Where the Air Feels Heavy: Boredom and the Textures of the Aftermath

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Set between an evocation and an ethnographic documentary, this essay explores aspects of aftermath of terror as an affective experience. Working through visuals and writing, I recall banal moments that disrupt the politics of forgetting by showing forms of remembrance through spaces, looks, or moments of simplicity. These moments signal leakages in official definitions of memory in otherwise classified spaces of nothingness, lethargy, and apathy. The article thus extends the evocative potential of photography and narrative writing as means to engage with multidimensional and hazy expressions of the experience of the aftermath of terror. [Colombia, evocative documentary, memory, photography, terror]

Introduction

Colombians tend to describe certain places as marked by heaviness. El ambiente se siente pesado, which literally refers to a feeling of the heaviness of the air or environment, is an expression used many times to refer to the power of sopor produced by heat and also by silence. It refers to the force of the swiftness of the wind that covers towns and places where things have happened, but where nothing seems to be happening. The image of a place that “feels heavy” can be that of a dusty plaza under a sweltering sun, where the weight of history and acts of violence permeate the density and the quality of the air. It is a place where fictions of imagined realities linger behind a pair of cheap Ray Bans, under a cracked park bench, or next to a cross with dry flowers on the side of the road. This photographic article takes seriously these spaces and moments where imagination and reality are blurred. It engages the affective qualities of memory and explores its possibilities as a means to narrate the subtlety of the experience of the aftermath of terror in a Colombian town where paramilitaries massacred more than 30 men on November 22, 2000.1

In what follows, I engage the memory of the massacre of Nueva Venecia, sometimes as a bodily experience, other times as a tremor of the spirits or simple dreamlike relationships with the emptiness of place. All of these are moments folded in the crevices of boredom that are part of the simplicity of the everyday. They are moments through which the linearity of time and the apparent banality of passivity are broken down by ordinary, unexpected, sometimes dreamlike, surreal, or imaginary acts of memory making.
Boredom is a warm and gray fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colorful of silks. In this fabric we wrap ourselves up when we dream. We are at home then in the arabesques of its lining. But the sleeper looks bored and gray within his sheath. And when he later wakes and wants to tell of what he dreamed, he communicates by and large only this boredom. For who would be able at one stroke to turn the lining of time to the outside? Yet to narrate dreams signifies nothing else. [Benjamin 1999, The Arcades Project]

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During the 1990s, Colombia saw the rise of previously isolated groups of heavily armed men, consolidated into a national armed movement—the so-called Colombian Self Defense Groups (Autodefensas Unidades de Colombia [AUC]). Through vicious forms of violence and terror such as massacres, the AUC claimed to defend the rights of landowners, to regain territories traditionally dominated by leftist guerrillas—especially the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN), the two largest guerrilla groups in the country—and to impose “order” through the elimination of any traces of communism and guerrilla warfare or ideology. On November 22, 2000, Nueva Venecia, a small town in the Colombian Caribbean, was the site of one such massacre. Under the orders of Jorge 40, the paramilitaries declared that inhabitants of Nueva Venecia were “collaborators” of left-wing guerrillas whose presence had been felt for more than a decade in the swamplands that surround the town. That night, 60 heavily armed paramilitaries, some drunk and high, stormed the small town of 4,000 inhabitants, claiming to be in search of four men. Enraged because they could not find these men, they murdered more than 30 innocent fishermen, not only killing but also dismembering some of their victims. Besides the terror of the act, this labeling of innocent people as collaborators further stained the memory of those who died, as well as the lives of those who lived through the event.

