Behind the Awakening: Tracing the Visual and Affective Reverberations of the 2021 Colombian
National Strike

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ABSTRACT

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Natalia Espinel Quintero

This thesis looks at the online and offline affective reverberations of the 2021 Colombian National Strike through its visual culture to understand what counter public digital expressions reveal about how Colombians engaged with the events and the affective histories of the nation surrounding these moments. My goal is to show how the interplay between material and digital spaces contributed to the emergence of a new affective structure. I argue that by looking at the images and affects that were shared online, it is possible to see a shift from an affective structure of fear and apathy—promoted by the visuality of the Colombian armed conflict and anti-insurgent propaganda—to a new, and perhaps temporary, structure of "awakening." By following particular nodes in the strike's visual and digital affective fabrics, I show how spaces like Twitter (now X) not only offered an affective and political arena to share, discuss and enact practices of resistance, but also became "affective archives" or "counter archives" through which these changes could be traced.

My thesis looks at affect through and as digital images to understand their textures and the ways in which visual activism and digital images touch us. Focusing on two particular moments/spaces that took place during the strike, I use the figure of the hero to understand how these affective changes happened, and, at the same time, how national identity was renegotiated.

Keywords: digital visual culture, affect, social movements, counter publics

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The morning of April 28th, 2021, I woke up to a video of members of the Misak Indigenous community bringing down the statue of Sebastián de Belalcázar, a Spanish *conquistador* and founder of the city in which the video was taking place, Cali, Colombia. This was not the first time the Misak had engaged in such a symbolic action, but this time, the toppling of the statue marked the beginning of a series of protests and acts of resistance that were to raise many questions about the normalization of violence, precariousness, and colonial logics in Colombia. As a Colombian who has lived abroad for several years, the video of the Misak community bringing down Belalcázar's statue reached me as most news about Colombia does, through social media. I first came across the video in a WhatsApp group, but soon after I realized it was also circulating on my Twitter feed. A mix of visceral, moving, inspiring and ungraspable images were to come—both through the chat and through other social media platforms.

From April 28th, 2021, the day I saw the video, to the end of July 2021, thousands of Colombians from different sectors and backgrounds took to the streets to reject a tax reform proposed by then President Ivan Duque Márquez and his party. Though the tax reform proposal was the catalyst that brought people to the streets, the protests were about much more than the reform. Colombians in the streets were also voicing their discontent over growing inequality, the killing of human rights and environmental activists, corruption, and the lack of commitment on the government's side to implement the 2016 peace agreement. As Bernal and Ortiz (2022) point out, "understanding the massive and generalized discontent that took place in Colombia means situating it in the context of the lack of legitimacy of the oligarchic and mafioso regime, characterized by intertwining the interests of economic sectors, the governing class, armed forces, and drug trafficking" (p. 410).

Although the demonstrations were articulated as a form of non-violent civil resistance at the national level, by the end of the first day of protests, four people had been killed by Colombia's police riot force (Observatorio de DDHH, 2021 July 21), and over 93 cases of police brutality had been reported (Temblores ONG, 2021, April 29). Four days after the protests erupted, the proposal for the tax reform was withdrawn, but that did not bring the uprising to an end. Demonstrations, Julie Turkewitz and Sofía Villamil wrote for *The New York Times* (2021), turned "into a collective howl of outrage over abuses by the national police force." The government, however, assuming that after withdrawing the reform protesters would have no reason to stay on the streets, ordered the deployment of the army to face what the president described as a "vandalic threat" and to guarantee the return to "normalcy" (Duque, 2021, May 5). This exacerbated the situation. By May 7th, at least 39 of the 47 people who had been killed were victims of police violence (Observatorio de DDHH, conflictividades y paz, 2021 May 9). Hundreds of videos recorded by protesters, citizens and journalists circulated online to denounce the brutality of the government's response. The backlash to the videos was such that on May 6th, Colombia's Ministry of Defense faked a cyberattack to label online criticism as "cyberterrorism" and delegitimize the images that were circulating on the web.

Over the four months the protests lasted, I stayed glued to my phone, with the privilege and the anxiety that comes from living such moments of political tension from a distance, refreshing my feed every other minute, witnessing through the screen how virtual and public spaces were turning into "affective-political warzones" (Kuntsman, 2020). On one side, government officials, politicians from the president's party, and some important right-wing figures kept portraying protesters as the enemy within and used their accounts to weaponize the feelings caused by the political unrest to justify the excessive use of force by the riot police, delegitimize the videos that were circulating online, and promote the right to self-defence. On the other side were protesters, activists and artists working together to establish a counterhegemonic discourse and fight such weaponization. This was done not just through the kind of citizen journalism videos that documented acts of police brutality and paramilitary and civilian violence, but also through hundreds of videos of dances, murals, student orchestras and performances that were unfolding around the country.

Through this form of symbolic performance, as Marcela A. Fuentes argues in *Performance Constellations: Networks of Protest and Activism in Latin America* (2019)*,* "activists create images and affective modes of relation that seek to 'win the hearts and minds' and thus build counter hegemonic power" (p. 4). While, as Fuentes suggests, these images were there to "win the hearts and minds" of viewers, which they successfully did, they were also showing, as I will argue, a change in the country's affective landscape. More specifically, I propose that by looking at the digital visual culture of the 2021 National Strike, it is possible to see a shift from an affective structure of fear and apathy—promoted by the visuality of the armed conflict and anti-insurgent propaganda—to a new, and perhaps temporary, structure of "awakening." Although it would be easy to interpret this "awakening" as what led to the historic victory of Gustavo Petro as the country's first left-wing president in 2022, I believe that this awakening called for deeper political, structural and social changes that are yet to happen. Paying attention to the processes behind this affective displacement and the affective forces that arose—and faded—in this *in-between-ness* (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010) can provide insights about this conjuncture beyond the formal demands that were presented by the strike's main actors, and beyond what Macarena Gómez-Barris (2018) describes as "the ebbs and flows of conservative and progressive governments" (p. 7). Observing these "ebbs and flows" of micropolitical resistance without trying to capture them within the right-left binary of politics can help us see, in the words of Suely Rolnik (2017), "their vital impulse for transmuting the dominant modes of subjectivation" (p. 3). Thus, attending to the affective dimension of resistance, as I will show, can reveal changes in the boundaries of the visible, the sensible and the grievable.

I will argue that spaces like Twitter[1] (now called X) not only offered an affective and political arena to share, discuss and enact practices of resistance, but also became "affective archives" or "counter archives" through which these changes could be traced. By looking at these

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[1] Although Twitter was rebranded as X in July 2023, after Elon Musk bought the platform, I will refer to the platform by its former name throughout this thesis, as the events under discussion took place when it was still known as Twitter.

moments as affective (counter)archives—rather than just archives of protest actions—I hope to trace the micropolitical shifts through which a desire for change was activated. These archives capture an aspect of social processes (in this case, the strike) that is yet to be fully formed—the *in-between-ness* of social transformations—and reveal the importance of affect in the context of resistance not just as a catalyst that drive us toward movement/action, but also as a form of resistance itself. Moreover, as Cecilia Macón (2022) has argued in talking about feminist "affective counter archives" in the Latin American abortion rights movement, counter archives express "a resistance to mainstream archives and a collection of affects in their relation to temporality and collective action. Transposed to the street, [they form] a particular and affective relationship with the past, articulating a key role in the unfolding of an encounter between bodies within activism itself" (p. 354). Throughout my analysis, I will also show the relationship with the past that was formed and reshaped in the case of the strike.

It is at this crossroads between the technology of social media platforms, politics, visual culture and affect that my thesis stands. I am interested in exploring the mediation of violence and resistance to understand how the interplay between material and digital spaces contributed to the emergence of this new "structure of feeling" (Williams, 2015/1977). Thus, this project will follow the online and offline affective reverberations of the 2021 National Strike through its visual culture to understand what counter public digital expressions reveal about how Colombians engaged with the events and the affective histories of the nation surrounding these moments. By reverberation here, I am particularly referring to a term used by Adi Kuntsman to "think through affective digital politics of visuality and visibility" and describe movement of emotions in and out of cyberspace (2020, p. 70). Kuntsman sees digital and material objects as affective anchors that can "hold, contain and archive feelings" (p. 70). This is the way in which I am seeing tweets and Twitter images. For Kuntsman, the term reverberation, "unlike sentiment analysis or any other positivist measurement of digital emotions, can capture the ways affect and feelings take shape through movement between contexts, websites, forums, blogs, memes, comments, tweets, hashtags, devices and platforms" (p. 70). My hope is that this thesis shows some of the affective movements and displacements that took place during the strike by following particular nodes in the strike's visual and digital affective fabrics. In this particular case, I will look at affect through and as digital images to understand their textures and the ways in which visual activism and digital images touch us. By doing so, I aim to explore how images contribute to both corporeal movements—such as the protesters who felt inspired to continue taking to the streets—and affective movements—as in the changing affective structures I will describe. Through this, I hope to shed light on the affective potentiality of images and visual activism, and the role these play in the (micro)politics of resistance.

To trace these reverberations, I will begin with a conjunctural analysis of the strike (Chapter 3). I will situate the strike within the context of a series of protests that began in 2019 (also known as "social outbursts") and provide an overview of the media ecology and protest repertoires of the 2021 strike. This will lay the ground for an in-depth analysis of the intertextual relationships between the images and discourses resulting from two affective-political moments/figures:

1. A video shared on Twitter by Colombia's former president Alvaro Uribe on May 7th, 2021 (Chapter 4). Through the analysis of this video, I will discuss the visual and affective tactics that were deployed to stigmatize the protests and weaponize the feelings of non-protesters, as well as the affective histories that tie together the video and the anti-insurgent propaganda that was created and shared during the Uribe administration (2002–2010). While Uribe's last presidential term ended in 2010, Uribe has remained a highly influential figure in Colombian politics. He played a key role in the election of two subsequent presidents: Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018) and Iván Duque (201–2022), who was in office during the 2021 strike. Thus, I chose to focus on the video shared by Uribe because the structure of feeling that was challenged during the strike was consolidated under his administration.

2. A set of images and tweets shared on Twitter by users referring to the Monument to the Heroes (*Monumento a los Héroes*) in Bogotá, one of the epicenters of the strike, and to the archetype of the hero, one of the major and most controversial figures in the Colombian imaginary (Chapter 5).

While at first glance these two moments might seem unrelated, they are tied together and informed by a powerful figure in the Colombian imaginary: the "hero." This figure, which has often been used to build sympathy and support for the government and the army, and gather up nationalist sentiment, gained a new meaning during the strike. Thus, by focusing on these two moments, I aim to trace the affective work that allowed this change in meaning to take place.

Although I would have liked to take a look at many other moments, like the toppling of statues across the country, the *cuir* (queer) aesthetics of Piisciis', Neni Nova's and Axid's voguing performance at the Plaza de Bolívar (see video here), or the many acts of resistance observed in Puerto Resistencia (Cali), I am aware of the limitations of a master's thesis. Thus, I have chosen to focus exclusively on these moments and this figure because they capture some attitudes and ruptures that can open a door to understanding the affective and visual entanglements of the strike.

The images shared around the two moments I have chosen are far from the most iconic. In fact, the images that generated stronger political affects were perhaps the images of police, military and paramilitary violence, but the moments I have chosen are closely tied to these images. While I considered looking into the circulation of these images of violence, I wanted to stay away from what Eve Tuck (2009) calls "damaged-centre research." This kind of research, as Tuck explains, is "research that operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation" (p. 413). The problem of engaging with damage-centered research, as Tuck argues, "is that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community" (p. 413). Most victims of state and paramilitary violence during the strike came from marginalized communities, and while images of this violence granted them visibility, I wanted to focus on alternative practices that also brought them into the public eye, highlighting their agency beyond the violence they endured. Therefore, I decided to stick to the analysis of

these two moments through the figure of the hero because they allow me to trace the histories that led to the strike as a conjuncture.

Here, again, the term reverberation is useful. While the tweet shared by Uribe and the tweets about the monument and the hero archetype are not direct representations of violence, they contain responses, echoes and affective reverberations of the engagement people had with all images of state and vigilante violence, but also with the broader history of visual representations of violence stemming from the Colombian armed conflict. In addition, it is in these moments of tension when people project or reject different forms of nationalism, and the figure of the hero allowed me to look at this tension closely.

Therefore, these moments must be observed as nodes *in* a bigger process. What I present here is an analysis of the strike around and beyond the strike. Through the analysis of these moments, I trace how the strike served to dismantle old affective structures that had been produced during Colombia's armed conflict and, following Ahmed's (2004) affirmation that emotions get their power through circulation, I inquire about the role that the strike, as well as other forms of visual activism that preceded it, have played in the consolidation of new affective structures. Thus, the research questions that guided my analysis are:

RQ1: How did the strike serve to disrupt and dismantle affective structures rooted in Colombia's armed conflict? How does the figure of the national hero help trace these changes?
RQ2: What was the structure of feeling that made itself evident during the 2021 National Strike? How did it differ from previous affective structures?
RQ3: Can digital spaces (in this case Twitter) be used to trace that emergence? If so, how?

On a large scale, my thesis will also address, through this case study, the ways in which changing affects are influenced by and influence memory politics, notions of the nation and visual culture. To do this, borrowing the words of Kathleen Stewart (2008), I have attended "to the textures and rhythms of forms of living [in this case, the protests] as they are being composed and suffered in [social, cultural and technological] poesis" (p. 71). In this thesis, I do this form of attending by looking at the visual and affective expressions of the strike on Twitter and drawing from my lived experience both during and before the strike. My goal is to map an affective cartography of the conjuncture that helps understand the *why* and the *how* of the changing affective landscape from one governed by fear and apathy, to a temporary one marked by a feeling of awakening and solidarity. This "awakening," as I will show, has to do with the political imagination of those who participated in the protests, and it is directly related with the recovery of part of the country's silenced memory.

Methodology, Data Collection and Analysis

Methodologically, I adopt a critical visual methodology framework as described by Gillian Rose (2023): "By 'critical' I mean an approach that thinks about the visual in terms of the power relations that produce, are articulated through, and can be challenged by different ways of seeing

and imagining" (p. 5). This methodology, Rose explains, takes into consideration four sites at which images, along with their social effects, are made: the site(s) of production, the image itself, the site(s) of circulation and the site(s) where images are seen (also referred to as *audiencing*) (p. 46-47). In addition, each of these sites are composed and can be looked through three modalities: technological (technologies used to make and circulate images), compositional (qualities of the image) and social (economic, social, and political context) (p. 47). Thus, in this thesis I look at each of the two figures/moments selected through these modalities and sites as follows:

Moment	Site of production	The image itself	Site of circulation	Audiencing
Video shared on Twitter by Alvaro Uribe (May 7th, 2021)	Unknown **Social modality**	Video shared by Alvaro Uribe **Compositional and social modalities**	Twitter **Technological and social modalities**	Twitter (comments by followers) **Social modality**
Los héroes monument + Hero archetype (April to June 2021)	2 sites: 1. Los héroes monument, Bogotá 2. "The Heroes in Colombia do Exist" propaganda campaign (early 2000s) **Technological and social modalities**	Images shared by protesters via Twitter **Compositional and social modalities**	Twitter **Technological and social modalities**	Twitter (comments and quoted tweets) **Social modality**

When I began working on this project, Twitter was acquired by Elon Musk, which resulted in the termination of access to the academic API. With this change, what I had first conceived as a mix of quantitative and qualitative examination of a large dataset turned into a thorough qualitative assessment of a smaller dataset. This, however, ended up favouring this project. As Faulkner et al. (2018) suggest, "it is generally through close interpretative work with small datasets that a sense of the richly intertextual meanings of images can be gained" (161).

I decided to adapt my collection methods to suit the context and dynamics of each of the moments. In the case of the first moment, I had already identified the tweet containing the video, so I focused on manually collecting all the comments that users had left under the video. I used a spreadsheet to paste all the written content and saved the images in a drive folder. I also collected

the content of all the retweets that contained textual or visual responses to the video. Since my goal was to analyze the intertextual relationships between images and other cultural and political discourses, I also did an advanced Twitter search to retrieve all the tweets that the Uribe had shared since the first day of the strike (April 28) until the selected tweet was shared (May 7). While I had been following Uribe's digital tactics during the strike, revisiting the timeline of his tweets allowed me to reconstruct the discursive and visual strategy deployed by him to dehumanize protesters and legitimize police violence against them. In the case of the heroes' monument and archetype, I carried an advanced twitter search using the #ParoNacinoal and the keyword "héroe" (hero). As in the previous case, I collected all the tweets in a spreadsheet and saved the images in a drive folder. Once I had all the required visual and textual content, I used MAXQDA to code the textual components and identify important themes and affective fields.

In both cases, I applied a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). I chose MCDA as a form of analysis because, as Way (2021) points out, the power of digital culture "lies in its multimodality—that is, how modes work independently and together to articulate specific meanings" (p. 58). As an analytical tool, MCDA presents a toolkit that "can be tailored to reveal the ideological discourses articulated in digital popular culture, depending on which aspects best reveals the ideological work at play" (p. 58). This flexibility seemed essential for an analysis like the one here presented, as each of the moments that were studied required a particular focus on the modes and semiotic resources used to articulate, explicitly and implicitly, different discourses (Way, 2021; Machin, 2013).

A Note on Twitter as an Affective and Visual Archive

Given that this thesis focuses on the visual material resulting from the strike and their affective entanglements, it might seem surprising that I chose to work with Twitter instead of a more visual social media platform like Instagram. While Instagram, as well as other platforms were used during the strike, several organizations denounced the removal of posts and stories related to the protests on the Meta platforms on May 5th (Caparroso, 2021), making Twitter the go-to place to share time-sensitive information and images coming out of the protests. Additionally, up until the acquisition of the company by Elon Musk, Twitter was "frequently used to call networked publics into being and into action during periods of political instability" (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012, p. 268)—and the 2021 National Strike was no exception.

This is one of the reasons why I decided to work with Twitter. The second reason has to do with the affordances of the platform itself. First, as Jackson et al. (2020) suggest, Twitter's landscape and technological architecture can help counterpublics make themselves audible and drive national conversations. Through what they call *hashtag activism,* counterpublic groups create "searchable shortcuts that can link people and ideas together" (p. xxviii). This is precisely what happened during the strike through the use of hashtags like #ParoNacional and #SOSColombia. As I will show in Chapter 3, given that most of Colombia's broadcast media is controlled by a few corporations that tend to side with right-wing and neoliberal politics, in times of political turmoil, people have turned to social media platforms for alternative conversations—and the hashtags used

to share information make it easier to trace and follow those conversations. Second, while in February 2023 Twitter ended free access to its academic API, its advanced search option still allowed me to retrieve historical tweets with more precision than other platforms. This feature proved essential, as it enabled me to filter tweets by specific date ranges, hashtags, keywords, and users, providing quick and precise access to the content I needed.

I was also interested not solely on the images that were circulating during the strike, but also on the other elements accompanying or complementing these images. As Bouko (2023) explains, "the text and/or hashtags that accompany the picture (be it a selfie or an eye-witness image) play a key role in giving additional context to the depicted event and in highlighting to what extent it is experienced as a private and personal event, as a political and public one, or as a mix of both" (p. 50). And it is precisely at this intersection between personal and political expressions that I wanted to look at. On other visual platforms, images are often shared alone, with little to no accompanying text, and sometimes they are ephemeral, as in the case of Instagram stories, making it difficult to draw connections between the images and circulating affects. While this might also occur on Twitter, users on the platform tend to be more vocal, and tweets and images will only disappear if the accounts are closed or if users choose to delete what they had shared. Additionally, since Twitter is not primarily a visual platform, users also articulate their feelings in standalone tweets/posts/replies without any visual elements, allowing for a more explicit expression of emotions and opinions that can complement the visual analysis. While platforms like Facebook offer different kinds of affective engagement (compared to the *like* and *retweet* options in Twitter), my goal was to follow the discursive manifestations of affect through replies and retweets.

The combination of all these elements is what drives me to consider and treat Twitter as an affective and visual archive for the purpose of this research. Unlike other studies on social movements and social media, my thesis does not focus on the role of the platform in mobilizing citizens, but rather on what digital expressions reveal about how citizens relate to the events that were unfolding and the affective histories of the nation that surround these moments. Although the protests took place in 2021, Twitter allowed me to capture and follow some of the visual and affective reverberations of the strike. In fact, this research would have not been possible without access to this digital platform. The video shared by Uribe was mainly accessible through Twitter, and the Heroes monument was demolished in September 2021, which means that without the images that circulated online it would have been difficult to reconstruct all the changes that the monument went through. That being said, it is also important to mention that while I was able to retrieve a great number of tweets from the Twitter archive, as an impermanent and unofficial archive, the data collected is far from perfect.[2] Some of the tweets that were shared during the strike were unavailable by the time I started to work on my data collection—be it because the accounts were deleted or because their settings were set to private. Therefore, I must also acknowledge that given that I was only capable of analyzing a limited number of tweets, my

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[2] It is also imperfect because, within the last two years, Twitter (or X) has gone from being a place in which counterpublics could gather to a network used (and owned) by the far-right.

findings cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, I believe that the analysis here presented can offer some important insights.

Ethical Considerations and Positionality Statement

For this research project I only engaged with publicly accessible tweets. My ethical approach was informed by the Association of Internet Researchers' ethical guidelines for internet research (franzke et al., 2020)—based on the "respect for persons, beneficence, and justice" (p. 9). To mitigate risks and protect the identity of users who were not public figures (like Alvaro Uribe) or public accounts (like digital news outlets), I anonymized their Twitter handles and usernames. Thinking about ethics also calls for reflexive thinking. As Ali FitzGibbon writes in in "Just because you can, doesn't mean you should" (2021), when doing research in and about times of crisis, it is essential to "consider not what we *can* do but what we *should* do" (p. 20, original italics). Thus, before starting this project, I spent some time reflecting on the purpose, time, and legitimacy of this research—following a set of questions FitzGibbon brings up in her article.

Purpose: As mentioned, I initially considered focusing on the videos of state and vigilante/paramilitary violence recorded by protesters and shared on Twitter to denounce the abuses. However, through a series of conversations I had with some of my colleagues (and texts), I started to question this focus. Thus, to stay away from what Eve Tuck calls "damaged-centre research," and to remain accountable as a researcher, I chose to focus on resistance as a form of what Tuck (2009) calls "desired-based research." While for Tuck "desire interrupts the binary of reproduction versus resistance" (p. 419), I am holding on to this contradiction and using resistance as a starting point within the binary to flesh out many shapes that desire took during the strike.

Time: Though the protests took place four years before the competition of this research, I believe that what took place from April to July 2021 does not end there. As Azuero Quijano puts it, "the strike produces a rhythm of time that exceeds it, that is to say, it is a 'destituent' moment that in a certain way begins but does not yet end" (p. 20). The practices of resistance, care and stigmatization that were observed throughout the conjuncture have impacted the logics and norms of the Colombian society. A clear example of this was the election of the first Black vice president, Francia Marquez, in 2022 with the support of millions of Colombians—as it is also the racism and misogyny that she has had to face.

Legitimacy: Focusing on the digital aspect of the protests has always been a priority for me given that this is how I engage with the political and social processes that take place in Colombia. Although I was born and raised there, I moved to Tio'tia:ke (Montreal) in 2013, which means that my understanding of Colombian politics has taken shape mostly in a space of privilege.[3] This has both distanced me and brought me closer to these processes and has also forced me to think (strongly) about my positionality. Choosing to study digital spaces is then not a way to avoid a reality that can seem distant, but instead a means to approach the aspect of that reality I feel the

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[3] I say mostly because my direct family still lives there, and though I moved to Canada at a young age, I am from a region (Catatumbo) directly impacted by Colombia's armed conflict, so growing up I was constantly in fear and aware of the conflict.

most at home with. While I was not in Colombia when the protests happened, I lived there until I was sixteen, so I decided to weave in personal anecdotes from my early years to draw the link between the circulation of images and the solidification of affective structures in the country.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

My citational politics and practice are guided by a desire to challenge what Aymara/Bolivian feminist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2012) describes as the "political economy of knowledge" (p. 102), which refers to the hierarchies of knowledge established through citation practices. Thus, my focus has been on exploring and highlighting literature produced in Latin America, while also incorporating and referencing insights from works produced in the Global North. This is also the approach I took in the development of this thesis.

My work engages with literature that examines the relationship between affect and visual culture, along with studies that investigate the role of social media and visual culture in protest movements and resistance processes. In this chapter, I will provide a literature review of four areas of study. That being said, I will also engage with many of the works reviewed as I develop my analysis in the subsequent chapters, so to avoid repetition I will not introduce those works in this section.

The 2021 National Strike

The literature regarding the 2021 National Strike follows two forms of analysis: a conjunctural and sociopolitical analysis of the events, and an analysis of performances, aesthetics and different forms of artivism observed during the strike.

Conjunctural and sociopolitical analysis: One year after the protests started, Duke University Press' *South Atlantic Quarterly* dedicated a section of its 121st volume to bring "together different perspectives of researchers committed to processes of social change in Colombia, analyzing the National Strike in relation to axes of historically constructed social inequality" (Castronovo & Fajardo, 2022, p. 404). The articles published in that journal by Martha Bernal and Ilich Ortiz, Hernán Cortés Ramírez, and Betty Ruth Lozano Lerma offer an excellent sociopolitical analysis of the strike. Bernal and Ortiz (2022) analyze the factors that led to the uprising and look into the structural roots of the conjuncture. They see the 2021 protests as a continuation of the 2019 protests and *cacerolazos* (pot-banging protests) and provide a thorough analysis of the accumulated social tensions that led to the protests. They show how previously adopted neoliberal policies, along with the country's long armed conflict, "formed the breeding ground for the progressive escalation of social tensions" (p. 413). Along the same line of argument, Cortés Ramírez (2022) suggests that "the destituent process initiated by the national strike, starting on April 28, 2021, opens a dispute over the forms of domination deployed through the reproduction of inequality and processes of capital accumulation, whose consequences are suffered by the majority of Colombians" (p. 417). Cortés Ramírez explains that the pandemic, in addition to increasing social inequalities, also revealed that these inequalities are rooted in "intense historical processes of accumulation, dispossession, and violence that are interwoven in complex and heartbreaking ways" (p. 417). For him, what was seen during the 2021 protests cannot be analyzed without a proper account of the

modes of accumulation that the country has favoured over the years. Lastly, within that volume, Lozano Lerma (2022) uses an intersectional lens to analyze the particular way in which the protests unfolded in Cali, Colombia. This lens, Lozano Lerma explains, accounts for "the multiple forms of oppression that come together in Black and Indigenous bodies and women, as well as in the practices and manifestations of resistance" (p. 426). Although the moments I am focusing on do not take place in Cali, the expressions of resistance and solidarity that were articulated across the country cannot be understood without looking at the events that took place in that region.

In addition to these works, several authors have analyzed the factors behind the significant youth participation during the strike (Bernal & Ortiz, 2022; Mahecha Montañez, 2022; Niño Castro, 2022). They indicate that many young protesters came from marginalized communities, and their involvement can be attributed to the severe impact of the pandemic on this demographic. Unemployment rates among youth were particularly high during this time. Additionally, the authors highlight that not only were young protesters crucial to the large-scale mobilizations, but they were also among the groups that suffered the most from state and paramilitary violence. Finally, in a recently published book, Fabio E. Velásquez (2024) has provided a thorough analysis of the 2019–2021 protests. Looking at the different actors and repertoires of action and situating the protests in the history of the Colombian armed conflict, Velásquez shows how the 2019–2021 movements called into question the country's conservative order.

Performance, aesthetics and artivism: Alejandra Azuero Quijano (2023) has argued that the National Strike does not start nor end with the protests. Instead, Azuero Quijano suggests that the potency/power (*potencia*) of the strike goes beyond the event itself (p. 18). Analyzing the strike as a conjuncture, in Stuart Hall's terms, Azuero Quijano suggests that the protests led to an epistemic burst/rupture (*estallido epistémico*) that created new temporalities and political trajectories (p. 27). Such burst, she explains, is an embodied experience as well as a political and aesthetic phenomenon "that begins in the street and takes over individual and collective bodies" (p. 21). By doing so, the strike produced the "epistemic, politic and aesthetic conditions needed for a change of register" (p. 149). Through an analysis that pays attention to the different "rhythms of endurance (*aguante*), resistance, register, care and mutual support" that have sustained the changes that the strike set in motion (p. 20), Azuero Quijano shows how the strike presented different ways to think, feel, and write the history of the country.

Along the same line of thinking, Olga Lucía Sorzano (2022) argues that the 2021 protests can be understood as "an epistemological-existential and pedagogical struggle" (p. 661). Looking at circus performances and at community pots (*ollas comunitarias*), Sorzano argues that these practices reveal "alternative forms of cultural production outside Eurocentric neoliberal models, precarity, individualism, and self-promotion" that are "driven by solidarity and cooperation as alternative (art)forms of resistance and re-existence in the world" (p. 659). These decolonial world-making practices challenge the neoliberal necropolitics and enact worlds otherwise. My research aligns with the work of Azuero Quijano and Sorzano, aiming to enhance the understanding of the

reasons and mechanisms behind these epistemic, affective, and political changes. My analysis brings the digital and affective side of things into this conversation.

Looking at two graffiti that appeared during the strike, Nathalia Lamprea Abril (2023) argues that the strike produced a "(re)configuration" of young people as an "alternative political subject" (p. 496). Lamprea Abril does a discursive-performative analysis of the graffiti to explore how young people (re)signified memories of violence and exclusion to produce emancipatory practices and "newly politicized citizenships" (p. 496-497). Juan Camilo Castillo (2022) argues that the participation of youth in the front lines has significantly influenced Colombia's political landscape. He suggests that the 2021 strike demonstrated how the struggle for social justice is not only taking place in the streets but also at a symbolic level. This shift underscores the importance and legitimacy of social movements that operate outside traditional political parties and parliamentary settings. As Lamprea Abril, Castillo highlights that a key symbolic achievement of the youth that participated in the front lines has been their recognition as political actors. He also observes that the struggle for the symbolic that was observed during the strike drew "on the influence and legitimacy provided at the regional level by the demonstrations in Chile and Ecuador and, at the international level, by the demonstrations of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States and Western Europe" (p. 454). Also looking at the forms of resistance observed within the front lines and beyond, Miguel Rojas Sotelo and Laura Quintana (2022) analyse the aesthetic-political dimension of different repertoires of resistance. They argue that through these repertoires, the front lines and other marginalized groups (Indigenous groups, marginalized youth, women, mothers, popular communities) asserted their existence as political subjects and fostered spaces of aesthetic-political experience and (re)existence. Through this, members of these groups sought "ways to re-inhabit spaces amid precarious conditions, while simultaneously offering diagnoses and proposals for change" (p. 348).

