



# *Nunca invisibles: insurgent memory and self-representation by female ex-combatants in Colombia*

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## *Nunca Invisibles*: Insurgent Memory and Self-representation by Female Ex-combatants in Colombia

CHERILYN ELSTON

In August 2019, former female combatants of Colombia's largest guerrilla group organised a film screening of a new documentary, *Nunca invisibles: mujeres farianas, adiós a la guerra* (*Never Invisible: Women of the FARC, Farewell to War*). Their organisation, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC), had reached a peace agreement with the Colombian government in November 2016 after more than half a century of war. For the screening of the film, which draws together the testimonies of five female ex-combatants and a daughter of FARC guerrilleros, they had chosen a site charged with significance for former insurgents. As part of the final peace accords it had been agreed that after the FARC laid down arms, their weapons would be transformed into three monuments to peace. The first of these was inaugurated in December 2018 in the ruins of a colonial house in Bogotá's historic centre. Entitled *Fragmentos* (*Fragments*) and designed by Colombia's foremost contemporary artist, Doris Salcedo, thirty-seven tonnes of FARC weapons had been melted and then pounded down by female victims of conflict-related sexual violence into 1,300 tiles that now formed the floor of a new gallery space where other artists could exhibit their work on the theme of reconciliation.

The installation, created by an artist known for her minimalist sculptures exploring Colombia's traumatic past, confounded the traditional idea of a war monument. Salcedo referred to her latest work as a 'counter-monument', a space of silence, ruin and emptiness, which would force spectators to bow their heads and reflect on the victims of the conflict, rather than providing an epic or heroic war narrative (Rinaldi np). For the guerrilleras in attendance at the screening of *Nunca invisibles*, however, the site provoked more contradictory emotions. Liliyan Obando, the director of the film, stated:

We have mixed feelings walking on this floor, because these were the FARC's weapons and at one point, they defended our lives and represented the means by which we could carry out a struggle we were prevented from doing peacefully.<sup>1</sup>

Whilst one former combatant declared the act of stepping on their arms an 'offence', others spoke of their emotion at knowing their own weapons, which they had carried throughout the conflict, were somewhere in the luminous floor, protected in a site that could bring people together in a space of memory. As another ex-combatant said:

I don't say we are stepping on them, I believe people come here to walk, to learn about the causes of the conflict and walk with hope and the desire for peace.

Screening this film, which was the result of a historical memory initiative led by female ex-combatants, in *Fragmentos*, formed an attempt to resignify a space that, as Obando commented, has 'negative connotations for us': 'the way we found to counteract this ... was to come here, so people could meet us and hear our stories'.

The diverging interpretations of *Fragmentos* articulated at the post-screening discussion are indicative of 'the battle for memory that is being fought today in Colombia' (Alarcón np). As part of recent peace processes, the Colombian state began implementing transitional justice mechanisms in the mid-2000s, which meant for the first time there was an attempt to balance 'alternative approaches to conventional justice' (Laplante and Theidon 50) with truth and reparations for victims. Alongside this there has been a veritable memory 'boom' in the country (Lazzara 19) and an 'irruption of the memories of the victims' in the Colombia public sphere (Reátegui Carrillo 27). Yet, alongside the focus on victims, over the last few decades former insurgents in Colombia have also called for the inclusion of their own narratives of the conflict in public memory initiatives. Responding to recent memory studies scholarship, which has begun to reorient memory studies away from a narrow focus on past trauma towards 'activist memories' (see Hamilton), this article analyses the construction of 'insurgent memory' in Colombia through a close reading of the *Nunca invisibles* documentary screened at *Fragmentos*, as well as participant observation

at memory workshops and reconciliation events with female ex-combatants of the FARC.

