Prostitution and “Narcocultura”: Violence, Sexuality and Beauty in Colombia

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This summer, I traveled to Bogotá, Colombia to research the representation of Colombian women in the world of prostitution and drug related violence. The drug traffic issue in Colombia has developed into a series of widespread cultural and social practices encompassed by the term “narcocultura.” My work concerned literary works, testimonies, and TV series, known as telenovelas. I looked at drug trafficking because some prostitution is linked with drug crime. What originally drew me to choose this investigation was the media representation surrounding the Mexican drug war. I saw too often perpetrators glorified in Hollywood films. I learned from Professor Celis that Colombian producers took these issues of drug violence and female testimonies onto the screen. Prostitution is a silent yet ever-present issue in society. Culture, symbols, norms and institutions install it. It is lead by its invisibility, its visibility and its acceptance.

To complete my research, I went to the local libraries: Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango, Biblioteca Alfonso Borrero Cabal, S.J and the Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia. In Bogotá, I also gathered articles from major publications like the newspaper El Tiempo, and the magazines Semana and Cambio. Other themes that emerged during my research included child exploitation, human trafficking and sexual tourism. The main cities my research focused on were Medellín, Cartagena, Bogotá and Cali.

Telenovelas centered on violence are common in Colombia. Critics have written that media communications and literature have naturalized violence to “cultural violence” or “narco-violence.” Besides the male dominated telenovelas centered on Colombian drug violence (i.e. La virgen de los sicarios and Pablo Escobar: El Patrón del Mal), I found interesting a series of telenovelas and films dealing with female prostitution, with female leads and conveying their participation in the drug world like Rosario Tijeras. These female perspectives have become popularized, and testimonies from the wives and partners of drug lords have been also written and produced.

As these realities come onto screen, critics have discussed their relation to Colombian identity, more specifically the representation of women implicit in presenting them as the most sexy and beautiful. I anticipated higher amount of secondary scholarly works on the subject, but it seems that even though these telenovelas and testimonies have been produced over the years, the subject is still fresh in the academia.

In addition to collecting written material, I interviewed Pablo Rodríguez Jiménez, professor at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia and editor of the book Placer, dinero y pecado: historia de la prostitución en Colombia. He advised me on the subject of these telenovelas and expensive prostitution known as “prepagos.” He offered his personal insight on the phenomenon and advised me scholarly texts that centered on the female body.

This summer experience has been amazing and has provided me with the material I need towards my future goals. Over the course of my Independent Study with Professor Nadia Celis, I plan to examine more closely the texts, books, films, newspaper and magazine articles gathered. We have also discussed the possibility of opening up the future independent study to Mexico.

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