparatory, future-oriented nature of its project, the Historical Memory Group devotes itself to the same kind of civicizing, pedagogical work that would be carried out by a truth commission in its active state. Since 2008, the Group has released 21 *informes* (human rights case study reports), accompanying each release with presentations of photo exhibitions, theater performances, and other types of cultural productions aimed at creating public knowledge about its research. Such cultural performances comprise a significant part of the annual “Week of Memory” the Group

⁵⁴ María Victoria Uribe, "Memory in Times of War," *Public Culture* (Duke University Press) 21, no. 1 (2009), 6.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

sponsors in Medellín and Bogotá, which brings together a wide range of human rights workers—including academics, NGO workers, artists, and survivor-activists—in a conference addressing the themes of memory and transitional justice in Colombia. With the passage of the Victim's Law⁵⁶ in December 2011, the group changed its name to “El Centro de Memoria Histórica,” and its activities have since become synonymous with Bogotá's memory museum project.

As a reparative instrument, the truth commission form has been theorized as a performative medium which reconstructs the nation through the “raw material” of the story.⁵⁷ Through the public ritual of testimony and dialogue, the truth commission goes beyond its role as a recording apparatus to realize the liberal ideal of a “national public sphere open to all voices.” Providing a platform for the previously voiceless to empower themselves through the act of speech, the truth commission constitutes a performative mechanism through which “victims” can be transformed into “citizens” through the therapeutic power of storytelling and story-listening. The truth commission thus acts as a medium for the emergence of a new citizen-subject of post-transition democracy, and for the formation of a collective “common sense” understanding of the public sphere into which this subject is to enter.

But while the democratizing instrument of the truth commission may work to

⁵⁶ Signed into law by President Juan Manuel Santos on June 10, 2011, the Victim's Law was drafted in order to address the shortcomings of the Justice and Peace Law. It aims to return land to internally displaced Colombians and provide reparations to victims of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. Like the Justice and Peace Law, the Victim's Law also provides a series of rights for victims—rights to reparation, truth, and justice—and establishes accountability for the various perpetrators involved. For a fuller discussion of this law, and the debates it has stirred, see Nicole Summer, “Colombia's Victims' Law: Transitional Justice in a Time of Violent Conflict?,” *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, 25, no. 1 (2012): 220-235.

⁵⁷ Upendra Baxi, *The Future of Human Rights* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

materialize and *shape* the democratic public sphere, it must do so within the already-established generic parameters of the liberal humanist project. The modern public sphere, Joseph Slaughter explains, “emerged with the democratic nation-state, human rights, and the *Bildungsroman* as part of institutions of popular sovereignty that set the state/citizen bind as the ultimate horizon of human personality development.”⁵⁸ It is, as such, “a regulatory institution that, in its ideal formulation, not only converts personal opinion into common sense but also gives personal stories their socially acceptable and conventional generic forms.”⁵⁹

In the absence of a transformative “event” such as a truth commission, the Historical Memory Group has turned to the domains of public space and cultural production to disseminate the information, stories, and testimonies recovered through their research. This has enabled it to stage large-scale democratic rituals that, like the truth commission form, seek to reshape the public sphere and create the foundation for future peace and morality through a therapeutic performance of the archive. The establishment of Bogotá’s memory museum will be among the first and most significant permanent public projects sponsored by the group, and will stand in for the truth commission as the performative “event” which will launch a new era in Colombian democracy. Beyond providing an aesthetic education in human rights, the museum project works in concert with urban renewal to create new aesthetic forms and genres for the formation of the citizen-subject of a loosely-articulated project of redemocratization, and to define the terms of their incorporation into this anticipated

⁵⁸ Joseph R. Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: World Novel, Narrative Form and International Law* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2007), 94.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

public sphere. While these forms are not exactly new, but globally inflected (by other memory museum projects, neoliberal urban restructuring models, truth commission practices and genres of “reconciliation,” etc.), and thus subject to their own regulation, they are nevertheless intended bring Bogotá in line ethically with the global society of post-conflict states, and to make the capital city the regulatory institution whose representational forms and genres serve as the horizon of possibility for peace for the country as a whole. Examining these forms will help us to understand how the idealized citizen-subject of transition is supposed to act, feel, and move through the social space, and in doing so, allow us to glean a better sense of what is entailed in the roughly-defined imaginary of “redemocratization.”

This aspirational image Bogotá—as the regulatory public sphere and vanguard of peace for the nation—is reflected in city council member Clara López Obregón’s 2008 proposal statement for the memory museum, which begins by declaring its primary objective: to “turn Bogotá into the City of Rights” through the institution of a development program geared towards “peace building and reconciliation” as one of its central targets. According to this document, the museum project will help to achieve this by turning the capital city into a “platform for the reconciliation that [Colombian] society requires,” through programming that will “guarantee a living memory and non-repetition” of violence.⁶⁰ In contrast to Law 975’s judicial mechanism of truth-finding, which precludes the state from culpability, this statement directly implicates the actions of the state in the violence it wants to document, and proposes the museum as a site

⁶⁰ Clara López Obregón, "Presentación del Centro del Bicentenario Memoria, Paz y Reconciliación," in *Archivos, Memoria, y Derecho a la Verdad* (Bogotá: Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá D.C., 2008).

where victims' testimonies can be met with "public apology and the acknowledgement of responsibility by the victimizers and the State."⁶¹ Other statements by scholars and public officials connected to the project reflect this sentiment, revealing a combination of self-indictment by the city government, as a part of the state, and projective indictment of state government that disavows responsibility for its crimes. Contributions by historian Guillermo Hoyos Vásquez exhibit the most pronounced example of the latter.

To brush Colombian history against the grain is to be able to relate to each moment of crisis in order to realize that, after partisan conflicts between generals motivated by their desire of glory; after drafting constitutions which resembled much more a catalog of all the promises that the State founded on the rule of law was unable to fulfill; after liberal, radical, and conservative reforms in which the only thing that was not taken into account was that the previous set of reforms had been created without the participation and consent of the real existing citizens, the victorious party would promise once again the same things neglecting the fact that it is also necessary to consider the *rationale of those who were defeated*, of those to whom, on account of their defeat, all rationale is denied, since this may in fact explain and justify their defeat...

This archive that we want to improve and turn into a paradigm for Colombia is important because we can count on historians who oppose the fable that the violence that has afflicted Colombia in recent years cannot be defined as an armed conflict; who do not share this distorting view that denies the social and political roots of violence, even though they are aware that this conflict has become widely depoliticized and demoralized and that it is being endured by the population mostly as extreme criminality. The armed conflict is part of our national identity. Only if we assume it as such—and those who criticized until the very end the Justice and Peace Law tended toward this view—shall we manage to integrate into our identity the displaced, the victims, the lasting injustice and discrimination, and this long series of crimes of exclusion, massacres, slavery and exploitation, which we can trace back infinitely, to the eve of independence.⁶²

I have quoted this presentation at length because I believe it reflects the nature of the "public sphere" that I argue is being promoted through the project of the museum and its attendant policies of urban renewal. First, it joins López Obregón's proposal in reflecting a notion of the liberal public sphere as that which, in the words of Slaughter, is

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Guillermo Hoyos Vásquez, "Seminar Opening Comments," in *Archivos, Memoria, y Derecho a la Verdad* (Bogotá: Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá D.C., 2008), 194-204.