Relating the film, and the wider historical memory initiative it formed part of, to a longer history of female ex-combatant memory activism in Colombia, I argue that whilst *Nunca invisibles* clearly situates itself within peace and reconciliation processes, it also seeks to vindicate an insurgent memory that recognises ex-combatant women as political subjects within those same processes. Challenging the predominant framing of ex-combatant women as victims in transitional justice and Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) scholarship, and building on previous analyses of the use of joy in Colombian ex-combatant narratives (Nieto Valdivieso), I show that the film mobilises a more complex representation – using emotions such as happiness, grief and loss – to articulate how ex-combatant women narrated their experiences in the FARC, both during conflict and after laying down arms. In doing so, I demonstrate the importance of creative, grassroots processes in enabling ex-combatants to represent themselves and move beyond the limitations of official memory and transitional justice frameworks.

### Transitional Justice and Women Ex-combatants

In 2018, as the FARC peace deal was being implemented, the project *Nunca invisibles: memorias de las mujeres de las FARC* (Never Invisible: Memories of the Women of the FARC), brought together more than fifty women ex-combatants living in Bogotá and in one of the rural reincorporation zones ‘Antonio Nariño’ in Icononzo, Tolima Department, for a series of memory workshops. Combining the creation of written documents, images, photography and audiovisual materials with elements of psychosocial support, such as meditation, physical movement and singing, the workshops sought to provide assistance to female ex-combatants transitioning to civilian life, as well as an opportunity to reconstruct their own history within the FARC. The resulting half-hour documentary, *Nunca invisibles*, is freely available online and has been shown in a series of screenings like that at *Fragmentos*, where the public can talk to the featured ex-combatants in person. In the film, women detail their lives in the guerrilla movement, and explain why they joined the FARC as well as their hopes for the future.

The fact that women in the FARC initiated their own historical memory project demonstrated an emerging gender consciousness within the organisation, as well as the pioneering inclusion of a gender perspective in formal peace negotiations. This challenged the historic exclusion of women from peacebuilding processes both within Colombia and internationally. Studies show that between

1992 and 2018, only 4 per cent of signatories and 13 per cent of negotiators at peace tables globally were women (UN Women np). In contrast, the FARC peace process has been celebrated for its recognition of the gender-differential effects of the conflict and significant inclusion of women peace negotiators. For example, by February 2015 women made up 40 per cent of the FARC peace delegation in Havana (Bouvier 20). Peace was implemented through the creation of what UN gender experts have referred to as ‘a unique mechanism in the history of conflict resolution’ (UN News), a gender sub-committee that reviewed the accords to ensure they had a comprehensive gender focus.

The innovative gender focus of the FARC peace process responded to increasing calls from academics and policymakers for attention to be paid to the gendered nature of conflict. Most importantly, in 2000 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1325 calling for a gender analysis of the impact of war and the participation of women in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. In Colombia this has resulted in an important body of scholarship that explores the gender-differentiated effects of the conflict on women and in particular the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war (see, for example, ABColombia; Amnesty International). Despite the importance of this research, as Lina M Céspedes-Báez argues, it has created the idea in Colombia of ‘a paradigmatic woman victim, mainly exposed to sexual violence’ (103) that reflects the stereotypical positioning of women as either passive victims of war or peacemakers (Moser and Clark 7), to the exclusion of more complex narratives that analyse women’s active role in armed conflict and perpetrating political violence. The consequence of this is that women combatants experience a ‘double alienation’ where not only is their participation in perpetrating violence made invisible but ‘they are also overlooked in the peace-building process’ (Anctil Avoine and Tillman 216).

The focus on women as passive victims or peacemakers also goes against the prominent role women have played in Colombia’s left-wing armed movements. Backing up previous estimates of the gender breakdown of the FARC (Londoño Fernández and Nieto Valdivieso 42), the 2017 socio-economic census of the group suggested that 23 per cent of their 10,015 members were women.<sup>2</sup> In response to this recognition, in recent years scholars have also begun to analyse the experiences of female combatants in the country. Much of this innovative work has detailed how women from the multiple armed groups who participated in the peace processes of the 1990s began collectively organising in the early 2000s in response to their exclusion from peacebuilding and DDR processes and in protest against the social and political marginalisation they faced after laying down arms (see Londoño Fernández and Nieto Valdivieso; Nieto Valdivieso; Sánchez-Blake; Dietrich Ortega).