Finally, looking at the strike's digital footprint, Arango Lopera et al. (2022) analyze the social media content shared from April 28th to May 28th, 2021, to understand *how* resistance was performed online. The authors argue that digital platforms were not just used for sharing what was happening on the streets, but rather a form "to encourage other forms of resistance" (p. 26). In this sense, Colombia's mobilization aligned with other global movements, where digitally connected youth played a central role in driving new modes of activism (p. 26). Although the performative elements of resistance were not entirely new, the authors emphasize that digital platforms introduced novel dynamics by enabling solidarity, collective action, and the reappropriation of the public sphere.

Protest Movements and Social Media Use

When it comes to analyzing the use of social media by protest movements, several authors have looked at the role of social media in the shaping of the contemporary public sphere as well as at the affordances that social media platforms provide to contemporary movements when it comes to coordinating and disseminating information (Castells, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2012; Jackson and Foucault Welles, 2016; Jackson et al., 2020; Papacharissi, 2016; Tufeki, 2017). Looking at

cases like Indignadas in Spain, the Arab Spring, the Egyptian revolution, Occupy Wall Street, and the 2011–2014 student movement in Chile, among others, Manuel Castells (2015) has argued that social movements in the digital age can be considered a new "species of social movement" (p. 15). He proposes that the internet provided these movements with more autonomy, transforming the dynamics of power and allowing movements to emancipate from top-down logics. Castells discusses how social movements in the internet age are increasingly organized in decentralized, networked forms and highlights the importance of emotions and their circulation in the formation of these movements.

Contrary to this logic of networks proposed by Castells, Paolo Gerbaudo (2012) advises to look at "mobilisation as a process of symbolic and material gathering" that involves physical gathering as well as different forms of mediation (p. 15). Gerbaudo also looks at the role of social media in contemporary social movements like the Arab Spring, Indignadas and Occupy, and argues that "social media use must be understood as complementing existing forms of face-to-face gatherings (rather than substituting for them), but also as a vehicle for the creation of new forms of proximity and face-to-face interaction" (p. 13). In addition, Gerbaudo suggests that social media, through the "symbolic construction of public space" and the emotional narration of the events, plays a choreographing role that he calls *choreography of assembly* (p. 12). Thus, social media constitute not just spaces where information circulates, but also "crucial *emotional conduits*" through which movement organisers condense "individual sentiments of indignation, anger, pride and a sense of shared victimhood and [transform] them into political passions driving the process of mobilisation" (p. 14). Zeynep Tufekci (2017) also analyzes how social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook have transformed the organization, mobilization, and communication of social movements. These platforms, Tufekci points out, facilitate rapid and decentralized communication, which empowers ordinary citizens to participate in protests and collective actions. As a result, they can often bypass traditional media and hierarchical structures. Similarly, Sarah Jackson, Moya Bailey and Brooke Foucault Welles (2020) study the use of social media (Twitter) by raced and gendered counterpublic groups in the United States. They argue that "hashtag activism" has been used by these groups to "make political contentions about identity politics that advocate for social change, identity redefinition, and political inclusion" (p. xxviii). The authors argue that hashtag activism is deeply intersectional and that this form of activism has material effects in both digital and physical spheres—though the impact could at times be limited—since it helps bringing important debates about identity politics, justice and citizenship from the margins to the center.

In their study of the Gezi Park protests, McGarry et al. (2019b) show that protest visuals, shared on social media, amplify everyday acts of resistance, creating a rupture in the political status quo. By sharing these moments on platforms like Twitter, activists counter the government's narrative, portraying themselves not as looters but as legitimate political actors. Moreover, McGarry et al. argue that protest is not only embodied in physical acts but also negotiated in digital spaces. Once an image is shared online, the protest's meaning is expanded and reframed, with social media acting as a key space for reshaping and spreading protest performances.

Looking at the cases of Greece and Sweden, Vasilis Galis and Christina Neumayer (2016) suggest that using media technologies like commercial social media platforms alter and reconstitute the ontology and materiality of protest in different ways. Thinking about the cyber-material aspects of protests, and accounting for the ways in which the logics of corporate social media can limit collective action, they use the notion of *detournement* to describe what happens when activists and social movements reappropriate social media to perform resistance, as well as the "subversion of mediated images, texts, and symbols of the commodified and over-mediated spectacle" (p. 4). They propose the concept of "cyber-material agency" to describe the "sociomaterial alliances between activists, computers, the Internet, transmitters, and receivers of information, web platforms, and mobile devices" (p. 2). This concept, they argue, "deepens our understanding of the complex interaction between human and nonhuman entities in the performance of (material-digital) resistance" while pointing to the "cyber-material *detournement*" that takes place when corporate social media is reappropriated (p. 2). They propose that this entanglement between activists, their environment and the platforms used creates "new expressions of political resistance" (p. 11). They claim that the production of protest footage by activists serves more than just creating visibility. By disseminating multimedia content of police brutality or misconduct through social media, activists can exert political pressure on state authorities, and such images and videos may also be used as evidence in legal proceedings.

Francisco Sierra Caballero and Tommaso Gravante (2018a) have studied the way in which protest movements have unfolded in recent years in Latin America. They explain that neoliberal politics have produced an unfavourable media landscape that is reflected in media politics through "the dominance of the private sector and the control of audiovisual media by the main transnational telecommunications operators [,]" which has "led to a lack of channels for public visibility and representation" (p. 10). They argue that digital culture and technology have made it easier for citizens to mobilize, protests and organize different forms of resistance. In the region, they explain, "the massive dissemination of low-cost technology and the Internet made it possible to use social media as a component of social protest" (p. 11). Thus, to understand social movements in the region is important to consider their digital footprint. Also looking at Latin America, Marcela Fuentes (2019) has examined how activists integrate online and offline strategies to coordinate collective action. Her analysis highlights the interplay between digital platforms and physical demonstrations, emphasizing how activists leverage both spaces to enhance mobilization and solidarity. She argues that the assemblages between "physical and digital sites, body-based and digitally mediated action, and synchronous and asynchronous cooperation [,]" which she refers to as performance constellations, "redefine traditional repertoires of protests and activism in ways that are key to responding to contemporary systems of exploitation and subjection" (p. 2). She uses performance theory, political economy, and new media analysis to map out "nascent forms of networked activism and protests launched by Latin American organizers and supporters in neoliberal capitalism" (p. 20). Performance and digital networking, she argues, are key elements of contemporary activism that allow activists and protesters to link the local with the global, and open new spaces of appearance.

Aesthetics of Protest and Resistance

In the introductory chapter to *The Aesthetics of Global Protest: Visual Culture and Communication* (2019a), McGarry et al. highlight how the aesthetics of protest, as a dynamic process, "carry a symbolic resonance bound up with identities, affect, attitudes, and new meanings and knowledge" that within protest movements can lead and support social change (p. 19). For the authors, aesthetics is not limited to the Kantian interpretation of aesthetics as what is beautiful and pleasing, which, as a positivist position, "fails to capture the complex communicative and expressive processes in protest action, and what it means for democratic processes" (p. 17). Instead, they see aesthetics (of protest) as a useful tool to "capture the interplay between material and digital spaces" (p. 28) and understand how expressions of protests, as forms of communication that can create new forms of engagement and participation, can foster solidarity and resistance. McGarry et al. understand aesthetics of protest "to be the slogans, arts, symbols, slang, humour, graffiti, gestures, bodies, colour, clothes, and objects that comprise a material and performative culture with a high capacity to be replicated digitally and shared across social media networks, ideological terrain, state borders, and linguistic frontiers" (p. 18). It is with this understanding of aesthetics that I will engage with the visual works I will analyze, as it allows me to better trace the relationship between protests, digital technologies, collective identities and affect, as well as the creation of meaning through "communication and exchange across digital and material spaces" (McGarry et al. 2021, p. 24).

The intersection of aesthetics and politics cannot be discussed without mentioning Jacques Rancière's work. Rancière argues that the aesthetic is at the core of the political—not to be confused with Walter Benjamin's concept of the "aesthetization of politics" (Rancière, 2004, p. 13). If sensory experience plays a role in the organization of power and the political, politics, Rancière argues, "revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of time" (p.13). Thus, aesthetic techniques or practices, as Rancière understand them, can challenge what he calls the "distribution of the sensible," which is what determines what can be seen and heard, but also "who have a part in the community of citizens" (p. 12). Thus, in the struggle for power, Rancière sees also a struggle for the distribution of the perceptible and the sensible configuration of a specific world (2011, p.7).

Also dealing with the politics of perception and power struggles, Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011) has described visuality as "both the medium for the transmission and dissemination of authority, and a means for the mediation of those subject to authority" (p. xv). Using a decolonial framework, Mirzoeff looks three "complexes of visuality," namely, the plantation complex, the imperial complex and the military-industrial complex, in which visuality was used as to supplement the violence of authority to classify, separate and aestheticize power. As Mirzoeff studies these complexes, he shows how in each case "the right to look" was claimed by those subjected to authority (the enslaved, the colonized and the opponents of war). These emergent "countervisualities" can thus be understood as forms of countering the techniques of visuality and claiming the right to autonomy and existence. In the context of protests, this means that movements

not only seek visibility but actively reclaim and reshape the visual representation of their struggles, contesting dominant narratives and power structures.

In Latin America, Adolfo Albán Achinte's has proposed the concepts of aesthetics and pedagogies of re-existence. Exploring the power and colonial struggles embedded in aesthetics and art, Albán Achinte (2012) proposes the term "aesthetics of re-existence" (*estéticas de re-existencia*) as a form of decolonial praxis that confronts coloniality and its categorization of racialized subjects and subjectivities "as despicable, horrible, enigmatic" (p. 290). The author understands aesthetics "as aiesthesis, that is, as the wide world of the sensible, and re-existence as all those devices historically generated by the communities to re-invent their lives in confrontation with the power patterns that have determined the way these populations should live" (p. 290). Thus, aesthetic practices of re-existence work to dismantle current systems of oppression (patriarchal, heteronormative, racist) by allowing different forms of living to emerge. For instance, Albán Achinte (2013) observes that when Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities use art "as a mechanism of self-representation, self-resignification and construction of new symbologies" they make visible "the plurality of existences that meet and do not meet in the multicolored scenario of contemporaneity" (p. 452-453). In this example, art does not only constitute an aesthetic practice, but also what he calls a pedagogy of re-existence, as such art is not only confronting colonial logics, but also creating emancipatory narratives that teach and show ways of being otherwise.

Along similar lines, Macarena Gómez-Barris (2018) has offered a critical exploration of that art and artivism have played within Latin American political movements. She looks into the political shift following the decline of the Pink Tide and explores how artists have responded to the new political and economic realities by creating "non-normative worlds of political being" that expand beyond the boundaries of the nation-state (p. 2). Gómez-Barris suggests that "paying attention to social activisms that are shaped by visual arts, film, performance, and music allows us to see a rising tide of world making" (p. 20).

Affect and Social Media

Within the affect theory field, I am particularly influenced by the works of Brian Massumi and Sara Ahmed. Following Spinoza's writings, Massumi (2015) understands of affect as a "body's ability to affect and be affected" (p. 4). He argues that power has been increasingly linked to and dictated through affect. "The legitimization of political power, or state power," he suggests, goes through affective channels, and given that media have the "ability to modulate affective dimension [,]" they are becoming direct mechanisms of control (p. 31). Massumi's understanding of affect not just as a state of in-betweenness and as potential, but also as central to power and ideology has been helpful to think about the work I will present. I will also be engaging with Sara Ahmed's (2004) concept of "affective economies." Ahmed argues that "emotions play a crucial role in the 'surfacing' of individual and collective bodies through the way in which emotions circulate between bodies and signs" (p. 117). In this surfacing and circulation, affect and emotions become "economic" (p. 119). Emotions, she proposes, do not reside in subjects or figures, but

instead, they circulate and pass through subjects as nodal points within the affective economies that emerge (p. 120). For Ahmed, to affect and be affected does not point just to the passing of affect from one body to another. Through this passing, affect and emotions maintain "the connection between ideas, values, and objects" (2010, p. 29). They generate attachments and mediate the relationship between individuals and communities. I am aware that Massumi's and Ahmed's understanding of affect and emotions differ. Although I understand the logic Massumi uses to argue that emotions are only partial and subjective expressions of affect, and such distinction can be useful at times, I will stick with Ahmed's phenomenological approach to the politics of affect and emotion. Finally, Lauren Berlant's exploration of the mobilization of national sentiment through the intimate in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997) has also been key in my understanding of affective politics. Berlant shows how the political public sphere in post Reagan America turned into an intimate public sphere in which political belonging is framed and experienced through emotions and intimacy. Both Ahmed and Berlant have observed the role of affect in acting as a social glue, aligning bodies and making them stick. In this thesis, I will observe how this happened in the Colombian context, but I will also pay attention to the way in which affect appears as resistance and its capacity to disrupt.

In regard to the relationship between affect and social media, Adi Kuntsman has studied the connection between digital politics and affect, as well as the ways in which digitalized and mediated accounts of warfare shape affective and emotional responses to suffering (Kuntsman 2011, 2012 & 2020). Looking to "find a language that captures the ways in which affect and emotion take shape through movement between contexts, websites, forums, blogs, comments, and computer screens [,]" Kuntsman arrives to the concept of *reverberation* (2012, p. 1). Unlike notions like representation, narration and impact, reverberation "invites us to think not only about the movement of emotions and feelings in and out of cyberspace, through bodies, psyches, texts and machines, but also about the multiplicity of effects such movement might entail" (p. 1-2). In addition, Kuntsman suggests, the concept of reverberation could also help in opening up "processes of change, resistance or reconciliation, in the face of affective economies of mediated violence" (p. 2). I find this concept particularly generative to think about and approach the topic of my research. In a context like the National Strike, tracing those reverberations could help understand not just the affective implications, but also the counterhegemonic and political potential of the protests' visual culture.

Susanna Paasonen's (2019) notion of "affective resonances" is also helpful to think about affect and digital media. Paasonen uses this concept to "explore affective encounters between people, networks, interfaces, apps, devices, digital images, sounds, and texts in the context of social media" (p. 49). She arrives to this concept through her research on pornography and the "affective appeal of online porn" (p. 50). "In the course of this exploration," Paasonen explains, "resonance became a means to describe the ways in which users attach themselves to site interfaces, images, sounds, videos, texts, tags, and search terms and how they perhaps come to recognize some of the sensations conveyed on the screen in their own bodies." (p. 50). Thus, resonance refers to "instances of attunement as momentary connections and impact [,]" and a

means to address the "oscillating registers of affect in their qualities, rhythms, speeds, and intensities" (p. 51). Outside of the online pornography field, Paasonen's concept is helpful to understand the affective politics of digital media. This concept, like Kuntsman's, uses Sara Ahmed's (2004) concepts of affective economies and stickiness to think about the role of affect in the making and unmaking of online publics.

Zizi Papacharissi (2015) has also described the role that affect plays in in mobilizing and materializing what she calls *affective publics*. Papacharissi argues that "the discourses produced via Twitter must be interpreted as […] soft structures of feeling" (p. 116). These discourses are often organized by hashtags and foster feelings of belonging through which a form of publicness emerges. Papacharissi understands publics that form through Twitter's affordances as "*affective: networked publics that are sustained by online media but also by modalities of affective intensity*" (p. 118). While Papacharissi's emphasis is on the affordances of Twitter hashtags, my research will explore the role of visual culture in the formation of such publics and the online and offline reverberations and resonances of the material shared.

Chapter 3: Who, What, Where & How: An Overview of the 2021 National Strike

As mentioned, on April 28th, 2021, thousands of Colombians took to the streets to reject a tax reform proposed by then President Ivan Duque Márquez which aimed at improving Colombia's fiscal situation by lowering the threshold at which salaries were taxed and eliminating tax exemptions on basic goods. The reform seemed, as journalist María Jimena Duzán wrote in an article for the Washington Post, "designed from a bubble," with the benefits of the elite in mind, and demonstrated a "clear lack of empathy" with the lower classes (2021). Although the tax reform proposal was the catalyst that brought people to the streets, the 2021 strike could be seen as a continuation of the 2019–2020 anti-government protests, also known as the 2019–2020 social outburst (*estallido social*), which had stopped shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic was declared. Collectively, the 2019–2021 protests represent a response to the ongoing precarization of life under consecutive neoliberal administrations and the lingering effects of the armed conflict in the country. In the words of Correa Ochoa et al. (2021),

> these protests [were] a direct response to a movement from above by economic and political elites to undermine the constitution and hollow out the peace agreement, in great part to protect their economic agendas. These neoliberal policies have long been wielded against marginalized communities, above all Indigenous and Black communities in rural and urban areas alike.

Therefore, to better understand the 2021 conjuncture, it is essential to look into the reasons that triggered the 2019–2020 protests, along with some background elements that will help contextualize the discontent that led to the 2021 strike.

The goal of this chapter is to provide an overview of the context in which the strike happened, as well as an exploration of the actors and repertoires of action that were seen during the strike. I will argue that, through a plurality of collective actions, some actors managed to create what Nicholas Mirzoeff (2017) has called "spaces of appearance." Then I will explain how digital media played an important role in the creation and preservation of these spaces.

The 2019–2020 Estallido Social

From November 2019 to February 2020, following the protests in Chile, Bolivia and Ecuador,[4] Colombians took to the streets to protest against corruption, staggering inequality, state violence, and the Duque administration's proposed austerity measures and its lack of commitment

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[4] As described by Anthony Faiola and Rachelle Krygier (2019) in a *Washington Post* article, at least in Bogotá, protesters were seen waving "the flags of Chile and Ecuador and [carrying] banners that read 'South America woke up.'" Additionally, the series of protests that unfolded both in Chile and Colombia later came to be known as "estallidos sociales" (social outbursts), and the metaphor of "awakening," as I will show later in this thesis, came to describe the affective rupture that these protests brought about in both countries.

with the 2016 Peace Agreement.[5] The first demonstration, held on November 21, 2019, was initially organized by what would later become the National Strike Committee (hereafter Committee), which included labor unions, pensioners, students, and civic, Indigenous, and farmers' organizations.[6] Alongside the Committee, the student movement and local communities are also believed to have played a pivotal role. The catalyst for this series of protests was what the Committee called the economic *paquetazo* (package), a series of government initiatives aimed at advancing neoliberal policies (Archila et al., 2020, p. 18). However, it must be noted that the plurality of actors and demands exceeded those that were formally presented to the government by the Committee. Yet all the demands and calls for justice were ultimately rooted in a shared discontent with the ongoing precarization of life. This, as I will discuss, was further accentuated during the pandemic and resurged in the 2021 strike.

Despite the wide range of peaceful activist tactics, the government's response was singular and blunt, using force instead of dialogue (Velásquez, 2024). This comes as no surprise. Just before the 2019 protests, the government had implemented strategies to incite fear and discourage people from taking to the streets. In the days leading up to the protests, authorities carried out raids on the headquarters of various collectives and social organizations; and in Bogotá, the police announced that the marches were going to be monitored by drones and that those causing disturbances would be identified with facial recognition tools (La Liga Contra el Silencio, 2019). During the first day of the protests, there were different clashes between the public forces and some demonstrators who tried to break into the National Capitol. This escalation led to curfews being imposed in various cities by 7:00 PM. Soon after the curfews were announced, various posts began to circulate on social media inviting citizens across the country to join a pot-banging protest from their homes at 8:00 PM. The goal of this sonic protest was to show that those who supported peaceful protest outnumbered those engaged in violent acts. Thousands of Colombians joined this initiative and by 8:00 PM, as described by Juan Fernando Velázquez (2021), "noise intruded into public spaces, shattering the institutional fantasies of social control embodied by the emptied and silenced streets."

Over the next two days, protesters returned to the streets and, as on the first day, riot police were deployed. As a result, on November 23, 2019, Dilan Cruz, an 18-year-old protester, was shot and killed with a rubber bullet, and multiple other cases of police brutality were reported across the country. Dilan, whose death was captured in multiple citizen journalism videos, became an

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[5] Duque won the 2018 elections with 54% of the votes. His administration was marked by non-compliance with several points of the 2016 Peace Agreement and by a failure to protect human rights defenders and former guerrilla members.

[6] Here is the full list of the Committee members as described by Karen Sánchez (2021): Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT), la Confederación de Trabajadores de Colombia (CTC), la Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CGT), la Confederación Democrática de los Pensionados (CDP), la Confederación de Pensionados de Colombia (CPC), Federación Colombiana de Trabajadores de la Educación (Fecode), Cruzada Camionera, Organización Dignidad Agropecuaria, Asociación Colombiana de Representantes Estudiantiles (ACREES) and Unión Nacional de Estudiantes de Educación Superior (UNEES).

icon of the 2019–2020 protests—and his figure came back during the 2021 protests.[7] In the weeks that followed, several groups continued to take to the streets, and different events were organised around the country to pay tribute to the victims. In addition, social media platforms were also used to denounce the excessive use of force and to call on citizens to keep protesting "until dignity becomes customary" (*hasta que la dignidad se haga costumbre*).

While at the beginning of 2020 there were negotiation attempts between the government and the Committee, when the pandemic hit no consensus had been reached. By March 2020, the dialogues had failed but, as Fabio Velásquez argued, "the mobilization initiative remained intact, and all that was needed were the right conditions to take to the streets again" (2024, p. 15). The pause brought by COVID-19 ended when, in September 2020, Javier Ordóñez, a 48-year-old lawyer, was murdered by police officers while in custody. Similar to the case of George Floyd's murder by Derek Chauvin in the United States that same year, a video showing how Ordóñez was repeatedly shocked with a stun gun by the police before he was taken to the detention site where he was murdered was widely shared on social media, sparking national outrage. In the days that followed, the streets were flooded with people, and multiple police stations were attacked and set on fire, which led the government to, once again, meet protesters with violence, leading to the death of thirteen more people (Velásquez, 2024).

In October 2020, the Committee called for another day of protests. This time, protesters in Bogotá were joined by the Indigenous Minga,[8] whose members were demanding solutions to the rise in massacres across the country and the murders of Indigenous leaders in the departments of Nariño, Cauca, and Valle del Cauca (Paz Cardona, 2020). During the following days, the Misak Indigenous community occupied the El Dorado airport in Bogotá for several hours. They were demanding that the government guarantee the cessation of violence, the implementation of the peace agreement, the defense of life, and the protection of their territories.[9] After this series of events, the protests remained dormant until April 2021, when the Committee called for another round of protests and members of the Misak community reignited the movement by toppling the Belalcázar statue on April 28th (Figure 3.1), marking the first day of the three-month-long National Strike. During the months that followed, significant protests and rallies took place in major cities around the country—such as Bogotá, Cali, Medellín, Barranquilla, and Bucaramanga—as well as in smaller towns and rural areas.

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[7] An example of this is the metallic statue of Dilan that was placed on the pedestal of a Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada monument soon after the Jiménez de Quesada statue was toppled by the Misak community.

[8] The Colombian Minga is a decolonial movement of Indigenous peoples who, over the past years, has been mobilizing to oppose colonial violence, defend their rights and demand justice.

[9] By 2021, over one thousand activists had been killed since the signing of the 2016 Peace Accord (Correa Ochoa et al. 2021). As Laura Correa Ochoa et al. write, the "fact that Indigenous leaders represent a third of the victims while representing only 5% of the population underlines this argument: that the conflict is inextricably intertwined with racism and coloniality."

Figure 3.1.

A person standing on top of the toppled Belalcázar statue raising the Misak flag.
"Belalcázar toppled in Cali" written at the bottom of the image.

Cae Belalcázar en Cali

Source: Hekatombe_, 2021, April 28

Quick Overview and Timeline of the 2021 National Strike

When the protests resumed, protesters were met with violence, and the government sought to link the strike with "urban terrorism" by portraying those on the street as "the enemy within" (Ameglio Patella et al., 2021, p. 113). Cali, Colombia's third largest city and home to the largest Afro-Colombian population in the country, became the "epicenter of repression" (Amnesty International, 2021), and other major cities like Bogotá, Medellín and Bucaramanga also saw intense clashes between protesters and the riot police.

Duque used official communication channels and his Twitter account to build a narrative portraying the country as facing a "vandalic threat," claiming that criminal organizations and guerilla leaders were behind the demonstrations. Official rhetoric also sought to blame the protests and road blockades for the country's poor economic situation. While people on the streets were brutalized and presented as criminals on official channels, Colombia's Ministry of Defense sought to label online criticism as digital terrorism while openly monitoring social media platforms (Romero, 2021, p. 16).

By May 3rd, the tax reform proposal was withdrawn, but the protests and violence persisted. In fact, that night, one of the deadliest during the strike, members of the riot police and the military launched an assault, also known as "Operation Siloé," on a vigil that was taking place in Siloé, a predominantly Afro-Colombian neighborhood in Cali known for its strong resistance movements. As a result, three protesters were killed, and many others were wounded. Thousands of videos denouncing the violence of the operation were shared on platforms like Twitter and Instagram that day. However, during the two days that followed, citizens of the area complained about internet cuts that prevented evidence from being shared. NetBlocks confirmed the disruption of internet services in the city, but the reasons behind the cuts were never clarified. Nevertheless, in 2023, the Colombian Constitutional Court ordered the government to carry out an investigation and

confirmed that the internet cuts that took place during the strike were "selective" (Botero & Velásquez, 2023).

In the days that followed, it also became clear that the violence was not solely perpetrated by the police and military but also involved civilians and paramilitary groups—which in some cases were suspected to have collaborated with the police. For instance, on the evening of May 5th, Lucas Villa, a 37-year-old activist, was shot and wounded during a protest in Pereira; he died five days later. His killing created a climate of fear among protesters and the local student movement. The police denied any involvement in the killing but failed to conduct a meaningful investigation into the murder. Despite the many videos capturing key moments leading up to the killing, no one has been prosecuted for the crime to date.[10] Another important case took place on May 9th, when members of the Indigenous Minga were traveling from Santander de Quilichao to Cali. Upon entering the city, they were attacked by armed civilians around the Ciudad Jardín and Pance neighbourhoods—among the most luxurious and exclusive neighbourhoods in the country. Videos of the events showed that the attacks happened in the presence of the police, who did nothing to stop civilians from shooting at the Minga. The clashes resulted in injuries to several members of the Indigenous group.

All these incidents, along with the brutality of the police response, were ignored or justified by Duque's administration with familiar narratives that frame protesters as a terrorist threat and link the protests to guerilla groups. In the case of the attack on the Minga, Duque asked members of the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca, leaders of the Minga, to "return to [their] reserves" to avoid further confrontations, as "citizens" did not want more blockades and felt their presence was a "threat" to their safety (Serna Duque, 2021). This not only shows the way in which Indigenous peoples in Colombia are often treated as non-citizens, but also how much a stigmatizing discourse that surfaces every now and then has been successful in trying to link the Minga with guerilla and narco groups.[11]

On May 10th, Duque met with the Committee for the first time to discuss their demands, but talks were inconclusive, and demonstrations continued. During the month of May, several road blockades were set up, causing food shortages in some cities, and adding pressure to the negotiations. The Committee and the government kept meeting on and off, and by May 25th, they reached a preliminary agreement. While the two parties kept meeting, on June 7th, 2021, the

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[10] In 2023, a Bellingcat (2023) investigation revealed that "at least one investigator from the General Prosecutor's Office (Fiscalia General de la Nación) was in contact with individuals suspected of Villa's killing in the days before, during and weeks after his death."

[11] Months after the attack to the Minga, in November 2021, I found myself having dinner with V., a coworker at the time who had been born and raised in the Ciudad Jardín neighborhood of Cali and had moved to Montreal a few years earlier. Although most of our conversation had revolved around work, in an attempt to talk about our common backgrounds (Colombia), V. started to talk about the strike, and before I could say something, she started to indirectly justify the attack, using denigrating language to talk about Indigenous communities, and using the guerilla/narco association to show how threatened her family had felt. While I had seen this type of discourse online, I was shocked to see that when it came to talk about our Colombian-ness, these colonial, racist, and violent associations were the first to appear—and that V. thought of this as a shared common ground and felt free to share her contempt solely on the basis that I was also born and raised in Colombia. This relation between fear, security, military admirations and the nation will be the subject of the next chapter.

Committee put a halt to the negotiations, arguing that the government was delaying the signing of a preliminary agreement on protest guarantees. Around the same time, a delegation of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (hereafter IACHR) started a three-day long visit to the country. From June 8th to 10th, members of delegation met with representatives from different sectors in Bogotá and Cali, including government officials, leaders, and victims of human rights violations, to gather testimonials. Following this visit, the IACHR published a report in which it communicated its concerns regarding "the disproportionate use of force; gender-based violence in the context of protests; ethno-racial violence in the context of protests; violence against journalists and medical missions; irregularities in transfers for protection; and reports of disappearances; as well as the use of military assistance, disciplinary powers and military criminal jurisdiction" (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2021, p. 7). Duque rejected the recommendations made by the IACHR in the report and argued that "no one can recommend a country to be tolerant of criminal acts" (Radio Nacional de Colombia, 2021). By the end of July, the large-scale protests had diminished, but localized protests and rallies were still happening. The loss of momentum could be explained by several factors including government repression, protest fatigue, lack of unified leadership and economic pressures on participants. Over time, things slowed down and by August most demonstrations had stopped. Nevertheless, although the public demonstrations stopped, the social, cultural and affective transformations brought about by the strike created the right conditions for Gustavo Petro's historic victory as the country's first left-wing president in 2022. I will come back to this at the end of this thesis.

Actors, Protest Repertoires and the Emergence of Spaces of Appearance

As in previous years, the 2021 protests were initially led by the National Strike Committee, but as the days passed and the Committee began negotiations with the government, people on the streets began to feel that the Committee did not represent them, and the Committee itself recognized its inability to speak to the interests of all protesters (González, 2022, p. 99). This is because the Committee's demands were limited to the interests of its member groups. By recognizing that they did not represent everyone protesting, the Committee sought to signal to the government that other actors—such as Indigenous groups, Afro-Colombians, and marginalized youth—also had demands addressing structural issues that required equal attention.

As the weeks went by, it became obvious that the protests were also being led by a group of young people that, as Pietro Ameglio Patella et al. point out, "found a sense of life and dignity in the so-called *primeras líneas* (front lines)" (2021, p. 109). In Bogotá, the front lines (Figure 3.2) were formed in response to the killing of Dilan Cruz in 2019, emerging as a collective for protection and solidarity. During the 2021 strike, the Bogotá front lines, for instance, were divided into four groups: two focused on shielding protesters from police and military violence, one that monitored the demonstrations to prevent police infiltration, and a paramedic group that provided care for injured protesters (Camilo via Capital, 2021). While front lines in other cities seemed to have followed similar organization patterns, it is important to note that not all the front lines that formed across the country followed this model and may have had a more organic structure.

Nonetheless, through these new forms of organizing, the front lines forged, as Nathalia Lamprea Abril (2023) suggests, "newly politicized citizenships, challenging memories and practices of protest and memories of the violent present and past of state repression" (p. 507).

Figure 3.2.
Front lines in Usme.

Source: Hekatombe_, 2021, May 28

Contrary to what one may think, a lot of the young men and women who defended the blockades and other protesters with their bodies and their lives did not belong to the student movement.[12] They came from historically marginalized communities and, as Betty Lozano Lerma (2022) explains, most of them came from a generation born in the past "forty years of liberal economy" and "had to live on a day-to-day basis because there is no way to dream or build a future" (p. 430).[13] Prior to the protests, many members on the front lines had already endured various forms of violence—physical, symbolic, and systemic. For example, as Lozano Lerma rightly points out, the first places to face repression during the protests "were the hillsides of the neighborhood of Siloé, the first human settlement on the hillsides of Cali, whose origin is tied to the displacement suffered during the period of La Violencia" (p. 428).[14] During the protests, Siloé had one of the strongest front line presences, and it is there where violence first returned to affirm the dominance of the ruling class not just over land and cities, but also over the bodies of the young, racialized and feminized protesters.

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[12] As Fabio Velásquez (2024) explains in his study of the 2019–2021 protests, in 2021 the National Strike Committee lost control over the strike, and with this "student organizations also lost their influence, especially after the failure of several negotiation attempts with the government. At that time, other actors took center stage, particularly the youth from low-income neighborhoods in the cities" (p. 183).

[13] The effects of the neoliberal policies that were adopted in the 1990s were exacerbated during the pandemic to the point that the youth unemployment rate went from 17.2% (before the pandemic) to 23.3% (in 2021) (Velásquez, 2024).

[14] *La Violencia* was a period of intense political violence between the Colombian Conservative Party and the Colombian Liberal Party that took place between 1948 and 1958. It is estimated that 200,000 people were killed and that about two million people were forcibly displaced. This form of political violence, Lozano Lerma (2022) explains, "was the dominant class's way of carrying out a type of land reform that dispossessed a still incalculable number of small and medium farmers from their lands, strengthening the latifundio system" (p. 432).

The figure of the front lines became so powerful that smaller front line groups with different demographic characteristics began to emerge across the country. Such was the case of the "Mothers of the Frontline" in Bogotá, or the "Ecumenical Frontline for Colombia" in Cali (Figure 3.3). While these groups were not as numerous or visible as the main front lines, they adopted the aesthetics of the original groups and made it their mission to help protect protesters.

Figure 3.3.

Mothers of the Frontline (left), Ecumenical Frontline for Colombia (right).

Source: Manifiesta Media, 2021, May 15; La Paz Colombiani, 2021, May 28

In addition to the Committee and the different front line groups that emerged around the country, Indigenous groups, student movements, environmental and human rights defenders, artivist collectives, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community also played key roles during the strike. Through their deployment of visual and symbolic forms of resistance—such as the toppling of different colonial statues, the painting of murals across the country denouncing state violence, the organizing and streaming of orchestra concerts, the establishment of community kitchens across different meeting points to feed the front lines and protesters, or the different anti-police brutality voguing performances, among other actions (Figures 3.4, 3.5, 3.6 & 3.7)—these groups claimed their right to be seen, pushed forward their own demands, and rejected the government's necropolitical management of the protests. These performances not only worked to construct counterhegemonic narratives and produce a reconfiguration of public space, but as videos and photos of these moments circulated online and moved across platforms, they also created what Nicholas Mirzoeff (2017) calls spaces of appearance.

Figure 3.4.

Toloposungo group in front of the Héroes monument in Bogotá.[15]

Source: Redcomunitariat, 2021, July 20

Figure 3.5.

Convivir con el estado (Living with the state) mural (left) & mural in honour of the disappeared (right)

Source: Melguizo, 2021, May 23; InvisiblesMuros, 2021, May 23

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[15] Toloposungo, the name of the collective, comes from a local adaptation of ACAB, *todos los policias son una gonorrea* (all police are a gonorrhea). As Rainer Lee (2024) explains in an *OutWrite Newsmagazine* post, "the movement opted to avoid the American phrase 'All Cops Are Bastards' (ACAB) to avoid the misogynistic implications of the word bastard. Calling cops 'bastards' names and blames their mothers for giving birth to them and implicates sex workers in particular […]. Instead, they've opted to call cops a gonorrhea — an especially derogatory insult in Colombian Spanish which is not misogynistic, anti-sex-worker, or queerphobic." The group made its public debut in 2019 during the march for the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women in Bogotá and later participated in the September 2020 protests through additional performances (Hernández, 2021).

Figure 3.6.

Community kitchens in Bogotá

Source: omsampayo, 2021, May 21; cvestigios, 2021, June 27

Figure 3.7.

Philharmonic Orchestra concert at Bogotá's Parkway (left) & Student Orchestra in Medellín (right)

Source: BogotaET, 2021, May 5; laorejaroja, 2021, May 5

In *The Appearance of Black Lives Matter* (2017), Mirzoeff looks at the transformations in visual culture brought about by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the US between the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014 and the beginning of Donald Trump's first presidency in 2017. Mirzoeff examines the role of BLM's visual activism in confronting systemic racism and police violence and argues that, from 2014 to 2017, the BLM movement reclaimed racialized spaces and inserted itself in the US visual culture to make white supremacy visible through the distribution and circulation of digital images. In doing so, the movement "created a decolonial space of appearance in which to prefigure a different 'America'" (p. 18).

Mirzoeff explains that these spaces emerge during moments of rupture, as seen with the Black Lives Matter movement, but also with movements like Occupy Wall Street, Indignadas in Spain and 2011 Egyptian Revolution, which as he suggests, created temporary spaces of appearance within the boundaries of neoliberalism (p. 27). Concretely, a space of appearance forms when (marginalized) bodies "appear" in spaces where they are not supposed to be. To appear, Mirzoeff

suggests, is "in the sense of Black Lives Matter, to be grievable" and to stand in defiance of the politics of invisibility that govern racialized and policed spaces (p. 19). Through this, spaces of appearance provide

> the means by which we catch a glimpse of the society that is (potentially) to come—the future commons or communism […] It is where a crack in the society of control becomes visible. Through this crack, it can become possible to look back and discover new genealogies of the present that were not previously perceptible, as well as look forward to the possibility of another world(s)" (p. 32-33).

While Mirzoeff's work is grounded in American politics of (in)visibility, I find this theorization of the space of appearance as a pre-figurative space of potential futures relevant and applicable to understand what happened in Colombia between 2019 and 2021. After all, as I will show throughout this thesis, the forms of visual activism and solidarity that came out of the 2021 strike (and the different struggles for justice that preceded it) were forms of reimagining past histories to project different futures. Mirzoeff suggests that these spaces appear in two forms, "the kinetic," meaning the physical spaces in which people interact, and "its potential, latent form in mediated documentation" (p. 34). While mediation can take many forms, in cases like the strike, the images shared on social media sites do not simply report but also retain this potential (p. 40). Thus, in a way, the work that I will be developing in this thesis is an attempt to look at and understand the potential that made itself graspable through the images that were shared on social media during the strike.

I argue that during the 2021 National Strike—a moment of rupture—these spaces of appearance were created through a repertoire of online and offline actions deployed by different counter public groups. As a negotiation of the boundaries of the sensible, the visible and the grievable, the emergence of these spaces challenged and ex posed the structure of feeling of apathy and selective desensitization (Giraldo, 2021; Yepez Muñoz, 2018) that were shaped during the armed conflict through the circulation of anti-insurgent propaganda. By looking at these spaces, it is possible to see the unfolding political and affective "awakening." This "awakening," which can be perceived though the different forms of resistance and solidarity observed during the strike, is closely related (inversely) to the structures of feeling of fear and apathy mentioned. I will explain how these structures of feeling of fear and apathy came to be, and how they are closely related to different propaganda strategies deployed to garner support around the army and the figure of the military hero in the following chapters. For now, what interests me is that the techniques of classification, separation, and aestheticization (Mirzoeff, 2011) deployed through the propaganda of the conflict contributed to the emergence of a visual complex in which many of the groups that later took centerstage during the strike were rendered invisible and ungrievable (Afro Colombians, peasants, internally displaced people, Indigenous peoples, victims of paramilitary violence, etc.). This is precisely why I am arguing that during the strike, through the performances, works of artivism and moments of solidarity mentioned, not only did these groups become visible, claiming their right to see and be seen (Mirzoeff, 2017), but also that through these repertoires of resistance

and solidarity they were able to project a new image of Colombian society in which the boundaries of the grievable are redrawn—if not erased. Inspired by Macarena Gómez-Barris' theorization in *Beyond the Pink Tide* (2018), I argue that through all these repertoires, counter public groups were dismantling, queering, and moving beyond the politics of the nation-state. Following José Quiroga's proposal that all politics should be queer politics, Gómez-Barris argues that "a focus on embodied forms of relating through artistic visions can lead us out of the confining, normative, and often stifling politics of the nation-state" (p. 2). My focus on the affective modes of relation and on the potentiality present in the space of appearance that that emerged during the strike is an attempt to discover how else were Colombians imagining the nation outside these confines.

Given that the spaces of non-appearance preceding these new spaces were mainly shaped by the visuality of the armed conflict, it can be argued that the emergence of these spaces of appearance began with the signing of the 2016 Peace Accord between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrilla group. While issues with other armed groups and dissident factions persisted after 2016, the Peace Accord—along with the establishment of the Truth Commission and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace—helped illuminate Colombia's violent history, shifting relationships and narratives surrounding violence and its victims. This granted visibility to groups that had remained in the margins during the conflict and allowed Colombians to imagine a country outside the sensible boundaries of war.

Another moment that was important for the creation of these spaces of appearance was the pandemic, when social media was used to bring attention to the red rags (flags, towels, shirts) that thousands of Colombians were hanging on their doors as a means to signal that members of their household needed food but could not afford it—creating spaces of solidarity within the pandemic constrains (Figure 3.8). Among the destabilizing crisis of the pandemic and through this visualization of precarity, the previous system of (in)visibility and representation was fractured, opening the possibility for those who have been historically on the margins of visibility to claim and develop a different sensibility—and to claim the grievability of their lives through their online and offline activist and performance repertoires. It is not that the precarious conditions in which many Colombians live was unknown to the wider population, but rather that the system that allows for such precarity to exist was further exposed during and because of the pandemic. This, along with the many other factors, motivated people to take to the streets again in 2021.

Figure 3.8.

Red flags displayed during the Covid-19 pandemic to indicate that households were in need of food.

Source: Vismundial, 2020, April 9

As mentioned, the spaces of appearance that emerged out of the peace accord and the pandemic were furthered solidified during the 2021 strike. To better understand how social media platforms facilitated the emergence of these spaces, I will examine the digital strategies various groups deployed during the strike. Before diving into these strategies, however, I want to highlight three key factors that help contextualize the environment in which the strike took place—and the conditions that shaped spaces of non-appearance:

1. Precariousness Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic:

A key to understanding the general discontent that drove people to the streets in 2021 is the fact that the proposed tax reform came in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had affected a large number of Colombians. It is estimated that just in 2020, over 3.5 million Colombians were pushed under the poverty line, which drove poverty levels from 35.7% to 42.5% (Bermudez et al, 2021). While "class divisions are so baked into [Colombian] society that poorer people refer to wealthier ones as 'your mercy' in casual conversation, a relic of colonialism" and cities "are divided into 'estratos,' which signify one's social class" (Turkewitz & Villamil, 2020), during the pandemic, the gap between the rich and the poor became more evident—and so did the lack of solidarity from the government and the ruling class.

While Duque had passed or attempted to pass several other neoliberal policies, "the most striking difference between this tax reform, and the many other neoliberal policies that his administration and previous ones have put forward, is that it threatened to affect a much broader sector within Colombian society, including urban populations and Colombia's white/mestizo middle and lower-middle classes" (Correa Ochoa et al., 2021). The reform proposed in 2021, known under the euphemism of "Sustainable Solidarity Law," was aimed at improving the

country's fiscal situation at the price of squeezing the sectors of the population that had suffered the most during the pandemic. Of the $6.3 million dollars that the reform was set to generate, 74% of it was expected to come from individuals and only 26% from companies (Blandón Ramírez, 2021).

Although the reform was presented as necessary for the country's recovery from the economic impact of the pandemic, Colombians were quick to realize that the Duque administration had not cut unnecessary spending across all areas in 2020. In fact, while almost half of the country was living in poverty, and one quarter living in extreme poverty (Redacción Economía, 2022), the Duque administration seemed mostly worried about his image and future uprisings. In May 2020, Colombian Senator Wilson Arias exposed that the government was in the process of purchasing $2 million worth of munitions for the riot police, including tear gas, rubber bullets, and stun grenades. That month, Colombians also learned that Duque had chosen to spend thousands of dollars in government propaganda to improve his public image online (Alsema, 2020).[16] The funds were reportedly drawn from Colombia's peace fund (Alsema, 2020), and although the government claimed this money was not allocated for the COVID-19 emergency, the news was poorly received by the public. A report published by the Foundation for Press Freedom revealed that this strategy to improve Duque's image had three goals: to project a positive image of the president in international media, to position him as a leading figure on social media networks, and to promote his image on national media by sponsoring news pieces tailored to his needs.[17] The strategy, the report reveals, also included the dissemination of propaganda aimed at discouraging people from engaging in future strikes (Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa, 2020). The goal was to convince the working class that protests were detrimental for the country's economy, which would hurt the working class more than they thought.

Finally, in addition to highlighting the government's poor management of public funds and its lack of solidarity with the lower classes, both factors that are key to understanding the 2021 strike, the pandemic also had an impact on media consumption in the country, favouring digital media. While seemingly irrelevant, this factor would play a crucial role during the strike, as social media platforms, as I will show, became an additional battleground. It is estimated that between 2020 and 2021, the number of internet users went up by 4% (with a total of 1.3 million new users), and the number of social media users went up by 11.4% (with a total of 4 million new profiles) (Alvino, 2021). This may have played a significant role in the popularity of social media platforms for sharing information related to the 2021 strike.[18]

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[16] Duque's popularity took a hit during the 2019-2020 protests, pushing his disapproval rating to 70% in the polls (Reuters, 2019).

[17] In addition to this, Duque also had his own television show during the pandemic, *Prevención y acción* (Prevention and Action), which was broadcast on national television channels every day from 6 to 7 p.m. The Duque administration stated that the production and broadcasting of the program were covered by regular operational expenses (Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa, 2020).

[18] However, despite the rise in internet and social media usage, there are several municipalities in the country that still lack reliable internet access, which explains why tv and radio, having the widest coverage, are the preferred media format for most Colombians (Romer, 2021, p. 7).

2. <u>Media Concentration in Colombia:</u>

While Colombia's media market includes several newspapers, radio stations and television channels, most audience gathers around two privately-owned television networks, (*RCN* and *Caracol*) two newspapers *(Q'Hubo* and *ADN*) and two radio networks (*RCN Radio* and *Caracol Radio*) (Media Ownership Monitor, 2017a). In these markets (TV, print, and radio), three corporations—Ardila Lule, Santo Domingo, and Sarmiento Angulo—control 57% of the market share (Media Ownership Monitor, 2017a). These corporations have strong ties with other business sectors and political parties. For instance, as noted in the Media Ownership Report (2017b), "it is common to find people who have held public office by election or appointment among the members of the boards of directors and the shareholders of media companies." This form of media concentration has affected journalistic practice and introduced different "logics of censorship and self-censorship [that] operate in relation with the economic and political interests of media owners" (*Hallazgos por sector,* 2015).

Historically, traditional media in Colombia have played a key role in the construction of spaces of non-appearance, "spaces where no one outside cares what happens there" (Mirzoeff, 2017, p. 21). As Villa Gómez et al., (2020) explain, traditional media has "strengthened the legitimization of the war, contributing to the prolongation of the armed conflict, covering up its structural causes" (p. 23).[19] Rather than informing, media organizations have played an active role in the affective and ideological construction of the conflict as a "terrorist threat," often erasing the structural roots of the conflict and focusing on the attacks committed by guerilla groups to legitimize state violence and reinforce social imaginaries of war, making a spectacle out of the conflict (Bonilla Vélez & Tamallo Gómez, 2007; Cárdenas Ruiz , 2015; González Pérez & Trujillo Quintero, 2002; Gordillo Aldana, 2014). This has led to a misunderstanding of the conflict, making the public favour a military approach to resolve the internal divisions over pursuing negotiations for peace.

Furthermore, mainstream media's visualization of the conflict has worked to erase the existence and demands of those who have been affected the most by the conflict: Afro Colombians, peasants, Indigenous communities, and internally displaced populations, among others. And, as Villa Gómez (2020) suggests,

> These hegemonic versions also entail forms of oblivion (of the unnamed), which are omitted from the collective imaginary so that other actors of violence [such as paramilitary groups] remain invisible or, at least, the emotions directed towards them are qualified, so that they can be considered as a lesser evil. (p. 24)

Although this thesis does not primarily examine the role of mainstream media in shaping the affective structures of fear and apathy that emerged during the conflict, recognizing how media concentration has favoured the emergence of these structures and the creation of spaces of non-appearance can provide valuable context for understanding the strike. This is not only due to mainstream media's coverage during the strike mirroring the narrative they had employed during the armed conflict, as I will briefly discuss, but also because activists and protesters adopted digital

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[19] In the next chapter, I will show how this was done in collaboration with the government under the Uribe administration.

media strategies as a direct response to mainstream media's pro-government bias—and the widespread fatigue it has generated.

During the strike, mainstream media channels like *RCN* and *Caracol* aligned with the government's discourse. Although there was an attempt to present their reports as objective, and at times they showed the artistic side of the manifestations, it became obvious that they were siding with the government's rhetoric. In talking about the protests, the words vandalism and violence where constantly used, and, as Ameglio Patella (2021) highlights, these channels sometimes even published wanted posters of protesters who had not gone through a legal process yet (p. 114). Other hybrid magazines like *Semana*, a right-wing magazine known for publishing pro-government propaganda, pushed the discourse further. Echoing Duque's words, *Semana* stated that Colombia was "under threat," and tried to link the protests to the opposition's leader, Gustavo Petro, and to armed groups like the ELN and FARC dissidents (Lòpez de la Roche, 2021). Unwilling to engage with the people on the street and their demands, this kind of discourse only contributed to a biased and limited understanding of the events. This emphasizes the importance of alternative media channels and social media networks in contexts like the strike.

3. Emergence of Digital Native Media in Colombia:

While digital journalism started developing in Colombia in the mid-1990s, Higgins Joyce (2024) explains that the first news organizations to have an online presence were print newspapers that often just transferred printed information to the web (p. 77). "In the early phase of digital news," she writes, "it was hard to distinguish journalism produced online from that produced offline" (p. 77-78). As digital media developed, news organizations began to incorporate interactive features such as forums, chats, and comments (p. 78). However, it was not until mobile technology gained momentum that digital news gained popularity. This is because internet penetration was slower in Colombia than mobile (Gómez-Torres & Beltrán, 2011; Higgins Joyce, 2024). With the rise of mobile users, and the increasing popularity of social media in the country, the news ecosystem has changed.[20]

In addition to the digitalization of print and broadcast media, during the 2010s, there was a quick rise in the number of digital native news outlets. Currently, many of these alternative media organizations have websites of their own through which they publish news articles, but there is a growing number of media outlets that rely entirely on social media platforms to share and distribute news (Romero, 2021). This, as Romero explains, influences not just the way in which news is shared, but also the relationship these media organizations have with their audiences. Romero suggests that social media users who follow these accounts do not see themselves as passive news readers any longer. Instead, this apparent immediacy and proximity with the media outlets makes followers feel the need to participate in the production of news.

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[20] About 81% of the Colombian population is active on social media (OOSGA, 2023), and it is estimated that "more than half of the inhabitants of the departmental capitals get their news from online media outlets and social media" (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.).

This was the case during the 2021 strike. In the report Romero redacted for the Foundation for Press Freedom about digital media and social media in the context of the 2021 protests, he explains that several journalists that talked to him were constantly messaged by people on the streets who were willing to share and gather footage, photos, and other material for them (2021, p. 14). In addition, journalists who were on the ground reporting for these alternative channels also decided to broadcast the protests through Instagram and Facebook Lives, which in turn allowed protesters and activists to guide reporters. Some of the journalists interviewed by Romero recount that, at times, when they were reporting live, followers would send them messages to let them know about confrontations, arrests, and human rights violations that were happening around the area (Romero, p. 14).

This form of broadcasting fostered a constant collaboration between activists and alternative media organizations and also allowed independent journalists and journalists from small organizations to connect with bigger accounts to amplify the voice of those who were on the ground. For instance, this was the case for Jahfrann, an independent photographer who was documenting the protests in Cali and decided to do a streaming on the evening of May 3rd as "Operation Siloé" was unfolding. Jahfrann (@jahfrann) held an Instagram Live to document the abuses and invited Residente, the Puerto Rican rapper, to the stream for almost 18 minutes. This means that the abuses Jahfrann was documenting and sharing with his followers were also visible to the millions of people that follow the singer.

Through cases like these, independent journalists and alternative media outlets facilitated what Mette Mortensen (2015) has called connective witnessing: "the contemporary mode of witnessing distinguished by online sharing of footage from situations of crisis or conflict, which has been recorded by individuals present on site mostly as participants (but sometimes also as bystanders)" (p. 1394). This form of collective witnessing was also enabled by the many videos and photos shared by activists and protesters on the ground, to which I will turn on the next section. While this form of collective witnessing was possible in many cases thanks to the work of journalists from alternative media organizations on the ground, it should also be mentioned that many local journalists covering the protests faced death threats and violence coming from the police and from some protesters. In fact, it is estimated that there were about 260 reported cases of aggression towards local journalists, 60% of which worked for digital media outlets (Romero, 2021, p. 4). Thus, while many journalists continued to report despite the threats, the work of activists and protesters on the ground—particularly their decision to post and share news about unfolding events—was crucial in constructing counterhegemonic narratives that extended beyond the efforts of alternative news outlets and in the creation of the spaces of appearance mentioned earlier.

Now that I have laid out all the necessary background elements to understand how and why social media became another front line during the strike, I will provide a cross-platform analysis that looks into the way that different platforms were used, and at the diverse digital tactics deployed by protesters and activists. While I will attempt to provide an overview of the role each platform

played, it is important to acknowledge that I cannot fully account for all the ways these platforms were used by both activists and pro-government actors. In fact, while social media played a key role in the circulation of counterhegemonic discourses and images, it was also a place in which a lot of fake news and hate speech circulated. Although the video that will be at the center of the following chapter is a clear example of the kind of hate speech and polarizing discourse that circulated during the strike, I will not be talking about other actors (other than the government) who also contributed to the circulation of this type of speech, as this would be outside of the scope of this thesis. My goal here is to provide a general overview to show how social media contributed to the creation of spaces of appearance, which, I hope, will provide a framework for the analysis of the two figures/moments that will follow in the next chapters.

Digital Repertoires of Action

In addition to being used by some alternative and mainstream media outlets to circulate news about the protests, social media platforms were used by protesters and organizers in a variety of ways. Facebook, for instance, was used to circulate information about the protests and invitations to join different rallies and protest actions, as well as images from the demonstrations (protests, rallies, concerts, etc.). Given that the strike happened when some COVID-19 restrictions were still in place, members of the organizing Committee further used their Facebook and YouTube pages to stream virtual press conferences and share information about the negotiations they were having with the government. In addition, public and private Facebook groups such as *Yo apoyo el PARO NACIONAL* (77K members), *PARO NACIONAL INDEFINIDO* (4.3K members), *Paro Nacional Colombia* (79K members), among others, were created exclusively to circulate relevant information about the different activities organized around the country. [21]

Other groups, like *Denuncias y abusos de la policia – PARO NACIONAL COLOMBIA 2021,* were created to share and archive content related to police abuses and state violence. It is also likely that groups initially created for other purposes prior to the strike were used to spread information and organize. That was the case, for instance, of Facebook groups that existed before the strike to connect Colombians abroad—such as *Colombianos en Montréal*, a group created in 2015 for Colombians living in Montreal, and *Colombianos Unidos en el Exterior #27N*, a group created to gather international support for the 2019 protests—which were used to disseminate information and to organize rallies in other countries. In Montreal, for instance, several rallies were organized during the first weeks of the protests. Although not many people showed up to the early rallies, on May 6th, 2021, hundreds of Colombians gathered in front of Radio Canada. Through dances, music and protest songs, Colombians in Montreal and the surrounding area managed to get the attention of local politicians like Andrés Fontecilla, who showed up at the rally and gave a short speech supporting the protests in Colombia. Similar cases happened in the United States, Spain, Germany, the United Kingdom, and France, among other countries. Although the intention of these international rallies was to get international attention, the circulation of photos and videos

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[21] All the numbers provided are as of 2022.

taken at these events also circulated on other social media platforms to show solidarity with protesters in Colombia.

Instagram was mostly used by protesters and journalists to do live streams and share what was happening around them through stories. Feminist collectives, news organizations (like *Revista Volcánicas, Manifiesta Media* and *Colectivo Vestigios*) and other activist groups also used the platform to share infographics and other content to explain what was happening and contextualize the events. Similarly, several human rights organizations and activist groups used the platform, as well as other social media platforms, to circulate information about how to stay safe during the protests and to offer legal resources for those who needed it. While this type of content was also shared across other platforms, it remained popular within Instagram, as protesters and people supporting the strike would reshare the posts through their stories. Instagram was also used to live-stream events from the streets and to connect protesters with influencers and artists who had larger followings, as well as with journalists. However, although both Facebook and Instagram allowed for important information to circulate, it is important to mention that several organizations denounced the removal of posts and stories related to the protests on May 5th (Caparroso, 2021). Days later, Instagram apologized and explained that between May 5th and May 6th, their algorithm had deleted several posts about the protests in Colombia and the National Day of Awareness of Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women in Canada and the U.S., as well as posts about on-going evictions in Sheik Jarrah, a Palestinian neighbourhood in East Jerusalem.

Twitter became the place to go to circulate videos of police brutality and bring visibility to missing person cases with many posts containing the hashtags #SOSColombia, #ParoNacional28A, #colombiaenalertaroja and #NosEstanMatando. That being said, it is important to mention that these types of images and hashtags were also shared on Instagram. However, as mentioned, they were at times erased or shadow banned, which favoured the use of Twitter. Users retweeted this type of content and tagged international media and human rights organizations in an attempt to get international coverage.[22] In addition, the circulation of images denouncing different acts of violence played key roles in the forensic investigations and reconstructions of different crime scenes carried by groups like Cuestión Pública, Forensic Architecture, Cero Setenta and Bellingcat. While collecting data for this thesis I also noticed that certain bots were programmed to gather and archive videos of police brutality. For example, *Cuestión Pública*, a media outlet focused on investigative journalism, used its Twitter account to promote the bot account @archivacolombia (Figure 3.9). On May 6th, 2021, the media organization shared a tweet inviting users to tag the @archivacolombia account when sharing images or videos of police brutality to ensure these were then saved in the Telegram chat. While it is not very clear who created the bot, the infographic shared by the outlet mentioned that the bot had been created in Chile: "Social media users denounce that publications about the #NationalStrike are being deleted or hidden. Our colleagues in Chile created a Twitter bot that backs up evidence of police

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[22] This seemed to have worked, as on May 5th, 2021, *The Guardian* published an article expressing their intent to "speak to those caught up in the events about their experiences" (Guardian Community Team, 2021). The request was shared via their official Twitter account and quickly circulated, not only on Twitter but also through WhatsApp groups.

abuse and violence in Colombia." This could suggests that the practice of using a bot to archive evidence may have been inspired by the Chilean protests in 2019, or that Chilean journalists collaborated with a Colombian media outlet to create the bot. Regardless of the origin, this indicates a commitment to preserving these videos to ensure they were not deleted and could be used as evidence of the attacks in the future.

Figure 3.9.
Screenshot of Tweet shared by Cuestión Pública

Source: cuestion_p, 2021, May 6

While a lot of these videos helped to give a realistic image of what was going on in the streets, galvanizing public sentiment, platforms like Twitter and Instagram also became a place for solidarity and hope. The circulation of photos and videos of different artistic expressions that took place around the country served to lift the spirits of protesters and worked against the stigmatizing picture that mainstream media tried to present. Local artists used their accounts to bring attention to the events and organized artistic modes of protests to contribute to the repertoire of actions. As a result, thousands of videos and photos of dances, murals, concerts, orchestras, and community kitchens went viral and contributed to the creation of an alternative narrative while providing visibility to different groups that were being overlooked by mainstream media. In addition, as all these kinds of images circulated, some started to stand out more than others, becoming iconic themselves, or making the people or the moment they captured icons of the strike. Such was the case of the front lines, captured in many pictures defending themselves and other protesters with home-made shields (Figure 3.10), or the photo of Susana Gómez Castaño (known as Susana Boreal) directing a student orchestra at the Parque de Los Deseos in Medellín, which went viral

soon after videos and photos of the events were posted, making of her a public figure (Figure 3.11).[23]

Figure 3.10.

Protester defending themselves against an armored water cannon truck.

Source: Photo by César Melgarejo / El Tiempo

Figure 3.11.

Picture of Susana Gómez Castaño (also known as Susana Boreal) directing a student orchestra.

Source: RadNalCol, 2021, May 6

Twitter also provided a platform for protesters to engage in cyber activism. This was the case of Colombian K-pop activists. On April 30th, Colombian ex-president Álvaro Uribe Vélez posted a tweet asking people to support the use of weapons by police and army men on the streets. The tweet read: "Let's support the right of soldiers and police officers to use their weapons to defend their integrity and to defend people and property from the criminal action of vandalistic terrorism." Though the tweet stayed up for some time, Twitter took the decision to delete it, to

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[23] In 2022, Susana, who was not known to the public before the strike, was elected as a member of the House of Representatives of Antioquia.

which Uribe's followers responded by making the hashtag #LaVozDeUribeSomosTodos (we are all Uribe's voice) go viral. In response to this, K-pop activists organized to hijack the hashtag by tagging photos and videos of their favourite singers and sharing information about police brutality under the same hashtag. That same day, as well as throughout the days the protests lasted, K-poppers hijacked anti-manifestation hashtags that aimed at associating protests and other forms of manifestation with vandalism—such as #VandalosAsesinos and #VandalismoPuroYDuro (Romero Torres, 2021).

Finally, while obtaining data on WhatsApp usage is challenging because of its encryption, I will rely on my own experiences with the platform during the protests to examine the unique features it offered. At the time the protests started, I was in the middle of a virtual master's degree that allowed me to connect with and meet different people from all over Colombia and Latin America. Through the four months the protests lasted, our WhatsApp group chat became not just a place to circulate important information for those who were attending the protests in person, but also a place to circulate information and organize cyber interventions. Those of us who were not able to show up and protest in person decided to trace virtual events to which Iván Duque or Alvaro Uribe were invited and leave comments on the chats to bring attention to the protests. The group chat also became an outlet for some members to express their feelings of frustration and anger, and for others, who had government jobs and could not protest or whose families were against the protests, to feel supported and understood.

As seen, the hybridity of collective action seen during the strike can be understood not just as a way to cope with challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, but also as an attempt to break with, what many called, the "media blackout" that Colombia's current media concentration allows for. Despite the many efforts to disrupt and stigmatize protests, protesters and activists took advantage of the changing media ecology to build a pluralistic narrative of the events that accounted for the complexities of the conjuncture. Instead of being perceived as a weakness, the lack of centralization helped the movement occupy online and offline spaces and use a different set of tools to challenge the simplistic narrative that aimed at delegitimizing the demands presented. As the images circulated, counterhegemonic histories and affects began to emerge, and the spaces of appearance mentioned earlier began to take shape. This will be explored more in-depth through the two moments/figures that I will analyze in the following two chapters.

Chapter 4: Alvaro Uribe's Regime of Fear and the Falling of a Living Statue

Growing up I often woke up terrified, fearing that the images of a recurring dream I had would eventually turn into reality. This dream, which I experienced multiple times per year, or at least a version of it, unfolded at my parent's country house. My memories are fuzzy, but I remember seeing myself taking a siesta with my parents and grandparents in the hammocks outside the house until a group of armed men, wearing military attire and concealing their faces with bandanas, forcibly breached the gates leading to the property. As they walked past the gates and down the small hill toward the house, I could feel how their presence was breaking not just the intimacy and calmness of the scene that preceded it, but also any sense of security I could have had. They were there to get us. Although my parents' country house was located near the military base, I knew that the men were not the "heroes" I would often see on the road, but faceless figures to be feared. As they get closer to us, my parents tell me to hide. I run inside the house and find shelter inside a closet, behind a shoe rack. I am waiting there for my parents to get me and tell me we are safe, but I can only hear the armed men walking around the house, and the last thing I see before I wake up is their black boots passing in front of me.

In *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008)*,* Ariela Aïsha Azoulay writes that "each of us carries with her an album of […] planted pictures" (p. 13). In my personal album, this is one of the phantom pictures that comes back to me the most. While I have grown to understand that the images in the dream are the amalgam that resulted from the stories of loss and violence I heard at home and of the images I saw on the news while growing up, I still find striking the embodied memory of fear I experience when I think about this dream. As Azoulay suggest, this kind of phantom pictures are planted "in the body, the consciousness, the memory" while us, the owners of the album remain "unaware of the violence involved, until the day [we are] able to see that this or that image that [we] had taken to be [our] own was in fact nothing of the kind" (p. 13). In my case, this realization came years later when, trying to better understand the Colombian armed conflict, I came across an iconic photo taken by Jesús Abad Colorado (Figure 4.1) in 2002 during a military operation—which came to be known as "Operation Orion" (*Operación Orión*)—to apprehend alleged guerrilla collaborators in the Comuna 13 neighborhood in Medellín.

Figure 4.1.
Operation Orión.
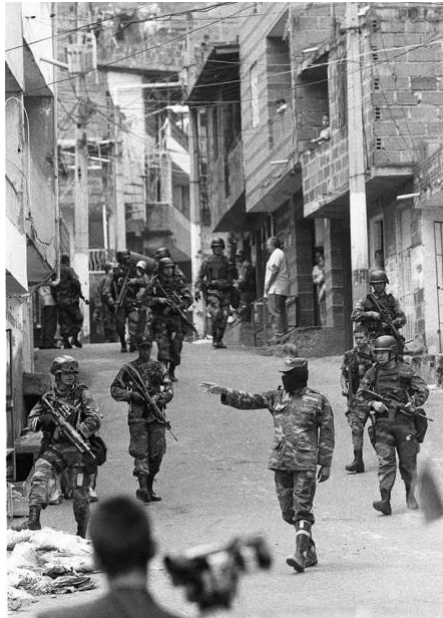
Source: Photo by Jesús Abad Colorado

Abad Colorado's photographic work has been essential for the construction of memory in Colombia. As Juanita Bernal Benavides (2022) explains, "Abad Colorado's massive visual archive—which covers the war of the last decades in different parts of the country—sheds light on the annihilation of the civil war, the attempts to erase the conflict, as well as the manufacture of a historical memory that those in power have tried to manipulatively wedge into the nation's imagery" (p. 179). This photo in particular served to confirm, many years after it was taken, that the Colombian army had carried out the operation with the collaboration of the paramilitaries of the Cacique Nutibara Bloc (Sanchez, 2023). Although it is possible that Abad Colorado's photo came out at around the same time as I began having this dream, I cannot affirm that this photo (or a similar photo taken by Natalia Botero from the same angle) had a direct influence on my dream, for I truly cannot remember seeing this particular image as a child. However, what I do remember seeing is many other images of the conflict on the cover of a magazine my mother would often receive, or on the news, which my parents would watch every day at noon. Nevertheless, I choose to bring Abad Colorado's photo here not just for its testimonial value but also because its composition captures many of the elements that composed my dream: the anonymity of the photo's main subject, the hand that determines the destiny of those who get pointed at, the group of armed men who are slowly taking over the scene, and an overwhelming feeling of uneasiness seen in those watching the operation unfold—and felt by those looking at the picture.

Unlike the armed men in the photo, most of who were members of the army, the men in my dream were members of one of the different armed groups (guerilla and paramilitary groups) that were consolidating their presence in the Catatumbo region, where I was born. Since I could not

really tell the difference between guerrilla and paramilitary groups as a child, I used to call the men in my dream "Vikings." In my binary understanding of the world as good versus evil, "Vikings," a term I must have picked up from a cartoon, was the word that came up to refer to all the "evil" actors that were the antithesis of the military "heroes" I was encouraged to admire. I could not understand what the armed conflict was, but what I could understand is that members of guerilla groups were to be feared and loathed. After all, during the 90s, the decade in which I was born, these groups resorted to kidnappings and extorsion to strengthen their economic power (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2018, p. 41), and some members of my direct and extended family had been victims of these events.[24]

I start this chapter with my childhood dream and with Abad Colorado's photo to lay out the way in which the manufacturing of historical memory and nationalisms are tightly tied to the production of images and affects. Although the Colombian conflict has been experienced in many different ways, some radically different to mine, inserting myself in this narrative of the conflict through my visual and corporal memory brings me closer to the embodied experience of fear that the threat of violence mediated by images and stories aims to inspire. This relationship between fear and images will be at the center of my analysis. As such, my goal is to use my experience and the historical point of view of the region in which I was born as a point of departure to explore the affective economy of fear that circulated around the conflict, and how Alvaro Uribe, the main character in this chapter, profited from it. As I explore the formation of this economy, I will point out to the ways in which Uribe took advantage of pre-existence fears to present himself and the army as "heroes" in his attempt to build an anti-FARC nationalism. This will serve as a background for the analysis of the social and compositional modalities of the video that Uribe shared during the 2021 protests—which was an attempt to keep in place the structures of fear and invisibility built during the conflict—and for the analysis that follows in the next chapter about the negotiation of meaning of the figure of the hero.

Alvaro Uribe's Affective Economy of Fear

Over the years, I have come to understand the fear I grew up with as a form of quiet fear. I was born and raised in the Catatumbo region, in Ocaña, a small city that (though semi-sheltered from the raw violence of the Colombian armed conflict) has always felt its impact. This region, located on the Colombian-Venezuelan border, has been historically marginalized by the state, which has mostly established its presence through the deployment of military forces (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2018). Instead of benefiting from investments in infrastructure, education and healthcare, inhabitants of this region have had to endure the historical presence of

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[24] Kidnappings were recurrent throughout Colombia since the 70s, but between 1996 and 2000, the number of kidnappings increased exponentially (Comisión de la Verdad).

the FARC-EP,[25] EPL[26] and ELN[27] guerrillas, as well as several paramilitary groups. The Colombian armed conflict, Rincón and Santisteban explain, "has one of its harshest manifestations in this region, where violence, instead of giving truce, is worsening day by day" (2020).

Ocaña, by virtue of being one of the main cities in the region, has been both, a paralyzed witness and a victim to the horrors of the war. Though tragic events happen in the city, they are never as appalling as what happens in the small towns that surround it—or, for that matter, in many other small towns around Colombia.[28] Its citizens, in an attempt to stay safe and keep living a form of normalcy in which violence is a background hum, opt to follow the movements of a carefully coordinated choreography that involves a set of rules imposed by all the actors of the conflict. I remember, for instance, that while growing up my parents had a car that they decided to stop using because they were being followed; or that when we had to travel to other cities we had to travel during the day or avoid circulating on certain roads at specific hours. Outside the privileges of my middle-class normative family, this choreography of forceful and careful avoidance was also meant to surveil and control nonnormative customs and bodies. For example, when I was growing up it was common to see members of the LGBTQ+ community, homeless people, and people with left-leaning ideas listed on pamphlets that paramilitary groups circulated around the city warning citizens about upcoming "social cleansing" operations. In addition, as reported by Colombia's National Center for Historical Memory, it was common for paramilitaries to impose

> controls on everything [citizens of the region] did or wanted to do, norms of behavior and ways [they] were allowed or forbidden to dress and show [their] bodies: in some towns [they] could not wear red clothes because that meant showing support for the guerrilla groups; in other parts, women were forbidden to wear certain items of clothing, such as cropped tops; and men were forbidden to wear their hair long" (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2018, p. 51).

But although all these forms of violence were always present, shaping our subjectivities and aiming to create a homogenous social fabric through fear, it was so normalized that at times it felt invisible. As Juliana Restrepo Tirado notes in the foreword to Rubén Darío Yepes Muñoz' *Afectando el conflicto* (2018), "the low intensity and extended duration of [the Colombian armed conflict] have succeeded in inserting the question of violence in social relations in such a way that we perceive it as an everyday occurrence" (p. 15). That is why I describe this form of fear as quiet, because although it lingers constantly, it has become so ingrained in my psyche that its impact on my mind and body often goes unnoticed—only making itself apparent when triggered by a particular event or an involuntary bodily response. This normalization and imperceptibility of fear, the constant

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[25] Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejercito del Pueblo (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army). The FARC-EP are also commonly referred to as FARC, the acronym I will use throughout this chapter.

[26] Ejército Popular de Liberación (Popular Liberation Army).

[27] Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army).

[28] At the beginning of 2025, the rawness of the war returned to the region. A state of emergency was declared as more than 37,000 people were displaced within a week due to the ongoing conflict between the ELN and dissident factions of the FARC.

threat that accompanies it, as I will explain, has turned into a malleable affective device used by different politicians to stay in power. This has been the case of Alvaro Uribe, Colombia's former president and one of the most powerful political figures in the country, who is also the person that shared the video that will be analyzed in this chapter.

Uribe rose to power in 2002 after the failure of the peace process between the government of his predecessor Andrés Pastrana and the FARC Marxist–Leninist guerrilla group. With the slogan "strong hand, big heart" (Figure 4.2) and the promise to fight terrorism and guerrilla groups through his US-backed Democratic Security policy, "the most aggressive and comprehensive tough-on-crime policy Colombia has pursued" (Isacson, 2023, p. 77), he remained in power until 2010. Uribe, whose mandate has been characterized as populist, held weekly televised security meetings through which he managed to maintain an average popularity ranking of 72% (Londoño, 2010). His Democratic Security policy contributed to his popularity, as "its security gains brought palpable relief to a large segment of the population and enabled economic activity" (Isacson, 2023, p. 84). Although this policy did succeed at weakening guerilla presence across the country, and brought an increase sense of security among many,[29] it was overshadowed "by human rights violations, extrajudicial executions, a peace process with paramilitary groups that was permeated by impunity and corruption through soft sentences and non-reparations to victims" (Abello, 2019).

Figure 4.2.
Banner from Álvaro Uribe's 2002 election campaign.

Credits: Carlos Duque.

A major example of this was what is known as the "false positives scandal," the extrajudicial killing of at least 6,402 non-combatants between 2002 and 2008 by the Colombian army. Lured with job offers, bonuses, and holidays, among other incentives, officers and army units killed vulnerable civilians and then presented them as guerilla combatants to elevate the

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[29] As Isacson (2023) explains, "Uribe took office in August 2002, and according to the Defense Ministry, by the end of 2005 homicides had dropped 37 percent, massacre victims 63 percent, kidnappings 72 percent, and 'acts of terrorism' 63 percent. Yet after 2005, the pace of improvement slowed" (p. 78). In addition, Uribe's "Democratic Security" policy also managed to re-establish military presence on some of Colombia's main roads, allowing Colombians to move securely within the country (López de La Roche, 2022).

army's body counts and inflate their operational success. Though the systematic nature of the killings was becoming obvious, and the family members of all the victims kept asking for justice, most Colombians had no idea of what was happening. In 2006, some newspapers started using the euphemism "false positives" to discuss the cases (Gutiérrez, 2019, p. 235), but it was not until 2008, when the mothers of a group of victims—taken from the province of Soacha and found in a mass grave in Ocaña—got together to demand justice, that the country started to question the "success" of the military operations that were carried under Uribe's government.

Over the years, the case of the false positives has gained more and more recognition, emerging, as I will argue in the next chapter, as a mediator of the structure of feeling that materialized during the strike. However, at the time, many people were in disbelief when the news of these extrajudicial killings broke, and Uribe was able to end his second mandate with high rates of approval. In fact, by 2008, 90% of the population had a favourable image of the Colombian army (Gutiérrez, 2019, p. 237). This could be explained in part by the fact that under Uribe's two mandates the Colombian army had launched a propaganda strategy focused on "the figure of the hero, inserting narratives that appealed to the emotionality and sentimentality of the viewer to create bonding, adhesion and cohesion around a particular discourse of security" (Gordillo Aldana, 2014, p. 31).[30] The conception of security that was mobilized around the "hero," as Gordillo Aldana suggests, was built around the interests of landowners and the Colombian elite—many of whom were able to travel again safely within the country (go back to their farms or country houses) and benefitted from the increase in foreign investment. It is this use of the figure of the hero, and the affective attachments that it generated, that I will argue was challenged during the 2021 strike.

In all the political propaganda that was launched and circulated during Uribe's presidential periods, fear was mobilized and set to work as what Sara Ahmed calls "affective politics" (2014). The images, figures and symbols that circulated worked to establish fearsome others, justifying the killing and displacement of innocent civilians to maintain the fantasy of safety. While this fearsome other took the shape of FARC members and informants during Uribe's two presidential terms, fear in Colombia has also worked as what Ahmed calls an "affective economy." Fear, Ahmed writes, "does not reside positively in a particular object or sign" and "this lack of residence that allows [it] to slide across signs and between bodies" (2014, p. 64). In fact, Uribe profited from this affective economy and the decades of anti-communism and anti-left leaning ideology that preceded him in order to set the FARC as the country's fearsome other when he got to power (Giraldo, 2021). As Isis Giraldo (2021) puts it, these decades of propaganda served as a form of "affective training: a pedagogy of urban classes with regard to the emotions certain categories of people arouse in them and how this translates into these categories of people being granted or not, the 'political capacity to claim rights'" (p. 68). This "affective pedagogy" has caused emotions like hate, fear and disgust to be associated with the guerrillero figure or anything that is related to it (p. 69). Giraldo asserts that although these affective attachments have always been present in Colombia, "it is under Uribe that their respective semantic field [became] more defined and

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[30] According to Gordillo Aldana, during Uribe's presidential period, the army launched a total of twelve propaganda strategies that served to consolidate this narrative (p. 38).

expanded […] (so as to include those who are unproductive or are productive outside the capitalist logic, or who fight for their rights)" (p. 69). During his mandate, these affective associations worked to determine who was disposable and killable in the name of security.

All this has allowed Álvaro Uribe and his political descendants to apply the same tactics over and over again, shaping what and who gets associated with *threat* and *security* in the Colombian social, cultural and political imaginaries. An example of this is the quick stigmatization of protesters during the 2021 National Strike by government officials and by Uribe himself. However, to understand how these changing associations have worked, it is necessary to first examine Uribe's early rhetorical and visual strategy.

Uribe's Pedagogies of Cruelty

During the eight years Uribe remained in power, his rhetorical and visual strategy consisted not only in presenting himself as a messianic figure capable of annihilating a threatening other (the FARC) and exalting the figure of the military hero, central to this thesis, but also in denying the existence of an internal armed conflict rooted in socio-economic and political inequalities which have been exacerbated by the implementation of neoliberal and extractivist policies.[31] Instead, he insisted on reducing the conflict to a "terrorist threat" to align his rhetoric with the Global War on Terrorism and gain international support (Viveros Vigoya, 2014; López de La Roche, 2022; Cardona Zulueta, 2016). Despite the presence of different armed actors, Uribe focused on portraying the FARC as the country's main threat, and through a politics of fear, "he managed to change the way Colombians viewed the armed conflict and to deepen, to his political advantage, the existing social polarization" (Cardona Zulueta, 2016, P. 25). The fact that the FARC committed several attacks against Uribe soon after he took power and intensified its violent acts across the country (bombings, kidnappings, etc.) helped in solidifying the image of the group as a terrorist organization.

Through speeches, banners, and political ads Uribe and his team exhibited a mastery of symbolic and visual language (Richard, 2008). As Fabio López de la Roche (2019) has shown, propaganda was the dominant genre of communication of the Uribe regime (p. 74). Additionally, López de la Roche explains, Uribe transformed community councils and meetings, which were televised for hours on the weekend, into "personalized and populist areas of communication" (p. 75).[32] Generally, his political campaigns aligned with patriarchal-neoliberal aesthetics, appealing to a discourse of development and economic growth, and invoking masculinity and whiteness as a means to establish legitimacy (Viveros Vigoya, 2014). Splitting the world into a good and evil binary, Uribe positioned himself as "an authoritarian but noble and good father, a fervent Catholic, religiously observant, [and] a dedicated worker for the good of the country" (López de La Roche,

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[31] An example of Uribe's denial of the conflict is the fact that he "prohibited reference in government documents to the existence of an armed conflict in Colombia; in its place they had to refer to a 'terrorist threat,' consequently rendering victims of the conflict invisible" (López de La Roche, 2019, p. 77).

[32] It is estimated that Uribe spent more than three thousand hours of his presidency in these councils (Salazar, 2010).

2022).[33] On the other end of this binary was the FARC group, and somewhere close to that end were also leftist politicians and human rights organizations, who were labelled many times as guerrilla sympathizers and accused of serving "the interest of terrorism" (Presidencia de la República de Colombia, 2003). As López de La Roche argues, this was done with "the intention of disqualifying any criticism directed at his "Democratic Security" policy coming from leftist organizations or personalities at the national or international level" (2022). This form of stigmatization used by Uribe followed a conservative "visual and conceptual moralizing regime" in which, as Cristancho Altuzarra (2014) suggests, "the opposition political groups were seen and conceived as immoral, disorderly, barbaric, uneducated, atheists, who threatened unity, national order and Christian values" (p. 59). Thus, whenever Uribe referred to the FARC or any political organization or figure that opposed his political ideology, he almost always labeled them as "terrorists" or "*narcoguerrilleros*" (narco-guerrillas). His communicative and visual regime tried to cast out everything that threatened its order, focusing instead on the figure of the hero (Uribe himself and the Colombian army) to promote "anti-FARC nationalism" (López de La Roche, 2019; Bayona, 2021) and on producing images of militaristic propaganda that made a spectacle out of the armed conflict to generate consent and complicity (Gordillo Aldana, 2014). An example of this are the *Los héroes en Colombia sí existen* (Heroes in Colombia do exist) military propaganda campaign—central to the next chapter—through which the administration sought to garner support for the army, or the "repeated enunciation by the government of the FARC's responsibility for the acts of violence and terrorism that took place between 2002 and 2010 in the media and the official sectors of academia" (Gordillo Aldana, 2014, p. 54).

Main media channels, particularly TV channels, played a very important role in the consolidation of Uribe's visual regime. As Gordillo Aldana and several other scholars point out, Uribe managed to dictate the media agenda, ensuring that mainstream media organizations followed his rhetorical and political strategy and granted him a platform to disseminate propaganda (Gordillo Aldana, 2014, p. 48). There was what López de La Roche (2021) has described as a "tacit media pact of support" among the main media outlets in Colombia for Uribe's "communicative regime" (p. 89). Their role was not to provide a critical analysis of what was happening in the country, but rather to amplify the official discourse and view of the conflict.[34] Their mediation of the conflict added to its spectacularization, focusing at times on "images of the bodies of guerrilla leaders killed by the army and of the havoc caused by the guerrillas" (Yepez Muñoz, 2018, p. 40). For instance, the televised killings of the FARC leaders "Raúl Reyes" and "Mono Jojoy" were presented as evidence of the safety and efficacy produced by the Uribe administration, the army (the heroes) and his Democratic Security policy (Gordillo Aldana, 2014,

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[33] While much of Latin America experienced various military dictatorships in the 20th century, Colombia maintained a relatively stable democracy. However, the prolonged armed conflict with leftist guerrilla groups cultivated a strong anti-communist sentiment in the country. This made the kind of paternalistic rhetoric used by Uribe aligning conservative values with military might and neoliberal governance—reminiscent of the language used during right-wing military coups in the 20th century—acceptable.

[34] For a thorough analysis of Uribe's militaristic propaganda see Gordillo Aldana's *Seguridad mediática: la propaganda militarista en la Colombia contemporánea* (2014).

p. 85). As images of the bodies of these two commanders circulated, media outlets encouraged celebration. All this helped in turning the FARC into Colombia's main enemy while weaponizing the grief and the fear of victims. The dissemination of these images, as Gordillo Aldana (2014) suggests, sought to persuade viewers that such deaths were essential as they seemed to indicate that innocent civilians were less likely to fall victims of the FARC (p. 89).

Additionally, the treatment mainstream media gave to the conflict and the images produced by the Democratic Security policy helped in making certain forms of violence invisible while silencing oppositional views. It also shaped the way in which urban residents, who were already removed from the direct impact of the armed conflict, perceived the unfolding events. As López de La Roche points out, mainstream media helped in building

> an unequal structure of visibility of the victims, where those 'kidnapped' by the FARC appeared as the main victims of the Colombian conflict, relegating other victims, those of the paramilitaries, those of the extrajudicial executions by members of the military forces, journalistically known as 'false positives,' or the 3,700,000 people forcibly displaced by the armed conflict, to the margins of visibility. (2021, p. 90)

Even though paramilitary groups were responsible for forty-five percent of the total homicides committed during the conflict (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022), and the violence perpetrated by these groups against peasants and other marginalized groups displayed far more cruelty than the crimes committed by the FARC, the latter would always get more attention and coverage.[35] This helped establish, in the words of Butler (2016), the "differential distribution of grievability upon which war depends" (p. xix).

Through this, Uribe, who has been accused of having ties to paramilitary groups (France 24, 2020), and his government not only managed to get away with stigmatizing campaigns against political opponents, as well as human rights violations, but also helped in consolidating a visuality of the conflict in which, as Restrepo Tirado (2018) puts it, "some aspects of violence remain invisible and others enter the public debate, but, in any case, what is seen and what is not is decided by those in power" (p. 15). This regime of (in)visibility, added to the fact that most of the conflict has taken place away from the main cities, created a deeper division between those living in main cities and at the center of politics, who were always represented and seen, and those living where war was waged, whose struggles have remained marginal and invisible. As explained by a report produced by Colombia's Center of Historical Memory, the conflict has been

> a war that many Colombians do not see, do not feel; a war that does not threaten them. It is a war that is reported through the lens of the media, in which *others* suffer and that allows thousands of people to live in the illusion that the country enjoys full democracy and prosperity, while at the same time it prevents them from understanding the extreme importance of each political decision, affirmation or negotiation for those who suffer it. Those who live far from the fields where the actions of the armed groups are carried out

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[35] As Isis Giraldo (2021) explains, "extreme cruelty has been the trademark of paramilitaries: they were behind 371 of the 588 *masacres con sevicia*—killings with at least four victims that involved extreme acts of cruelty—perpetrated between 1980 and 2012, established 'dismembering schools' in the nineties, and have become associated in the Colombian imaginary with the electric saw, one of their weapons of murder" (p. 70).

ignore that, for example, an agreement that establishes a ceasefire represents for those peasants the difference between staying or fleeing, between living or dying (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 22).

Consequently, populations living in rural areas, mostly Indigenous, Afro-Colombians and *campesinxs* (peasants), became second-class citizens, while those living in major cities, as Isis Giraldo (2021) points out, began to identify under the category of the "fine citizen" (*gente de bien*). These "fine citizens," most of whom belong to the middle and upper classes, supported—and still support—the maintenance of the status quo. And despite the fact that major cities ended up receiving thousands of internally displaced Colombians, the displaced remained on the margins of visibility. This division between first and second-class citizens was used during the strike to determine which lives deserved to be protected and who had the right to use weapons in "self-defence."

This form of visuality has worked to produce and enforce the economy of fear that I referred to earlier. Furthermore, the erasure and distancing from marginalized bodies, as well as the repetition of visceral images of violence committed against armed groups, have been part of the "pedagogies of cruelty" deployed by the Colombian state to, in the words of Giraldo, train "Colombian urban dwellers to despise a certain type of person" (p. 65). These pedagogies, as outlined by Argentine-Brazilian feminist anthropologist Rita Segato (2018), refer to "all the acts and practices that teach, habituate, and program subjects to transmute the living and its vitality into things" (p. 13). Therefore, all the practices through which subjects are taught to accept and normalize cruelty and precarity, and that promote low empathy thresholds can be considered pedagogies of cruelty (p. 13).[36] As Segato suggests, this pedagogies have been present in colonial-capitalist regimes, so though not limited to the Colombian case, this is a helpful way to understand the mechanics of Uribe's regime. The goal, as Suely Rolnik (2017) has also described when talking about the subjectivities shaped under capitalist-colonial regimes, has been to create relations in which the "other" is confined in "an imaginary place of inferiority or even subhumanity, leading to its total invisibility and nonexistence, and even to its concrete elimination" (p. 6), as has been the case in Colombia.

This training on "selective empathy and desensitisation" (Giraldo, 2021, p. 73) has resulted in a form of collective apathy that, as Yepez Muñoz (2018) suggests, became the main structure of feeling of major Colombian cities (p. 38). In this structure of feeling, he explains, apathy "emerges from collective indifference towards the violence of the conflict and the suffering of its victims" (p. 38). The excess of "images of the torn and swollen bodies of slain guerrilla commanders or of suffering or grieving peasants [,]" he writes, "produce a paralyzing shock in our psyche that, through their continuous repetition, tends to translate into detachment and apathy, an inability to be affected in a way that can lead to socially productive action" (p. 34). However, as Yepez Muñoz clarifies, the effects produced by these images are always relational and influenced

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[36] However, it must be added that in Colombia the normalization of violence goes beyond the armed conflict. Narcotrafficking and illegal mining, as well as the alliances between paramilitary groups, corporations and politicians, have contributed to the violent landscape of the country.

by the sociocultural background of viewers. This structure of feeling does not speak for the complex affects and emotions experienced by those living in marginalized regions and witnessing the visceral nature of the conflict first-hand. Still, it is this structure of apathy that, I argue, was suspended during the strike. It is with this background and contextual understanding that I approach one of the many videos shared by Uribe during the National Strike. However, before diving into the analysis, I will take a short detour to explain what has gotten to be known as "Castrochavismo Theory," as the content of the video relies heavily on this conspiracy theory.

A Short Detour: Understanding Castrochavismo Theory

After Uribe's second term ended, Juan Manuel Santos, who was Uribe's former Minister of National Defense from 2006 to 2009, served as president of Colombia from 2010 to 2018. Although he initially rose to power with Uribe's support, Santos distanced himself and his government from Uribe's policies shortly after he became president, which caused the two politicians to split. This was mainly due to the fact that Santos sought to reestablish diplomatic relations with Venezuela—which Uribe had cut—and because of Santo's decision to pursue peace negotiations with the FARC—breaking with Uribe's military approach.

The split between the two, and the negotiations which culminated in the 2016 Peace Accord between National Government of Colombia and the FARC was an important step in weakening Uribe's image—and the structures of fear and apathy that were promoted under his regime. However, during the negotiations Uribe still had a lot of support and trust from the people. During this time, his stance against the FARC transformed into opposition against the peace process itself. In October 2016, when Santos called for a plebiscite to ensure that Colombians supported the peace agreement, as he had promised at the beginning of the peace talks, Uribe and his political party launched a campaign to invite Colombians to vote against it (also known as the "No campaign").[37] López de la Roche (2022) explains that during the final stages of the peace agreement, Uribismo, the political movement and ideology organized around Uribe, used a rhetorical strategy that consisted of accusing Santos of handing the country over to the FARC and to Cuba to install a "Castro-Chavist regime" (*régimen castrochavista*) in the country. This strategy, similar to the propaganda used during the Uribe regime, appealed to emotions rather than presenting logical arguments to challenge the accords. It primarily focused on disseminating conspiracy theories on social media to incite indignation and anger, and present a new threat that extended beyond the existence of the FARC. For example, as Guerrero-C and Jaraba-Barrios (2022) explain, "WhatsApp chain messages circulated widely, especially near key voting dates, with affirmations about the imposition of a 'gay dictatorship,' as the right labeled issues of gender equality in the peace agreement, and threats to private property or national identity" (p. 1084).

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[37] As Cardona Zulueta and Londoño Álvarez (2018) explain, the Colombian government and the FARC developed "structured agreements on issues related to comprehensive rural reform, opening of the political participation system, ceasefire and reincorporation of demobilized combatants into civilian life, illicit drugs, illicit crops, victims' rights and transitional justice, among others" (p. 48).

Shortly after the referendum, Juan Carlos Vélez, manager of the "No campaign," admitted that the campaign was aimed at getting people angry ("Estábamos buscando que la gente saliera a votar verraca").[38] Nevertheless, despite the success of the campaign, with the accord narrowly rejected by 50.2% of voters, the government proceeded with the negotiations and signed a revised agreement on November 2016. After this, Uribe and his political party found a new political bogeyman in *castrochavismo*,[39] which came to replace the image of the FARC—profiting in parallel from the xenophobia and aporophobia fueled by the massive migration of Venezuelans to Colombia and tapping into the failures of the two countries. Slowly, castrochavismo became one of the main rhetorical devices used in Colombia's contemporary political landscape by right-wing politicians. It began to be presented as a threat that, unlike the FARC, was not there yet, but "that would mark the future and was about to invade [Colombia] if it was not stopped" (Quintana, 2021, p, 43).[40] Eventually, all the things that jeopardized the status quo, and that challenged Uribe's legacy were linked to castrochavismo and presented as a threat, as it happened with the strike. In the video I will analyze, this theory was used to convince viewers that the protests were part of this plan to take over the country. However, although this strategy had worked during the 2018 election campaign—helping Duque, Uribe's second predecessor, win the elections—this time, as I will show, Colombians were not as easily deceived.

The Ex-President That Tweets

As it has been the case with many politicians, Twitter has been one of Uribe's primary platforms for engaging with his followers and shaping public discourse. As of 2020, he was the second most-followed Colombian politician on the platform. Over the years, he has used the platform, as Jon Lee Anderson (2016) has aptly described, "like a general uses artillery, often many times a day, in order to react to news, quarrel with other politicians and with journalists, and generally make his presence felt." When the 2021 National Strike began, he used his account to generate panic among his followers, profiting from a long history of stigmatization of social protests in the country. As Laura Quintana points out (2021), the assimilation of social protest to acts of vandalism in Colombia is so strong "that every time one of them emerges, images and figures begin to circulate in the media that intensify the association" (p. 70). And this is precisely what Uribe set out to do.

During the first day of the strike alone, he shared twenty-eight tweets containing videos and photos showing people destroying private and public property, burning public transit buses,

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[38] In *Rabia* (2021) Laura Quintana studies the place that resentment and retributive logic have played in Colombia's political history. She explains that the political project or the Uribismo has relied on the need for retaliation, and that "In the No campaign and, in general, in its need to fix 'enemies' and 'culprits' that threaten its project of a 'white,' masculine and enterprising country, [the Uribismo] knew, among other things, how to move [the] simplifications produced by the desire for retribution from the discontent harbored in many of the country's citizens" (p. 221).

[39] The term comes from "the conjunction of the surnames of two of the most recognizable leaders of the left in Latin America[,]" Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez (Guerrero-C & Jaraba-Barrios, 2022, p. 1087).

[40] Quintana uses the singular figure of "el castrochavista" (the castrochavist), but I will be referring to castrochavismo.

and looting stores. That day, after having referred to the protests as "vandalism" seventeen times, Uribe ended his Twitter spree by asking his followers to support the Colombian armed forces and their (violent) actions without any hesitations (Figure 3.3), anticipating the many cases of police brutality that would follow. On April 29th, following his old script, he began using the term "terrorism" when referring to what was happening on the streets. Though the protests had just begun, by labelling protesters with sticky words like vandals and terrorists, Uribe was appealing to a history "whereby such names assign the other with meaning in an economy of difference [,]" transforming them into objects of fear and hate (Ahmed, 2014, p. 59). This would come to justify a tweet that followed on April 30th, mentioned in the previous chapter, that read: "Let's support the right of soldiers and police officers to use their weapons to defend their integrity and to defend people and property from the criminal action of vandalistic terrorism." The post was later removed by Twitter for failing to comply to its policies, but on May 1st, as if responding to Uribe's request, Duque's government authorized the deployment of military presence in urban centers arguing that the protests were manifestations of vandalism, violence and terrorism.

Figure 3.3.

Uribe's tweets.

Translations:
"I am informed that there are still people unable to travel from the airport to Cali because of 30 people completing a 12-hour blockade. Let's support the Armed Forces."

"They use the tax reform to justify their prepared violence knowing that there is no way it will be approved and that a consensus is being sought to finance the fight against poverty exacerbated by the pandemic. Unwavering support for the Armed Forces."

"And the wounded policemen, and their families and their future! And the vandals are now on talk shows of political enjoyment for the exploits of their damage. Support the Armed Forces."

By May 7th, 2021, over one week after the strike had begun, forty-five people had been killed (Observatorio de DDHH, Conflictividades y Paz, 2021). That day, ignoring the excessive use of force by the riot police and the army and insisting on stigmatizing protesters, particularly members of the *Primeras Líneas* (Front Lines), Uribe shared a gory and sensationalist video accompanied by the following message: "They destroy Colombia, which has a future, in order to build another Venezuela or another Cuba, which has no future." Unlike previous videos shared by the ex-president, which looked more like citizenship journalism with actual footage from the protests, this video was clearly a piece of propaganda that appealed to many aspects of the visuality

of the Colombian armed conflict described above (the saturation of violent imagery, the anonymity of the actors, the constant threat to urban centers, and the desire to continue fighting an enemy within) to delegitimize the demands of protesters. It is precisely because of this that I have chosen to analyze this video and the responses it generated, as I wanted to investigate if the old "terrorism" trope would still resonate with viewers. Though Uribe did not claim authorship over the video, or at least not explicitly, and the video itself is edited to look anonymous, it is evident that by sharing it he endorsed the message that the video was trying to convey. Following Rose's (2023) critical visual methodology framework, I will begin with an analysis of the compositional and social modalities of the video (the image itself), and then I will move on to the analysis of the comments (audiencing) that the video received to understand how it was received.

Analysis of the video's compositional and social modalities

The one-minute-long video, composed of a mix of fifty-nine short clips playing in the background while an anonymous narrator describes a plan to take over Colombia, feels, as many Twitter users pointed out in the comments, like a trailer for a Netflix show or a thriller film. Given that both image and sound are used to stir the emotions of viewers, I will begin by providing a translation of the transcript of the video, which guides the images that are seen on screen:

[Diosdado Cabello] We are at war with Colombia. We are going to wage it in your territory.

[Anonymous informer] The national strike is nothing more than an infiltration in Colombia of Castrochavismo. The same was done in Chile and Ecuador.

[Diosdado Cabello] There's a Bolivarian breeze.

[Anonymous informer] Everything is planned and financed by Narcoterrorism…

[Diosdado Cabello] The plan is unfolding perfectly!

[Anonymous informer] … supported by the FARC and the ELN groups, which are sharing weapons and money with us to destabilize another country.

[Diosdado Cabello] Tomorrow we are going to wage it in your territory.

[Anonymous informer] It is easy. You deceive the people and the youth.

[Diosdado Cabello] It is absolutely impossible that Colombia stays as it is.

[Anonymous informer] You then incite violence and chaos.

[Diosdado Cabello] Tomorrow we are going to wage it in your territory.

[Anonymous informer] You deceive the people and the international community. You take away the government's power to protect its citizens.

[Diosdado Cabello] Tomorrow we are going wage do it in your territory.

[Mix of voices] A Bolivarian breeze. We are fulfilling the plan. We are fulfilling the plan of the São Paulo Forum. Tomorrow we are going to wage it in your territory.

The video opens with a dramatic soundtrack as a question appears on the screen: "There is no tax reform. Why does the violence continue?" A few seconds before the text disappears, as if providing an answer to the question asked, we hear the voice of Venezuelan politician Diosdado Cabello saying, "We are at war with Colombia, we are going to wage it in your territory." While we are still hearing Cabello's voice, the text on the screen is replaced by images from Cabello's TV program *Con el mazo dando*, the very platform where Cabello initially articulated the declaration. Though the fragments of the program used were broadcast on April 8, 2021, and Cabello's threat to go to war with Colombia was made in relation to a crisis of violence in the state of Apure, Venezuela, in the video his speech is used to make viewers believe that the protests were financed and supported by the Venezuelan regime (Ospino Orozco, 2021). In fact, though different shots of Cabello appear throughout the video, it is mostly his voice off-screen and the repetition of the phrase "we are going to wage [war] in your territory [,]" as seen in the transcript, that was used to add credibility to the plan outlined by what appears to be an anonymous informer. In this shot, a person whose face has been blurred and voice has been distorted appears in front of the camera. They are wearing a plain black hoodie and seem to be in an unidentified location (Figure 4.4).

Figure 4.**4.**
Screenshots from the video shared by Uribe.

The parts of the video in which the informer appears seem to have been recorded in an abandoned warehouse—though the video is so pixelated, perhaps on purpose, that it is hard to tell if the background has been added with a green-screen effect. As the video unfolds, the informer's and Cabello's voices serve as the backdrop. Simultaneously, footage featuring them is seamlessly interwoven with a composite of clips depicting scenes of buses and buildings ablaze, individuals breaking windows and vandalizing police cars, riot police facing confrontation from protesters,

and aerial views capturing the dispersal of protesters through the deployment of tear gas. All these images of destruction and violence look like the videos Uribe had shared during previous days, but the duration of each clip is so short, and the quality of the images is so low, that it becomes hard to fact-check them. As the video unfolds, we can also see some images of guns and people shooting, as well as footage from the FARC and ELN guerrilla groups. Additionally, towards the end of the video, short clips showing leftists politicians like Gustavo Petro, Gustavo Bolivar and Roy Barreras appear on screen to ensure that those watching the video start drawing the link between them, the protests, violence, and castrochavismo. This is all tied in together at the end of the video when the screen turns gray and the following text appears: "This is not a protest; it is a plan to seize power in 2022. Colombia do not let yourself be fooled" (Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.5.
Screenshots from the video shared by Uribe.

Thematically, most of the screen time is dedicated to showing videos of destruction and violence, as seen in the chart generated with MAXDA below (Figure 4.6). These clips, however, go at such a rapid pace and are cut so abruptly that it is difficult to identify where the videos took place and who the subjects are—except for the riot police and other law enforcement figures, who are portrayed as victims of civilian attacks. Additionally, the predominance of darker tones, contrasted solely by the flames coming out of buildings and buses ablaze, contributes to the creation of an atmosphere of chaos and terror. The anonymity of the protesters, as that of the informant, helps support the narrative constructed through speech. The video is not even about those who took to the streets, who are shown as mere puppets in the theory presented, but rather about those who the informer affirms are behind the chaos that is portrayed. Thus, the video is not presented as mere evidence of the attacks against police and public and private property, but instead as the revelation of a meta narrative that drives attention away from the demands of those protesting to an allegedly new threat that the country needs to eradicate.

Figure 4.6.

Analysis of video content by theme.
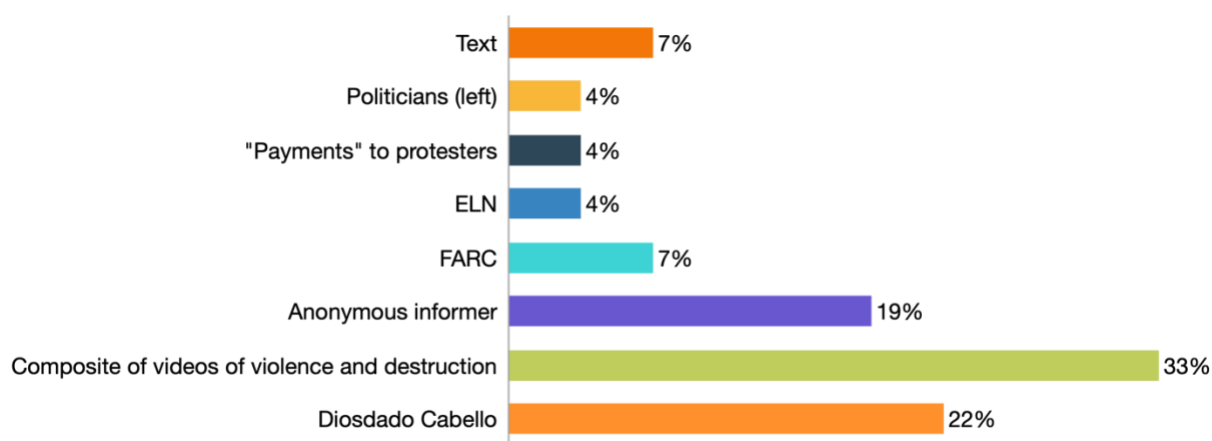
I view the video as an attempt by Uribe to capitalize on the established associations between the FARC, terrorism, *castrochavismo*, and destruction—all of which are mentioned or shown in the video—to foster intolerance towards protesters. As the spaces of appearance discussed in the previous chapter began to open and take shape, Uribe shared this video to capture and disrupt the political and affective shift happening in and through those spaces.

In the previous chapter, I argued that through different visual and symbolic forms of resistance—which took place offline and were shared online—counter public groups not only caused a reconfiguration of public space but also created these spaces. Through these, they claimed their right to be seen while negotiating the boundaries of the sensible, the visible and the grievable. While most of the images that were discussed in the previous section were images of artistic resistance, there were two other types of images that circulated online that contributed to the creation of these spaces: images of police and vigilante violence (evidence), and images or memes aimed at resignifying the categories "hooligan" (*vándalo*) and "fine citizen" (*ciudadano de bien*). As mentioned earlier, the term "fine citizen" began to be used during the Uribe administration to refer to first-class citizens or those who aligned with Uribe's political views. During the strike, the term resurged to refer to those who were against the strike—the privileged for whom the strike was an inconvenience—and as a way of creating a contrast with those on the streets, who were often referred to as "hooligans" and, as in the case of the video analyzed, "terrorists." The resignification of the first term was done by contrasting the words "fine citizens" with images of the violent actions of vigilante groups and the police (Figure 4.7). Additionally, many of the memes shared transformed the phrase "I don't strike, I am productive" (*yo no paro, yo produzco*), which had gained popularity among celebrities, entrepreneurs, and fine citizens, into "I don't strike, I fire" (*yo no paro, yo disparo*). This change emphasized the message even further. Although the collaboration between the upper classes and government forces to maintain social hierarchies and reinforce their control over public spaces existed prior to the strike, the images and memes shared during the strike aimed to challenge and expose this normalized form of violence in the country. In a similar way, memes and images circulated showcasing the artistic aspects of the protests and the various acts of solidarity that took place—such as community kitchens and the distribution of food to those in need—were shared to counter the labeling of protesters as "hooligans" and "terrorists." These memes or the messages accompanying the images often included ironic captions that mocked the idea that these protesters were "dangerous" (Figure 4.8). All this contributed to the creation of those spaces of appearance, while challenging traditional forms of visuality. Thus, Uribe's video can be interpreted as an attempt to reinstall the structures of meaning and visibility that were crumbling. I interpret it as an attempt to remind viewers that violence can only and will only come from those he and his political allies categorize as "terrorist" or those who have historically been imagined as not belonging to the "fine citizen" category.

Figure 4.7.

Memes drawing the link between vigilante violence and "fine citizens."

Source: Twitter (anonymized to maintain author confidentiality as per ethical guidelines)

Figure 4.8.

Memes reversing the meaning of "hooligan."

(Message): #ParoNacional I will always be a hooligan, peasant and popular feminist. Never a fine citizen
(Image): They took the land away from us, but we kept the seeds.

(Message): Hooligans are very dangerous. Poor fine citizens #SOSJoeBiden #ColombiaResists #ColombiaSOSDDHH they are killing us and Ivan Duque and Alvaro Uribe are behind the killings.

(Image): [Top] Armed and dangerous hooligan. [Bottom]: Fine citizen who doesn't strike/fire [play on words] but is productive.

Source: Twitter (anonymized to maintain author confidentiality as per ethical guidelines)

While the video is at the center of this analysis, it must be noted that this was not the only piece of propaganda that was shared with this purpose. As the days went by and the protests started to gain support, different strategies were deployed by the government to delegitimize the images of police and vigilante violence that were circulating online. A major example of this was a video shared on Twitter on May 6th by the Minister of Defense, Diego Molano, following the blackout of the Ministry of Defense and National Police websites. In the video, Molano affirmed that there had been an attempt to "block" government accounts and labelled the information and images that were circulating online about the protests as fake, affirming that they were part of a "digital terrorism" campaign. The tweet read: "They have tried to block the strength of Colombia, our image, health, life. We are still standing. A lot of the information that circulate on social media is fake, generating hatred and digital terrorism. Let's talk with the truth about what the Public Force really does for Colombians. #ColombiaIsMyTruth." This turned out to be a highly coordinated PR stunt put together to present social media users and journalists as a new threat and justify the cyber patrolling of those who criticized the government online.

Thus, the video shared by Uribe must be understood not as an isolated event, but as part of a strategy that was deployed by his political party, members of the government, and the ruling class during the strike. Its goal was not the mere stigmatization of protesters, Indigenous resistance fronts and the Front Lines, but also a way of ensuring that their lives remained (ontologically) ungrievable and that their bodies remained in what Mexican sociologist José Manuel Valenzuela Arce (2019) has called necro zones. These are zones of exclusion and places of vulnerability and subalternation in which the *other*, often racialized and feminized youth, is forcibly placed (p. 73). There, they are exposed to different forms of violence (economic, institutional, criminal, symbolic, racist, and sexual), all of which are necessary for political and economic domination.

The video assumes a patriarchal-colonial understanding of public space that is classed, raced and gendered in such a way that only the bodies of "fine citizens," many of which are white, light-skinned male citizens, are allowed to circulate freely. Thus, the destruction of public and private space, as it is shown in the video, is meant to be seen as an attack on these privileged bodies. Moreover, the presence of bodies who were prevented to circulate in such spaces, and any alterations to the cleanliness and the normalcy of the spaces are presented as a threat to the movement and visibility of the privileged classes. In this case, fear, the feeling that the video aims to arouse, works "to align bodily and social space: it works to enable some bodies to inhabit and move in public space through restricting the mobility of other bodies to spaces that are enclosed or contained" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 70). This explains why the attack on the Indigenous Minga on May 9th, which was mentioned in the previous chapter, did not come as a surprise. It also clarifies why, despite numerous instances of police brutality, some still attempted to justify the government's violent response.

Thus, given that protesters kept resisting violence and marginalization through the occupation of space (both digital and physical) and the creation of the spaces of appearance mentioned, propaganda material like the video in discussion was deployed to weaponize pre-existent fears and relations in the social imaginary, indirectly forcing protesters back into the necro

zones where they came from. Through this material, Uribe attempted to set in motion something resembling what Preciado calls (2022) the "necropolitical eye of the father: a binary, heterosexual, bourgeois, colonial father who can, through the gaze, decide not only on the life and death of his subjects, but also on the degree of political sovereignty that those under his gaze deserve" (p. 257). Drawing the link between the protests, terrorism, and the *castrochavismo* theory, the video becomes a tool of the pedagogies of cruelty deployed to justify violence in order to keep the existent necropolitical regime in place. This, however, as I will show next, did not fully work.

Audiencing: Uribe as a Falling Statue

Looking at the comments/replies engagement function that Twitter offers to users, I tried to understand how the video shared by Uribe was viewed, as well as the ways in which users renegotiated its meaning. Though my analysis focuses on Twitter as the video's main site of audiencing, it is important to acknowledge that there could have been other places where the video was seen that I am not accounting for. In Colombia, it is common to see this kind of anonymous-looking and fear-inciting videos circulating on end-to-end encrypted chats like WhatsApp—particularly during moments of tension like the strike or election campaigns. For instance, I remember that when the protests started, my grandmother, who is not on Twitter but is very active on WhatsApp, would talk to me about her fears, which were, unsurprisingly, the same kind of fears that videos like the one in question were trying to incite. Consequently, the site of audiencing that I will be looking at here, is only one of the many potential digital sites in which the video could have been disseminated and seen.

The way in which audiencing unfolds for images that circulate on social media can be partially traced and captured by the different engagement functions that platforms offer. Through likes, reshares and comments, users have the option to make explicit their feelings and thoughts on the images they encounter. But this does not capture the full picture, as not all users choose to share their reactions to the content they see. That is why thinking about Twitter as the site of audiencing involves, as Rose (2023) outlines, understanding it as composed by, first, the digital platform itself along with all the archived comments and reactions (what Rose calls the technological modality) and, second, by the spaces in which users react to these comments offline—as well as everything that influences the way the video is seen (the social modality). Given that I do not have access to offline reactions, I will only be able to trace and analyze the video's technological modality. The social modality will be indirectly approached by putting the comments into conversation with the context that has been provided throughout the chapter.

Since audiencing refers to the site in which images are looked at, perhaps it is relevant to begin by asking who the video was meant for and who were the actual the viewers of the video. The video, as a piece of propaganda that tries to weaponize pre-existent fears, is directed not just to those who firmly believed in Uribe and supported his politics, but also those who, unaware of what protesters were demanding, did not know what to make of the conjuncture. It addressed that uncertainty by presenting an answer aimed at preventing uninformed viewers from sympathizing with protesters. A big percentage of the actual viewers might fall under these two categories, but

there is also a group of people who viewed the video and did not agree or were willing to challenge the information presented. Though it is hard to know the exact numbers, as Twitter had not yet implemented the "view" metrics for individual tweets at the time, I will interpret the 1.8K likes and 1.3K retweets as a form of ideological endorsement, as suggested by Conover et al. (2011)—unless stated otherwise. Although my focus here will be on the 780 comments that the tweet received, many of which expressed dissent, it is important to note that this form of positive engagement and support deserves equal attention. Events like the attacks on the Indigenous Minga and the shooting of protesters by vigilantes in Cali speak of the violence that stigmatizing discourses like the one presented by the video carry and promote. Investigating the relationship between these discourses, the affects they carry and the processes of subjectivation of the actors involved would be important, but it exceeds the scope of this thesis.

Out of the 780 comments that the video originally received, I was only able to manually collect about half of them. Some comments were not displayed either because they were deleted or because the accounts from which the comments came from did not exist any longer. Of the more than 300 comments collected, over 280 contained text or text and images, and the rest contained memes or just images. Once the comments were collected, I imported them into MAXQDA for coding and analysis. Through several rounds of coding, I tried to identify the primary themes and affects expressed by users, eventually grouping these categories and refining them down to five: desire for justice, need for a new future, awakening/sick and tired of Uribe's legacy, support for Uribe's politics, and hate (Figure 4.9). Given the limited number of comments expressing both hate and support for Uribe, and the clarity of these sentiments, I will not delve into an in-depth analysis of those, as I will do for the other three categories. All comments that were considered under the hate category contained insults and offensive language. And most of the comments that showed support echoed the anti-castrochavismo discourse and voiced the need to fight the new "narco-terrorist" threat. Driving this support was also a desire to return to a politics as usual and to an understanding of democracy in which there is no room for the demands that Afro-Colombians, Indigenous, women, campesinx, and all those living under precarious conditions were presenting. In addition to these five categories, there were also some comments in which users asked Twitter to block Uribe's account, and others that replied with hashtags like #ColombiaResiste (Colombia resists) to express that the people in the streets were simply resisting the ongoing precarization of life. A few comments had an ambiguous tone that was difficult to interpret. What follows is an analysis of the main categories identified.

Figure 4.9.

Key themes identified from the coding and analysis of the video's responses.
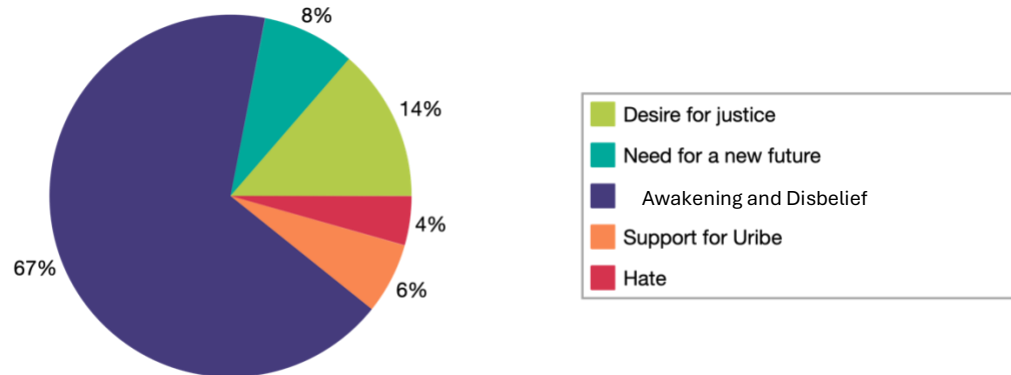
Awakening and Disbelief: The majority of the comments that the tweet received were under the "Awakening and Disbelief" category. Generally, the users who left these comments expressed fatigue with the dominant discourse in which a threat is always presented. Like people in the streets, users claimed that the country was experiencing an "awakening." This notion of an awakening first gained popularity during the 2019-2020 protests with the slogan "*Colombia despertó*" (Colombia woke up), which was inspired by the "*Chile despertó*" (Chile woke up) slogan used during the 2019–2020 protests in Chile. When the 2021 strike began, protesters revived the slogan to express their refusal to accept the continuation of the status quo. This slogan also reflected the political and, as I will argue, affective awakening that many people felt was occurring—a kind of openness to new forms of governance and futures.

Users who responded to the video shared by Uribe used the concept of "awakening" to express that they were no longer falling for Uribe's "lies," and that they would no longer let "fear" control or direct their political convictions. As one of the users put it, "[…] No one believes in his cheap speech any longer. Now we read, we have judgement and we are able to discern […]" ("[…] Nadie le cree su discurso barato. Ya leemos, tenemos criterio y somos capaces de discernir […]"). Under this category, I was able to identify four subcategories, which though slightly different from each other are all related to fatigue and this rousing from indifference and fear:

- Fatigue with deceptive messaging: Comments in this category addressed Uribe directly, urging him to stop spreading lies and to leave the country alone. Users recognized that behind Uribe's hate speech lay a desire to further divide the nation to strengthen his political party's position in the polls. While Uribe was once viewed as the country's "hero," these comments portray him as having fallen from grace. There were images or text replies with the message "Colombia anti-uribista" (Figure 4.10) and videos in which protesters chanted "Uribe, paramilitary, the people are angry" (*Uribe, paraco, el pueblo está berraco*).

Figure 4.10.
Colombia anti-uribista image.

Source: Twitter (anonymized to maintain author confidentiality as per ethical guidelines)

- Rejection of the castrochavismo conspiracy theory and of fear tactics: The comments in this category showed fatigue with the castrochavismo conspiracy theory and an understanding that the theory has been used to polarize and rule through fear. As one user wrote: "Don't be a liar; you keep sowing terror with lies". Additionally, some of the users hinted that they could have believed in the theory in the past but that it was not the case any longer.
- Attribution of responsibility for ongoing precarization: The comments in this group echoed the feelings expressed by the comments in the previous subcategory. Since the video warned viewers about a plan to transform Colombia into "another Venezuela," users replied echoing this concern. They argued that in terms of social and economic precarity, Colombia already resembled its neighbour and blamed Uribe for such precarization— claiming that he was the one responsible for implementing many of the neoliberal policies that left vulnerable Colombians in precarious conditions. In the words of a user: "You cannot destroy what you yourself destroyed when you came to power almost 20 years ago."
- "Colombia despertó" (awakening): Finally, there was a group of comments that used the slogan "Colombia despertó," or something along the same lines. Users noted that they once believed in Uribe and his rhetoric, but that they were "waking up" or "opening" their eyes and contributing to the efforts to build or find a new or different Colombia.

I decided to group the feelings of fatigue and awakening together because, as these subcategories demonstrate, it is precisely the exhaustion generated by the politics of fear and invisibility, and the precarity of life that has fostered the awakening of which the users speak. This awakening, as Omar Rincón (2019) suggested in an opinion piece published during the 2019 protests, had been taking place since the signing of the 2016 peace agreement. In his words:

Fear is gone. We have taken to the streets. We are no longer terrorists. We are citizens. And this is a great victory of the peace agreement. In times of peace, democracy is lived, the citizenship of fear is diluted. We are citizens with rights and freedom of expression.

With the signing of the agreement, as Rincón suggests, the structure supporting the affective structure of fear, apathy and selective desensitization weakened. Although the agreement did not represent an end to political violence in the country, institutions like the Truth Commission and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace were established to address truth, justice, and reparations for the victims of the conflict. This has led to a new understanding of the conflict and helped citizens stop seeing each other as a potential threat.

Desire for Justice: This category received the second highest number of comments. While still related to the fatigue expressed with the Uribe regime in the previous category, the comments that were identified under this category expressed a yearning for justice concerning three specific matters:

- The false positives scandal: Several users made direct and indirect references to the "false positive" scandal. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, this scandal refers to the extrajudicial killing of at least 6,402 non-combatants between 2002 and 2008 by the Colombian army.[41] While over two thousand investigations have been opened, and over one thousand people have been convicted for their involvement in the crimes, Uribe's responsibility for the crimes has yet to be investigated. Several high-ranking officials and members of his government have been under investigation, and various testimonies indicate that the pressure to achieve results—which led to the killings—originated from the highest levels of government. Nevertheless, Uribe continues to deny any involvement or knowledge of these crimes. As I will show in the next chapter, the number 6,402, and the aesthetics developed by the mothers of the victims to get attention in their quest for justice, has been crucial in bringing this issue to public attention. Thanks to their work, an increasing number of Colombians now believe that Uribe should be held accountable and judged for his actions. While the video shared by Uribe does not even reference this case, many users made clear their desire to see Uribe appear before the International Criminal Court. Other users called him a murderer and characterized him as genocidal (Figure 4.11).

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[41] 6402 is an approximation of the total number of victims of extrajudicial killings between 2002 and 2008. Since the number was made public in February 2021 by Colombia's Special Jurisdiction for Peace (Jurídicción Especial Para la Paz, 2021), it has become a kind of collective mnemonic device used to support claims for justice, mobilize a desire for change and remind Colombians of the horrors that took place behind the scenes.

Figure 4.11.

Screenshot of tweet reminding Uribe of his involvement in the false positives scandal.

Translation: Hahaha they don't know what else to make up! Those [the false positives] were lives and families destroyed and victimized. They were not bricks!

Source: Twitter (anonymized to maintain author confidentiality as per ethical guidelines)

- Uribe's association with paramilitary groups: Echoing the popular protest chant "Uribe, paraco, el pueblo está berraco" (Uribe, paramilitary, the people are angry), some users just replied to Uribe's video with the word *paraco*, the abbreviation for paramilitary. The alleged ties between Uribe and paramilitary groups are not news to the country. As Nicholas Dale Leal (2023) wrote in a news article published after Salvatore Mancuso, a former commander of the paramilitary group AUC (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia), accused Uribe in front of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace of being involved in the 1997 El Aro massacre:

  > a part of the population takes for granted that Uribe was deeply involved in paramilitarism and its activities: they consider that the abundant evidence of his close ties, personal but also of his governments, with so many accused and convicted for paramilitarism and parapolitics makes implausible his assertion that he had no idea of what was going on behind his back.[42]

  Although there have been several investigations, a definitive verdict has proven elusive. However, the public firmly believes in the connections between Uribe and the paramilitaries, and many continue to hope that Uribe will face trial for this.

- Use of fear and stigmatizing discourse to normalize state violence: Users in this subcategory held Uribe and his tweets, which incited violence, responsible for the police and vigilante violence that occurred during the strike (Figure 4.12). Although Uribe was

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[42] Parapolitics (*parapolítica*) is a term used to refer to a congressional scandal involving several Colombian politicians and the AUC paramilitary group.

not president at the time, he used Twitter to urge Duque, his political predecessor, to deploy the army in major cities. Many interpreted his tweets as commands.

Figure 4.12.

Screenshot of a tweet alleging that Uribe was responsible for the excessive use of violence during the strike.
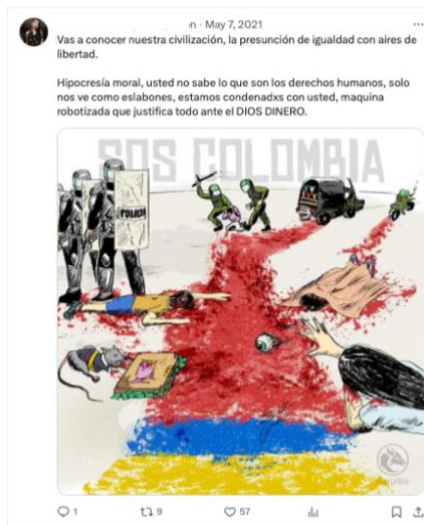
Translation: You will get to know our civilization, the presumption of equality with an air of freedom.
Moral hypocrisy, you do not know what human rights are, you only see us as links in a chain, we are condemned with you, robotic machine that justifies everything before the GOD OF MONEY.

Source: Twitter (anonymized to maintain author confidentiality as per ethical guidelines)

Futurity/An Opening to Other Futures: While this theme ranked third in frequency, the references to future and futurity were considerably low compared to the other two themes. Nevertheless, considering the message that Uribe shared along with the video talked about only two kinds of possible futures for the country (under Duque's repressive government or a future like "Venezuela's"), I found it pertinent to analyze them, seeking what insights might be revealed. Overall, the comments under this category alluded to the need for a new imagined future and refused to adopt the narrative in which Colombia's future is continually under threat. Most of them were a reply to Uribe's affirmation that the future of Colombia was getting "destroyed" to build a new Venezuela. As with the other two categories, I found that users who talked about future and futurity did so in two different ways:

- A refusal to return to normalcy: The comments categorized under this label accused Uribe of having deprived the country of its future. A return to normalcy and business as usual, which is what Uribe and his political allies were promoting, could only lead to more misery, inequality, extra judicial killings, and internal displacement, as a user suggested. There was also a recognition that under "normal" circumstances, those protesting had no future, as the necropolitics in place deemed them disposable and invisible. "A future for whom?" users asked.

- A different future is possible: While the number of comments in this subcategory was limited, those proposing the prospect of a different future asserted that such a future must be void of Uribe's influence in the country's politics. As the photo of a protest banner

shared by a user read, "Erasing your legacy will be our legacy!" (Figure 4.13). Within this group of comments, there was a desire to transcend the Uribe era, but also to build futures outside the boundaries dictated by his politics of fear. Through these comments users made it clear that they did not want either of the two futures proposed by Uribe, and that together they were able to build a different future.

Figure 4.13.

Screenshot of tweet with "Erasing your legacy will be our legacy!" banner.

Although it is not directly stated in the comments, one can see that behind this refusal to continue with politics as usual there was also a refusal to feel the fear promoted by the messages shared by Uribe. If the state's monopoly of violence worked on the premise that things will always be violent—a kind of presentness that erases all sorts of emancipatory futures—users were ready to interrupt this temporality of violence to imagine and project alternative futures. This refusal to accept and live in the kind of future projected by fear, where the bodies and struggles of marginalized Colombians are still invisible, could be understood as a form of resistance and as an opening to other futurities in which those who were formerly constructed as "feared" are no longer seen as a threat.

Overall, these three categories I have identified in the comments left under the video point out to a moment of rupture, both affective and political. While the tactics used in the video were effective in the past, the resistance expressed in the comments indicates that earlier forms of online and offline activism had also been successful. While the figure of the hero is not directly mentioned in the video, the rejection of the hero's antithesis (the terrorist), and the discontent with Uribe (a character previously regarded as heroic) manifested in the comments reveals a change in the affects that circulated around this figure. In the following chapter, I will go more in depth to show how this change happened. Additionally, I will show how the memory activism of the family members

of the "false positives," a figure that was very present in the comments left under the video, has played a crucial role in symbolically diminishing Uribe's status as the country's hero—as well as debilitating the structure of feeling of fear and apathy built around the figure of the military hero. Their activism, which I believe is key to understanding the rupture that we witnessed during the strike, has also contributed to reshaping the national identity that was constructed and supported by the anti-FARC nationalism promoted by Uribe.

Chapter 5: Whose Heroes? Space, Bodies, and the Aesthetics of Resistance

I must have been ten years old when the spots of a military propaganda called *Los Héroes en Colombia Sí Existen* (Heroes in Colombia Really Do Exist), one of the most impactful military propaganda campaigns in Colombia's recent years, started to circulate. I do not remember paying particular attention to the message, but I do remember feeling proud whenever I heard the slogan "heroes in Colombia really do exist." Although I do not recall ever associating the word hero with the soldiers stationed on the roads to greet travelers or those positioned outside the military base on our way to my parents' country house, I do remember feeling some warmth for these soldiers, perhaps a form of gratitude for the protection they were there to provide.

It was 2006, Álvaro Uribe was entering his second mandate, the FARC had intensified its attacks against the civilian population around the election time (Human Rights Watch, 2006), and although the army had made some military gains, news reports had revealed that some "successful" operations had been staged (Semana, 2006; Caracol Radio, 2006). The campaign's primary objective was to garner support for the army, with a crucial emphasis on nurturing affective engagement and commitment to military operations. While various spots featuring different storytelling approaches were released over the years, the one that I remember the most is "Camuflaje" (Camouflage). In the video for this particular campaign, we see army personnel camouflaging themselves and emerging in various seemingly deserted landscapes (Figure 5.1), accompanied by a voiceover narration that, in an effort to appeal to the viewer's emotions, described how the Colombian army was always there, looking after Colombians:

Aunque no nos veas, siempre estamos ahí.
Aunque no nos oigas, también estamos ahí.
Y aún en medio de la oscuridad, somos tus guardianes.
Los héroes en Colombia sí existen.
Ejército Nacional.

Even if you can't see us, we are always there.
Even if you don't hear us, we are also there.
And even in the midst of darkness, we are your guardians.
Heroes in Colombia really do exist.
National Army

Figure 5.1.
Screenshots from Los Héroes en Colombia Sí Existen video.

Source: Germanpe, 2007

Developed by the advertising agency McCann Erickson, a major US advertising agency, the campaign sought to inject the Colombian army's promotional material with greater emotional impact, striving to present a more "humane" image of soldiers (Gordillo Aldana, 2014, p. 31). It is important to remember that with Uribe's negation of the armed conflict also came the construction of an official memory that, as Carlos Arturo Gutiérrez (2019) suggests, "denied the crimes committed by the armed forces" and part of that strategy "aimed to enhance the image of the army and present their members as heroes" (p. 232). Thus, the slogan "heroes in Colombia really do exist" served not only to underscore the connection between the military and the hero archetype, removing any doubt or ambiguity regarding the type of hero being referenced, but also to solidify the construction of the FARC as a terrorist group to be defeated. Slowly, with the repetition of the different spots, as Gordillo Aldana has shown, the hero became the central figure of a security discourse that emphasized "the protection of interests deemed crucial by the social sectors represented by Uribe [,]" and also a figure used to persuade various social sectors of the importance of Uribe's conception of security (p. 48). After all, the spots meant to convey that the army was looking after *all* Colombians—though in reality only the lives of *some* Colombians were deemed worth protecting.[43]

The campaign was so successful that by 2009, 90% of the people surveyed said that they had a favourable image of the Colombian army (Gutiérrez, 2019, p. 237); and the slogan itself became so memorable that over the years it has been taken by other organizations and politicians to portray other groups (teachers and rural teachers, peasants, etc.) as heroes (Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2.
Screenshots of different campaigns that have borrowed the "heroes in Colombia do exist" slogan.

Source: Ramo, 2019; Petro, 2013; Medios ACPO, 2018.

But while this campaign was unfolding, generating complicated affective entanglements of admiration, gratitude and respect, several members of the army were engaging in some of the most macabre human rights violations in Colombia's contemporary history: the extrajudicial killings of innocent civilians, also known as the "false positives" scandal.

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[43] For a thorough analysis of all the spots see Gordillo Aldana, 2014.

The "false positives" scandal, as mentioned in the previous chapter, refers to the murder of at least 6,402 civilians by army units across the country between 2002 and 2008. The victims, predominantly impoverished, unemployed, homeless, or disabled young men from rural areas, were enticed by "recruiters" with promises of job opportunities in other regions. The "recruiters," some of whom were members of paramilitary groups, were paid by members of the military to bring the victims to the regions where the killings were to take place. Soon after, they would be killed and falsely portrayed as combat casualties. Over the years in which Uribe was in power, this practice became systematic, resulting in higher body counts, which helped support claims that the Uribe administration was winning the war against the FARC.

In 2008, the scandal broke when the bodies of a group of young men that had disappeared in the municipality Soacha were found in a mass grave in Ocaña, more than 600 kilometers away from their homes. That year, the State had achieved significant victories in its war against the FARC, which led to the scandal being downplayed as the failures of just a few "black sheep" within the army.[44] At the time, in spite of the accusations made by the victims' relatives, Uribe dismissed their testimonies and asserted that the group of young men who had disappeared from Soacha had not gone to Ocaña to "collect coffee," implying they were not innocent and alleging that they had gone to the city with "delinquent propositions" (Secretaría de Prensa, 2008).[45] Nevertheless, a group of mothers and family members of the victims, which came to be known as "Las Madres de Soacha" (the Soacha Mothers)—and later became MAFAPO (Mothers of False Positives of Soacha and Bogotá)—got together to advocate for justice and truth, and demand accountability.[46] Their memory activism, as I will show, played a crucial role in shaping the "false positives" figure as a mediator of the structure of feeling that emerged during the strike.

In the previous chapter, I showed how the mediation of the armed conflict during the Uribe administration, as well as the deployment of different propaganda campaigns vilifying the FARC ended up producing a visual regime in which certain forms of violence enacted against "second-class citizens" (populations living in rural areas such as Afro-Colombians, peasants and Indigenous peoples) remained invisible. This training on "selective empathy and desensitisation" (Giraldo, 2021, p. 73), used to support Uribe's anti-FARC nationalism, shaped a structure of feeling of apathy and fear in urban centers. While the figure of the "terrorist" was central to the construction of this structure, so was the figure of the "hero." Previously, I showed how the fear surrounding the figure of the "terrorist" was challenged during the strike. Thus, in this chapter, I will explore how the meaning of the "hero" figure evolved—from a military hero to a new kind of popular hero. I will do this by (i) looking at a collection of images shared on Twitter by users reporting the artistic interventions that were taking place at the Monument to the Heroes (*Monumento a los*

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[44] That year, Raúl Reyes, second in command of the FARC Secretariat, was killed, and the Operation Jaque, which resulted in the rescue of 15 high-profile hostages held by the FARC, was carried out.

[45] In 2021, following widespread criticism triggered by disclosures from the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, Uribe admitted that his statement had been an error but rejected the idea that the crimes were connected to his government's quota for killings.

[46] As many authors have pointed out, the origins, purpose and structure of the Soacha Mothers group resembles that of the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina.

Héroes), one of the epicenters of the strike and a monument that embodied the heroic in the country, and (ii) by analyzing how the word "hero" was used on the online conversation. Thus, to set things in context, I will start by providing a brief historical recount of the Los Héroes monument and its relationship to the imaginary of the Colombian nation that was built around the Independence Heroes and later around the army. Then, looking at some of the images that were shared on Twitter, I do a visual analysis of the interventions that protesters did around the monument, trying to trace the visual and affective links and histories behind the images. Given that the monument was removed later that year, I revisit Twitter as an archive of the public space that was shared, occupied and (re)constructed by protesters. At the end of the chapter, I turn to an analysis of the online conversation surrounding the archetype of the hero during the strike. This serves to support my visual analysis by highlighting shifts in the affective structures associated with this archetype and the ways in which national "heroes" were redefined.

A Note on Data Collection

Photos of the monument circulated on different digital platforms, and were also shared by some news outlets, but I decided to follow the conversation on Twitter to not only look at the changes that the monument went through, but also to understand the affective engagements of those who were sharing or commenting on the images. Thus, the visual analysis that I will present in this chapter looks at some of the images that were shared on Twitter from April 28, 2021, to June 30, 2021.

To retrieve these images, I initially carried an advanced search and collected the tweets that used the keyword "los heroes," with the direct object pronoun "los," as I wanted to look only at the transformations that the monument had suffered. The hashtag was used to filter the tweets and to ensure that what the tweets collected were referring to the strike. This approach was chosen because I had first conceived this chapter as a visual analysis of the images that circulated about the monument. My goal was to examine the audiencing of these images by looking at the accompanying text, as well as the replies to the images that garnered the highest levels of engagement. However, during the initial stage of the data collection process, I noticed that the word "heroes" was being used nor just to talk about what was happening around the monument, but it was often used to question and challenge the archetype of the hero that I will describe. This made me rethink my approach.

Thus, to try to get a wider sense of what happened online not just with the monument, but with this important archetype and its role in the nation-building project, I restarted data collection but this time using only the word "heroes" along with the same hashtag. As a result, more than five hundred tweets were retrieved and analyzed. Of these, over one hundred contained images. While this chapter will delve into various themes derived from the tweets and accompanying images, I will begin by examining the images showcasing the monument and documenting its transformations.

Monumento a Los Héroes: Independence Wars and the Idea of the Colombian Nation

Inaugurated in 1963, the monument to Los Héroes commemorated the Boyacá (1819), Carabobo (1821), Bomboná (1822), Pichincha (1822), Junín (1824) and Ayacucho (1824) battles of independence led by Simón Bolivar. The monument was first designed in 1952 by Angiolo Mazzoni (former state architect and engineer of the Italian Fascist government) and Ludovico Consorti (sculptor) under the presidency of fascist sympathizer, ultraconservative president Laureano Gómez (August 1950—June 1953) to commemorate the lives of the Colombian soldiers that were sent to the Korean War. When commander in chief Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (1953—1957) seized power in the 1953 coup d'état, the project was abandoned. Years later, the monument was redesigned and it was decided that it was going to be dedicated to the soldiers who fought on the previously mentioned independence wars.

The monument, a rectangular stone-plated tower approximately six stories high, was located in the northeast of the city, at the intersection of Avenida Caracas and 80th Street. On the north side of the monument was an equestrian statue of Simón Bolívar made by French sculptor Emmanuel Frémite in 1910, as well as the inscription of an excerpt from the Political Testament of Simón Bolívar (Figure 5.3). On the other faces of the tower were also inscribed the names and data of the battles fought by the independence armies in Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia.

Figure 5.3.

Photo of the Los Heroes monument by Inaldo Pérez

Source: Perez, 2019

Before the monument became one of the primary gathering points during the 2021 National Strike, it had lost significance and there was a certain indifference towards it. But during the strike, it became, as I will show in this chapter, a center for disputing national memory and identity, as well as a palimpsest of resistance.

From April 28th, 2021, to June 30th, 2021, protesters gathered around the monument multiple times to voice their demands, honour the victims of police and state violence, and re-signify the symbolism behind the archetype of the hero. Over this period, the walls of the monument were covered with murals referencing the "false positives" scandal, celebrating Indigenous and Afro-Colombian women, and conveying other messages of resistance, revealing emerging figures in the political imagination of the country. It must be noted, however, that the resignification and dispute over meaning and memory that took place in Los Héroes was not an isolated case. In fact, during the months the strike lasted, protesters occupied, reappropriated and renamed several public spaces around the country, painted hundreds of massive murals, and as many as thirty public monuments were intervened or toppled (Vargas Álvarez, 2022).

The toppling of colonial monuments like the Sebastian de Belalcázar's statue in Cali and the Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada statue[47] in Bogotá by the Misak Indigenous community,[48,] the renaming of several Transmilenio (public transport) stations in Bogotá, the massive murals painted and repainted all over the country after they were covered in gray paint by "fine citizens," are just a few of the most striking examples of visual and symbolic resistance that we witnessed during the Strike (Figure 5.4). While many of these gestures took place during the 2021 strike, this form of iconoclastic resistance in Colombian goes back to 2020, when the Misak, joined by members of the Pijao and Nasa Indigenous groups, toppled the statue of Sebastián de Belalcázar in the city of Popayán, joining other global anti-colonial iconoclastic gestures.[49]

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[47] In 2024, the statue of Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada, which was toppled during the Strike, was artistically intervened by members of the Misak community and featured in a temporary exhibition at the National Museum of Colombia.

[48] Sebastian de Belalcázar and Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada were Spanish conquistadors.

[49] The statue stood on top of a pre-Columbian site of burial and temple called El Morro de Tulcán.

Figure 5.4

Re-named Transmilenio station "Portal of Resistance" (top left), Misak group next to the toppled statue of Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada (top right), Misak group moments after the Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada was toppled (bottom left), & "Genocidal State" mural in Barranquilla (bottom right).

Source: Twitter/X

The movement to topple colonial statues originated from South Africa's #RhodesMustFall movement in 2015 directed against the University of Cape Town. The #RhodesMustFall or #Fallism movement began with the removal of the statue of Cecil Jhon Rhodes and turned into a fight against tuition hikes, colonial education and white supremacy. As the movement began to receive global attention, other campaigns to decolonize education began to emerge around the world. In 2017, the toppling of statues gained momentum again when in the United States confederate monuments began to be toppled as a response to the Unite the Right fascist rally in Charlottesville that led to the murder of Heather Heyer. Finally, in 2020, the movement regained momentum after the police murders of George Floyd ana Breona Taylor (*The All Monuments Must Fall Syllabus*, n.d.).[50] It was precisely the removal of racist and colonial statues in South Africa,

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[50] As Courtney R. Baker (2019) explains, while Confederate monuments "refuse to let die the social touchstone of white supremacy and black subjugation [,]" monuments to colonization "refuse to let die a social commitment to manifest destiny and native genocide."

the United States and around the world during that year that encouraged the Misak, Pijao and Nasa communities to perform their own form of anti-colonial resistance. In the words of Didier Chirimuscay, spokesperson of the Misak community and the Movement of Indigenous Authorities of Colombia (AISO),

> what we are doing is re-signifying our history of vindication. Recovering the land is not enough; we must also reclaim the sacred places significant to our memory. What we did was an act of justice. The opportunity arose with what was happening in the United States and Europe. We, the Indigenous peoples, are not in museums or books; we have a proposal for memory (as cited in Rojas-Sotelo, 2022, p. 24).

Although the toppling of the Belalcázar statue was probably the most popular anti-monumental gesture of 2020, that year, at least thirty-five monuments were intervened (Arenas 2021). In fact, before the Belalcázar statue was toppled in September, the Colombian Communist Party had already intervened with the monument of Francisco Fernández de Contreras in Ocaña in July 2020. They placed a banner on it that read: "I am Francisco Fernández. I participated in the genocide of 80 million Indigenous people. Do I deserve a tribute for those deaths? No more racism. We are back! PCC" (Figure 5.5). Gestures like this one did not reach national news and only circulated within smaller news outlets or Facebook groups, making them harder to trace and archive, but this signals how much of an influence the "All monuments must fall" global movement had within local activist groups.

Figure 5.5.
Francisco Fernández de Contreras Statue in Ocaña.

Source: Ocaña Hoy Facebook group

In the U.S., Marita Sturken (2022) writes, the "removal and destruction of so many monuments revealed a shift in public discussion about race, nation, and memory and a surging of

memories of racial violence that had long been suppressed" (p.1). In Colombia, this ongoing conversation, previously expressed through murals and other forms of activism, first gained visibility in 2020 and began to gain significant momentum in 2021. During the strike, and over the three months that the protests lasted, many videos or photos of counter-monumental actions by different actors (Indigenous groups, artivist collectives and anonymous collectives, among others) circulated on social media, reflecting the changing relation with national narratives that Colombians were having. So, while, the toppling of the Belalcázar statue in 2020 followed the global movement and the demand to denaturalize and engage critically with the violent histories of colonization, within the framework of the strike, these counter-monumental actions, as Sebastián Vargas Álvarez (2022) points out, were "integral to a broader process of 'dismantling' the official historical and identity narratives concerning the Colombian nation, aimed at redefining the commons" (p. 3). During the strike, not only were statues toppled, but we also witnessed the construction of popular monuments, like the iconic *Monumento a la Resistencia* (Monument to Resistance) in Cali—a nine-meter-tall structure representing the hand of Kay Kimi Krachi, the Mayan god of battle—that commemorates the victims of police brutality (Figure 5.6). As Rebecca Solnit wrote in a 2017 article about the removal of Confederate monuments in New Orleans, "In the monument wars, as we excavate our history like an archaeological site—or a crime scene—we have a chance to arrive at new conclusions, nominate new heroes, rethink the past, and reorient ourselves to the future." And this nomination of new heroes is precisely what ended up happening during the strike, as this chapter will show.

Figure 5.6.
Monumento a la Resistencia, Cali, Colombia.

Source: Twitter/X

During the strike, two distinct forms of aesthetic resistance stood out: the toppling or intervention of statues, carried out in many cases but not exclusively by Indigenous groups, and

the creation of massive murals, painted by street artists, art collectives and anonymous collectives. The toppling of statues, as discussed, represents a relatively recent form of resistance in Colombia, emerging in the wake of the 2020 anti-monumental wave. In contrast, the creation of murals is deeply rooted in the country's longstanding tradition of street art. For years, marginalized groups have used city walls as powerful tools of resistance against dominant narratives, as spaces to contest violence, and as repositories for "underground memories" (Grunow, 2019; Griffin, 2023; Naef, 2024). At Los Héroes, these two forms intersected, making the site a place in which new and old forms of symbolic resistance were deployed to transform the monument and project a different idea of the Colombian nation. Although the Bolivar equestrian statue was not physically toppled— the city removed the statue after it became a focal point for protesters—demonstrators engaged with it to redefine its significance. Furthermore, the walls of the monument were used as a canvas onto which activists and protestors painted massive murals and graffiti alluding to different moments in the (violent) history of the country.

Before the protests started, it had been established that the monument was going to be demolished as part of the Bogotá subway construction plan. However, as the strike concluded and the walls of the tower, covered with graffiti and murals, faced demolition, debates arose regarding the meaning and monumentality of the site. When Claudia López, the then mayor of Bogotá, announced that only the equestrian statue was going to be preserved, Diego Molano, the defense minister under whose leadership police abuses were committed against protesters, wrote a letter to López arguing that the monument (the statue and the building) was "a symbol of great importance not only for our soldiers and, therefore, for the Ministry of National Defense, but for all Colombians" given that, according to him, it represented "a milestone in our collective construction as a Nation and a symbol of independence" (Redacción BLU Radio, 2021). The monument, in Molano's view, was not just a tribute to Bolívar and the independence wars, but also "to all the heroes who gave their lives for the freedom we still defend" (Redacción BLU Radio, 2021). Although the monument was not originally created to celebrate the army or its role in the armed conflict, associations between the independence heroes and the army have emerged over time. This notion of the nation centered around military admirations that Molano was trying to preserve was precisely the idea of the nation that protests and activists, through their interventions, were trying to contest. When the monument was finally removed in September 2021, the Twitter hashtag #SalvemosLosHéroes (#LetsSavetheHeroes), echoing Molano's words, was used by many to lament what they considered a loss in Colombia's memory. As María Mazzanti and Juana Salcedo (2021) wrote in a piece for the Failed Architecture website, the conversation that took place around the demolition of the monument reflects "the strong tensions around the interpretation of the past that were exposed during the Strike."

Since its independence, Colombia's national identity has been "forged by [a] dominant nationalist white elite" (Dennis, 2006, p. 95). Over the years, the independence wars and founding fathers like Bolívar have become key elements of the foundational myths that are at the core of the Colombian national identity. As María Elena Erazo Coral (2008) points out, the Colombian nation-building project solidified in the late nineteenth century with the goal of generating social cohesion

through a homogenizing discourse that pretended to conceal class, cultural and racial hierarchies while maintaining a general intolerance towards everything that challenged the idea of the Colombian nation as modern. As a result of this "civilizing" project, guided by colonial legacies and led by the elites of the era, the conventional notion of the Colombian nation often "has nothing to do with the socio-cultural reality of the country," as it tends to leave out the realities and demands of Indigenous peoples, Afro-Colombians, campesinxs (peasants), women, and everyone who does not fit in the quest for modernity and development (p. 42). Over the years, these realities have stayed concealed, and the political demands of these groups have continued to be ignored, if not invalidated. In fact, as Marisol Dennis (2006) has suggested, "old myths of ethnic election [have given] the political class the conviction of having a mission to lead the country and therefore impose their value system and worldview on the majority subordinate groups, by violent means if necessary" (p. 104). Additionally, the armed conflict, as explained in the previous chapter, has only worked to accentuate this division, and to make this kind of violence invisible.

It is this idea of the nation, and the affective investments and economies that circulated around it that, I will argue, was suspended, or momentarily dismantled, during the strike. To understand this affective movement, I look at the changes that the monument went through and the meaning and affective links behind the graffiti that appeared on its walls. I will also turn to the tweets in which users talk about Colombian "heroes," both, contesting the idea that "heroes in Colombia do exist" and re-signifying the slogan to present new national heroes. Although the monument is only one of the many spaces that were intervened upon, as a place where old and new ideas of the nation collide, I believe that it reveals, as the other spaces, new imaginaries of the nation and affective entanglements.

Anti-Monumentality as a Revision of the Imagined Nation

As mentioned, protesters gathered around the monument at different times during the months studied. The frequency of tweets and images surged notably whenever a major protest or rally was scheduled. Although I expected to get a more sequential understanding of the monument's transformations, the paintings and graffiti imprinted on the tower's walls was so abundant that it made it challenging to discern anything beyond the bigger and most notable murals. Another factor complicating the analysis of smaller posters and graffiti was the prevalence of images captured from a considerable distance, likely using cellphone cameras. Consequently, only the murals intended for long-range visibility were prominent and discernible in these images. Although I will briefly mention the smaller graffiti that appeared during the first days of the strike, my analysis here will focus mainly on the four murals that were painted on each of the walls of the monument, as well as on some symbolic elements that were added to the equestrian statue before it was removed by the city.

What interests me is to look at the images through their compositional modality to trace the changes in the monument (the site of production) and their social modality to understand the context and meaning of these changes. For this analysis, I am also incorporating what Vis et al. (2019) have called the 'anatomy of the image,' which involves doing a close reading of images

using two modes of analysis: (i) looking at the image as a visual artifact "used and given meaning in specific ways in particular contexts" (p. 251), and (ii) finding the links between the image and "the subjects to which it is linked but does not literally depict" (p. 252).

Between April 28th and May 12th smaller and simple graffiti and posters appeared on the monument referencing the different cases of police abuse that had taken place during the first days of the strike, but also during the 2019 and 2020 protests (Figure 5.7). Messages like "no to the reform," "SOS dictatorship," "ACAB" and "no more police abuse," as well as the names of different victims of police abuse were written on the walls of the monument to demand justice and commemorate the victims.

Figure 5.7.

Photo of the lower part of the monument and of protesters hanging out around the Bolívar statue, which appears covered in pink paint.

Translation: The protesters of the #nationalstrike took over the los heroes monument to say no to the tax reform and no to police violence.

Source: Twitter (anonymized to maintain author confidentiality as per ethical guidelines)

Of all the messages and graffiti that appeared on the walls of the monument, these were the ones that I expected to see the most. After all, what had initially brought people to the streets was the proposed tax reform, and police repression was one of the reasons why many continued to protest. These visual expressions were complementary and spoke directly to the hundreds of videos of police brutality that were circulating on social media. Their goal was to make visible a form of violence that main media outlets were ignoring, but also to articulate the *digna rabia* (dignified rage) that many were experiencing. This affect, which "emerges as a corporal recognition of an injustice," as explained by Miguel Rojas Sotelo and Laura Quintana Porras, was used to express political fatigue with structural violence (2022, p. 352).