“neither fully antagonistic to nor fully complicit with the administrative institutions of the state,” but is nonetheless “charged with vigilating the state and its observance of human rights.”⁶³ Both authors envision the museum as a democratizing space in which the will of the people can recognize the “truth” of state violence and, in doing so, ensure its non-repetition. Second, it envisions the public sphere as an incorporative medium for the victimized individual, who becomes an historical subject through speech, and through the inclusion of their “rationales” in the production of the archive. In both of these examples, the technologies of memory, testimony, and the archive emerge as the foundations of a public sphere capable of regulating the violence of the state, and as the discursive means through which the humanity of the victim can be realized.

Citing a talk by Etienne Balibar, Randall Williams notes, “history is the means by which violence is converted into nonviolence and is transferred into political institutions.”⁶⁴ In its exemption of state officials from the category of violent actors, Law 975 illustrates this observation, as it effectively functions to legalize state violence by rendering it invisible and, thus, nonviolent. On the face it, the city government’s decision to bring state violence into visibility would seem to indicate an ideological schism between the state project of transitional justice and the local production of the memory museum. I would argue, however, that the state’s disavowal of its own violence, and the recognition of state violence on the local level, are motivated by the same desire to represent the Colombian state as modern, cosmopolitan, and essentially nonviolent. While this representation operates through silence and erasure on the level

⁶³ Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*, 148.

⁶⁴ Randall Williams, *A Divided World: Human Rights and Its Violence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 69.

of the state, on the local level this operates through self-purifying performances of confession and atonement which will become further ritualized with the production of the museum space.

The National Museum and The Bicentennial Center: Architectures of Citizenship

Officially named *El Centro Bicentenario: Memória, Paz y Reconciliación* (The Bicentennial Center: Memory, Peace, and Reconciliation), the forthcoming museum serves a dual purpose: to pay tribute to victims of violence since 1948, and to commemorate 200 years of Colombian Independence. In her introduction of the project, city councilperson Clara López Obregón placed the museum in the same category as institutions such as the Jewish Museum in Berlin, the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, and the ESMA in Buenos Aires—commemorative sites in capital cities that pay tribute to victims of state violence, and project a new vision of nonviolence for the nation's future.⁶⁵ The critical difference in this case is that the museum in Bogotá does not devote itself to commemorating a single historical episode—observing the Bicentennial alongside the commemoration of victims, it conflates the conflict with the nation itself, rewriting the totality of Colombia's history as trauma. In this respect it functions culturally as a supplement, if not a successor, to Colombia's existing national museum, providing a postscript of loss to its accumulated symbols of modernity and political independence.

⁶⁵ Clara López Obregón, "Presentación del Centro del Bicentenario Memória, Paz y Reconciliación," 317.

Public museums, as Carol Duncan explains, are “powerful identity-defining machines,” not only *servicing* the public, but also *creating* its citizenry through the orchestration of rituals which confer identity as they impart knowledge.⁶⁶ Critically, they also serve as self-defining national symbols, projecting an image of the nation’s modernity, strength, and wealth on a global stage. Born of the bourgeois political revolutions of the 18th century, the public museum has long been equated with the egalitarian values of the modern liberal state, providing its citizenry with equal access to the art and artifacts once belonging to royalty. When transferred to the Third World context, Duncan argues, the genre of the public museum consolidates the production of the nation and its people in the image of Western liberalism, while at the same time “signaling to the West that one is a reliable political ally, imbued with proper respect for and adherence to Western symbols and values,” and is, as such, “a safe bet for economic or military aid.”⁶⁷ The contents and display practices of the Third World museum, rather than reflecting the true history of a nation’s “people,” are always already mediated by the state’s relationship to foreign investment, international aid (military and otherwise), and trade relations. The public museum thus operates both as a symbolic representation of a state’s civility and political virtue, and as a site of tutelage in which the visiting public learns how to inhabit political subjectivity within a given international order.

The National Museum in Bogotá is illustrative of the deliberate architectural self-fashioning of a nation-state under duress. Housed in a building that was once

⁶⁶ Carol Duncan, "Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, 88-103 (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

Colombia's primary penitentiary (popularly referred to as "El Panóptico"), the decision to transform the recently-evacuated prison into the new National Museum occurred in 1948, in the midst of a tumultuous confluence of historical events. On April 9th of this year, Liberal presidential candidate Jorge Gaitán was assassinated on the streets of Bogotá, resulting in the explosion of riots in the capital that left thousands dead and thousands more injured. This event, popularly referred to as *El Bogotazo*, destroyed much of the city's downtown, and is credited with sparking *La Violencia*, an intensification of existing violence in the countryside that is typically regarded as the "origin point" of the contemporary conflict. The night of Gaitán's assassination also coincided with the Ninth International Conference of American States in Bogotá, a meeting at which the Latin American contribution to the emergent internationalist discourse of human rights was established in two ways: through the adoption of the charter of the Organization of American States, and the ratification of the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man. While the latter was primarily intended to articulate the obligations of OAS' member states, it also served as the world's first general human rights instrument, predating the Universal Declaration by several months, and influencing several of its articles.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Paolo G. Carozza, "From Conquest to Constitutions: Retrieving a Latin American Tradition of the Idea of Human Rights," *Human Rights Quarterly* (Johns Hopkins University Press) 25 (2003): 281-313.



Figure 10: Museo Nacional, Bogotá

As a mirror reflecting the idealized image of the state, the choice of the panoptic-inspired prison as the setting for Colombia's national museum reveals much about how the state imagined the paradigm of the universal, rights-bearing subject in a political context of widespread partisan violence and, later, Cold War guerrilla mobilization. In contrast to European museums—which housed their collections in former palaces to evoke the collective wealth of the democratic state, or in neoclassical buildings to align the state with the highly evolved civic institutions of ancient Greek or Roman societies—the architecture of Bogotá's museum communicates a national ethos linking democratic modernity to political technologies of surveillance and discipline. Many of its objects are displayed in former prison cells which continue to bear the trappings of their original purpose. [figures 10, 11, and 12] Carefully preserved iron bars on the entryways, doors, and windows are a central feature of the building's distinctive aesthetic, contributing to its stately elegance and its recognition as “la obra número uno del

Museo” (the Museum’s number one work).⁶⁹ The layout of the building and organization of its collections guide the visitor through a programmatic route tying the attainment of cultural literacy to one’s physical movements from cell to cell, facilitating a contemplative ritual in which citizens are formed through the performance of compliance, constraint, and atomization. Staging a literal enactment of the individualizing and normalizing operations of disciplinary society, the museum’s ritual of spectatorship restores order to the disordered body-politic by creating an environment in which visitors “educate themselves” into a relationship of docility to the museum’s content and the architecture of its presentation. Bespeaking a disciplining, punitive relationship between the state and its subjects, the museum served as a fitting backdrop to the political climate of the second half of the century, during which Colombian democracy took the form of nearly continual states of siege, with the expressed intent of containing a fractured, violent, and undisciplined public. In that regard, it also embodies, on a symbolic level, the very qualities that have made the Colombian state apparatus an appealing recipient of increasing military funding from the United States since World War II—the promise of the control and containment of social elements which transgress the liberal state’s norms of civility and the orchestration of freedom through the regulation of the citizen conduct.

⁶⁹ Juana Suárez, "Transitions towards the new museum: the mise-en-scène of the bicentenary in Colombia," *Latin American Cultural Studies: Travesia* (Routledge) 20, no. 4 (December 2011): 419-442.



