

Mujeres Se Levantan Por Mujeres: The Naked Body and Social Protest in Bogotá, Colombia

Rebecca Mercado Thornton

I once considered myself a radical feminist; then I stumbled upon a protest performance in the streets of downtown Bogotá, Colombia. Now I know how limited my interpretation of feminism was and how conservative my protest praxis is. The performance recorded and preserved above is an unrestrained public demonstration of resistance against institutionalized religious dogma that makes it illegal for women to have abortions in Colombia. What this performance represents is the potentiality of the naked body and sound in subverting dominant ideology, cultural and legal tyranny. The naked body and sound serve as rebellious interlocutors—speaking in a universal language and defying the legal and cultural constraints imposed on women’s bodies.

I found myself in Bogotá in 2010 after I wrote a grant proposing to complete a local news analysis project for a women’s rights group called SISMA Mujer.¹ This news analysis left me indoors all day, staring at screens and mulling over archives. Suddenly, while I was working at the office one morning, excitement and energy buzzed all around me. The women at SISMA Mujer were gearing up for a sizeable protest. Not knowing why or where we were headed, I agreed to attend the protest with the rest of the women from the of-

Rebecca Mercado Thornton (Ph.D. Ohio University) is an assistant professor in the department of Communication and Journalism at Oakland University in Rochester, MI. Her research focuses on how economic, political, and social encroachments influence the way women narrate their lives, identity, and culture. Her research appears in journals such as the *Journal of Latino/Latin American Studies*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, and *Departures in Qualitative Research*. She teaches courses in Performance, Family Communication, Race and Communication, Communication Theory, and Multicultural Communication.

¹ SISMA Mujer is a nongovernmental organization that serves to defend women’s human rights and encourages political action for the protection of women’s rights in Colombia. I worked alongside this organization to complete an analysis of the local media coverage of violence against women since the passing of Ley 1257. Ley 1257 was passed in Colombia in December of 2008. This law serves to adopt regulations that guarantee all women a life free from violence.

face. On the *TransMilenio*, I inquired the journalistic questions; the who, the what, the when, the where, and the why.

On that ride and on that day, I received a frank lesson about the complexities of colonization and patriarchy that was unmatched by my feminist education at predominately white institutions in the United States. Prior to this day, my learning was anchored in an ethnocentric and egregiously patriotic perspective. Not until my doctoral program at Ohio University, did I learn about the brutal colonization of South America by Europeans, which was edified by the supposed mission of spreading Catholicism.² And as a result of my own Mexican-American, conservative Catholic upbringing, I was no stranger to the religious, patriarchal forces which police women's bodies and behaviors. But Colombia—and the exigencies which prompted this demonstration—was a bit more expansive and complicated than a mere course on (post)colonial theory. There on the streets of Bogotá, I discovered I was just as old school as the rest of the Mercados.

A *Muy* Brief Lesson on Colombia

Catholicism is so engrained in the dominant culture of Colombia (and much of “Latin America”), that the separation between church and state sounds like a chimera—religion rules politics, land, bodies, and minds. For instance, in 2006, because of a heinous sexual assault by a stepfather against his eleven-year-old daughter, abortion was legalized only in the incidents of rape, a badly deformed fetus, and/or when a woman's body is in danger.³ Before this case, abortion was completely illegal in Colombia. Although this case was fought all the way up to the highest court in Colombia, abortion was still widely and overwhelmingly opposed. In fact, church officials threaten to excommunicate the medical staff that performed the abortion on that eleven-year-old. To this day, even in the cases when it is legal to perform an abortion, they are rarely received in Colombia.⁴ This is not difficult for me to imagine given the present conservative political rhetoric—which attacks reproductive rights in the United States—is also insidiously entrenched in religious code.

Women's reproductive rights should be basic human rights particularly when one considers the lived realities of women in a country with a history compounded by colonization, violent governmental and paramilitary polarization, and oppression. Like most of “Latin America,” Colombia was violently

² My introduction to this history of colonization was through reading James Loewen's *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

³ McDermott, Jeremy. (25 August 2006). "First legal abortion in Colombia." *BBC News* (Bogota). Retrieved 4 April 2014.

⁴ Maloney, Anastasia. (14 February 2009). "Unsafe abortions common in Colombia despite law change." *The Lancet*. Retrieved 4 April 2014.

depopulated by European expansionists and then violently repopulated by the conquistadors in the 16th century.⁵ For hundreds of years, the topography was victimized by war; for colonization, then for independence, and now for political control.

