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Cleared for investment? The intersections of transnational capital, gender, and race in the production of sexual violence and internal displacement in Colombia’s armed conflict

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This article was named the winner of the 2018 Enloe Award. The committee commented:

“The article successfully embodies the spirit of the Enloe Award as it manages to ground pressing, everyday experiences of targeted violence in historical and global processes of political economy, creatively deploying a set of theoretical lenses to make sense of it.”

“It provides a really rich and powerful account of how transnational capital networks are complicit in ongoing violence against women and Indigenous groups in Colombia. The study traces how the violence that is used by militant groups to displace people from the land works to benefit big corporations and how this violence is underpinned by a process of dehumanization that leaves certain marginalized groups profoundly killable, disposable, or injurable. It joins in with highly topical current debates and scholarship on race, class, gender, coloniality, and neoliberalism without reproducing a zero-sum understanding of the challenges at hand, sensitive to the co-constitutive nature of the material and immaterial aspects of oppression and violence in the longue durée.”

“The article fizzes with many exciting ideas, bringing together a range of theoretical perspectives with some really engaging empirical work. It also does a good job of using the literature in a truly intersectional way, rather than merely ‘adding on’ postcolonial and/or race considerations, thus transcending White/Western-centric theorization and source material.”

ABSTRACT
Investigating the nexus of transnational capital, gender, and race, I argue that sexual violence and internal displacement tacitly serve the interest of transnational corporations (TNCs). Drawing on extensive ethnographic research in war-torn regions in Colombia, I elucidate how violence is deeply intertwined in the globalization of neoliberal capitalism and operates by exploiting and instrumentalizing constructions of gender and race that
are articulated through colonial legacies and further dehumanize the “Other.” The focus on intersectional power relations advances a critical understanding of the political economy of armed conflict. First, it reveals how local and global (economic) actors are entrenched in exacerbating local forms of domination that produce sexual violence and internal displacement through a particular political economy of masculinity and neoliberal forms of expansion and exploitation. Beyond that, both forms of violence are not only the product of colonial, capitalist, and gendered structures and ideas but also serve to re-entrench these power relations between dominant and subaltern groups. I conceptualize this relationship as the “coloniality of violence.” It constitutes a shared space for violent forms of domination and appropriation that facilitates capital accumulation, and it may further foster a relation of structural oppression in “post-conflict” Colombia.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

RESUMEN
En mi investigación sobre la interrelación entre capital transnacional y formas de opresión basadas en concepciones de género y raza argumento que la violencia sexual y el desplazamiento interno sirven implícitamente a los intereses de los grandes grupos transnacionales. Partiendo de una investigación etnográfica integral en regiones afectadas por el conflicto armado en Colombia ilustro de qué manera la violencia está asociada a la globalización del capitalismo neoliberal y explico el mecanismo funcional subyacente que consiste en instrumentalizar y explotar construcciones de género y de raza que se manifiestan a través de históricos vínculos coloniales los cuales contribuyen a deshumanizar al “Otro.” El objetivo consiste en alcanzar una comprensión crítica de la economía política en el marco de un conflicto armado a través de un enfoque centrado en la interseccionalidad de las relaciones de poder. De esta
manera se revela el arraigo profundo de las actores (económicos) locales y globales en formas locales de dominio, fenómenos que a su vez contribuyen a exacerbar la violencia sexual y el desplazamiento interno en Colombia por medio de una economía política basada en un determinado concepto de masculinidad y en formas neoliberales de expansión y explotación. Así mismo, ambas formas de violencia no solamente se pueden ver como resultado de determinadas estructuras e ideas coloniales, capitalistas y de género sino que sirven también para consolidar tales relaciones de poder entre grupos dominantes y subalternos. Conceptualizo esta relación como “colonialidad de violencia” que a su vez constituye un escenario compartido para formas violentas de dominación y apropiación. Considerada en su conjunto la colonialidad de violencia fomenta la acumulación de capital estimulando de esta manera una relación de opresión estructural y violenta en la Colombia del llamado “posconflicto.”

KEYWORDS Gender; race; transnational capital; sexual violence; Colombian armed conflict

Peace for a few and a continuum of violence for many:
Colombia’s peace deal in historical perspective

In October 2016, former President Santos’ government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) announced a ceasefire deal to end one of the lengthiest conflicts in the Western hemisphere: Colombia’s war. Since its beginnings in the mid-1940s, it claimed more than 8.5 million lives and displaced around 7.5 million people, many of whom experienced sexual violence (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2017). While violence against women occurred everywhere and across all socio-economic classes, it was disproportionately directed against women racialized1 as Black or Indigenous in resource-rich areas. These women were caught up in the crossfire between guerrilla groups, state military forces, drug traffickers, and paramilitaries. Paramilitaries not only operated under the behest of drug traffickers and the Colombian state itself but also committed sexual violence as part of displacement to clear fertile land in the interest of (global) economic actors such as transnational corporations (TNCs). According to Alejandra, one of my interviewees,

This is one of the main causes for the sexual violence here because transnational corporations have sowed terror and criminality everywhere in the country. We have the case in La Guajira, in Cartagena, also in Barranquilla and Santa Marta. (Alejandra, a violated2 woman, 2017)3

Since the 1980s, peace negotiations had repeatedly but unsuccessfully taken place with various armed groups, including, notably, the failed demobilization of the right-wing paramilitary group United Self-Defenders of Colombia (AUC) between 2003 and 2006. It is thus the 2016 peace agreement that has fostered the most optimism that peace will finally be achieved in the postcolonial state
given the deal’s unprecedented focus on issues of gender, race, class, land, and other structural sources of inequality.