Figure 11: Museo Nacional, Bogotá

Built with the specific intent of excavating, and purging, the nation of the violence it has endured since 1948, the Bicentennial Center constitutes a site for the reflection and appraisal of the forms Colombian democracy has assumed over the past 60 years. While National Museum symbolizes the state's democratic trajectory as a project of discipline and regulation, the Bicentennial center revises this narrative to redefine the task of nation-building as one of suturing the social schisms wrought by the fallout of Cold War-era policies of containment and state repression. As Edgardo Maya Villazón, acting Inspector General of Colombia, explained in his presentation of the museum in 2008, the project's primary ambition is to "reconstruct" Colombian society through the pursuit of historical truth, in the hopes of "overcom[ing] authoritarian practices of marginalization" that have effectively "hamper[ed] a critical perception of history."⁷⁰ Central to this process of reparation, he argues, is restoration of a "living,

⁷⁰ Edgardo Maya Villazón, "Opening Remarks," in *Archivos, Memoria, y Derecho a la Verdad* (Bogotá: Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá D.C., 2008), 189-193.

collective memory” which will protect the state and its subjects from the “deceptive workings of a hegemonic version of history” and reveal the “historical truth” of decades of violent confrontation. Accordingly, the architectural design of the building produces a symbolic representation of the state, and ritual of citizenship, markedly different from that of the National Museum.



Figure 12: Museo Nacional, Bogotá

Given that the objective of the Center is to promote national reconciliation and a reparation of the “social links that have been broken, wounded and affected by the ongoing conflict,”⁷¹ it is perhaps not surprising that the basic structure of the building takes the shape of a single, monolithic block, reflecting the aspired-for ethos of national unity and consensus pursued by the project of transitional justice. [figure 13] Avoiding the atomizing enclosures of the National Museum’s carceral architectural form, the rectangular, box-like structure of the Bicentennial Center is open and atrial, acting as a

⁷¹ Samuel Moreno Rojas, "Opening Remarks," in *Archivos, Memoria y Derechos a la Verdad* (2008: Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá D.C., 2008), 205-107.

conduit directing and channeling the flow of pedestrian traffic from one end of the building to the other. If the structure of the National Museum is impenetrable and fortress-like, erecting strict divisions between activities internal and external to the programming contained within its walls, the Bicentennial Center relaxes these borders, promoting a fluid, symbiotic relationship between the museum and its surrounding environment. Pedestrian pathways link entrances on all four sides of the building directly to sidewalks lining the adjacent streets, creating seamless connections between pedestrian life and the designated space of the Center. Architect Juan Pablo Ortiz, whose design was chosen out of a competition for the project, describes the building as an “urban connector,” “receiving and distributing” the everyday activities of pedestrians and facilitating their engagements with the surrounding park.⁷² According to Ortiz, the center is intended to serve not as a self-contained building, but as a “gateway” *to* and “alternative passage” *through* the park, establishing a “frank” and “transparent” relationship between the Center and the community.⁷³ While the architecture of the National Museum suggests a vision of sovereign integrity built on the fortification of borders and careful management of what enters and exits the museal space, the Bicentennial Center projects an image of radical openness resonant with the border-loosening mandates of globalization, supplementing the National Museum’s symbolism of the state as an *administrator* of governance through security and discipline with a

⁷² Juan Pablo Ortiz Suarez, José Andrés Vallejo and Santiago Fonseca Guardiola, *Centro del Bicentenario/Primer Premio: Juan Pablo Ortiz*, [n.d.], http://www.elmuro.org/A/08/12_CB/1/1_JPO.html (accessed August 2012). See website for the architects’ theory behind the design, and for more images.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

representation of the state as a *facilitator* of moral, community-oriented behavior amongst self-governing subjects.



Figure 13: El Centro Bicentenario, Juan Pablo Ortíz, 2009

This valorization of the notion of the citizen-body as a community of self-regulating, ethical individuals is most clearly exemplified in the kinds of rituals and interactions engineered by the Bicentennial Center’s organization of space and flow of bodies within it. Entrances on each side of the building siphon visitors from the sidewalks and pathways leading into the structure, drawing the public into a long, narrow exhibition hall without objects. This space, referred to as the “monolith,” is the only part of the museum to rise above ground—the auditorium, exhibition halls, offices, archives, and all other rooms related to the museum’s everyday operations are located in the basement, suggesting that this hall holds a significance greater than its function as a lobby or entrance. [figure 14] Collecting and convening citizens in an otherwise empty spatial void, it acts a meeting point and site of encounter for subjects coming from

distinct social locations and different walks of life. While this void signifies loss, it also represents the possibility for the substitution of this loss with a harmonizing unification of strangers. The monolith serves as a frame for what is presented as the museum's most important exhibited work: the assemblage of individual subjects into a cohesive political community, brought together by rituals of mourning and acts of remembrance.



Figure 14: El Centro del Bicentenario, Juan Pablo Ortíz, 2009

The monolith thus enables a different way of inhabiting citizenship, one which redirects the self-disciplining gaze of the National Museum's panoptic architectural form towards an attention to the Other in the service of consolidating an image of the nation as a morally-bonded community. The repertoires of conduct and practices of subjectification embodied in each of these institutional spaces correspond to Nikolas Rose's distinction between *disciplinary power* and what he terms *ethico-political power* as forms of governmentality shaping and regulating the comportment of individuals in response to changing needs of government. Discipline, as illustrated in the Foucauldian

metaphor of the panopticon, was a mode of power inaugurated by nineteenth-century liberalism which sought to make populations more governable through the production of “self-managing citizens capable of conducting themselves in freedom, shaping their newly acquired ‘private lives’ according to norms of civility, and judging their conduct accordingly.”⁷⁴ Operating through practices of “hierarchical observation and normalizing judgment” administered via a range of institutionalized practices, disciplinary power emphasized the cultivation and dissemination of techniques of the self-control on the level of the individual, towards the end of maximizing the docility and utility of subjects and the body-politic in general. The panoptic design of the National Museum combines the symbolism of security with a ritual of self-discipline, representing the state as a territorially bounded institution containing, disciplining, and expelling elements which pose a threat to its sovereignty, while inculcating its subjects in a pedagogy of responsibility towards the self.

Ethico-political forms of governmentality, according to Rose, diverge from the disciplinary strategy of inducing “new relationship[s] of humans to themselves,” focusing more on animating the individual’s “bonds of obligation” and sense of responsibility towards networks of other individuals unified by common moral codes and values.⁷⁵ The emphasis of ethico-politics is less on managing populations through the inculcation of habits of self-discipline and self-regulation amongst individualized subjects than on promoting the creation of “affect-laden relationships” among groups of individuals who

⁷⁴ Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 242.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

come to construct their identities and conduct through an emotional and ethical identification with a collective. As Rose explains:

For what is happening here is not the colonization of a previous space of freedom by control practices; community is actually instituted in its contemporary form as a sector for government. And this is not a process of social control if this is to be understood in the sense of mechanisms to ensure that members of a society conform to expectations. Rather, in the institution of community, a sector is brought into existence whose vectors and forces can be mobilized, enrolled, deployed in novel programmes and techniques which encourage and harness active practices of self-management and identity construction, of personal ethics and collective allegiances. I term this *government through community*.⁷⁶

Corresponding to what others have referred to as “neoliberal” forms of governmentality,⁷⁷ Rose theorizes ethico-politics as reflective of a “new diagram of power”⁷⁸ emerging in response to globalization, and the challenges it has posed to the idea of the nation-state as a territorial unity with a single national economy, governed through a “single source of law, right, and authority.”⁷⁹ In this context, he argues, distinct subjectivities and ways of thinking and acting have emerged in accordance with new global standards for political rule which conceive of “good governance” in terms of a state’s willingness to institute neoliberal reforms aimed at privatizing its corporations, downsizing its political apparatuses, and encouraging the expansion of market competition, private enterprise, and non-state mechanisms of regulation. As the image of the state as a bureaucratically centralized service provider gives way to that of a “facilitator” or “animator” of decentralized apparatuses of governance, the image of what it means to be a “socially-identified citizen,” too, begins to assume new

⁷⁶ Ibid., 176.