Most importantly this scholarship has challenged the discourses of victimhood that typically frame ex-combatant women in Colombia by recognising the existence of an insurgent memory in the country. As Clara Inés Guerrero, a member of the Red Nacional de Mujeres Excombatientes de la Insurgencia (National Network of Female Ex-combatants of the Insurgency) and Colectivo de Mujeres Excombatientes (Collective of Women Ex-combatants),<sup>3</sup> states, the idea of an insurgent memory involves ‘a recognition that these women are political, that they took up arms as a political option, that they are conscious of what they do’ (np).

In contrast to these ethnographic and qualitative accounts of ex-combatant women’s experiences, scholarship on women in the FARC has been dominated by political science analyses exploring how and why the FARC recruited women (Gutiérrez Sanín and Carranza Franco). Whilst some of this work acknowledges that in qualitative interviews many of the FARC’s female ex-combatants describe their experiences in positive terms, the overall approach largely reinforces the predominant public narrative that women joined the FARC not out of choice but due to ideological indoctrination, forced recruitment or lack of opportunities, and suffered widespread violence, including sexual violence from within the guerrilla group (Herrera and Porch; Stanski). Influential critiques of the treatment of women in the FARC are articulated, for example, by the Corporación Rosa Blanca, which has denounced sexual violence in the ranks of the organisation. Despite this, the scholarship, which predominantly relies on interviews with combatants who demobilised through government programmes prior to the peace process, often fails to foreground the actual voices of female ex-combatants in the FARC or grant them political agency in narratives of the conflict (Salazar and Buitrago 7).

In response to this absence of women’s voices in the recorded narrative, and echoing the memory activism of the Colectivo de Mujeres Excombatientes, during the peace process women in the FARC not only began to participate more actively in formal negotiations, they also began to lead a series of public-facing initiatives in which they could construct their own narratives about their experiences in the guerrilla movement and their reasons for taking up arms. Their decision to focus specifically on women’s experiences paralleled what scholars have observed in other DDR processes, where gender consciousness amongst female ex-combatants only emerged after laying down of arms, as during the armed struggle this was subsumed within a class-based, revolutionary project (Dietrich Ortega 234; Londoño Fernández and Nieto Valdivieso 72). This resulted in the creation of the website and blog *Mujer Fariana* (*Women of the FARC*) in 2013 and the 2014 documentary *Rosas y Fusiles, mujeres de las FARC-EP* (*Roses and Rifles*:

*Women of the FARC-EP*) which were important precedents for the *Nunca invisibles* project. As former FARC commander Victoria Sandino argues, such projects allowed them ‘to vindicate the topic of women as political subjects, that’s to say, that we are women who are active politically’ (Paz np).

The creation of these initiatives for women ex-combatants to tell their own stories, which were outside the framework of official negotiations and transitional justice initiatives included in the final peace accords, pointed to the FARC’s growing participation in cultural and historical memory activities from the beginning of the peace talks in 2012. While some of this work involved contributing stories to new testimonial texts produced by journalists, it also included a number of FARC-led grassroots projects, like *Nunca invisibles*, which ranged from memory workshops in the reincorporation zones to painting murals commemorating their history, publishing testimonies and other literary accounts, as well as releasing music videos, documentaries and other audiovisual productions. Significantly, this responded to a broader trend in Colombia in which memory and transitional justice discourses began to be articulated by diverse human rights groups, peace activists, victims of state crimes, relatives of the disappeared and those displaced by the conflict that come ‘from below’ (Uprimny and Saffon),<sup>4</sup> and which challenged official memory discourses and the government’s definition of justice and reconciliation (Díaz; Rowen). Engaging with this political contestation over the memory of the conflict in Colombia, as well as calls to include ‘non-legalistic, non-liberal or non-state-centric initiatives’ in our accounts of transitional justice (Zunino 231), after decades of operating clandestinely the FARC aimed to add their own voices to national debates over the memory of the conflict, as well as challenge the narratives that have framed women combatants in the FARC.

### Grassroots Self-representation

While the *Nunca invisibles* project and film were funded by an official transitional justice body – the National Centre for Historical Memory – and international aid, it was led by FARC ex-guerrilleras working at the grassroots. As Obando states, ‘It was an exercise that was 100% ours, 100% FARC and by the women of the FARC’ (np), in which female ex-combatants, rather than an outsider journalist or academic, had narrative control of their own representation for the first time. This desire for self-representation is reflected in both the tone and content of the documentary. In contrast to popular culture depictions of dangerous guerrilleros in the jungle or the clandestine visits of foreign journalists to FARC camps, *Nunca invisibles* foregrounds a bottom-up insider

perspective as the peace accords were being implemented. While incorporating archival footage of life in FARC camps – which is placed in black and white to signal how war has been consigned to the past – the documentary is mainly composed of a series of talking-head interviews with rank-and-file female ex-combatants. Accompanied by an upbeat soundtrack of rap, reggaeton, vallenato and ranchera music, the women no longer wear their camouflage uniforms but are dressed in colourful civilian clothes; they speak against a rural background of green fields, prefabricated houses and washing lines that clearly locate them in the reincorporation zones established by the peace deal.

As the film's title emphasises, these women have said 'farewell to war' and are committed to the peace process. The resultant uplifting tone and aesthetics of *Nunca invisibles* is linked to a desire to represent the 'human aspect immersed in war' (Insuasty 3) and to do so through what FARC senator Sandra Ramírez describes as 'the life histories of average women' in the FARC (Farianas Nunca Invisibles np). Over the last few decades, testimonial accounts by ex-combatant women in Colombia have sought to challenge their invisibility in official accounts of Colombia's multiple armed groups (Elston 145–47). However, the majority of such testimonios have been compiled by an outside transcriber (see, for example, Lara; Millán Cruz) or told the life stories of guerrilleras who came from the educated middle class and reached the top ranks of guerrilla movements (see Vásquez Perdomo; Grabe; Claux Carriquiry). *Nunca invisibles* explicitly challenges the top-down nature of women's testimony in Colombia. Although Obando, a sociologist, former FARC miliciana and political prisoner, directed the film and the memory project, the documentary was produced collectively: 'Some of us took the photos, others recorded the images, did the pedagogical work, and wrote the script' (Farianas Nunca Invisibles np). Thus, rather than an individual account of a well-known high-ranking guerrillera, the documentary draws together a group of anonymous ex-combatants, who importantly represent the guerrilla movement as intersectional. Re-signifying dismissive descriptions of the FARC as 'overwhelmingly rural, frequently illiterate or barely educated' (Herrera and Porch 614), the six women who speak directly and articulately to the camera come from Afro-Colombian, indigenous, urban and rural peasant backgrounds, and represent the different generations and social classes that made up this 'complex organisation' (Obando np).

The grassroots origins of *Nunca invisibles* are reflected in its relatively low production value and use of basic documentary techniques, such as the talking heads and archival montages. This reinforces the sense of authenticity of the film, which appropriates the methods of 'objective' expository film-making and places these tools in the hands of a group that has rarely had a

platform. Thus, the expert talking heads are the female ex-combatants who speak directly to the camera using a language particular to the FARC. For example, their vocabulary is peppered with references to the FARC's military structure (such as squads, the National Cadre School) and specific verbs used by the organisation (such as 'ranchar', to make camp), which are not always clear for a viewer unfamiliar with their world. They also detail what life was like for them in a narrative that moves thematically through different sections, from joining the FARC in 'The Beginning', to the experience of combat in 'War', and the 'New Life' offered by the peace process. Backed up by images that give viewers an insight into the FARC's daily activities, guerrilleras are shown carrying out domestic work in the camps, such as cooking and cleaning, as well as participating in other roles, such as nursing, dentistry and surgery. Significantly, the image of the gun-wielding guerrilla fighter is largely eschewed in the film, replaced by another perspective on guerrilla life, which also involves studying and reading, using computers and spending time with comrades.

### 'A Beautiful Life'

This vision of life in the FARC is obviously motivated by both the peacebuilding context in which *Nunca invisibles* was made and the political position of the film-makers and those interviewed in the film, who have maintained their ideological commitment to the new FARC political party. In this way *Nunca invisibles* presents an important counterview to the predominant public perception that life was uniformly bad for the FARC's female combatants or that all women were there against their will. As Yorli, one of the young ex-combatants interviewed states, for her the FARC was a positive space of learning:

If you are willing to learn, you can learn anything, like nursing. I also worked in dentistry, radio, I learnt how to use a computer. I also learnt how to read and write well.

This is a point backed up by other recent testimonial accounts about women in the FARC (see Millán Cruz) and scholarly research that has shown how for many women the guerrilla movement provided a 'degree of fulfilment and satisfaction' (Herrera and Porch 611), 'a life of adventure and meaning' (Stanski 140) and was a 'place of learning new skills and values' (Nieto Valdivieso 79).

In both testimonial accounts and social science literature, this positive description of life in the FARC contrasts starkly with the situations of socio-political marginalisation from which many women originated. The film reinforces this common narrative in which joining the insurgency represented an escape from a life of



rural poverty, political violence and abuse. In the first section, 'Childhood', Marina describes the lack of educational opportunities available to her – 'I barely completed second grade' – while Patricia states that after her mother was assassinated she and her siblings 'were divided up like animals'. The FARC in contrast is represented as a space of aspiration and beauty. Esther describes the guerrilleras she observed as a child: 'they looked so beautiful. I said well, I have to be a guerrilla fighter.' In the same way, Marina, reflecting back over many years as a combatant, states that 'despite the difficult situations we experienced, I think that in the FARC we had a beautiful life'. She reinforces this point by describing the cultural life they enjoyed when they weren't engaged in combat: 'the closing ceremonies of the courses, the Sunday dances, the cultural shows, theatre, all that part, the culture created by guerrillas of the FARC that was our own'. This joyful representation is also channelled in the aesthetics of the film. For example, the opening credits are followed by images of the six women who give their testimonies; each woman smiles or laughs into the camera, as the soundtrack plays an uplifting song by FARC hip-hop artist Martín Batalla that vindicates the power of historical memory.

For critics, *Nunca invisibles*' overtly positive portrayal of guerrilla life could appear to offer a romanticised or idealised version of the past and a highly partial view of the conflict. Yet its mobilisation of discourses of beauty and joy reflects a key feature of ex-combatant women's narratives in Colombia, which is considered taboo in liberal peacebuilding scholarship. In her research into the grassroots memory practices of ex-combatant women in Colombia, Yoana Fernanda Nieto Valdivieso highlights that happiness, joy and pleasure are common tropes in how women narrate their experiences as part of insurgent groups. She argues, however, that these tropes have been overlooked in official transitional justice and DDR discourses, which simply 'expect repentance and the search for forgiveness from former combatants' (79) and largely erase the political motivations behind why women participated in the armed struggle. In contrast, Nieto Valdivieso shows how in female ex-combatant self-representations, pleasure and joy are explicitly linked to a political identity as guerrilleras, and the fact that for many women the guerrilla movement provided a space of political agency and equality that was denied them in civilian life. This point has also been noted in various works of scholarship on the subject (see Kampwirth) and is replicated in the FARC's own claims of gender equality in the organisation. In *Nunca invisibles*, for example, Yorli explains how when she 'joined the FARC, I saw how good it was that the men also cooked, made the camp, helped women to pack up their gear and do the washing, that is, everything was equal'.