Over the years, the notion of *digna rabia* has been used by different protests movements in Latin American to describe a form of affective resistance—an affective transformation of anger into action. It was popularized by the Zapatistas, which have described it as a movement from resentment and revenge into a pursuit for justice. As it is formulated through a set of questions in a text titled *Eighteenth Part: The Rage* (2023) on the website of the Sixth Commission of the EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation):

Is rage the bridge between pain and rebellion?

At what moment do anguish, desperation, and helplessness turn into rage?

What if the disappeared men and women, conversely, inherit the rage of those who search for them? What if they give birth to their parents?

What if the seekers do not seek consolation, pity, sympathy, the alms of another's ear? What if they also seek our rage?

What if all anger has the same root and they, we, the people, find each other at that root?

During the strike, the notion of *digna rabia* was articulated in different spaces, and, as Rojas Sotelo and Quintana Porras suggest, this was key in the creation of anti-colonial political imaginaries (p. 353). The monument is one of the many places where those imaginaries were projected, and it is through these projections that old ideas and imaginaries of the Colombian nation were dismantled. For instance, on May 15th, a few days after the Indigenous Minga was attacked in Cali, a mural of an Indigenous woman with the message "Ancestral Warriors" appeared on the back wall of the monument (Figure 5.8).

Figure 5.8.

Picture of the Ancestral Warriors graffiti on the south facing wall.
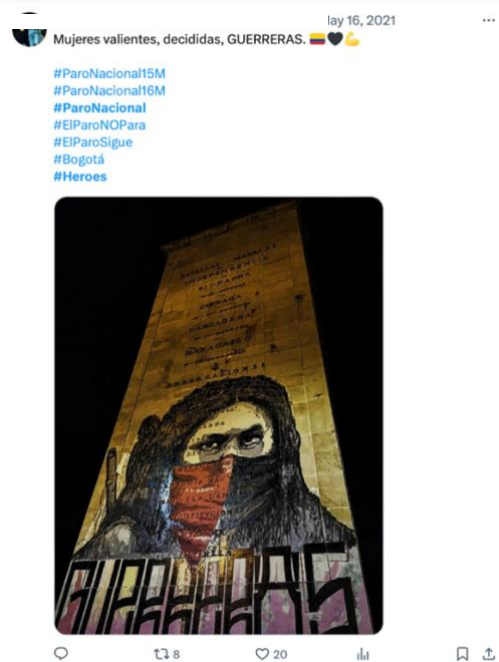
Source: Twitter (anonymized to maintain author confidentiality as per ethical guidelines)

The woman in the painting is wearing a black and red handkerchief over her face and it is carrying a baton, similar to the green and red handkerchief worn by members of the CRIC (Indigenous regional council of Cauca) and the baton carried by Minga members (Figure 5.9). As with many of the other murals, posters, and stencils that appeared on the monument, the creators of the "Ancestral Warriors" mural remain unknown. It is possible that, this one was created in collaboration between art collectives and protesters, as was the case with other artistic interventions. This anonymity, combined with the potential for collaboration and the widespread desire to share it—evidenced by the numerous photos of the mural shared online—heightens the urgency of interpreting these murals as they become expressions of the popular. As one user wrote when sharing an aerial photo of the people gathered around the monument "the power of the people [took] to the streets, flooding them with diversity. In the #NationalStrike we seek the fall of the oppressive, warlike and transgressive state" (Figure 5.10).

Figure 5.9.

Picture of the Indigenous Minga

Source: Robayo, 2021

Figure 5.10.

Tweet about the power of the people

Source: Twitter (anonymized to maintain author confidentiality as per ethical guidelines)

Nathalia Lamprea Abril (2023) suggests that murals like the one mentioned reversed "the condescending look that the state has given to the Indigenous people, recognizing their capacity for political agency" (p. 505), thus breaking already with the idea of the nation in which Indigenous groups are not imagined as citizens with full access to rights. Furthermore, the warrior woman challenged "the hegemonic narrative of the place, where the soldiers who participated in the independence process of the Bolivarian countries are the *inherited heroes*" (p. 505, my italics). The mural puts into question this conception of the "hero" and asks us to examine the historical turns behind this military admiration. This questioning is also seen through the interventions made on the statue of Bolívar, located at the front (north-facing wall) of the monument, and the other big murals that appeared on and around the tower.

The same day the face of the Indigenous woman was painted, a pencil, signifying the right to public education, was added on one of the arms of the statues, where one would expect to see a sword; and the Wiphala, a flag used by Andean Indigenous peoples as a sign of resistance was raised (Figure 5.11). While the statue was not toppled, these two symbolic interventions point towards a desire to disrupt and question the country's cult around independence figures like Bolívar. In fact, a few days after the pencil and the flag appeared, two feminist murals were painted on the stairs leading to the statue and the tower (Figure 5.12). One mural read "Estado violador" (violating state or state violator)—a slogan popularized by Latin American feminist movements to denounce state-sponsored violence, including gender-based violence, repression, and the lack of accountability for such abuses—and the other mural read "Monumento Betsabé Espinal"—honoring a key figure in Colombia's labor movement, particularly known for leading the first female labor strike in the country in 1929. These significant feminist interventions not only expose the role of militarized histories in perpetuating gender violence but also challenge the exclusion of historical feminist figures from the narrative of national heroism. As with the previous example, through these three interventions, the question of the national hero is revisited, and new figures begin to emerge.

Figure 5.11.	Figure 5.12.
Equestrian Bolívar Statue	*Feminist murals*

Source: Twitter (anonymized to maintain author confidentiality as per ethical guidelines)

Finally, when the equestrian statue was removed later that month, the word "oppressor" was written under the engraving "Bolivar liberator," bringing forth the colonial legacies of Bolívar, who endorsed racial and colonial hierarchies after winning the independence wars (Figure 5.13).[51] Under the message, an Afro-Colombian woman was painted with her hand making a "stop" gesture and the words "no more blood" written across it—a reminder that the Afro-Colombian population has been one of the most affected by the armed conflict, but also of the fact that many of the victims of police abuse during the strike came from Afro-Colombian and other racialized communities. This is particularly important in a country in which many still negate the country's structural racism and fail to see the relationship between racism and the armed conflict. While as mentioned, the conflict has disproportionally affected Afro-Colombian and Indigenous populations, as Eduardo Restrepo (2023) points out, "to make the relationship between racism and armed conflict visible, it is not only necessary to examine who and where the dead have been killed, who and where the dispossessions and displacements have taken place, but also who and where have accumulated wealth, land and political power" (p. 132). This is something that the country is still grappling with, and a reality that many refuse to acknowledge.

Figure 5.13.

Zoomed-in image of the north-facing wall after the Bolívar statue was removed.

Source: Twitter (anonymized to maintain author confidentiality as per ethical guidelines)

While the mural at Los Héroes does not represent a sudden undoing of the country's racial hierarchies, it does point to a form of "awakening" from at least a part of the population. This

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[51] In his epistolary analysis of Bolívar's letters, Marco Lovón (2023) discovered that "Bolívar produced and reproduced discursive representations of the Other primarily through racial and stereotypical voices," often linking the white elite with conceptions of the "citizen" and Black and Indigenous populations with the "uncivilized" or "enslaved." As Sergio Armando Gallegos-Ordorica (2018) puts it "despite voicing liberal ideas and adopting anti-colonial attitudes, several actions throughout [Bolívar's] life are partially colored by the racist assumptions embedded in the thought of European philosophers" (p. 199).

would be later seen during the 2022 elections, when Black human rights and environmental activist and lawyer, Francia Márquez, was elected as the country's first Black vice-president.[52] In fact, after Márquez announced she would be running as vice president with Gustavo Petro, other candidates also nominated Afro-Colombian figures as their vice-presidential candidates (Herrera, 2022). In total, for the 2022 elections, five out the of eight vice-presidential candidates were Afro-Colombians. While some of these nominations reflected the logics of neoliberal multiculturalism, prioritizing symbolic diversity over substantive structural change, this goes to show the cultural, social and political changes that took place after the strike in terms of representation.

Now, going back to the murals and the interventions on the equestrian statue, what these anti-monumental actions and references reveal is that beyond recognizing the pivotal role of Indigenous groups, Afro-Colombian protesters, and women during the strike, a new conception of the nation was emerging—one that involved a reinterpretation of the past, present and future to bring forth previously invisibilized subjects, giving rise to new affective entanglements. As Várgas Álvarez (2022) suggests in his analysis of the toppling and intervention of different monuments and statues during the strike, these actions show "the discontent of the citizenry with respect to the hegemonic ways of narrating national history and its evident ethno-racial, gender, class, religion, etc. biases" (p. 4). In this desire to bring forth new imaginaries of the nation and make visible previously concealed subjects, there was also a need to address and redress the violence that has been committed against these very same marginalized subjects. This is particularly evident in the murals that memorialize victims of police violence, as well as in the accusations that frame the state as the root cause of such violence. Thus, through these transformations, the strike fostered spaces in which bodies that were at the limits of the visible and grievable, were able to re-inhabit and re-design these spaces in relation to old cultural and historical narratives.

Through these actions, the space was transformed not only materially as protesters reclaimed their right to the city and to their own monuments, but also epistemologically and affectively. This affective shift is particularly evident in the welcoming messages shared online alongside photos of these actions. The positive reception of these performances makes clear that the overidentification with the military hero's narrative had been disrupted, making possible the emergence of new affective entanglements with the anti-monuments, and the subjects depicted in the murals. Former hierarchies and visual complexes were suspended, and the lives of those who were deemed disposable, invisible and ungrievable under those complexes took center stage. These symbolic acts not only highlight the gaps in the nation's memory of the conflict and the exclusionary imaginaries that constitute the Colombian nation but also open the possibility for a new national identity that addresses these omissions. As Marita Sturken (2022) suggests when discussing the processes of memorialization in the US, disruption "can act as a force that demands more of national narratives, which bend toward themes of heroism and sacrifice to restore pride and comfort" (p. 4). This is what happened during the strike. Through these interventions the

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[52] During her campaign, Márquez bowed to represent the "nobodies" (los nadies), referring to "the country's Black and Indigenous minorities, the poor, working-class women and others at the fringes of a nation historically dominated by a white-mestizo male elite based in the cool Andean climes of Bogotá" (McDonnell, 2022). Many of the strike actors saw themselves represented in this group.

monument became a palimpsest onto which new meanings were written. Figures previously invisibilized (victims of state violence, women, Afro-Colombians and Indigenous peoples) became not only visible but heroic. They were projected on the monument, but also featured online, as I will discuss later in this chapter, through tweets and images in which users celebrated new forms of heroism. In this process, new (popular) heroes emerged.

While the three interventions mentioned earlier appeared to negotiate the direct meaning of the monument, and the idea of the nation that has been constructed around independence figures like Bolívar—one type of hero—the other two graffiti I will discuss in the following paragraphs were there to contest Uribe's legacy, his militaristic contribution to the most contemporary idea of the Colombian nation, and the admiration of the military hero—the second type—that resulted from the propaganda campaigns mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

Days before the previously mentioned murals were painted, on the bottom half of the west-facing wall of the monument a big mural that read "public enemy" and that featured an illustration of Uribe's face as a skull was painted (Figure 5.14). The style of the Public Enemy mural was simple yet striking. As a public indictment, the mural was meant to draw attention and generate affective responses—perhaps fuel the discontent that protesters were already experiencing. In fact, many of the tweets that were shared documenting the protests and rallies around the place featured this side of the monument.

Figure 5.14.
"Public Enemy" mural.

Source: Twitter (anonymized to maintain author confidentiality as per ethical guidelines)

The declaration of Uribe as a public enemy speaks directly to the false positives scandal that took place under his administration. This is made evident by a small imprint of the number 6402 that

appeared on the second E of "enemigo" in that mural and by another mural that appeared on the other side of the monument that read "6402 heroes" (Figure 5.15). As mentioned in the previous chapter, since the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) revealed in February 2021 that at least 6,402 civilians were victims of extrajudicial killings by the Colombian armed forces, the number became a mnemonic device used to support claims for justice and mobilize a desire for change.

Figure 5.15.
*Picture of the "6402 Heroes" mural.*

Source: Twitter (anonymized to maintain author confidentiality as per ethical guidelines)

During the strike, the figure gained popularity, appearing not just in the mural mentioned, but in multiple other spaces (Figure 5.16). Through this repetition, it became what Nicolás Rudas (2024) calls a "fact-icon." Fact-icons, according to Rudas, are "cultural items that: (i) convey a strong imagery of 'facticity'; (ii) carry epiphanic properties; (iii) encode deep narratives of national identity; and (iv) possess a distinctive aesthetic shape" (p. 2). The power of these icons, Rudas argues, lies in their authority and affectivity, as well as on their capacity to trigger mobilization and remain in the public imaginary (p. 2). Additionally, Rudas suggests, "as aesthetic objects, [fact-icons] become focal points around which to produce effervescent collective emotions" (p. 2). During the strike, the number was infused with meanings already present in the cultural and political imagination "by linking [the number] with encompassing sentiments of national identity" (p. 11). So, given that the strike was against Duque, Uribe's political descendant, invoking the false positives seemed natural for activists to use the figure as a symbol of injustice (p. 11).
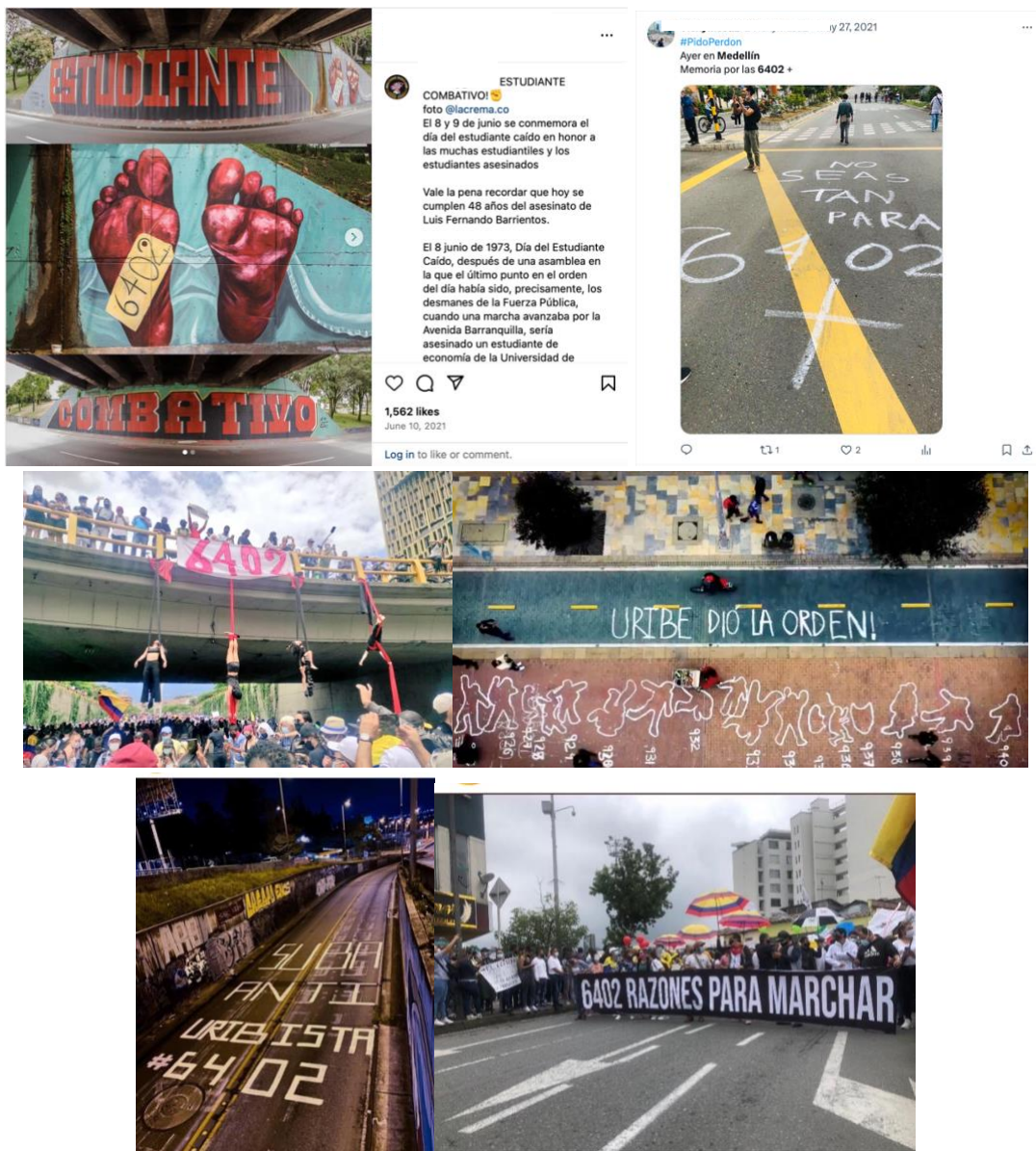
But why did the figure 6402 became such an icon? It is not that Colombians were not aware of the killings before. In fact, many of us had been trying to wrap our minds around the fact that such a systematic and horrific practice had been allowed and kept in the dark for so long. But having a number, an easily decoded sign that made evident the magnitude of the scandal, made the rewriting of history that the family members of the victims had been advocating for urgent. Perhaps

this has to do with the collective realization, for some, that in one way or another the affective training designed and deployed by previous administrations had worked, even if just as a blindfold. Through induced ignorance and a collective desire for safety many had been, in one way or another, complicit.

The sense of urgency was further fueled by the increasing visibility of historically marginalized and overlooked communities—and their struggles—and by the violence that was deployed against the front lines. In the narrative surrounding the "false positives," many recognized a cautionary tale, inciting a pressing need for change to prevent repetition and advocate for justice. With this in mind, I would like to propose a reading of the figure of the "false positives" and the revelation of the total number of victims by the JEP as mediators of the structure of feeling of "awakening" that was perceived during the strike. This awakening, which served as a driving force, also has to do with the activation of the political imagination, the rejection of apathy, and a recovery of the country's silenced memories.

"Los falsos positivos:" Mediating a New Structure of Feeling

While the MAFAPO collective was not in total agreement with the "6402 Heroes" mural—asking protesters to avoid romanticizing the victims of state violence by presenting them as heroes—the fact is that the figure of the false positives has gone on to become a national symbol of attunement, inciting collective grieving and a desire to revisit the country's historical memory. As Trinh T. Minh-ha (2016) writes when talking about the Tiananmen Square victims and the Tiananmen Mothers, the "mere act of grieving collectively and the courage of taking a national trauma on a regular walk reveals a silent potency, a dormant antipotency, and a diffuse agency that remain ungovernable by nature" (p. 111). Hence, what follows is my attempt to explore how it is that this "potency" came to be in the Colombian case.

To understand how is that the "false positives" figure has become a mediator of this new structure of figure it is important to look at the memory activism work that the MAFAPO collective has done, and its impact on the understanding of the armed conflict. Over the years, the collective has filed lawsuits, campaigned for justice, established a solid social media presence, collaborated with other human rights organizations, and participated in events and activities aimed at memorializing the victims. As Luz Marina Bernal, the mother of Fraí Leonardo Bernal and founding member of the group, puts it: "We are history. We are memory" (ONU Mujeres Colombia, 2015).

In addition to their legal battles against the Colombian state, and their collaboration with Colombia's Truth Commission, their activism for memory and non-repetition has manifested through different artistic performances. Through theater, murals, music, weaving exercises, embroidery and visual arts they have creatively expressed and transcended the pain of losing their sons while denouncing impunity (Figures 5.17 and 5.18). Though the recognition of their work has been slow, their activism has been key to raise awareness, shed light on the silenced histories of the armed conflict, and dismantle the visual and affective regimes consolidated under the Uribe administration. It is precisely through their artistic performances and visual arts that they have

managed to insert themselves and their stories in the consciousness of many Colombians. In addition, by asking us to revise the history of the conflict, they have also forced us to revisit our affective investments in the idea that we had of the "Colombian nation."

Figure 5.17.

Photos from different artistic initiatives in which the MAFAPO collective has participated.

Source: Instagram @mafapocolombia

Figure 5.18.

Photos taken by Carlos Saavedra for the project Madres Terra

Source: Instagram @mafapocolombia

As Isis Giraldo (2021) points out, during Uribe's administration, and for the years that followed, "love and solidarity for the army […] constituted the glue binding the Colombian nation" (p. 70). Propaganda material like the *Los Héroes en Colombia Sí Existen* campaign was key in the construction of a Colombian identity that, following old ideas of the nation as modern, positioned the army as a central figure in the protection of modern values (development, neoliberal policies and foreign investment).[53] For example, as Giraldo describes,

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[53] Here, we observe how the idea of the nation that was built around independence figures like Bolívar is transformed and updated, yet it maintains the same exclusionary attributes and militaristic admirations.

In the presidential letter accompanying the 'Democratic Security' programme published in 2003, [… Uribe] narrowed down the 'terrorists' to those who 'kidnap' and thus chase away investors, disperse capital and destroy job opportunities, a rhetoric that was to be constantly hammered by state and private institutions so that it became incontestable truth (p. 70).

Following this logic, Giraldo suggests that the semantic field around the "terrorist guerrilla figure" expanded to include "anyone that [was] *unproductive* from within the logic of capitalism" (p. 70, original italics). So those who obstructed or did not contribute actively to the realization of the modernity project, like the victims of the false positives scandal, became disposable (p. 71), and, I would add, ungrievable. For Giraldo, this form of affective training, the teaching to despise and dehumanize the unproductive others, "has been key in the 'affective economy' that has been constitutive of the Colombian nation" (p. 65).

Thus, when the members of MAFAPO reclaim the grievability of their family members in their performances and visual arts projects, they are also opening avenues outside the apathy and hatred promoted by this economy. Grieving has been, by itself, a form of resistance that has managed to corrode the apathy and sensitize the unsensitized. Through this, the mothers and family members of the victims have called into question the idea of the Colombian nation that necessitates these affects to hold. This process, I argue, has produced a visual/affective language and common ground from which other demands for justice have been mobilized—granting the possibility of becoming visible and reclaiming their grievability to other parts of the population that were also deemed disposable and ungrievable under this logic.

In what follows, I will try to trace how this has happened through the insertion of symbols or what Marita Sturken (1997) calls "technologies of memory." These technologies (objects, images, representations, etc.) are not "vessels of memory in which memory passively resides" but rather objects through which "memories are shared, produced and given meaning" (p. 9). In this case, I will explain how the rubber boot, and the slogan "Who gave the order?" *(¿Quién dio la orden?*), have acted as technologies of memories in a similar way as the figure 6402 did.

The rubber boot is perhaps one of the oldest technologies of memory that members of the collective have used to represent their struggle. A seemingly ordinary object, which first served as painful proof of the killings, has become, through the recollection and retelling of the history of the armed conflict, an object of attunement. When altering the crime scenes to depict the victims as guerrilla members, the army would change their civilian clothing and dress them in military attire and rubber boots. While this was intended to provide convincing evidence, inconsistencies in the montages sometimes ended up serving as proof of the crimes instead of supporting the army's narrative. Such was the case of Mario Alexander Arenas, the first Soacha victim to be declared a crime against humanity. Mario Alexander was killed at the beginning of 2008 by members of the 5th Brigade of Floridablanca (Santander). When his sister, Cecilia Arenas, attended the exhumation of his body in December of 2008, she noticed that her brother's body "was evidently marked by the sign of a coup de grâce," but what stood out the most is the fact that "he was wearing two new rubber boots, both for the left foot" (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2023). Over the years, the collective has taken the boot as a symbol of memory and

justice (Figure 5.19). Through artistic "botatones" (artistic interventions on boots), they have sought to transcend their grief while inviting the public to empathize with their struggle.

Figure 5.19.
Digital banners used for different events.

Source: @mafapot on Twitter

This technology of memory has been so effective, that at times it has acted as a threat to negationists of the crimes. For instance, in November 2024, Colombian congressman and member of Uribe's party, Miguel Polo Polo, filmed himself throwing away the boots that had been placed in front of the National Capitol as part of an art exhibition by MAFAPO. The video, which was shared on his social media accounts, showed the congressman placing the boots inside a garbage bag and saying that the boots were "dirtying" the place and affirming that the false positives scandal was a hoax—revictimizing the members of the collective. After the video was posted online, thousands of Colombians took on to social media to show their solidarity for the victims and their families.

The second technology of memory is the slogan "Who gave the order?" This slogan was popularized in 2019 when MOVICE (the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes), launched the #CampañaPorLaVerdad (#CampaignForTruth).[54] Part of the campaign was the creation of a mural in front of the General José María Córdoba Military Academy in Bogotá on October 18, 2019. The image, however, was covered with white paint in a move to censor it just a few hours after it was done (Figure 5.20). This was done by the 13th Brigade of the National Army. Before the mural was finished, a troop was sent to intimidate the artists who were working on the mural. Although the mural was removed, a digital version of it started to circulate online, allowing the message to spread widely in a short period of time.

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[54] MOVICE is composed of over 200 organizations of victims of enforced disappearance, extrajudicial and targeted killings, and forced displacement.

Figure 5.20.

Photo of the before (left) and after (right) of the mural that was painted on October 18, 2019.

Source: @pulzo on Twitter

The campaign was so popular that by the end of 2019, General Marcos Evangelista Pinto Lizarazo, one of the commanders who appeared on the mural, "filed a tutela (writ of protection of constitutional rights) to have the mural erased from social media given that, according to him, MOVICE actions [had] damaged his honor and good name" (PBI Colombia, 2021). Another commander joined the legal action, and in 2020 the court that was in charge of the case ruled in favour of the commanders. Though the court ruled that the mural had to be pulled from the streets and social media, "it was impossible to comply: the image of the mural had already been shared hundreds of times by digital users and around 5,000 posters with the mural image had flooded the streets of Bogotá and, later, other Colombian cities" (PBI Colombia, 2021). The original mural was censored, but this small act of dissent had already begun to pull the affective strings needed to lift the veil from many people's eyes in the "awakening" that was to come. Attempts to censor the movement continued, and although the army tried, time and again, to remove the mural whenever a new one appeared, in November 2021 Colombia's Constitutional Court ruled in favour of the movement. The Court argued that, as a critique of the state, the mural was part of public debate, and that the victims had the right to fight for truth. This granted protection to the mural in its physical and digital versions.

The victims, artists and human rights organizations behind the campaign chose murals as their medium as a form of *escrache* (Campaña por la verdad, 2022, p. 301).[55] This a form of protest, denouncement, and public shaming that originated in Argentina in 1995 as the human rights group H.I.J.O.S (Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice Against Forgetfulness and Silence) sought to bring justice and "condemn the genocides committed by members of the military dictatorship

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[55] From the verb "to scratch."

that had been pardoned by Carlos Menem," president at the time (The Center for Artistic Activism, 2013). Over the years, this form of protesting has also been appropriated by feminist collectives in Latin American that have used digital *escrache* to bring attention and justice to cases of gender violence. In the case of the "Who gave the order?" mural, the graphic was used to shame the officials behind the operation and fight impunity.

In terms of composition, a yellow background color was chosen, as yellow has been associated with warning signs (Campaña por la verdad, 2022, p. 296). The vectorized images of the officers were rendered in black to provide strong contrast, enabling a "quick and easy interpretation of the image, [and] making it suitable for stenciling so that people could appropriate it for replication in different spaces" (Campaña por la verdad, 2022, p. 296). The question "Who gave the order?" was set on top, and right next to it appeared the number of extra judicial killings that were estimated had taken place between 2000 and 2010 (Figure 5.21).

Figure 5.21.

2019 version of the "Who gave the order?" mural.

Source: Twitter/X

Initially, the image only featured the portraits of five officers, but when in February 2021 the Special Jurisdiction for Peace released the report with the number 6402, the design was updated and faces of generals whose units committed the highest numbers of false positives were added (Figure 5.22). While the figure 6402 has had a greater impact on public opinion, the visual indictment of the generals, in other times regarded as "heroes," might have helped weakening the

over-identification Colombians had with the army. Yet, while the number of generals featured in the mural has grown, so has the desire to see the picture of Uribe added to this indictment.

Figure 5.22.
*2021 version of the "Who gave the order?" mural.*

Source: Twitter

Although, as mentioned, the campaign was not organized by the MAFAPO collective, the mural has become an essential part of their identity, "a very significant piece that embodies the question that [they have been asking] in many spaces" (Campaña por la verdad, 2022, p. 301). In addition to promoting the circulation of digital versions of the mural, they have used other mediums like t-shirts, and face masks during the pandemic, to give visibility to the question and to denounce the generals behind the killings. They have also used the image and appropriated the same aesthetics to produce visual material for their social media accounts and for their tours around Colombia and Europe (Figure 5.23).

Figure 5.23.