⁷⁷ see Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," *Theory & Event* 7, no. 1 (2003).

⁷⁸ Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, 188,

⁷⁹ Ibid, 3.

characteristics, having less to do with an individual's capacity to conform to the norms of a "single integrated national society" than their ability to enter into moral communities satisfying a host of new needs engendered by the expansion of capital and the waning of the social state—among these, the need for ready-made, self-organized consumer markets, and for a "self-steering" citizenry which can govern itself in response to novel and ever-shifting measures of "ethics."

The rise of ethico-political forms of power, Rose explains, should not be thought of as indicative of an epochal shift, or as overriding or replacing other modes of governmentality. Rather, he argues, it develops "within and alongside old arrangements" which continue to be active in shaping practices of governance.⁸⁰ Indeed, what the Bicentennial Center and the state's turn to transitional justice reveals is that the pursuit of a "single integrated national society" is not a remnant of an older form of governmentality, but the very modality through which the state seeks to cultivate communities, subjectivities, and citizen behaviors which can be harnessed in the service of globalization, and its injunctions to standards of "good governance." The community sensibility fostered by the Bicentennial Center's design signals an evolution from the more repressive, individualizing forms of governmentality represented by the National Museum's panoptic aesthetic, to present the nation as a collective of ethically self-modulating citizens, bound by a communion in trauma and empathy.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 171.

Making the Citizen Global

It is not a coincidence that the state's implementation of transitional justice measures, and the proliferation of discourses and cultural initiatives aimed at redefining the image of Colombia in terms of its capacity for peace and national reconciliation, comes amidst of the institution of myriad policies defining Colombia's geopolitical role in the region, and its relationship to US military and economic hegemony. Collectively, these policies enact a militarized rearrangement of territory in the service of facilitating the imposition of globalized market conditions in the region, and consolidating US' privileged access to Colombia's economy. The 1999 passage of Plan Colombia ushered in this new era of US-Colombian bilateral relations, conferring to the state billions of dollars in aid, under the guise of drug-eradication efforts, to amp up military operations against insurgent forces antagonistic to the foreign acquisition of the country's natural resources. Colombia's role as the custodian of US interests and military operations in the region was further consolidated by the ratification of the 2008 accord, later ruled unconstitutional by the Colombia Constitutional Court, which would have significantly expanded the presence of the US military in the country. Granting the US access to seven additional bases, and removing prior constraints on the number of personnel that could be deployed on Colombian soil, this agreement sought to maximize Colombia's position as the Pentagon's primary ally in Latin America, providing a strategic location from which the US could conduct "full spectrum operations" in a region increasingly inimical to US military presence.⁸¹ The 2011 Free Trade Agreement accompanied the

⁸¹ John Lindsay Poland, "Retreat to Colombia: The Pentagon Adapts Its Latin America Strategy," *NACLA REPORT ON THE AMERICAS*, January/February 2010: 22-37.

deepening military alliance between the two states, relaxing trade regulations to give US industries expanded access to valued resources, as well as nearly unlimited access to Colombian consumer markets.

It is important to note that it was precisely during the years between Peñalosa's failed proposal to build a park on the grounds of the Central Cemetery, and the announcement of the decision to use that space to construct a museum devoted to national peace and reconciliation, that the success of this bilateral partnership was most in question. During these years, the recently implemented US-Colombia Free Trade agreement was stalled in Congress by Democrats, and later by President Obama, over human rights concerns regarding the murder of trade unionists. As such, attracting the foreign investment necessary to keeping Colombian industries competitive in the global marketplace has required a delicate balancing of the militarized enforcement of national "security" with the development of new discourses of casting off Colombia's reputation as a society locked into irreparable "culture of violence."⁸² A July 2012 article in the Wall Street Journal named Colombia as an emergent Latin American "tiger economy," citing the strengthening of the military, the prosecution of drug lords, and the reduction in "terrorist acts" and kidnapping as major factors minimizing the risks associated with investing in Colombian industries, and opening up new markets previously inaccessible to foreign investors.⁸³ But while militarism and security policies have managed to contain the violence of "organized crime groups, urban street gangs, ... armed neo-

⁸³ Michael Molinski and Polya Lesova, "Colombia y Perú: Los 'nuevos tigres' latinoamericanos," *The Wall Street Journal América Latina*, July 26, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390443477104577549433882597546.html> (accessed October 15, 2012).

paramilitary gangs” and the FARC to a level acceptable to foreign investors’ calculations of “risk,” redefining Colombia as a good “host state” for global capital has also required the state to account for the everyday comportment of ordinary citizens left out of the “solid economic growth” the country has experienced since the early 2000s.

The past few years have seen an explosion of stories in the US media plugging the “renaissance” of Colombia as a tourist hotspot, nearly all of which open with a requisite statement testifying to the country’s safety and hospitality. A recent New York Times article on Santa Marta is emblematic of this discourse, averring that even though guerrillas, prostitutes, and petty criminals rendered the city-off limits to tourism up until a few years ago, “the city has made great strides toward putting its bloody, drug-riddled past behind it.”⁸⁴ Santa Marta is “no longer plagued by the kidnappings and killings that kept tourists away for decades,” and even though “petty crime remains a problem,” the city’s inhabitants are warming up to a new code of ethical living. Evan Dore, an American hostel-owner, attests to the pacification and new-found civility of the local culture, assuring the reader that “the city is full of people going about their daily lives, going to work or selling things on the street with almost no interest in a foreigner walking around.” The article presents the relative peace attained by Santa Marta as much to the “government crackdown on illegal drug and paramilitary activity in the region” as to the money it has spent revamping the city’s parks and converting its streets into pedestrian zones. These reforms, along with the tourist-friendly businesses they have invited, have brought about a non-coercive release of the cultural “authenticity” that had

⁸⁴ Lionel Beehner, *On the Colombian Coast, Natural Beauty, Gritty Charm*, September 15, 2010, http://travel.nytimes.com/2010/09/19/travel/19nextstop.html?pagewanted=1&_r=0 (accessed October 20, 2012).

long been repressed by the city's links to the conflict. Contrasting present-day Santa Marta with his disappointing first visit to the city in 1981, Dore insists that development has finally brought the city up to speed with its true identity, or as he puts it, "the real South America I was searching for."

This image of Colombia now exported by the tourism industry—as an increasingly non-violent society capable of being civilized by urban renewal and the incursion of foreign capital—is reflected in Bogotá's discourse of its own transformation. Bogotá, as we have seen, has refashioned itself as a safe and civilized city through policies and public works that reorganize pedestrian and leisure spaces to foster a sense of community accountability, and give a potentially wayward public something to do. Citing these reforms, Bogotá now boasts a citizen body capable of getting along not only with itself, but also with a public sphere that is growing increasingly global. As one New York Times article points out, Bogotá won the City of Peace Prize in 2002-3, an award Unesco reserves only for cities which have achieved "a true urban conviviability."⁸⁵ The headline for this article succinctly sums up the new consensus on the city's readiness for tourism: "Bogotá is not just for the Brave Anymore."

The Bicentennial Center is the latest addition to the city's civilizing mission, joining the expansion of libraries, parks, and plazas in the city's larger project of creating pedagogical spaces that promote harmony and create a shared civic identity amongst

⁸⁵ Seth Kugel, *Bogotá Is Not Just for the Brave Anymore*, February 12, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/12/travel/12bogota.html> (accessed October 20, 2012).

citizens. López Obregón describes the “functions and characteristics of the Center” as follows:

To become a meeting point for peace initiatives and for the promotion of a pedagogy of International Humanitarian Law; a center for the promotion of a culture of peace and an active culture of non-violence: a center to forge civic culture around the search for truth, justice and reparation; and a center to support the formulation of proposals and policies for reparation, for moral, symbolic, and psychological reparation, and for collective reparation and that of different collectivities.⁸⁶

What is notable here is that, despite the museum’s relationship to the project of *national* reconciliation, the stated intention of the project is to produce a better *global* citizen, one versed in the culture, rhetoric, and practices of international human rights. This returns us to the questions raised earlier in this chapter: If Bogotá serves as a paradigm for urban development in a globalized world, how does it function, as a medium, to consolidate the kinds of affects, subjectivities, and politics that are thought to “make globalization possible?” Since the programming for the museum is still very much in flux, I will attempt to answer this questions through an analysis of the building’s architecture, its relationship to the surrounding landscape, and how it organizes affect and the movement of bodies in the public sphere.

The Bicentennial Center: Designing Catharsis

The defining feature of the Center’s architecture is the temporal narrative inscribed in its structure and façade. Using the same building materials found in local colonial architecture, the monolith is comprised of 200 layers of *tapia pisada* stabilized with cement, each of which is 7 centimeters high. These layers correspond to the 200

⁸⁶ Clara López Obregón, "Presentación del Centro del Bicentenario Memória, Paz y Reconciliación."

years of Colombia independence, with the ground-level layer signifying 1810, the year of its inception, and the top layer denoting 2010, the year of the bicentennial. The building's representation of the nation's temporality is not limited to its verticality—the horizontal axis, too, is divided up into units of time correlating to the 12 months of the year. Adding another dimension to this temporal tableau, the design of the building imagines the vertical axis as charting not only the years of Colombian statehood, but also the number of victims subjected to political violence during those years. The windows of the building are dispersed along these coordinates, plotting the number of lives lost to violence during each month of each year of Colombia's existence as an independent state. The façade of the monolith thus functions as a diagram, inscribing a visual snapshot of the nation's history of violence upon the architectural landscape of the city.⁸⁷

Visitors enter this space through an act of descent, either following the path of a downward-sloping ramp (on the east and west sides of the building), or walking down a set of stairs (on the north and south sides). Once inside, these distinct vectors of pedestrian traffic coalesce below ground-level, forming a contemplative community whose collective attention is marshaled upwards, towards the sunlight streaming in from the hundreds of windows⁸⁸ lining the walls of the monolith. [figure 15] Structurally long, narrow, and lined with apertures holding the symbolism of death, the design of the monolith simulates the architecture of the adjacent columbaria, positioning the viewer both on the inside looking out, in the space of death and victimization, and also on the

⁸⁷ For an illustration of this concept, and for more photos of the project, see http://www.el-muro.org/A/08/12_CB/1/1_JPO.html

⁸⁸ The precise number of windows is unclear from the plans for the building. If some months or years are not accounted for, structure may have only dozens, rather than hundreds of windows.

outside looking in, inhabiting the space of witnessing and mourning. In either case, the windows act as a portal connecting the living and the dead, replacing the shrouded enclosures of tombs with the illuminating transparency of windows, and emblemizing the Center's objective to shed light on the condition of victimhood in Colombia.



Figure 15: El Centro del Bicentenario, Juan Pablo Ortíz, 2009

The monumentality of the monolith, which measures approximately 46 feet⁸⁹ from ground level to the roof of the building, structures the process of mourning as a

⁸⁹ I estimated this by multiply the number of tapia pisada layers by the height of each one. This measurement was not indicated on architectural drawings of the Center made available on the web.

communal, rather than individual activity. This monumentality is underscored by the placement of the windows, all of which hover well above eye-level, echoing the clerestories of cathedral architecture, and triggering the reverential affects they evoke. Presenting a panoramic quantification of victimization, these windows harness the viewers' attention through a visual staging of the arithmetic sublime, shocking and humbling the visiting public with a representation of the sheer magnitude of suffering endured by the Colombian people, while at the same time affirming the diagnostic powers of the state to know, manage, and make intelligible incomprehensible human loss through its technical expertise. Reverence for the dead becomes conflated here with a reverence for the authority of state, whose mastery of the quantitative technologies of modern governance allows for the distillation of a complex history into a single diagram, capable of being apprehended by the totalizing gaze of the viewer. The act of paying tribute becomes the path by which the visiting public acquires a shared command over the inscrutability of Colombian violence, restoring the coherence of the citizenry as a collective subject.

This aspect of the building's design, of course, fixes and naturalizes numbers and categories which are constantly under debate, installing the state's representations of historical reality as the consensual foundation of the "truth" the Center is supposed to uncover. As Winifred Tate explains in her ethnography of Colombian human rights NGOs, the new model of human rights work instituted in the 1990s was based on legal standards. Credibility in this context has demanded the presentation of quantifiable and veritable claims, making the production of statistics, especially concerning percentages of

“kinds of violations and kinds of perpetrators,” highly controversial and contested.⁹⁰ By monumentalizing its practices of calculation, and making its statistics a permanent, constitutive element of the Center’s architecture, the state institutes its own determinations of these categories as part of the common sense framing the contents, conversations, and activities which will be organized through the space. Despite the intention to use the Center as a space in which to interrogate legal definitions of “victimhood,” the structure of the building—as an institutionalized embodiment of the state’s statistics on violence, and understandings of the categories that inform them—effectively flattens and depoliticizes the very discourses that the museum project has pledged to complicate.

The building’s numerical plotting of statistics of violence against its temporal plotting of the Bicentennial lends, moreover, a deceptive air of internal consistency to categories whose meanings have shifted considerably over the course of Colombian history. By presenting “violence” as a coherent, transhistorical category of analysis, the façade’s graphic inscription of Colombia’s past erases the contexts and power relations that have discursively shaped how its distinctions have been interpreted and accounted for over time, reifying it into what Allen Feldman has described as a “commodity artifact for the marketplace of public emotion.”⁹¹ Notwithstanding the anticipated complexity of the dialogues that are slated to happen in the space, the design of the Center projects an operative understanding of “violence” as reducible to “death,” and decontextualizes it

⁹⁰ Winifred Tate, *Counting the Dead: The Culture and Politics of Human Rights Activism in Colombia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 118.

⁹¹ Allen Feldman, "Memory Theaters, Virtual Witnessing, and the Trauma-Aesthetic," *Biography* (University of Hawai'i Press) 27, no. 1 (Winter 2004), 169.

from the historical and geopolitical particularities that have contributed to Colombia's distinct formation as a site of chronic conflict.