The film links gender equality with familiar descriptions of comradeship that many women found in guerrilla groups. Esther refers to the 'harmony, fraternity and solidarity' she experienced; Yorli reminisces about 'spending time with my comrades, when we were in a difficult situation, we were all in it together'. The importance of these affective ties in the FARC echoes what Patricia Madariaga Villegas identified in her study of the 'emotional community' (268) of another Colombian guerrilla group, the M-19, and demonstrates the key role that emotions and affect played in constructing revolutionary political identities in Colombia. This is also powerfully illustrated in the structure and collective narration of *Nunca invisibles*. Despite progressing teleologically from childhood to the recent peace process, the documentary is characterised by an informal, often digressive narrative style in which as the women speak they often falter, laugh and cry, freely expressing their emotions and revealing intensely personal details about their lives. In this sense, the film deliberately rejects the reduction of lived experience to the 'cold statistical data' of official transitional justice reports (de Greiff 18) and illustrates the efficacy of creative formats in evoking the emotions and feelings provoked by war, as well as creating space for ex-combatants to express more complex narratives about their lives and experiences.

### Grief and Loss

This complexity is extended in the film's decision to include a section entitled 'Love' where the ex-guerrilleras detail experiences of falling in love and of intimacy during the war. Although the language of romance is a common trope in Latin American revolutionary narratives, here romance is not used to simply construct a revolutionary, patriotic subject (Rodríguez). Instead, in the same way that Zoe Norridge demonstrates in her analysis of such discourses in African women's war writing, the language of sexuality, pleasure and desire provides a means of foregrounding the body and emotions that also creates a space for speaking about painful memories. Thus, if *Nunca invisibles* presents a joyful image of guerrilla life in which women encountered a degree of sexual liberation – 'Love in the guerrilla group, well, it means being with your partner [... but also] free, and if we decide we no longer want to be together, it's not a problem', says Yorli – this is underlined by negative expressions of pain, sadness and loss. Indeed, these women do not propagate a heroic narrative of war but describe its cruellest aspects, alongside the deprivations suffered in the FARC: 'sometimes we had to treat our wounded comrades with sugarcane, some swelled up, others were wounded and captured by the army when



they attacked the camps', says Esther. Most forcefully, the film foregrounds the feelings of grief and loss that were an inevitable part of guerrilla life. Marina, for example, who chokes up when speaking, emotionally describes losing her romantic partner as the 'hardest part' and Patricia describes the horror of losing comrades: 'They killed some of our comrades in a bombardment. That was the worst thing I saw, the dead bodies killed in the bombing, at our feet.'

*Nunca invisibles'* engagement with grief goes significantly beyond the loss of romantic partners to commemorate the many female combatants who died during the FARC's long war. The film poetically evokes this by referring to 'the women of the FARC who planted their seeds in the mountains and cities of Colombia' and inserting at various points in the documentary archival photographs of guerrilleras, some of whom died during the conflict. The inclusion of such images, which have also been shared on the 'Women of the FARC' Facebook page, points to the existence of an archive of materials recorded by the FARC that have thus far remained clandestine (Obando np). The photographs also open up a space to grieve and remember dead comrades, often denied to combatants during the urgency of conflict. By including them in a documentary with a clear pedagogical and memory-oriented goal, *Nunca invisibles* seeks to amplify the field of memory in Colombia to incorporate members of the FARC, whose lives have been considered beyond the ethical and political boundaries of who is publicly grievable in the country.

Grief also characterised the *Nunca invisibles* memory workshops, yet here the focus was less on mourning the loss of individual comrades than on the loss of the collectivity that had constituted these women's identities. These creative workshops, in which former combatants shared photographs and stories, sung songs together and participated in physical therapy activities, involved an element of catharsis and healing in an attempt to come to terms with the legacy of the conflict. However, they also clearly sought to reconstruct a common revolutionary past and reclaim a collective political identity at risk of being lost in the individualised reincorporation process. In this way, they mirrored the collective spaces created by the Network and Collective of Women Ex-combatants (Dietrich Ortega 239) in response to the isolation felt by female ex-combatants, who described leaving the guerrilla movement as like jumping into a 'void' (Sánchez-Blake 262; Elston 169–70). This loss narrative was also evident in the FARC workshops and was most powerfully expressed by one young ex-guerrillera who sobbed at what she expressed as the 'heartbreak' of losing her previous political identity and connection to comrades who had left the movement.

## Hopeful Futures?

*Nunca invisibles* the film, however, largely minimises this sense of loss through its overall aim of supporting the peace process and articulating a political identity for female ex-combatants in relation to the new FARC political party. Indeed, in the final section, 'Farewell to War', all of the women interviewed express hope for the future and a desire to continue fighting for social justice through peaceful means. Yorli, for example, hopes 'to study medicine and go to all of the areas of Colombia completely abandoned by this system'. Consequently, the overwhelmingly positive tone and content of the documentary is a radical departure from one of the only previous documentaries about female ex-combatant in Colombia, *Mujeres no contadas* (*Uncounted Women*, 2005) by Ana Cristina Monroy, which interviewed women who laid down arms in the 1990s and explicitly depicted their social and political erasure by not revealing the faces of any of the former guerrilleras interviewed. *Nunca invisibles'* images of smiling ex-combatants looking straight at the camera suggests a much more hopeful vision for the peace process and the opportunities available for female ex-combatants in the country.

This is not to say that the FARC peace process has not been beset by severe political challenges. Ongoing violence against and assassinations of former FARC combatants, as well as the rearming of a prominent sector of the guerrilla group and severe implementation delays have demonstrated the fragility of transition. While the production of *Nunca invisibles* in the midst of the reincorporation process meant it was too soon for the film to give an overall assessment of the success of the peace accords, it does reference the initial difficulties of the process in Colombia through depicting the government's failure to prepare the reincorporation zones for FARC combatants. Yorli describes how they had to build the zones themselves, 'there was nothing here, we built our shelters as we have always done'. Yet, these criticisms are largely subsumed by one of the most striking elements of the documentary, the fact that three of the ex-combatants interviewed speak to the camera with toddlers on their laps. The 'new life' these individual combatants will embark on is thus equated literally with what the film describes as the children 'born in times of peace', who represent the hopeful future. As Nancy states, 'I hope that my children have a better life, the opportunity to study, to do something with their lives.'

Yorli states that 'with my baby I feel really happy, even though I said I never wanted children'. By replacing the happiness of militancy with the joy of motherhood, the film could arguably be seen to be reinforcing the problematic loss of agency and return to traditional gender roles faced by former insurgent women. As Londoño Fernández

and Nieto Valdivieso put it, paraphrasing the scholar Victoria Brittain, ‘passing from arms to the kitchen’ (131). Obando herself notes that the film has received criticism for this overt representation of motherhood (Farianas *Nunca Invisibles* np), which appears to replicate the media attention on the FARC’s ‘baby boom’ in the reincorporation zones (Brodzinsky np). However, I would argue that the film’s equation of ‘maternalism’ and the politics of peace – which evokes a long-standing trope in Colombian and global women’s peace activism (Elston 197–98) – is embedded in a more nuanced attempt to engage with the controversial issue of motherhood in the FARC. The organisation has long been accused of forcing its female members to abort pregnancies, and while they have always denied such allegations, like other left-wing guerrilla groups they did enforce a pregnancy ban on female members or make them give up their children due to the practicalities of warfare (Trisko Darden, Henshaw and Szekely 1325). Alongside representing the positive experience of motherhood during a new era of peace, *Nunca invisibles* directly addresses how some FARC women combatants did give birth during the conflict and were thus forced to endure painful separation from their children.