In 2003, the AUC was dismantled. Since then, there have been many efforts in Colombia to deal with the consequences of this period of violence, such as the creation of Law 975 of 2005, better known as the Ley de Justica y Paz. This law aimed to facilitate peace processes and the reintegration into civil society of the members of illegal armed groups, thus guaranteeing the rights of the victims to truth, justice, and reparation. As a result, the Comisión Nacional de Reconciliación y Reparación (CNRR) was created as an institution similar to a truth commission to ensure the memory of the victims of the conflict in general—that is, victims from actions by both guerrilla and paramilitary groups. Some of the objectives of the CNRR have thus been the production of official reports and collective actions in places where massacres took place (CNRR 2008). Besides these governmental projects, there have also been initiatives by social movements in the forms of investigations, rallies, and public performances.
that derived from a constant unease with the act of just speaking about. Rather, when approaching the possibilities of life in such scenarios of terror, it was more suitable to read and interact with them through forms where imagination, reality, and truth were neither denied nor privileged, but rather relocated to their ambiguous nature, to a constant infection of one by the other. Many times I imagined the real process through which murdered bodies decayed into the waters, creating a polluted substance full of residues and detritus of themselves and their lives, wondering what it meant to live within this substance. I also found myself staring at places like empty patios or sandy beaches where bodies once lay. The documentation of the fleeting moment, a time lapse when one is able to feel the presence of absence, when the past inhabiting the present is palpable in some way, thus required the use of various mediums that could make these fragmentary moments visible, or at least imaginable.

An exploration of photography, sound, and writing understood as poetic forms with documentary purposes facilitated a sensitivity to the conditions of place and its inhabiting, creating the possibility of an interaction with the experience more closely related to speaking nearby (see Minh-ha 1991). In turn, this allowed me to interact with memory as more than a defined experience, category, or academic concept. Rather, I conceived memory as an inchoate experience that begins to form, develop, and take shape at moments, some of them unexpected, contingent on history and discourses, some also on luck, emotion, and even more violence. Memory is not a thing that we can simply delimit, but is rather a fluid process of becoming, where bits and pieces are put together in unexpected ways, through instances when the past comes about in momentary impulses, flashes, and fleeting images.

In his film Sans Solei, Marker (1983) relies on the disconnected and banal as a collection of ordinary fragments that mimic the way memory actually works as a fragmentary and unexpected form of recollections (Schlenker 2009). Marker’s use of fragments, juxtaposition, and his attention to banality set forth the possibilities of poetic forms that, situated between creating and documenting, could thus engage these fragmentary forms of reality. Other films, such as Taijiri’s (1991) History and Memory (for Akiko and Takashige), also address the relationship between documentary and the expressive through the poetics of imagination and its relation to reality. By juxtaposing personal stories, popular movies, objects, and invented memories of the Japanese interment camps during World War II, Taijiri re-creates moments and histories that have been forgotten by those who experienced it—or
reshaped by official and popular propaganda. The film thus locates the centrality of imagination and juxtaposition for the engagement of the presence of absence.

Similarly, Elizabeth Edwards has argued for the possibilities of rethinking anthropology and photography as a counter-inductive enterprise, as a creative photographic expressive that “constitutes and is constituted by a cogent, coherent interrogation, expression and interpretation of the subject and its significances within the full range of the medium’s characteristics” (Edwards 1997:57). She points to alternative photographic spaces of representation and production pushing the limits of photography as ethnographic and its relation to verisimilitude, searching for the intersecting space between the aesthetic expressive and the ethnographic documentary (Edwards 1997:63–67). Because the photographic medium is prone to ambiguity, fragmentation, and emotive properties—what some have actually seen as its flaws for the representation of “truth”—components of culture that precisely require a more evocative, multidimensional, even ambiguous expression than the realist documentary paradigm permits can be expressed or at least suggested through such poetic possibilities.

These works—together with other groundbreaking films such as Robert Gardner’s Forest of Bliss (1986)—have shown the documentary possibilities of an expressive practice, where visual images, sounds, and other senses as sources of experience are suitable means for the articulation of different forms of being in the world, enabling sensory interactions, interruptions, and representations of historical situations and relationships of power (Feld and Brenneis 2004; MacDougall 2006; Minh-ha 1991). The semi-visible, the partially present, even the haunting are therefore more than topics of theoretical analysis but maybe more so, subjects of a critical expressive documentary.