This effacement of the particularities of the Colombian context is underscored by the Center's temporal conflation of the Bicentennial with the history of the conflict. The expansion of the time of victimization to include the entirety of Colombian history enables the abstraction of the Center's working definition of "violence," universalizing it, and making it consumable in ways consistent with established transitional justice models that call for collective therapeutics and a cathartic break from the past. Critical questions concerning which historical episodes are to be counted as part of the conflict, and which transgressions should be the subject of reparation and reflection, are visually elided in favor of a general celebration of "reconciliation" and premature pronouncements of "peace."

While the building's association of Colombian independence with the conflict would seem to suggest an understanding of violence as foundational to Colombian modernity, the windows of the monolith tell a different story. Referred to by the architects as "perforations," these windows—which appear as small, oblong slits scattered along the east and west walls of the structure—represent the violence as a collection of incisions, ruptures, and injuries marring two otherwise unbroken planes. Violence is figured as a physical trauma inflicted upon a generally robust and intact national anatomy. This trauma is not only aberrant, it is periodized and consigned to the past, terminating at a ceiling point corresponding to the Bicentennial year. Such periodizations of violence, Feldman notes, are normative aspects of the Truth Commission form, allowing for the petrification of historical trauma into an "object of

spectatorship” whose reentry into the present can be managed and controlled through “appropriate commemoration.”⁹² However much these protocols of commemoration may seek to keep memory alive in the present, their temporal enclaving of violence, Feldman argues, “already preselect[s] the restorative powers of legal, medical, media, and textual rationalities as post-violent,” creating strict distinctions between the time of reconciliation and the time of the conflict to be reconciled.⁹³ Even as the city government and museum coordinators acknowledge the persistence of the conflict in the contemporary moment, their association of the museum with the project of national reconciliation positions the Center, and the city itself, in an alternative time-space of post-violent reflection. It is through the fabrication of this retrospective vantage point that the project is able to align itself with the implausible, but familiar, post-atrocity injunction to non-repetition, despite the continued repetition of violence in the present.

This raises the question: how is this fulfillment of non-repetition envisioned, and how will the Center contribute to the attainment of this vision? In his presentation of the project, Samuel Moreno Rojas, former mayor of Bogotá, explains this in the following way:

[W]ithin the framework of transitional justice, in which the imposition of alternative punishment is accepted for the sake of the greater good that peace represents, truth and memory, that is, the social and public recognition of the evidence, become even more important: they are basic resources for moral reparation, which is often the most relevant, and with it, for strengthening social conscience and solidarity as a community. In this sense, the publicly acknowledged truth plays a crucial role in guaranteeing non-repetition. If we know it, if we do not forget it, we will not allow it to happen again.⁹⁴

⁹² Ibid., 170.

⁹³ Ibid., 164.

⁹⁴ Samuel Moreno Rojas, "Opening Remarks," 206.

Echoing the reparative model that has become a mainstay of the truth commission genre, Moreno Rojas conceives of peace as the natural outcome of a process whereby the public conversion of memory into collective knowledge occasions a social conversion of violence into non-violence. The symbolism of the Center's design, and its relationship to the topographical history of its location, reflects this curative trajectory. As mentioned above, the walls of the monolith will be composed of *tapia pisada*, a rammed earth comprised of soil, chalk, lime, and gravel used in Colombian colonial architecture. The earth used for the construction of these walls will be derived mainly from Santander and Boyacá—two departments where the first battles of Wars of Independence were fought—and then mixed with soil, donated by victims, from localities affected by the conflict. Representing the reconciliation of two presumably contradictory phenomena—Colombian statehood and the violence suffered by its subjects—the synthesis of these materials is emblematic of the Center's larger narrative of overcoming. Here, the excavation of the historical truth of the conflict resurrects the national body, figured as a wounded, but healing, survivor. It is also through this act of excavation that the earth—the raw material of burial and death—is able to reconstitute itself as reconstructed domestic space, emerging triumphantly from the space of interment.

Visitors physically engage with and become a part of this excavatory project through their prescribed programmatic relationship to the building. As mentioned above, entry into the Center requires visitors to follow a downward path leading below ground level, to the base of the monolith. Emerging from the former cemetery, the monolith itself functions as a vertical bridge traversing the world of the dead

(underground) and the world of the living (above ground). Visitors begin their journey in this liminal space, which they must leave in order to participate in the Center's programming, all of which takes place in halls adjacent to the entrance, which are entirely below ground. The indexical relationship of these halls to the erstwhile graveyard creates the effect of walking through a giant tomb or, more precisely, a mass grave, establishing the act of inhabiting the space as one of empathic identification between visitors and the bodies that were once buried there. The ritual facilitated by the Center, however, is focused less on dwelling on loss than it is transmuting this loss into transformative knowledge. Replacing the inertia of corpses with the revitalizing instruments of "living memory," the Center supplants the hollowed out cemetery with a pedagogical space which includes an auditorium, an exhibition room, a classroom, a documentation center, a site museum, and a victim's attention center where the public will be able to access therapeutic services that are more medicalized and less symbolic. The thrust of the activities to be carried out here emphasize gathering, collecting, and processing testimonial information and artifacts which will be later transferred to the official Bogotá archive, but the organizers also imagine it as a site in which to make testimonies public through commemorative events, seminars, and workshops that will "grant visibility to history." Perhaps most importantly, the museum directors intend for the Center to be used as a space of dialogue and political mobilization, a "meeting point for the initiatives of social organizations, analysis groups, universities and schools."⁹⁵ Through this collective process of "excavating" truth, of giving and receiving testimonial information,

⁹⁵ Clara López Obregón, "Presentación del Centro del Bicentenario Memoria, Paz y Reconciliación," 320.

the public re-emerges from graveyard of history resurrected as a living repository of knowledge, equipped to reenter the public sphere as an ethically-bonded community. “Truth” is the resuscitative instrument that enables the redemptive survival of the nation.

Origin Fantasies and the Fetish of Peace

This ritual occurs in conjunction with the transformation of the cemetery itself as an archival document to be read and examined for traces of truth. As discussed above, the Center's metaphorical excavation of history was staged against the literal excavation of Lot B of the Central Cemetery, an endeavor which was intended to reveal the buried details of state violence that occurred during the Bogotazo in 1948. According to popular legend, thousands of unidentified corpses were thought to be buried in a mass grave on the lot—victims of massacre at the hands of police and military forces who responded to mass protests with the use of indiscriminate violence. This exhumation, which has looked not unlike the gentrification-driven exhumations of corpses in other areas of the cemetery, was discursively recast as a benevolent act of political and historical redemption on the part of the government, which employed 20 full-time archaeologists to unearth and analyze the remains in order to "determine human rights violations on the part of the state," identify those assassinated, and "generate a new political culture" in Colombia.

Since the late 1980s, the exhumation and forensic analysis of human remains has become a dominant paradigm for the investigation of atrocities. Countering historical denial and revisionisms with the “objectivity” of physical evidence, the post-atrocity

practice of excavation has served to empirically validate the confessional trauma narrative, supplementing the curative power of testimony with the technical mastery of scientific analysis.⁹⁶ Celebrated as the “largest excavation in Latin American history,” this latest episode of the cemetery’s exhumation delivers a deployment of scientific expertise on par with the scale of trauma suffered by the nation, opposing the ordering capacities of scientific knowledge to the disorder of bones and history.