For the past fifty years, Colombia has been in an internal armed conflict, and arguably, women have suffered the worst of it. Paramilitaries and guerilla groups (mostly in more rural regions) plunder and exploit women for political gain and control. They leave women behind raped, beaten, and sometimes even killed.⁶ Gender based violence is pervasive throughout the world and Colombia is not immune. However, the burden of violence is hammered by the weight of imposed religious convictions, which renders abortion not only sinful but outright illegal.

The *Procuraduría General de Colombia* was charged with protecting basic human rights in Colombia. This governmental agency was formed because of the precarious position citizens are in as a result of the armed conflict, and they are failing. This institution, like much of the political leadership in Colombia (and arguably in the United States), cannot separate their personal, religious morals from the creation and implementation of public policy which effect women's lives and bodies.

On this day in 2010, we unified to dissent. Women, men, and people in between, arrived, gathered, and performed in large numbers at the *Procuraduría General de Colombia's* doorstep. The video above demonstrates the bold resistance to the occupation of religious ascriptions on women's bodies and to undermine paradigms of patriarchy.

Olas of Protest

On this cloudy December morning, radical *Colombianos* organized to resist this imposition of religious dogma in ways that made even liberal ole' me gape. The protesters arrived in waves; the SISMA Mujer group and our bags of black and purple T-shirts, the colorful painted mimes on stilts, the lesbian drummer band with purple bandanas across their faces, and then arrived the most daring of protesters — brave women baring painted letters across their naked chests.

⁵ McFarlane, Anthony. *Colombia Before Independence: Economy, Society, and Politics under Bourbon Rule*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

⁶ The United Nations. (2013). "Educational communication strategy within the integral programme against gender based violence." United Nations Website. Retrieved 4 April 2014.

Ola One

When the women of SISMA Mujer walked up the concrete steps of the headquarters of the *Procuraduría General de Colombia*, we were determined to be as loud as possible. In our black grocery bags, we had big hot pink and purple clown wigs and puffy tutus that we slipped over our jeans. Our shirts displayed *dichos* such as, “Keep your rosaries off my ovaries.” But our dress and megaphones paled in comparison to *Toque Lésbico*. First came the cacophony of the drums, rolling in towards us from the gaps between the skyscrapers of downtown Bogotá. We heard, long before we saw, the drummers. They tied purple bandanas around their neck as a means of signifying their queerness. *Toque Lésbico* established their presence with each flick of their wrist; they did not wait to be recognized, they commanded it. Again, because of religious ideology embedded in the law and culture, same-sex unions are not just ignored but nonexistent. On this day, however, no one could ignore the whistle that jarred the attention of everyone that stood outside, and especially not those who pretended to be at work inside the headquarters. I imply that the drumming, whistling, and chanting are a means to disrupt the silence surrounding the colonization of women’s bodies and demand their sexual and reproductive rights. These women were both seen and heard. Their physical position in the center of the protest and as the loudest entity earned *Toque Lésbico* one of the most powerful authorial voices of the protest performance.

Ola Two

Silence, usually being at the center of a mime’s performance, was “played” with by the raucous sounds of drumsticks grating the ridges of a tin can. The mimes’ actions; dancing, drumming, and smiling played with the dimensions of their traditional performance. Although they incorporated their whole bodies, they also diverted from their typical silent disposition. I assert that their subversion of silence was a symbolic act of resistance to traditional parameters of the mime performance. They adhered to some of the “rules” of the mime tradition; the unwavering smile, the balancing stilts, the jester costume, but, they not-so-subtly broke the essence of a mime’s performance—vocal silence. The role of mimes and performance activism in Bogotá, was duly analyzed in the dissertation of a colleague, Dr. Karen Greiner.⁷

She noted that mimes are a “playful” way to engage the citizenry and open dialogue about power, communication, and social change in Bogotá, which is visible in the video. The mimes smiled through their painted faces, but their

⁷ Greiner, Karen. *Exploring Dialogic Social Change*. Electronic Thesis or Dissertation. Ohio University, 2010. OhioLINK Electronic Theses and Dissertations Center. 14 Apr 2014.