By including the voices of Nancy and Marina, both older guerrilleras who had children whilst in the FARC and describe the suffering this caused – ‘that’s really hard, it breaks your heart... it’s really hard to have a child and leave it like that’ – the film further amplifies the theme of grief and loss to make visible the human suffering of motherhood and separation in the insurgency. These experiences have largely remained hidden behind media narratives focusing on sexual violence in the FARC.

## Conclusion

One of the most interesting choices of this memory project is the decision to include the perspective of María Alejandra, a teenager and daughter of two FARC combatants who was brought up apart from her parents. She speaks about her mother’s pain at their separation and how she questioned their decisions: ‘I started to think about why they left and never said anything to me, if I’m their daughter why did they decide not to spend my childhood with me?’ María Alejandra’s testimony points to an important and under-studied area of research into the narratives of the children of former combatants, whose voices have thus far been sidelined in official memory and transitional justice processes in Colombia.

Despite the pain of separation, María Alejandra does not negate her parents’ politics; she speaks of the sense of solidarity they inculcated in her, which has inspired

her to now study medicine. In this sense, her testimony underlines how *Nunca invisibles* portrays insurgency as forming part of a transformative political identity that goes beyond the armed struggle and involves the active role of insurgent women in transitional justice processes. Building upon a significant body of ex-combatant women’s activism and scholarship in Colombia, which has challenged discourses of victimisation and the marginalisation of ex-combatant women after laying down arms, the *Nunca invisibles* project, which FARC women hope to replicate across the country, represents how the FARC peace process has adopted a historic and inclusive gender focus.

Yet, as this article has illustrated, this has not been a top-down process. Instead, ex-combatant women working at the grassroots have adopted creative methods to challenge their invisibility in official memory projects and articulate more complex and emotive narratives about their own participation in armed violence. As the screening at *Fragmentos* showed, these narratives do not necessarily invalidate their reconciliatory aims. Instead, they create space for dialogue between ex-combatants and the public. The warm reception of the film, and intense interest in the lives of the female ex-combatants, was balanced with difficult questions for the FARC members, as well as the intervention of one of the victims of sexual violence who had participated in the creation of Salcedo’s installation. Acknowledging the FARC’s critique that the floor only contains the weapons of one of the armed actors responsible in the conflict, the woman told the FARC women about the cathartic experience of hammering down the weapons but also recognised the importance of changing the public imaginary of ex-combatants. In response, Obando thanked the woman for participating in the creation of *Fragmentos*, which had allowed her to mourn and release the pain caused by the war. Thus, by bringing women with different experiences of the conflict together, *Nunca Invisibles* has created spaces for active listening and the construction of more plural and diverse memories of the Colombian armed conflict, which also include the recognition of ex-combatants as political subjects who can contribute to peacebuilding. Yorli sums it up: ‘women have been the protagonists of this struggle, we who have put our all into it, as well as being mothers too, we can help build a new society’.

## NOTES

- [1] All quotations in this section come from a panel talk after the screening of *Nunca invisibles* in *Fragmentos* on 1 Aug. 2019. All quotations are the author’s own translation.
- [2] The census divided FARC membership into guerrilla fighters, militias and those imprisoned, with women making up 33, 12 and 7 per cent, respectively, of each group, or

23 per cent of total membership (Universidad Nacional de Colombia).

- [3] The collective is an umbrella organisation that operates through the network. Formed in 2000, more than ten years after laying down arms in a country still at war, the collective has led a series of national meetings of ex-guerrilleras, as well as produced a number of written texts and audiovisual documents, which aim to recover silenced narratives, support women ex-combatants and campaign for gender-responsive peace processes (Dietrich Ortega).
- [4] This feature of transitional justice in Colombia makes it a significant case study, reinforcing calls from international scholars to move away from the abstract accounts and ‘institutionalist biases’ of transitional justice literature to focus on the role of ‘cultural and individual transformations’ (de Greiff 13) and the significance of local, civil society in transitional mechanisms (Androff; Arriaza and Roht-Arriaza; McEvoy and McGregor).

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