So it is to the lived experiences of dreams, of fantasies and imaginations, to empty spaces, twisted looks, twisting bodies, and histories that I turn as alternative forms of narration that register the slippages by which death and terror get imprinted in the linings of boredom. They are the little stitches that hold together the mantle over that apparent nothingness, that make the scenes that one as a stranger sees as empty, feel so heavy under the blazing sun.

Mirages

Everyday life is always a privileged site of political colonization because the everyday, prepared as a zone of devaluation, forgetfulness, and inattention, is also the site where new political identities can be fabricated by techniques of distraction; where power can make its own self-referential histories by absencing anything that relativizes it. Everyday life is mythicized as the atopic and the repository of passivity precisely because it harbors the most elusive depths, obscure corners, transient corridors that evade political grids and controls. Yet everyday life is also the zone of lost glances, oblique views and angles where micropractices leak through the crevices and cracks of official cultures and memories. (Seremetakis 1996:13)

An event. A massacre. It lingers in people’s minds, in everydayness. I asked questions that directly address the events of the night of November 22, 2000. I asked questions that address what numbers seem to forget. Many times I regretted my own questions and stopped asking, being left to a simple stare at the water, surrendering to the heat. I looked for a marker in the emptiness of a gaze, in a pair of shining eyes staring out a window overlooking the church patio. So many times they would turn around and lose their gaze toward a place that I could not see, but others could, even if blurred by houses or the coming rain.

As they spoke, I usually stared into glassy eyes and lost myself for moments trying to imagine what those eyes were seeing. It felt like staring at an empty highway, nothing around for miles on end, only the sounds of a bird or a lizard, only the sizzling mirage that seems to rise from the sweltering pavement. I imagined the moment of acceptance. It was the way she said it one day, “You tell me, Juan, what can I do?” That is what I remember looking at for weeks on end; at eyes that lingered in time that made acceptance part of their memories. But it is never as simple as overcoming. Overcoming means to go beyond, to leave behind, to win a battle. Accepting, at least this type of acceptance where a fact as true as the loss of life is caught, and maybe more so, suspended in time, implies making these moments part of one’s everydayness.

People spoke, but as they did they gave the impression of watching a moment that was not simply passed. Because it has not passed. I remember sitting on the porch, wondering what it was like to live over these stained waters, living your life drenched in memories permeating all around. Memories seemed to be living in the swift movement of water, creating an imaginary presence in the landscape, a presence within the emptiness that registers absence, but which we tend not to see under the sun.
The daughter of the man who was murdered in this room kindly wrote a beautiful response to this image where she recalls its active days when it was a store full of life and playful activities. A store, though, that ultimately became his death sentence.
I remember the day Sr. Armando looked into the past. He had stayed. During the days that followed the massacre, after many had left running with the little they were able to carry, the howling of dogs was the only company for the few men who decided to stay. Loneliness covered the swamp. He was scared. Why had he not left when he had the chance? He could not; he simply could not leave this place and move to a place he would not know. He had lived here for too long now. This was his home. His dogs were here. And all they did that night was howl—all night long.

A few days later, a neighbor returned. Armando was so happy he wanted to cry. He wanted to jump up and down and hug him. Slowly, people began to come back. First, the men would come for a few days and do some fishing—which ended up being really good because not many were doing it. Then, with time, women also began to come back. They would spend a few days and then go to the city. Slowly, very slowly, the dogs stopped howling. But there is still an echo in his head, he claims, “uuuuyyyyy, that sound, how terrible, how empty, how lonely,” he said, “I’ll take the howl with me to the grave.”

Echoes get clogged up in mud and in the mangroves. A branch is remembered—for some say once a man hanged from it, his arms carved in little squares. Way down deep into the swampy roads, along the path that the paramilitaries took when they were leaving the town, groans and moans inhabit the otherwise now empty space. Yes, they say, that area was great for fishing, but as many men were shot when they encountered the paras leaving town toward the inner waterways, only a few who dare to confront the past go there. But when they do, they hear things in those silent mangrove tunnels. These corridors of what used to be outlaw territory, the home of guerrillas, and later paramilitaries and today, some claim, a refuge for new armed groups, have been abandoned by most fishermen, replaced by fear. Some say that a few pieces of old crosses hang from the same branches where bodies once hanged. But do not go there, Juan, what is the point of taking the risk to catch a glimpse of a rotting cross?

Embodiments

There is something deep that rests inside the body. It is carried along through the days, attached to the skin. When I met him, I could not help noticing how wrinkled Don Eusebio's face was. I mean really hard, deep poignant wrinkles. His eyes submerged in some type of oblivion that made his sun-baked skin harder than the salt it breathes daily. His wife was telling me how difficult it was for him to overcome the trauma. At first, she said, he would get a fever, but later, the fever would come together with screams and shouts. He would be sleeping and then feel an urge to get up in the middle of the night to take a piss. When he got up, he would lose a sense of things. It was as if he were suddenly jerked out of this world. Just like that, asleep, gentle one minute, out of it the next, like living in this world and then, with one tick of the clock, becoming part of another. One night, his shaking was so strong and uncontrollable that he stumbled and broke his face. They took him to the city to see a doctor, and then another one, and another one. Until one day, while resting at his daughter's house she convinced him to go with her to a Pentecostal service. Skeptical, but with a sense of nothing else to lose, he agreed.

The pastor told him he needed to let go. He was holding on too tight. His body was so strongly attached to his two dead brothers and his son that their presence within his own body would end up killing him as well. He was in danger, the pastor said, for holding on to these feelings. Harboring them inside was a challenge to the will of God and made him prone to acts of the devil. They needed to pray. During the service, as people prayed in chain, Don Eusebio was angry. He jerked. His body moved like crazy. Suddenly, there was a terrible noise that people recalling the moment describe as having gone directly into the speakers of the church. You could hear a voice, a muffled, angry, deep voice inside the box, as if the demon that was inside him had suddenly been locked into the speakers, where strong noises and echoes could be heard. People praised the Lord with no intention of stopping until the devil was finally under control. At the end of the service, Don Eusebio's face had changed. It was a moment of movement when the past shook inside and rattled the room.

Maybe that is why, as the day slowly faded away after long hours of nothingness, of chitchat and simple living, I would see the constant repetition of moments, every Sunday, of people falling to the ground, being healed by acts of spitting and vomiting, by singing and dancing, and by saying, “I cannot do it by myself. I need you, Lord.” And then life would go on.
There is a man who saw. His eyes registered everything. It was not just the sounds of gunshots that echo in his head. He was the driver of one of the canoes that was intercepted by the paras on their way to the town. He was forced to drive them through the swamp, traversing the network of mangrove forests and shallow waters. Then, list in hand, the paras ordered him to show them the houses of the men named on their damned list. After a few hours of this, and by now having seen some of the killings as they took place on porches and in rooms, they forced him to take them to the church patio. Other canoes carrying men who had been dragged out of their homes were already there. He remained in the canoe while they forced the others to stand in a line. Some of them were locked in the church. He was not called.

What about this fucker?
Nothing, said the guard.
Aaggg, he said while returning his attention to the men lined up, facedown in the mud.

The little man with the big gun just told him to shut his eyes, to remain quiet, and throw away the canoe’s cargo of fish into the water. And then he stated again, “Don’t look or I’ll shoot you as well.”

Shots went off, dry and stiff. He wanted to look, he wanted to turn his eyes and witness only what the sounds made him feel inside. Another round. But he remained huddled next to the canoe in a corner of the patio. His eyes were shut tight but his body was registering everything, so tight, entumido he said, numbed, his joints almost collapsing from the strength and the pain. He heard the motors again, and as he realized they had left, he ran without looking back and locked himself up in his house. He lay on his hammock for days on end, not eating, crying, and seeing flashes of images imprinted in the walls of his eyelids, of his house, of his wife’s face. He cried and cried, his eyes cleansing, I guess,
the horror of having seen the coming of death, while the line of murdered men was being inscribed in the dirt.

For seven months he did not leave town. Then he spent lots of money on a doctor who told him he was suffering from stress. But trauma meant for him living with the constant image of his murdered friends. It was a convoluted head that made his brain ache, a pain so strong it would sometimes paralyze his legs or arms. It was the search for an electrocardiogram to control the pain in his heart, as well as the pills and painkillers for the soothing of the hurt in his body, for the control of the memory within his body. Trauma meant having dreams, some of which still come every so often, dreams where he is always present with the ones who died. It is an unexpected and fleeting flash, a burst of collected feelings that go off, like pushing a button attached to the church patio.

For many years he did not set a foot on that damned place. But he would see it every day as he sat to catch the afternoon breeze in his porch.
Walls and Rooms

At noon, when the sun is almost unbearably hot and the crackling wood of a cooking stove is slowly fading away, the town seemed to be a ghost town. All one could hear was the gentle splashing sounds of a canoe against the porch and the mumble of conversations from within the rooms where people retire to ease away. In some of these rooms, there are dark corners covering and covered by memories. Embedded in the walls of a patio up against which someone was pushed, in planks of wood and dusty corners, memories remain—maybe in this room or that one someone lay dead.

Sounds, screams, gunfire, and motors live on and roam disjointedly in people’s heads but also in the silence of spaces. In the mute position, isolated echoes remain dormant, as if hiding from the heat. But sometimes what is almost a hiss hums by when people meet to chat under the shade, maybe because November 22—the fateful anniversary—is coming up, or maybe because someone had a flashback that day as they walked into the back room, the one that was once bustling with laughter and is now filled with gloom.

At sunset, the outside of the big house where Don Ramón was killed turns to a nice pink orange. When the heat of the day has dissipated into a cozy warmth and people are moving slowly as they wait for the day to end, sometimes his daughters find themselves staring at a house with a few empty rooms that are filled with such a heavy load of absence that the floors seem to sink.
One day, she called me aside and asked me to make a portrait of her. When I asked where, she took me to her bedroom and pointed to the spot where he was killed.
How can we think about these echoes of fractured spirits and fragments where things of the past linger in empty rooms, about the screeching sounds and fleeting images that dissipate in the ripples of the water? Some might argue that, for example, the success of Pentecostal churches in such places responds to an emotional “need” for people to name and expel the source of the pain. One could see in these acts of ghostly presences and shaking bodies forms of cathartic resistance to years of abandonment and the establishment of para-states and their inscribed rules of terror. Yet, the presence of these spirits does not necessarily have to seek the eradication of pain—even if in the form of an evil spirit. The loss does not simply dissipate. Rather, these experiences open up spaces for people’s memories to be expressed within the sanctity of refuge (Franco 1999; Skidmore 2004)—religious, bodily, and intimate. The memories of the massacre are therefore issues that at certain moments share the space with more “mundane” troubles, but that are nevertheless part of the same conditions of possibility that form the experience of the aftermath. They are not there to be expelled but to be expressed, as are other unresolved tensions, the open-ended realities of those who live in such places. These performances of memory will continue to bring to the fore the residues that these people embody. They will continue to narrate the experience of the aftermath, its trajectories, extensions, and banal realities.