“play” was markedly different and purposeful in this case. I understood their acts are a means to draw the audience’s attention to and with their drums and cans to signify and amplify their stance with those who stand against the government’s ban on reproductive justice.

Ola Three

The six women, some wearing no more than a tutu around their waste and Chuck Taylor’s on their feet, were positioned out front and out loud of the headquarters of the *Procuraduría General de Colombia*. Their naked chests and necks were painted in a pattern of green, red, and white. They were the most obvious and subversive performance which captivated my attention and interest. Women’s bodies—the very subject of criminalization in this country which cannot extract its religion from its politics—are the most powerful objects to confront this amalgamation. In their organizing and disrobing they show us and encourage us to identify with one another. Identification is a necessary step to persuading women to organize and protest.⁸ Their naked bodies illustrate that we are unified by the biological and material “facts” of being women.⁹ Their bodies became the site of access in seeing and understanding that an institutional ban against abortion is not a private matter but a public assault on all women’s bodies. This unification is a crucial step to organizing, confronting, and transforming a government ruled by religion to one ruled by its public.

By exposing their breasts on the front steps of the headquarters, the women also call attention to and upset the conservatism and patriarchy ingrained in the law and dominant culture. As the law stands, allowing abortion in only three instances, serves to contain the female body and seize it as property of the state. These women are not revealing their breasts as a means of sexualization or exploitation, but rather to fiercely critique and rebel against a system, which institutionally silences them, in a mode of communication that many can easily access and understand. No one I saw in the streets that day could ignore naked women covered in body paint, propped above one of the busiest streets in downtown Bogotá. And their mere naked bodies speak louder and further than if voices and words were behind a megaphone. Barbara Sutton’s article, *Naked Protest: Memories of Bodies and Resistance at the World Social Forum*, informs us that naked protest are not entirely novel but they are still compelling.¹⁰ Their version of nakedness, on their terms, much like the protesters at the World Social Forum, starkly confront dominant representations of the nude female body, which serve to sexually objectify it, and disrupts the everyday social order.

⁸ Burke, Kenneth. *Rhetoric of Motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950.

⁹ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge Press, 1990.

¹⁰ Sutton, Barbara (2007). Naked Protest: Memories of Bodies and Resistance at the World Social Forum. *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, 8(3), 139-148.

These women appear comfortable and confident in their own naked bodies, standing to be seen by not only the *Procuraduría General de Colombia*, but the city of Bogotá—and in the age of digitalization—countless others. This powerful performance of social protest continues to talk back to me years later, and back to the state, which seeks to control them.

Mujeres se Levantan por Mujeres

There are many possible interpretations to this video of a protest performance. I constituted my meanings here, which may not be accessible to all audiences of this video. The video cannot capture the richness of a having “been there” experience¹¹. I can only offer partial truths, from a gaze that is filtered through a non-native Colombian perspective with my pro-choice politics and novice camera technique and video editing skills.

What this video might offer is a small window of sight into how the Colombian female body could be a site of resistance against institutional and cultural patriarchy and religious ideology. As Laura Briggs explains in her treatise about U.S. imperialism in Puerto Rico, by positioning women’s bodies and sexuality as deviant the state justifies and necessitates the exertion of paternalistic power.¹² By standing on the steps of the *Procuraduría General de Colombia*, protesters not only undermine this conservative cultural tyranny, but they also draw attention to the absurdity of women “needing” a law to protect their bodies from their own sexual and reproductive choices.

The powerful nuances of this protest can be seen and understood without words. The power of this protest is embedded in the visual and auditory elements of the performance, not the semantics. What I find so compelling about this protest is that language was part of the backdrop and the body and sound were the primary focus of the performance. This performance reveals the limits of language, which is fixed with the same patriarchal and religious ideology that the protesters are struggling against. As Butler writes, “language assumes and alters its power to act upon the real through locutionary acts, which, repeated, become entrenched practices and, ultimately, institutions.”¹³ By singing instead of chanting (which I have experienced at demonstrations in the U.S.), and by standing naked, they resist the institutionalization and possible coopting of their subversive act. But more importantly, the performance demonstrates the dissenting potential of the naked body and sound in protesting the legal and cultural colonization of women’s bodies.

¹¹ Wolcott, Harry. *The Art of Fieldwork*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1995.

¹² Briggs, Laura. *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

¹³ Butler, 158.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike International 4.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA