Visual Representation of Rural Landscapes of Colombia:
Redefining Territorial Misconceptions on Instagram

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1 Introduction

Colombia is usually ranked as one of the top happiest countries in the world according to a survey of happiness, hope and economic optimism conducted by pollster Gallup in 2017[1]. However, as a Colombian, I often ask myself how it is possible to embrace this title in a country with over 8.5 million registered conflict victims.[2] How can we pride ourselves on such emotion in a place where kidnappings by left-wing guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries used to be commonplace? Have we already forgotten that no other country in South America has endured 50 years of civil war?

Although this survey seems contradictory to the actual reality of the country, it reflects the need to project optimism in a society that has been identified, even stigmatized, as violent in the last decades. According to the Colombian anthropologist Fabián Sanabria, "the survey makes subjective questions about how you are feeling and not objective inquiries about the state of well-being, which has to do with access to food, potable water, employment, education, etc." (2018). Sanabria explains that even though many basic needs are uncovered for a good quality of life, the popular phrase, *look on the bright side, applies* in this situation. "That is how the resilience processes work for a country or an individual. If there is the courage to move forward, it does not matter how bad the conditions can be. This feeling is very commonplace in third world countries, where people are happy even though they do not have something to eat."[3]

The urge to *look on the bright side* led me to question how Colombians are trying to overcome misconceptions about their national identity and the violent referents with which they have been

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[1] www.gallup-international.com.

[2] www.unidadvictimas.gov.co.

[3] www.eltiempo.com.

associated.[4] Studies of how residents from a specific place use social media, and the consequences of this use in their daily lives, have been made by the analysis of social media posts about personal relationships, politics and national citizenship, specifically on Facebook. As Nell Haynes writes in *The Social Media Landscape: Performing Citizenship Online*, "In particular social media constitute a new - and possibly the most important - public sphere in which notions of citizenship are performed and debated." (2016: 41) In Colombia, social media use has become an integral part of the communication, entertainment and media practices of large sections of the population. For this reason, this research draws attention to the ways in which social media provides users with a unique space to address reconstruction of identity and redefine misconceptions about their homeland. To explore this phenomenon, a qualitative study of visual features representing Colombia is guided by two related questions: How do Colombian Instagrammers employ visual content about their country to form and represent their own virtual identity? And what visual strategies do they use to change national stereotypes given the referents of violence in their society?

This study is in the field of Digital Anthropology and draws on the theoretical framework of Benedict Anderson's landmark analysis of imagined communities. Any interpretative analysis of virtual communities will have to address the constraints and specificities of the Internet (and Instagram in particular) as a medium of communication. One way to think about the social meaning of applications such as Instagram is to conceptualize them as "networked publics," that is "spaces and audiences that are bound together through technological networks." (Boyd 2007: 8) What differentiates networked publics from unmediated publics or other media such as television, radio or newspapers are the following characteristics: persistence, searchability, replicability and invisible audiences (Boyd 2007: 8). Also, in contrast to television, radio, and the press, networked publics facilitate the multidirectional interaction between participants, thus enabling sociability.

Anderson argues that imagining the idea of a nation arose historically, after the emergence of the printing press, under a system of capitalism, "which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate to others, in profoundly new ways"(1983:36). Today´s imagined communities, whether national or not, are most likely imagined through the internet, which has in many ways replaced the book and the newspaper in Anderson´s theory. For instance, in Instagram the geographical tag of each photo provides a representation of a particular piece of land that can be interpreted as part and parcel of national territory, becoming part of a wider conglomeration of images that become the visual expression of

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[4] Colombia is ranked as one the most violent places in the world too. To come up with this ranking, the forum "measures the extent to which a country exposes tourists and businesses to security risks mainly related to serious harm to people (violence and terrorism)", www.thisisinsider.com/.

an imagined community. While people cannot currently acquire the geographical coordinates of any person in unmediated spaces, finding one's *digital body* online is just a matter of keystrokes (Boyd 2007: 9).

2 Methodology

The research was managed over a period of two months of fieldwork. A series of single semi-structured interviews with four participants via Skype were conducted, as well as participant observation on each account of Instagram/field sites, and an anonymous survey with 33 participants. The interviews, questionnaire, and exchange of emails and text messages were done in Spanish, our mother tongue. However, the relevant data has been translated. Despite my being based in New York City, we were connected virtually. I was able to communicate with the informants by commenting on their photos, direct messages and online meetings.

In the following, the experience of four Colombian volunteers, whose main visual content on their Instagram accounts is about their homeland, will be discussed. For this purpose, the analysis of their Instagram accounts will take into consideration three elements of the content: the visual aspect represented by the photograph or video, the accompanying caption, and the hashtags given by their users. During our conversations, they shared information about their travels, experiences, and memories related to their country.

"The *ethnographicness* of any image or representation is contingent on how it is situated, interpreted and used to invoke meanings and knowledge that are of ethnographic interest."(Pink 2011: 4) Therefore, I was interested in what their motivations behind the published content in their respective accounts are, and how the relationship with their native land, in reality, is shaped and visually represented in an online environment. Based on my interactions with them and their descriptions of their experiences, I aimed to interpret the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of the culture-sharing group (Creswell 2007: 68). This process allowed the employment of Ethnographic Research. It consists of what people do, what they say, the potential tension between what they do and ought to do, and of what they make and use, such as artifacts. "It does not claim to produce an objective or truthful account of reality, but should aim to offer versions of ethnographer's experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, negotiations, and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced."(Pink 2011: 3)

Figure 1. Still frame taken from a video of the interview session with Paulo on February 28th, 2018 via Skype. The use of visual media for research purposes as 'second-hand observation.' I met Paulo 14 years ago, one year before I moved out of Colombia. We have kept in touch on our social media platforms through all these years. As an ethnographer, I ought to be self-conscious about how I represent myself to the informant and how my identity is constructed and understood by the people with whom I was working.

Regarding any bias, it is important to mention that as a Colombian who has been living out of the country in the last 13 years, there is a constant need to reconnect with my homeland. Sometimes I can travel there, but the majority of that connection happens in online environments. I take part in Colombian expats in USA communities on Facebook, and I follow campaigns and Instagram accounts that are related to Colombian content. From my personal experience, I was able to relate to those I was studying. "In a 'global era' of movement and deterritorialization, the Internet is used to strengthen, rather than weaken, national identities." (Ericksen 2007: 3) In the contemporary world, group identities are no longer spatially or territorially bounded.

People support, produce, or cling to territorially based identities even though they do not actually live in the territory (Demmer 2002: 89), hence my fascination to explore the construction of a collective identity on online platforms, and my relationship with the informants previous to the research collaboration.

A survey was the first approach to test the waters about the study. Colombians were invited to participate voluntarily by completing an online questionnaire posted in groups of Colombians on Facebook. This questionnaire had active participation of 33 anonymous volunteers. From this poll, the majority were between 26-35 years old. The most used social networks sites are Facebook and Instagram. 90 percent considers the content they employ about Colombia to be positive, and that landscapes are the visual representation they associate the most with their homeland.

The findings of the survey led me to focus the case study on the experiences of four participants whose main visual content are photographs about the rural and urban landscapes of Colombia on Instagram. Landscapes give visible form to the qualities of belonging to a nation. As stated by Don Meining, "every mature nation has its symbolic landscapes. They are part of the iconography of nationhood, part of the shared ideas and memories and feelings which bind a

people together" (1979: 165). Among my informants, mountainous landscapes are by far the most common visual, followed by urban sceneries and the ethnic diversity that those landscapes contain. A theme encountered in the experiences narrated by each participant is that optimism is a specific feature of their visual style, in which aesthetic appeal and the rendering invisible of any negative aspects are the main criteria.

Figure 2. Caption translation: A solitary tree in the beautiful potato town Gabriel Lopez, in the Cauca. #Cauca #Colombia #tree #landscape #tree #potato #agriculture. Throughout the process of participant observation, I became aware of the existence of towns I had never heard of before. A case in point, the town of Gabriel Lopez. Located to the east of the region of Cauca, in the upper part of the municipality of Totoró., it is well known in the region for its excellent lands suitable for growing potatoes.

Through the conversations, I found that most of the people I interviewed were interested in making regions of Colombia that are not part of the mainstream spectrum visible. This initiative was sparked by a series of events in their own lives.

For Diego, in his experience as an independent photographer and videographer, he had the opportunity to visit rural places that are unknown to the average Colombian. During these visits, he was not only exposed to the beauty of nature, but also to the diverse communities (indigenous, mestizos and Afro-Colombians), that coexist in regions like the Cauca department.

What I have traveled in Cauca has left me with great experiences. The people one encounters there are the opposite from the one portrayed in the traditional media, like violent and dangerous. When you are in these towns of the Cauca, you do not feel threatened at all. Sometimes it has been very long trips, very difficult territories to arrive. That is why I intend to show to the people from Popayan (Cauca capital city) and the rest of Colombia, the beauty that can be found in these places. (Diego, interview via Skype on March 9, 2018).

Figure 3. Caption translation: The Salvajina, hidden treasure of #Cauca #dam #lake #boat. The Salvajina Dam is located in the Cauca region, it is a potential touristic place, but it is cataloged as a high-risk area for travelers. As Diego explains, it is impossible to shoot any video or photographs in some areas of the dam due to drug trafficking, specifically to the south of Salvajina where the coca cultivations are located.

Precisely, the ethnic and geographical diversity of the country is what represents Diego's national identity. The encouragement to change negative references of specific regions and its people explicitly positions his visual content in a counter-discourse to traditional media. Although Diego's primary intentions do not involve social activism, he uses technology as a tool for "contesting media representation of racialized bodies and marginalized communities" (Bonilla and Rosa 2015: 5). Social media offer new ways to break through induced stereotypes.

In the case of Rene, his passion for sports combined with his awe for the splendor of nature were motives enough to found his own adventure tourism business called *Picoloro Ecoturismo,* a company of which the primary purpose is to generate in people a passion for life and wellbeing through hiking tours. He publishes photographs of the visited places, some of them are Rene's authorship, and some belong to the accompanying hikers. His Instagram account works as a bridge to bond with others and attracts people to the experience he offers as *Picoloro*. Without having cues about who will witness a given expression, this imagined audience provides a necessary way of envisioning who should be present. "It is necessary to understand the scope of one's audience to properly present oneself" (Boyd 2007: 14-15).

He explains that the lack of visibility of some regions is due to the legacy of armed conflict and the poor infrastructure to access some of these remote places:

I would say, among other factors, there is still much resentment of what the guerrillas have left us. These areas were considered unsafe. Even for me, there are still places that I have not dared to visit yet. One still hears that it is recommended not to go there. The Nevado of Huila (the highest volcano in Colombia) is a good case in point [...] I know this man who went there in 1998. After he climbed the snowy mountain peaks, when he came down he noticed this huge area, the size of a soccer field, full of tents. It was a guerrilla's

campsite. He passed through it with great fear. He said they were not there on his way up, only when he came down, did he find them. Since 1998 he did not come back. Nothing happened to him, they did not do anything to him, but the fear stays with him (Rene, interview via Skype on March 8, 2018)
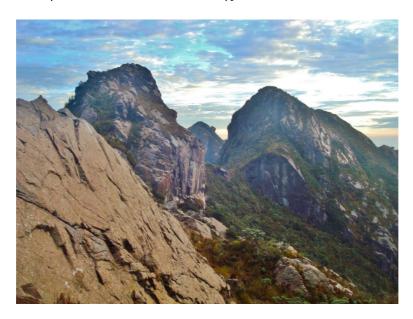

Figure 4. When I asked Rene about his favorite photograph, he sent me this image of the highest mountain peaks of Farallones de Cali National Park via Skype on March 8, 2018. He snapped it the last time he went there in April 2010. It is his favorite picture because not many people can make it all the way up there, "it is cool to be on top."

The topic of traveling off the beaten path reverberates on the journey stories of Guillermo too. After living in Barcelona for two years, he felt the need to change his relationship with his country land for two reasons. One, he got inspired by the positive and appreciative way many foreigners felt about Colombia and its natural wealth. He realized the need to discover the uncovered treasures of his land that were already well known by outsiders. Two, the sense of belonging that many people from Barcelona have about their own region encouraged Guillermo to be more appreciative of his native city, Cali. By sharing his experiences, he wants to show Colombia in the way that many people appreciate it from the outside. In his opinion, the foreigner has a better perception of the country than the native inhabitants. It is also his attempt to show something different from the traditional tourist destinations and overcome the negative stereotypes of some areas of Colombia, such as the Pacific Coast. He said:

Pacific coast beaches got the stereotype of dirty beaches. Also, some people believed that if there's no blue water or golden sand, the beaches are not good enough. [...] When I went there, and I posted some pictures, everybody asked me: where is that place? I replied to them: It is about 2 hours from here, you take a bus, then a boat and you will get there. If you show people that there are cool beaches on the Pacific coast, they will go. (Guillermo, interview via Skype on February 26, 2018)

Figure 5. Screenshot from Guillermo's Instagram Story on March 26, 2018. Translation: *Up to this date: 23/32. 72% of my Colombia traveled, and I go for all.* This image of a scratch map of Colombia refers to Guillermo personal commitment of visiting all of the departments of the country. He had traveled to 23 out of 32 departments so far.

The need to explore and expose unknown territories of the nation shows a modern-age paradox: although many feel that the nation is our natural community, we do not know the vast majority of the other people who constitute this group. Anderson defines the nation as imagined "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (1983: 6). The nation is defined as a community because "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship."(1983: 7) Therefore, the concept of an imagined community assumes that nations and national identities are socially constructed.

Paulo's motives are quite different. He defines his approach as documentary photography, inviting the viewer to reflect on the location, the story behind his subjects, the time when the image was taken, and the relation of the photographer to that moment. His shots represent singular appreciations about the essence and the artistic possibilities of the landscape, and everything else that calls his attention, registering them as memorable presences. It is also his way of showing a good side of the country from the moment in which he is experiencing it. The photographs of Afro-Colombian towns or the crowds of busy streets in the city of Bogota have a very descriptive power that, as Roland Barthes demanded from urban and rural

12

landscapes, invites them to be *habitable*, not only visitable (1981:38).

Figure 6. Among the prominent themes in Paulo's photographs are the portraits of children. He finds attraction in the human genuineness and purity that is in them. One of his most memorable experiences is the story of *Mañana* (Tomorrow). "*I said to him: make a cool pose, the one you like the most, and he posed as if he were shooting at me. It hit me a lot. I could not imagine what was happening in the mind of this child, what he has seen in his four years of existence! The shirt he was wearing was for a child a year younger than him; he wore it very short, one can see his belly button. It is a tender and harsh image at the same time. I like that picture a lot*".

4   Captions and Hashtags

Captions and hashtags are the two elements that help to contextualize the image and complement the motivations behind their content. Hashtags do an essential job within social media of creating a category of mainly interrelated things and offering a perspective on that hashtag. However, hashtags can only ever offer a limited, partial, and filtered view of a social world, "we must approach them as what they are: entry points into larger and more complex worlds" (Bonilla and Rosa 2015:7). For this reason, it is important to talk about the intentions of the participants in writing their captions and hashtags, besides highlighting the location of the image.

In the opinion of Guillermo, ignorance about national history and territory is another cause for Colombians not to value the wealth of the land "that makes you not have a sense of belonging." Through the caption, he tends to add facts that represent and symbolize the history of the region or the country. For him, it is one of the most important features of his content, so everyone can identify his images with his nationality and at the same time, the viewers can gain general knowledge of Colombian culture. The use of the hashtag for Guillermo reflects his attempt to expose his content not only to the locals, but also to the global community of the platform by employing hashtags in English too.

Similarly, Diego makes uses of the caption. He aims to be as specific as possible about the geography of the image and make clear the rapport built with his subjects. He sees Instagram as a tool to spread local stories to the global realm as long as his subjects are depicted with dignity and reflect their trust in him, the photographer. "My real

intention is to let people know that I am not one of those who steals the identity of others to generate likes. I want to make clear that at least I get to know my subjects, I live with them and talk to them. Also, you can see in their faces the trust they developed with me. They are not posing out of obligation, that is the idea behind the caption of my photographs." He wants to make clear to his viewers he is not exploiting the image or stealing the representation of the others' identity to get more "likes" and followers.

Figure 7. Caption Translation: The Velasco, a Misak family, farmers of the rainbow trout in the station *El Espiral,* in the village of *Santa Clara.* Indigenous Reservation of *Guambía.* #Colombia #Cauca #trout #fishfarm #indigenous #portrait #family #igercolombia. Posted by Diego on April 8, 2016.

Hashtags are very useful for promoting and connecting with others. For Paulo, the use of hashtags has to do with the aesthetic of his photograph (#blackandwhite), the location (#Colombia) and a word that makes direct reference to what the subject represents (#woman). He explains the employment of hashtags; it is a way to position Colombia globally by showing a sweet side of the country from the moment he is living it. In the case of Rene, the content of the hashtags he uses must be directly related to landscapes and nature. He said "I used a lot #CaliCo, it's cool because it makes reference to the city and the country but I realized there are many pictures of cats under that hashtag, that's why I stopped using it. I prefer to customize my hashtags like #CaminatasCali (#HikeCali) or #Picoloro." Language and discourse are used as the essential means through which the uniqueness and distinctness of a community and its particular values are presented.

4   Conclusion

I learned a lot about Colombian identity related to the territory through this research and through listening to the informants' stories and opinions. But I realized through the study, that there is not one typical national identity story. People employ their visual content for various reasons, and even people with similar content have different motivations. However, I found common ground in the ways they want

to redefine current misconceptions about some regions.

All participants agree that online environments can contribute to the change of negative stereotypes by portraying a different reality from the that presented in traditional media. They employ their visual content as an attempt to educate and expose unknown territories, unrepresented communities and overcome the instigated fear of the traditional media in war-torn regions. They are part of the transitional generation that contributes to and witnesses the process of reconciliation as the country pulls together in the post-conflict era.

Through their experiences traveling around Colombia, they have overcome their own prejudices and misconceptions of their national territory; what is certain is that new landscapes, actual and symbolic, are being created, and like those we have already experienced, they will be at once a mold and a mirror of the society that creates them (Meining 1979: 188). Discourse, language, and the media influence our sense of belonging, whom we think we are, or to which nation we feel we belong.

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