The montage produced by the visual juxtaposition of this ruinscape to the modern aesthetic of the Center’s architecture resonates with Feldman’s analysis of what he calls the “scopic regime” of human rights. Reviving the “post-mortem aesthetic” of the public anatomical dissection theaters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, human rights inquiry and the confessional trauma narratives they generate open “not only the speech, but also the body of the political victim, in the form of accounts of terror and pain.” Both performances, he points out, “enact a common Enlightenment speculum that opposes culture, hierarchical vision, and diagnostic intervention to unruly material violence, dis-ease, and the pathogenic.”⁹⁷ As an “Enlightenment stand-in,” human rights testimony therefore creates a “regime of truth” which dichotomizes the transparency of the trauma narrative to the “murky density of embodied suffering and institutional indifference and denial,” invoking the diagnostic and redressive protocols of legal, medical, therapeutic and, in our case, archaeological frameworks to make legible the experience of victimization and authenticate the comparative civility of emergent political orders over previous ones.

⁹⁶ Layla Renshaw, *Exhuming Loss: Memory, Materiality, and Mass Graves of the Spanish Civil War* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2011).

⁹⁷ Allen Feldman, "Memory Theaters, Virtual Witnessing, and the Trauma-Aesthetic," 167.

In a transnationalized world, the need to demarcate, through performance and iconography, disorderly political matter and spaces of death and violence from supposedly civil terrains of order discourse and rationality becomes a political ceremony. David Harvey has called this the pathologization of social space, a demarcation that creates arenas of judgment and didactic spaces of disorder... In many instances the mediatization of witnessing through commissions of inquiry or electronic circulation is but the creation, replication, and enforcement of such difference, marking virtual boundaries in a world rife with political complicity, leaky ideological borders, and interspatial accountability. The erection of virtual boundaries throws up virtual figures of disorder that require *cordon sanitaire*. These historical ghosts... partake in a provisional subjecthood that is polarized to enlightenment vision and lends itself to various objectification practices.⁹⁸

Like the “political ceremonies” discussed in this passage, the theater of excavation staged by the city’s exhumation of the Central Cemetery lays bare the ruins of history to draw a distinction between the order of the Bicentennial Center’s enlightened orchestration of organized witnessing and the chaos of past state terror. The city relies on the rhetoric of pathologization in its justification of the project, positing the excavation’s retrieval of historical knowledge as the antidote to the lack of public consciousness surrounding the lasting impact of the events of April 9th. The popular cemetery, in this discourse, figures as a reservoir of undiagnosed afflictions demanding a postmortem inspection to identify the cause and magnitude of the nation’s social ills, and a purgative cleansing to ensure its expulsion from the collective body. The knowledge derived from this investigatory process constitutes the vaccine that will prevent its recontamination. A resolution on the project drafted by members of the city council, for example, makes explicit connections between the haphazard collection and interment of corpses in the aftermath of the Bogotazo and the social derangements coloring Colombia’s recent political history,

⁹⁸ Ibid., 197.

making the case that political healing in the contemporary moment requires a cathartic return to the originary trauma of the massacres of 1948:

[A]ccording to an article in El Tiempo newspaper on April 16th, 1948...: “identifying the numerous cadavers is totally impossible. The overcrowding in the three cemeteries constitutes a macabre spectacle... the death certificates are issued blank... on April 14th in the Central Cemetery, one of our reporters was able to observe no less than 300 cadavers piled up, many of them in a state of decay. Some of these cadavers were found thrown onto the pavement near the entrance, others onto the southern sector of the cemetery and the majority in the harrowing stacks that were made in the police mausoleum, and others in sites destined for posthumous dwellings of a collective nature...”

Massacres such as those of April 9th continued to present themselves in subsequent years, like those of 1954 and 1957 and, more recently, the macabre slaughters on the part of paramilitary groups in various regions of Colombia. The most recent case of state and paramilitary violence was the extermination of the Patriotic Union. Likewise, the assassinations of Jaime Pardo Leal, Bernardo Jaramillo, Luis Carlos Galán, among others. All these crimes, however, have remained in absolute impunity.

Colombia requires the uncovering of the truth about the grave violations of human rights by the state that occurred on April 9th and during subsequent decades. An understanding of the truth and historical memory is essential so that such acts of state violence are not repeated; this would facilitate the recovery of the dignity of the victims, allowing their descendants and society in general the possibility of honoring them, and permitting a comprehensive means of reparation, as a people who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Caicedo, et al., *Proyecto de Acuerdo No. 370 de 2008*.

“[S]egún un artículo del periódico El Tiempo del 16 de abril de 1948... ‘la identificación de los numerosos cadáveres es totalmente imposible. Los hacinamiento hechos en los tres cementerios constituyen un espectáculo macabro... las boletas de defunción se expiden en blanco... en el cementerio central uno de nuestros cronistas pudo observar el miércoles 14 de abril no menos de 300 cadáveres amontonados y muchos de ellos en estado de putrefacción. Parte de estos cadáveres se encontraba tirado sobre los pavimentos cercanos a la portada, otros sobre los sitios del sector sur de cementerio y la mayor parte en el horripilante hacinamiento que fue hecho en el panteón de la policía y otros en los sitios destinados a la morada póstuma de algunas entidades de carácter colectivo.’”

“Masacres como las del 9 de abril se siguieron presentando en los años siguientes como las de 1954 y 1957, y mas recientemente las macabras Matanzas por cuenta de los grupos paramilitares en varios regiones de Colombia. El caso mas reciente de violencia estatal y paramilitar fue el exterminio de la Unión Patriótica. Igualmente los magnicidios de Jaime Pardo Leal, Bernardo Jaramillo, Luis Carlos Galán, entre otros. Sin embargo, todos estos crímenes, han quedado en la más absoluta impunidad.

This representation of the violence of the Bogotazo is similar to what Saidiya Hartman, citing Laplanche and Pontalis, has described as a “fantasy of origins.” “Akin to collective myths,” she explains, “such fantasies ‘provide a representation of and solution to whatever constitutes a major enigma for the child’ and ‘dramatise the primal moment or original point of departure of a history.’”¹⁰⁰ Invoking this psychoanalytic logic, the city council’s proposal for the excavation represents the events of April 9th as the “origin of the subject,” the primal scene from which subsequent “symptoms” (e.g. violent episodes, historical traumas, failed expressions of political modernity) have developed. In revisiting the remains of that day, dignifying the anonymous dead through identification and naming, and rectifying the amnesias of history through forensic technologies of truth-telling, the excavation provides the raw material for *working through* what is presented as the founding moment of the current conflict, as well as *working on* the compulsive repetition of its symptoms in the present. As an act of redress, the exhumation and examination of bones promises to bring closure to the traumatic event and facilitate a therapeutic healing intended to attenuate its cyclical returns, staging a process of recovery which transforms urban space into a “concrete unconscious” to be

Colombia requiere el esclarecimiento de la verdad sobre las graves violaciones de los derechos humanos por parte del Estado ocurridas el 9 de abril y en décadas posteriores. El conocimiento de la verdad y la memoria histórica es fundamental para que los hechos de violencia estatal no se repitan, lo cual permitirá la recuperación de la dignidad de las víctimas, facilitando a sus descendientes y a la sociedad en general la posibilidad de honrarlas y permitir la reparación en forma integral, ya que un pueblo que no conoce su historia esta condenado a repetirla.”

¹⁰⁰ Saidiya Hartman, "Time of Slavery," *South Atlantic Quarterly* (Duke University Press) 101, no. 4 (2002): 766.

tapped and interpreted towards the ends of collective psychic healing and behavioral remediation.¹⁰¹

The symbolism of the mass grave is of particular significance to this process. In Colombia, the mass grave has become an icon representing the mechanization of violence. Depicted as the inaugural mass grave among many in a long trajectory of war, the excavation of the Central Cemetery allows for a literal return to the repressed origins of the conflict, as well as for a symbolic reckoning with the violence in its current form.

Coincidentally, the largest mass grave in the history of the conflict was accidentally discovered outside of a Colombian army base in La Macarena in 2010, at the same moment that the excavation in Bogotá was underway. Like the exhumation of the Central Cemetery, the discovery of this mass grave unearthed the bodies of approximately 2000 victims, alleged guerillas who were killed and buried by the Colombian army under the supervision of U.S. military advisers.¹⁰² In contrast to the exhumation in Bogotá, however, the state did not ceremoniously declare its commitment to identifying those interred. Rather, the bodies were buried in secret, without undergoing the standard military protocol of having the government certify that those murdered were indeed illegal combatants. Those buried were widely suspected of being

¹⁰¹ I appropriated the idea of a “concrete unconscious” from Jennifer González’s use of the term in her essay “Archeological Devotion,” which discusses the installation practices of Amalia Mesa-Bains, Renée Stout, and Jenni Lukac. See Jennifer González, “Archeological Devotion,” in *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture*, ed. Lisa Bloom (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

¹⁰² Dan Kovalik, *U.S. and Colombia Cover Up Atrocities Through Mass Graves*, April 1, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dan-kovalik/us-colombia-cover-up-atro_b_521402.html (accessed September 2012).

“false positives”—civilian victims of extrajudicial killing falsely presented as guerrilla by the Colombian military.¹⁰³

Returning to Feldman’s insights in the quotation above, the contradictions between these two scenes of mass burial compel us to ask: What virtual boundaries are erected through the topographical inscription of the state’s narrative of transitional justice onto city space? What political complicities and ways of knowing the violence are occluded in the process?

As I have been arguing, for the Colombian state, like many other states that have dealt with political transitions, the primary boundary distinguishing political order from political disorder takes the form of a *temporal* demarcation—the state itself, in its older, supposedly more repressive iteration, becomes the “figure of disorder” against which the emergent transitional state must define and inoculate itself. In the case of Colombia, the need for this temporal boundary is particularly pronounced, since, in the absence of an official regime change, the persuasiveness of the state’s claims to nonviolence rest on the plausibility of its democratic progress narrative. Aligning itself with the time of nonviolence, the state’s contemporary transgressions, such as the mass grave in La Macarena, become discursively and symbolically sanitized as anachronistic eruptions of violence that the government is in the process of working on, and working through.

The temporality of the now post-violent Colombian state is spatially expressed through the physical erasure of the remains of political violence in the Central Cemetery, and their substitution with the unity and consensus symbolized by the Bicentennial Center. With this transformation of space, the city vacates the unresolved histories

¹⁰³ I provide a fuller discussion of the false positives scandal in the footnotes in chapter 2.

embodied by the accumulated layers of anonymous corpses, associating the nation's present moment with future reconciliation and imminent peace. But insofar as the anonymous burials of the Bogotazo operate as a metonym for the mechanized violence of the present, the establishment of the Center proves to be reflective less of an aspired-for peace-in-the-making, than an erroneous projection of an already-achieved national intactness. Echoing Laura Mulvey's account of the Freudian fetish, the city, under the combined auspices of national reconciliation and urban renewal, returns to the originary site of trauma to replace the "ugliness and anxiety" of its residual traces of political repression with a "phantasmatic topography" which masks and disavows the unfinished business of the conflict.¹⁰⁴ The idea of "peace," reified as the outcome of collective therapeutics, reveals itself as a fetish object rife with disavowals, denouncing sensationalized episodes of violence and atrocity while naturalizing the everyday political and economic arrangements that enable their repetition. Reducing culpability to armed groups and individuals, the fetish of peace disavows the role of the state's continued complicity with global capitalism and foreign military aid in fueling the conflict and, consequently, disavows the meaningful structural transformations that would have to take place for the elimination of violence to become a genuine possibility—transformations that cannot be addressed through choreographed performances of mourning, redemption, and national consensus.

¹⁰⁴ Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 5.

Resistant Ruinscapes

In an unexpected narrative turn, the fetish of peace, and the consensus it promotes, has been undermined by the outcome of the excavation itself. In July 2011, the city publicly presented the preliminary results of the project, revealing a forensic archive which yielded no signs of death by firearms. Of the two thousand corpses examined, the archaeologists could not find any evidence of the state violence of April 9th. Moreover, they found that the burials were not consistent with the characteristics of mass graves, leading them to conclude that the victims were most likely legally buried in the cemetery columbaria.¹⁰⁵ In the face of these findings, museum officials swiftly abandoned their initial rationale for the exhumation, which anticipated a seamless connection between the exhumation of the remains and the truth-dealing objectives of the Bicentennial Center project. What was supposed to have been a pivotal moment of collective reckoning with the state's history of atrocities became a giddy, if somewhat disinterested, disclosure of "how Bogotanos lived" between 1800-1970, the years the bodies were interred.¹⁰⁶ Hoping to discover corpses riddled with police and military bullets, the city was instead left with an assemblage of everyday curiosities including teeth made of gold and black onyx, the clothing and belongings with which the bodies were buried, and examples of the femur and hip prosthetics that were once commonly used. At its most "scientific," the excavation revealed that many of these bodies suffered

¹⁰⁵ *Concluye Excavación Arqueológica en el Cementerio Central*, June 2011, <http://cafe-y-tertulia.blogspot.com/2011/06/concluye-excavacion-arqueologica-en-el.html> (accessed August 2012).

¹⁰⁶ Sánchez Alvarado, *Exhumación de cuerpos revela cómo eran los bogotanos de hace 2 siglos*.

from bone diseases, and that Bogotanos, in general, used to be much smaller in stature.¹⁰⁷ In short, the exhumation revealed not much more than the everyday traumas of life, death, and urban poverty—traumas so mundane they could not be recognized as traumas as all, but rather curious histories to be studied for relatively trivial details.¹⁰⁸

The quotidian character of the exhumed remains has thwarted the core premise informing the city's justification for transforming the cemetery into a site for the Center—the presumption that this lot could function as a literal and symbolic origin point for the history of the conflict. Instead of paying homage to the victims of state violence, visitors to the Center will walk amidst a former graveyard which once held remains with much more varied and ambiguous genealogies—remains which cannot fit easily into the prescribed narratives of truth, redemption, and redress emplotted¹⁰⁹ by the aesthetics of transitional justice. These remains withhold the satisfaction of providing a primal scene, leaving the public with a proliferation of symptoms which cannot be healed through the exorcism of a single historical event. Resisting all promises of “closure,” these bones have resurfaced as intransigent specters attesting to the inability of transitional justice, in its existing conception, to convert violence into peace.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Feldman uses this term to refer to the practice of processing biographical narrative through prescriptive expectations.

¹¹⁰ Williams, *A Divided World*, 74.

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