Photos from different MAFAPO events and invitations to join the events.
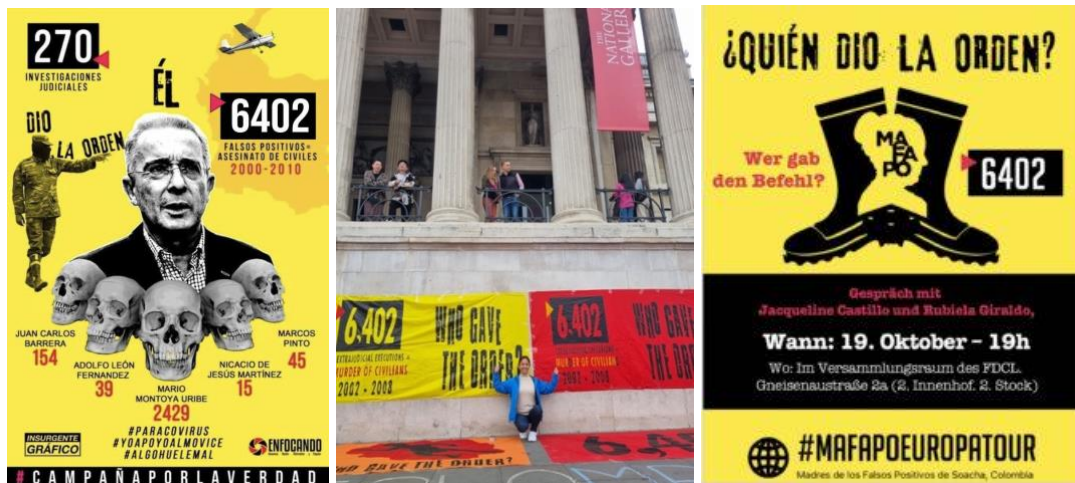
Source: @MafapoT on Twitter (left and center) and FDCL website (right)

During the protests, the question and the aesthetics of the mural, as well as the symbol of the boot, were featured online and in offline spaces (Figure 5.24). They were used to refer to the "false positives" scandal, but also in relation to the hundreds of victims of police brutality left by police repression during the protests. Drawing parallels between the two cases, protesters pointed to Uribe's tweets (such as those analyzed in the previous chapter) as symbolic proof of his role in encouraging the police and armed forces to suppress non-violent protests, ostensibly in the name of security and the protection of private property. Beyond a display of solidarity with the victims, this form of visual activism shows a crack in the affective structures that were in place. As Laura Quintana (2021) suggests, affects can strengthen the boundaries of the sensible, "but they can also undo them through relationships that are woven or destroyed in painful experiences" (p. 71). If the structure of apathy (Yepez, 2018) and selective desensitisation (Giraldo, 2021) established during the armed conflict had set the boundaries needed to allow crimes like the extra judicial killings case to go unnoticed, the desire observed during the strike to archive evidence, avoid the repetition of history, and collectively grieve police brutality victims, shows a change in these affective structures. This, I argue, was possible, among other things, thanks to the activism of MAFAPO members, who, in reclaiming the grievability of the false positive victims, turned their personal experience of loss into a collective one, weakening the structure of apathy and, therefore, expanding the boundaries of the sensible.

Figure 5.24.

Images shared on Twitter by protesters.

Source: Twitter (anonymized to maintain author confidentiality as per ethical guidelines)

As a technology of memory, the figure 6402 was perhaps the one that was used the most during the strike. This could be due to the fact that it had just entered public conversation, galvanizing protesters into action, but also because the figure itself served as an indictment of Uribe's ongoing legacy. By invoking the figure, as well as the other technologies of memory, protesters were tapping into an existing visual and affective common ground that allowed them to denounce not just violence perpetrated against the front lines—which echoed the false positives scandal—but also the system that normalizes such violence. All these technologies of memory preceded the strike and had their own force, but they were actualized through murals and artistic interventions like the ones painted over the Heroes Monument.

It is with this in mind that I propose the figure of the "false positives," along with all these technologies of memory, as mediators of the awakening of a new structure of feeling. As the systematic practices behind the scandal have come to light, largely due to the work of the collective, Colombians have increasingly recognized the killings as a profound stain on the nation's memory. Moreover, many have come to see silence as a form of tacit complicity that must be confronted and questioned. These technologies and figures have not just produced a change in the affective economy that circulates around the figure of the "hero," as I will show in the following section of this chapter when I analyze the tweets collected, but also a move from apathy to solidarity and collective awakening.

Before the strike, the armed conflict and the violence that accompanied it had produced what Laura Quintana (2021) describes as an "affective blockade," the feeling and belief that things could not be otherwise (p. 26). The awakening that took place during the strike, described throughout these two chapters, is not only social, but also affective. The strike, with all its potency and strength (see Azuero Quijano, 2023), served to break this blockade. Protesters were capable of imagining and projecting different futures, as the murals and the replies to Uribe's tweets show.

Thus, this awakening, the breaking of the affective blockade, not only has to do with the way Colombians relate to the history of the armed conflict, but also with an awakening of the political imagination and the desire for futures that are different from the ones established by the systems in place. There was not just a desire to break with Uribe administration's legacies, but also to interrupt colonial-capitalist development and imagine other ways of living that center life and life-sustaining practices. This reveals not only fatigue with the regime of fear previously explained, but also with the necropolitical management of the population needed to sustain this affective regime.

If old forms of affective training had taught Colombians to despise marginalized "unproductive" others (like the victims of the extrajudicial killings and in the case of the protests the members of the front lines) and to normalize violence through apathy, the protests showed new forms of solidarity and affective engagement with unknown others that offered a glimpse not just of the awakening of a new structure of feeling, but also of a different idea of the Colombian nation—one that is plural, inclusive and just. To explore this, I now turn to the analysis of the tweets collected.

The Emergence of New Heroes Online

As mentioned, an advanced Twitter search was conducted using the keyword "heroes" and the hashtag #paronacional. A total of 543 tweets were collected. Although the total number of tweets displayed by the platform was larger, in the process of collecting data I noticed that one user kept tweeting the same message multiple times per week, usually accompanied by an image or video of police or army officers attacking protesters:

> "He aquí los "héroes de la patria" #ParoNacional #EstadoAsesino
> #ParoNacionalColombia #SOSColombiaDDHH #NosUnimosONosHundimos
> #ColombiaEnAlertaRoja #SOSColombia #NosEstánMatando #FuerzaPúblicaAsesina
> #RégimenDelTerror #DuqueRenuncieYa #SOSColombiaEnDictadura
> #TerrorismoDeEstado"

> (Here are the heroes of the nation #National Strike #MurderState
> #ParoNacionalColombia #SOSColombiaDHH #EitherWeUniteOrWeSink
> #ColombiaOnRedAlert #SOSColombia #TheyAreKillingUs # PublicForceKills
> #RegimeofTerror #DuqueResignNow #SOSColombiaInDictatorship #StateTerrorism)

This message invokes the hero narrative and reverses it, by showing images of "heroes" (the army and police) enacting violence against the population instead of protecting it. Although this reversal and refusal of the hero narrative was seen across multiple other tweets, as I will briefly describe, I decided to skip the tweets coming from this user, as I could not confirm whether or not it was a bot.

After collecting all the other tweets, I brought them into MAXDA for coding. I analyzed them and identified the following key and recurring themes (Figure 5.25): tweets containing

citizenship journalism type of videos and tweets shared by news outlets (reporting/desire for visibility), tweets presenting "new" national heroes as a response to the military hero narrative (new heroes), tweets supporting the strike (support), tweets refusing the "heroes in Colombia do exist" narrative (refusal), tweets denouncing cases of police brutality (disapproval of State brutality), tweets endorsing the State-driven terror narrative, tweets declaring Uribe a public enemy, tweets with unclear meaning, tweets manifesting their distrust of mainstream media, and tweets reinforcing the "heroes in Colombia do exist" narrative.

Figure 5.25.

Main themes identified on tweets coded.
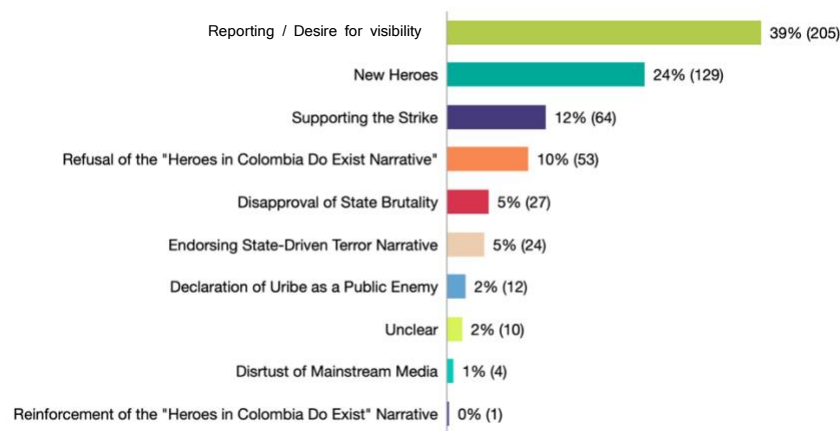
Source: MAXQDA

Although all these themes are important, my primary interest lies in the following three:
- Reporting/Desire for visibility
- New heroes
- Refusal of the "Heroes in Colombia Do Exist Narrative"

Therefore, the analysis that follows will focus on these. I have chosen to narrow down my analysis given that i) a full analysis of all the categories found would be beyond the scope of this chapter, and ii) the themes in the remaining categories were frequently observed on other Twitter strike-related discussions and are relatively straightforward.

Reporting/Desire for Visibility: This was the category with the greatest number of tweets (205). Overall, the tweets placed under this category shared a common desire to report and bring visibility to what was happening on the streets. After coding, I found that 48% came from the official accounts of news outlets. To focus specifically on the "desire for visibility" that I was studying, I made sure to consider only the remaining 52%, which consisted of tweets shared by protesters or civilians. Although many tweets from other categories could have been included in this group, I chose to restrict the application of this code in MAXQDA to those tweets that solely expressed a desire to report on and draw attention to the strike. By this I mean that the text shared was mostly

descriptive rather than expressive. A lot of the tweets placed under this category, although not all of them, shared a photo or a video, or a description of what was happening (i.e. the Indigenous Minga arrives to Los Héroes), along with the hashtag #ParoNacional and other hashtags. Descriptions varied from short and straight to the point, such as, "Monumento de los Héroes. Bogotá. 12/05/2021. #12M #ParoNacional," to long and more detailed, such as

> At this hour, more than 10,000 people are protesting at the Monument to the Heroes in Bogotá. So far, the gathering is peaceful and cultural. Today, the capital marks 31 days of demonstrations as part of the national strike. #ParoNacional #Colombiaco #Bogotá

Sometimes, these tweets would be retweets of images shared by news outlets with a descriptive message or an emoji expressing support. While the tweets in this category were reporting exclusively about what was happening around the monument (as the keyword "hero" was used in the retrieval), there were many more tweets like this that were shared in relation to the protests in general during the strike. The tweets reflect not only a desire for visibility but also a desire for collectivity. By sharing their experiences of being near or involved in the protests, users contributed to the affective and digital counter archives that were being shaped while joining the digital front lines shaping a counter hegemonic narrative of the strike and the spaces of appearance mentioned in Chapter 3. As their physical presence in the streets was an act of resistance, their online expressions can also be seen as forms of resistance and solidarity.

New Heroes and Refusal of the Heroes in Colombia Do Exist Narrative: In terms of analysis, I decided to group the "New heroes" and the "Refusal of the 'Heroes in Colombia Do Exist' Narrative" categories together as they closely related—with the latter arguably being inherent in the former. The tweets that constitute this "refusal" directly challenge the traditional military hero narrative by highlighting or depicting the excessive use of force by the police and the army (Figure 5.26). In doing so, they not only critique the tactics used to normalize state violence but also offer a counter-narrative, suggesting that the true heroes are those resisting such repression, rather than those perpetuating it.

Figure 5.26.

Tweets refusing the military hero narrative (pictured in the video is a police officer pointing a gun against protesters)


Source: Twitter (anonymized to maintain author confidentiality as per ethical guidelines)

Some referred to police and army officers as "Uribe's heroes" and "heroes of fine citizens," while others claimed that the police and army were following Uribe's commands. This highlights how closely the "Heroes in Colombia Do Exist" narrative is associated with Uribe's mandate and his connections to the false positives scandal. This refusal is directly connected with the "Awakening and Disbelief" category found in the previous chapter through which users expressed their fatigue with Uribe's politics of fear, as well as with the murals painted on the monument that presented Uribe as a public enemy while bringing the figure of the false positives to the category of "new heroes."

Unlike the unanimity of the message found within the refusal category, the "new heroes" narrative featured a plurality of figures being referenced. While all the tweets within this category put forth a new vision of heroism, they reference around ten different figures (Figure 5.27). As seen in *6402 Heroes* mural, during the strike, there was a desire to bring forth new heroic figures that were closer to the people and their struggles. This plurality reflects the movement's embrace of diverse forms of resistance and its rejection of a singular, top-down notion of heroism.

Figure 5.27.

New hero archetypes identified on tweets coded.
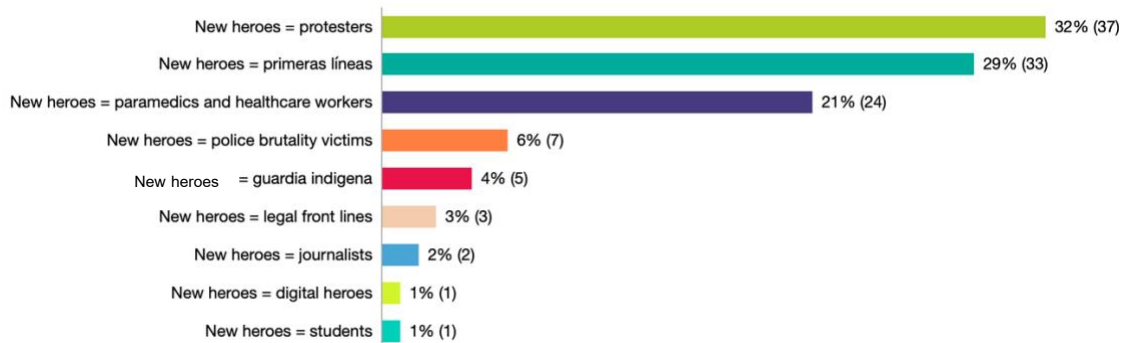
Source: MAXQDA

Although some of them (students and digital heroes) were mentioned only once, I thought it was still pertinent to include them in this category, as they were pointing to figures that, like the others, offered alternative narratives, therefore fostering and supporting the collective awakening. Journalists were mentioned two times, the "legal frontlines" (lawyers helping protesters who were arrested and charged) three times, and the guardia indígena (Indigenous Guard) five times. Users also presented police brutality victims from the 2019, 2020 and 2021 protests as their heroes. The figures that were mentioned the most were protesters, frontline workers, and healthcare workers. The reference to the latter could be explained by the fact that the strike happened in the middle of the pandemic and that, in addition to handling the pandemic with limited resources, many healthcare workers publicly expressed their support for the strike (Figure 5.28). Additionally, users also referenced the paramedics who were purposely bringing first-aid stations to important gathering points to offer support to wounded protesters.

Figure 5.28.

Tweet containing image of healthcare workers showing their support for the strike

Translation:
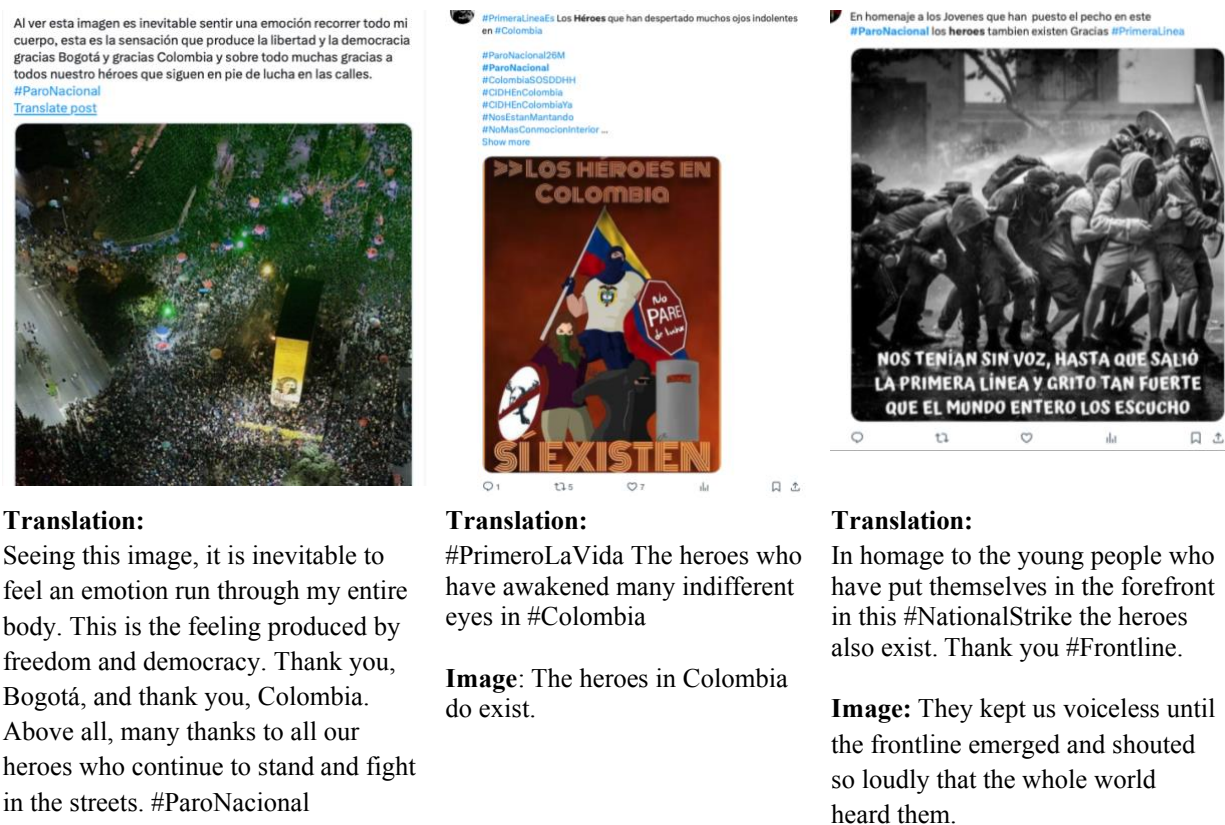**First Tweet:** Postcards from the strike...

Banners held by healthcare workers: With passion, I took care of you in the ICU, those who got infected at a party. And with double the effort, I'll take care of those who get infected. Now standing in the fight! NO to the tax reform!

@user's response: This brings tears to anyone's eyes!!! For the true heroes, SYSTEMATIC VICTIMS OF LAW 100!!! #ParoNacional

Source: Twitter (anonymized to maintain author confidentiality as per ethical guidelines)

Both protesters and frontline workers were praised for their resilience and dedication, and were acknowledged for their crucial roles in the country's "awakening" and in the ongoing struggle for rights, democracy, and peace (Figure 5.29). As one user noted, many felt that during the strike, the word "hero" regained its true meaning. It is through these tweets and the emergence of new affective attachments to the archetype of the hero and the heroic that I see the renegotiation of national identity taking place.

Figure 5.29.

Tweets proposing new heroes.

Translation:
Seeing this image, it is inevitable to feel an emotion run through my entire body. This is the feeling produced by freedom and democracy. Thank you, Bogotá, and thank you, Colombia. Above all, many thanks to all our heroes who continue to stand and fight in the streets. #ParoNacional

Translation:
#PrimeroLaVida The heroes who have awakened many indifferent eyes in #Colombia

Image: The heroes in Colombia do exist.

Translation:
In homage to the young people who have put themselves in the forefront in this #NationalStrike the heroes also exist. Thank you #Frontline.

Image: They kept us voiceless until the frontline emerged and shouted so loudly that the whole world heard them.

Source: Twitter (anonymized to maintain author confidentiality as per ethical guidelines)

The military hero that was built through the propaganda campaigns deployed during the Uribe administration was used as a rhetorical strategy to build support for Uribe's anti-FARC nationalism, his democratic security program and the implementation of neoliberal policies that ended up benefitting the privileged classes. This version of the "heroic" centered military might and force instead of community and solidarity. During the strike, not only did protesters reject this national symbol, but they turned it into an anchor for popular sentiment. The emerging figures of the popular heroes are not just new representations of the heroic but rather point towards a

generalized discontent with this very narrative. While many of the "new" heroes presented are grounded in the temporality and context of the strike, with some still imagined within a framework of war and conflict, this rejection of the military narrative and the emergence of figures representing the people's struggles is significant. As a challenge to traditional national narratives, this desire for change and new forms of representation could be seen as a first step toward imagining a country beyond the boundaries of the sensible established by the armed conflict.

In *Global Icons: Apertures to the Popular* (2011), Bishnupriya Ghosh studies how three highly visible public figures (Phoolan Devi, Mother Teresa and Arundhati Roy) become global icons capable of galvanizing affect and become catalyst for social change. Ghosh's analysis can serve as a good starting point to understand how the figure of the hero went from being a governmental icon used to gather support for a controlling regime, to a technology of the popular. For Ghosh, "The force of icons lies in the hydraulic 'pull' of an embodied encounter that is at once multi-sensorial and cultural" (p.4–5). This pull, she explains, "can mobilize the affective transfers necessary for moving subjects toward a larger social network" (p. 5). This conception of the icon's materiality, as a technology that brings back the body as a field of power (p. 8), is what attends to the icon's "potentialities as a catalyst for social change" (p. 4). While the hero is not quite an icon, it does remain an important figure and a moving technology that, like icons, has been used to manufacture consent (p. 6).

In the case of the strike, I suggest, it was not the "embodied encounter" with the figure of the hero what helped mobilized the affective transfers that led to the changing structure of feeling. Instead, I propose that it was the affective disassociation that happened through the encounter with images of police, military, and vigilante violence (as the previous category of tweets testifies) and, at the same time, the feeling of embodiment of the hero's antithesis—the protester as terrorist and as hooligan—that played a role in that mobilization. It was also the encounter with the truth— made tangible by the number 6,402—of the "false positives." The new heroes that emerged during the strike can be considered "reassembled" figures whose potential is precisely that of countering the hegemonic histories of a post-conflict nation and the affects surrounding these histories— opening, in the words of Ghosh, "a social to come that is intuited but not fully perceived" (p. 9). By presenting all these previously invisibilized figures as "heroic," a whole set of imaginaries and social relations are set forth. What does it mean for a post-conflict society to overcome its patriarchal and military affective dependencies? What kind of feelings would these new heroic figures incite if they were upheld by the wide population? How would the memory of the conflict be reshaped considering these emerging actors? All these are questions about national identity that arise with the opening generated by these figures and by the suspension and undoing of old affective structures.

Thus, as this chapter has demonstrated, the conversation around the Los Héroes monument makes evident that during the strike there was an interruption of the affective training and engagements that many had experienced under and after Uribe's administration. The admiration and surrendering to the military visual and affective complexes, embodied by the figure of the hero, were suspended and revoked. This shift allowed for new entanglements around newly visible

figures to emerge, sparking a collective awakening and the emergence of a differently imagined nation—beyond the boundaries of the nation and beyond the sensible boundaries previously drawn during the war.

Chapter 6: Conclusion: The Echoes of Change

In this thesis, I have followed the affective shift that occurred during the 2021 National Strike in Colombia by approaching the strike's digital visual culture as affective archives that captured this transformation. Using the figure of the hero, I have explored the ways in which old affective structures of fear and apathy were dismantled, and how the strike fostered an affective awakening that opened up the possibility of imagining a country beyond the conflict. A year after the strike ended, on June 19th 2022, Gustavo Petro, a former member of the M-19 urban guerrilla group, became Colombia's 34th president, making history as the country's first left-wing leader.[56] His vice president, Francia Márquez, an Afro-Colombian human rights activist, also marked history by becoming the first Black person to hold that office in Colombia.[57] During the campaign, Petro and Marquez appealed to this awakening by promising to represent the "nobodies" and to be a government of the people, of life—referring to necropolitics of the country—and of change. While addressing the demands presented by various groups during the strike was crucial for their victory, I also believe that the political and affective shifts that occurred during the strike enabled both a former guerrilla member and a Black feminist and activist to rise to power. Before the strike, Petro—a long-time member of Uribe's opposition—had struggled for years to gain country-wide popularity due to his past, while Márquez, despite gaining international recognition for her activism, remained largely unseen within Colombia due to systemic racism and the country's structure of invisibility.[58] This marked not only a political shift but also a pivotal step in questioning the country's national identity.

Yet, though their victory may represent one tangible outcome of the affective awakening, it is crucial to recognize that the affective shift I have described only accounts for the transformations experienced by a portion of the population. For instance, in Chapter 4, I showed how many individuals were able to overcome the fear generated by Uribe's rhetorical tactics. Nonetheless, the theory of castrochavismo and the fear of reverting to the horrors of the conflict continued to play a significant role during the 2022 elections. When Petro's victory was announced, I was on a flight from Bogotá to Bucaramanga, which happens to be the hometown of Rodolfo Hernández, the other candidate in the race. While Hernández was not the candidate of the Uribismo,[59] one of the first things I heard when I landed in the city was a version of the castrochavismo theory mentioned earlier. In the rawness of the emotions that are stirred after elections, the taxi driver who was to take me home started elaborating on the theory and taking it to a conspiratorial level that I could have not expect. He affirmed that Petro was "possessed" by

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[56] The M-19 and the Colombian state signed a peace agreement in the 1990s, after which the group became a political party. Petro was engaged in the peace talks that led to the agreement.

[57] Márquez had become "Petro's running mate after winning more than 750,000 votes in a primary in March, beating a number of established career politicians," something that has also been regarded as historical (Parkin Daniels, 2022).

[58] In 2018, Márquez won the Goldman Environmental Prize for her role in organizing the women of La Toma to stop illegal mining on their land.

[59] Uribe's candidate was defeated during the first round.

Hugo Chávez' spirit, which in itself was the embodiment of evil—and yes, he seemed very serious about this.

Now that three years have passed and Colombia has not "turned" into Venezuela, the castrochavismo theory has lost strength. However, Petro's own failures have provided the right with a fertile ground to embolden their attacks, bringing to the Colombian landscape the cultural wars happening across the Americas—particularly in the United States and Argentina. Additionally, his promise to represent the nobodies has fallen short, and he has proven, at times, incapable of listening to those who voted for him. But just as the affective changes here outlined were not meant to describe a country-wide change, the affective awakening I referred to should also be observed beyond Petro's victory—and beyond the right-left binary understanding of politics. What interested me in this thesis was not to just argue that an affective structure of "awakening" had formed to contest and—in some cases—replace the structures of fear and apathy present during the conflict but rather to show how such changes had happened and to point to the in-between-ness of those changes. Looking at these moments, I hope, could help provide insights into what are the issues and struggles shaping the desires, subjectivities and imaginaries of Colombians.

While the strike concluded four years ago, the micropolitical forms of resistance observed in its in-between-ness are still alive. The affects and the desire to recuperate the country's silenced memory and redefine the post-conflict Colombian nation continue reverberating. Even if at times it might seem like the affects activated during the strike have gone back to dormant, significant events can suddenly reignite them. For example, the recent discovery of human remains at Medellín's *La Escombrera* (The Dump) has brought these affects and desires back to the forefront, compelling the public to confront past injustices and reflect on the ongoing quest for recognition, justice and memory in a post-conflict nation.

On December 18th, 2024, after years of forensic investigations, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace and the Unit for the Search for Missing Persons located the first human remains at *La Escombrera*, a dump of construction material within the Comuna 13 neighbourhood long suspected to contain the remains of victims of "Operation Orion." As mentioned in the introduction of Chapter 4, the neighbourhood was the epicenter of "Operation Orion" in 2002, one of the largest military offensives carried out by the army under Uribe's first administration in collaboration with paramilitaries to apprehend alleged guerrilla collaborators in the area. This operation led to numerous instances of extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances. After the operation concluded, family members of the victims, along with witnesses and survivors, reported that many victims of the operation and the subsequent paramilitary violence had been buried in the area. Despite their ongoing efforts to have the site closed as a dumping ground, it was not until 2014 that an official order was issued to halt operations there (Álvarez, 2025). Soon after, the digging began. However, it was not until December 18th, 2024, "after sifting through more than 36,000 cubic meters of debris and soil, the equivalent of the water in approximately 15 Olympic-size swimming pools, [that] forensic experts found the first human remains" (Álvarez, 2025).

As with the case of the false positives, the findings have reignited the dispute over truth and the memory of the armed conflict. Days after the news reached all the corners in the country, murals with the slogan "*Las cuchas tienen razón*" (The mothers are right), referring to the years-long struggle of mothers and family members of the disappeared, started to appear in Medellín and over the country—reaching as far as Germany, Spain and Austria.[60] The compositional qualities of the murals, often painted along highways, were similar to those used in the murals observed during the strike, and in the "Who gave the order mural?" described in Chapter 5 (Figure 6.1 & 6.2). The murals not only referenced the struggle for justice, but many of them also centered, once again, Uribe's role in the extra judicial killings and forced disappearances that happened under his administrations. Both, in the murals and the posters that appeared across the country, Uribe's face was featured with the sentence "I gave the order," a direct answer to the question asked years ago by the MAFAPO and MOVICE collectives, and the figure of one of the mothers who has been fighting for justice was put at center stage. While during the strike old heroes fell and new (temporary) heroes were reimagined, in a post-conflict society that is still trying to grapple with its history and memory, it is perhaps the mothers and family members of the disappeared who are silently emerging as the actual heroes of a (desired) nation that is yet to come.
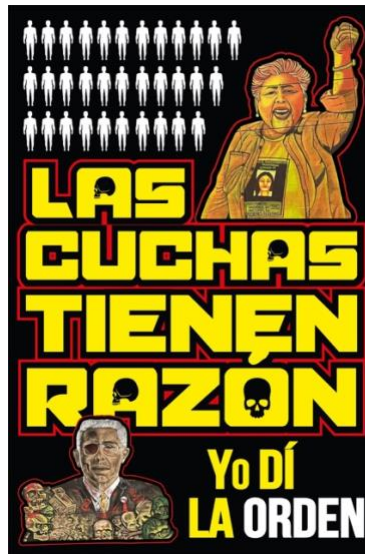
Figure 6.1.
Mural "Las Cuchas Tienen Razón"

Source: @fuerzaygraffiti | Instagram

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[60] In the murals, "cucha," a popular word used to refer to mothers and elderly people, was used over the formal "madres." This became a marker of difference when "good citizens" started to criticize and censor the murals.

Figure 6.2.
Poster "Las Cuchas Tienen Razón"

Right after the first murals appeared, the mural in Medellín was censored by the local government, which covered it with grey paint, and some of the murals in other cities experienced the same treatment. This form of censoring has been long used in the country, but the desire to address the silenced memories has been getting stronger. After the murals were covered, art collectives and other collectives composed by the family members of the disappeared were joined by citizens to repaint the murals in different cities—showing that murals can be covered but the people remain awake. This shows that the awakening from apathy and selective desensitization, along with the unraveling of the country's fabricated memory, will continue to redefine the boundaries of the sensible, the grievable, and the visible in the country. While this thesis has sought to trace part of this redefinition, I believe that the negotiation of these boundaries will continue for many years to come. Following the redefinition of those boundaries will be key to understanding the negotiations of power and national identity in the country.

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