Such moments when people remember, when they experience a momentary interruption of normalcy, when the body is jerked out of consciousness and subsumed to the surreal, when dreams and nightmares become one, are instances that link an unexpected action with the passing of time. Sandra said it clearly to me one day, “People want to dig a hole and throw the remains of the tragic day in it, and seal it off forever.” The irony of her statement is contained in the many mass graves in the Colombian countryside, a result of the same idea practiced by the paramilitaries. It is also contained in the state’s bureaucratic procedures for claims to recognition of victimhood and reparation. Memories tend to get lost in mazes, loopholes, and fragments. This is why we tend to see nothingness in the penumbra. And still, as Sandra recalled in the end, “But they can’t, even if they wanted to.” It is through the apparent impossibility of remembering, in the apparent lethargic existence of the everyday, in the ordinary sight of a man on the side of a dusty road seeking shade, that a certain degree of resilience emerges along with the hiss of the presence of a ghost. For days, weeks, or months, the image of the past will be lost. But suddenly, a story holding on to the inner linings of boredom, contained within the apparent passivity that seems to cover this wetland, will express itself. That which has been resting under the asphyxiating heat can be told in the blinking of an eye, in a screaming body, the shadow of a dog’s echo or the movement of water. These moments transgress the need to define, explain, and control—and thus tend to be omitted by social reason (Richard 2004). They are, nevertheless, other forms of telling stories and producing knowledge through the senses, through the repertoire that escapes the lettered city (Franco 2002; Taylor 2003). These moments are residual elements of the modern that participate in the reconstitution of life through spaces, looks, and simplicity. They are fragments from a language of dreams and nightmares that will not budge over for the passing of time.

These moments are forms of narration, the result probably of unintended conversations and questions on a porch, on a patio, or next to a stove. They are stories that question the idea that narrative is a linear form of logic to explain “a culture,” “a moment,” or even “an event.” Rather, they set forth the idea that explanations will always be unfinished projects. These are not just matters of description. They are condensations of sensations, feelings of intimate relationships that remain, many times folded in the crevices of boredom.
Acknowledgments

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Notes

1 All photographs were taken by the author in the town of Nueva Venecia, Colombia, between 2006 and 2007.

2 In her study of terror in Colombia, anthropologist Maria Victoria Uribe has located the idea of the collaborator as part of a phenomenology of terror where people’s identities are shaped without any real defining parameters. When paramilitaries consolidated together as a regional structure of terror, the category was used to accuse people of helping the guerrilla, many times sentencing them to death. But “collaborating” was loosely used and could even be applied to a person who under force had, for example, sold goods to a member of the guerrilla. In disputed territories between paramilitaries and guerrillas, civilians used this label as a mechanism to implicate people for personal reasons, such as love affairs, jealousy, or envy. The looseness of the category and its deadly implications represent for Uribe the creation of a category of dehumanized beings that can be eliminated (Uribe 2004:118–122).

3 In June 2011, the “Law for Victims” was approved by President Santos and ratified by Congress. This law seeks to recognize and protect victims of the armed conflict through land restitution and other rights to memory and reparation.

4 On the history and postcolonial inscription of boredom and racial classifications on Colombian notions of geography and “culture,” see Taussig 2004.

5 These acts of engagement with substances are further developed in my dissertation, “Aqueous Recollections,” Yale University, 2009.

6 In Nueva Venecia, I also made sound recordings. Like the images, my attention was to the everyday soundscapes, but my intention was to highlight some of these banal and everyday sounds, like outboard motors, which at times articulate the memory of the massacre for some. Edited through the use of interruption and repetition, I used this audio track in a multimedia piece, which together with the photographs provided me ways of addressing aspects of this experience through their own sensory and evocative qualities (see Schneider and Wright 2010). I thank Chris Wright for his attention to the work.

7 Reflexive anthropology has used these qualities for some time now, but the exploration and possibilities of them through other mediums outside of the dominant written narrative continue to offer new alternatives to a project of critical expressive documentary (see Hammond 2004 and MacDougall 2006).

8 All names have been changed.

9 For the believers, the manifestation of these spirits at Pentecostal churches in Nueva Venecia is a powerful reminder of the presence of evil. They are embodiments of the malices that, according to the preacher, are also expressions, residues of a general concept of evil that took shape in acts of terror such as the massacre.

10 Cutting up bodies with chainsaws or machetes and scattering them in ravines, rivers, and chasms, burning body parts or burying them in mass graves scattered in harsh landscapes or clandestine cemeteries in landowners’ haciendas—sometimes concealed by perpetrators through modifications to the landscape—were techniques used by paramilitaries for symbolic purposes of terror, as well as to simplify the killing and dissemination of evidence (see Gómez and Patiño 2007 and Uribe 2004).

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