Yet, such optimism might have been premature or even misplaced regarding the persistence of structural and overt violence in the post-conflict reconstruction. Since the peace agreement, more than 700 social activists and 138 FARC ex-combatants have been assassinated, massacres have become more frequent, forced displacement has continued, and sexual violence has remained prevalent in both the private and public sphere (Amnesty International 2018). Most of the violence, which has disproportionately affected Indigenous and Afro-descendant women, can be linked to paramilitary groups. For many women I talked to, the correlation between TNCs, the state, and paramilitaries remains one of the biggest – yet largely invisible – concerns despite the 2016 peace agreement. These dynamics already indicate that the peace deal in Colombia may at best imply peace for a few, but a continuum of violence for many (Cockburn 2004). The lack of attention in international relations (IR) and media reports, however, raises several concerns as to the mechanisms that produce political violence and simultaneously render it invisible. How is it possible that it is so easy to rape and displace – and get away with it? How is it possible that violence continues at the same time as the peace agreement is celebrated within and outside Colombia?

Drawing on extensive ethnographic research in Colombia’s conflict-affected zones in 2016 and 2017, this article develops the concept of the “coloniality of violence” and contributes to a critical understanding of the political economy of armed conflict as implicated within the gendered and racialized power relations that likely pose an impediment to peace. Informed by critical (Escobar 2004; Harvey 2003) and feminist global political economy (Meger 2011; True 2012), decolonial thought (Lugones 2007; Quijano 2005), and intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; McClintock 1995), the article elucidates how sexual violence and internal displacement proliferate and disproportionately affect Afro-descendant and Indigenous women in geostrategic areas. Analyzing the mechanisms and networks that link the presence and role of transnational capital to the local power relations that produce and rely on violence, I argue that sexual violence and internal displacement serve as “fast and easy” weapons of conflict in the interest of both local and global (economic) actors.

While not sidelining the relevance of guerrilla groups in perpetrating and using sexual violence, the article focuses on the relationship between TNCs, the state, drug traffickers who are diversifying their investments, and paramilitaries in one of the conflict-affected and resource-rich departments in Northern Colombia – Bolívar – in which I conducted a significant portion of my field research. This focus is crucial for understanding the entanglement of local with global actors in the very structures of sexual violence and
displacement. TNCs, drug traffickers, and the state are understood as three different kinds of investors in land yet to be “cleared for investment.” These entities respectively contract paramilitaries to outsource sexual violence as part of a strategy of displacement to clear land for the implementation of mega-projects (such as those by large companies), for the cultivation and trade of drugs, and for maintaining the state’s own authority/power and position in the global market. Paramilitaries prove particularly suitable to do this labor because they are part of a process of rentier economic expansion based on the exploitation and appropriation of land (Richani 2012) and reproduce a particular political economy of hyper-masculinity that naturalizes violence against women (Meger and Sachseder 2020; Payne 2016; Theidon 2009). They are accused of more than 60 percent of the incidents of sexual violence (Holmes and de Pineres 2011; Meger and Sachseder 2016). Beyond that, the vast majority of non-sexual violence in the conflict has also been attributed to the paramilitaries, who largely utilize it for the purpose of clearing land for commercial and economic interests in the service of both local and global actors (Hristov 2014; Oslender 2007; Reyes and Bejarano 1998; Richani 2012).

In order to explain why Afro-descendant and Indigenous women have been disproportionately affected by sexual violence and displacement, I draw on the basic premise of postcolonial and decolonial scholarship that colonialism constitutes a critical historical juncture in which (post)colonial identities have been constructed in opposition to European ones and have come to be seen as Europe’s “Other” (Fanon 2004). From this perspective, the “Other” is seen as not entirely human, and thus is always already positioned as inferior, socially non-existent, and not endowed with subjectivity (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2019). My analysis builds on the concept of the “Other” within (post)colonial relations of power and shows how paramilitaries in particular operate by exploiting and instrumentalizing the gendered and racialized constructions of the “Other” women as sexually available, constantly willing, and fundamentally promiscuous (Boesten 2010, 2014; Wood 2009). Acting upon these constructions inscribes “rapeability” (Maldonado-Torres 2007) onto women’s bodies and constructs them as primary targets of violence to clear land. Through such mechanisms of racialization and sexualization, sexual violence and displacement contribute to the perception that the “Other” is subordinated and inferior and thus not fully human. Beyond that, they perpetuate and naturalize intersectional power relations that constitute the shared space for violent forms of appropriation and domination. The article concludes by arguing that the armed conflict operates to (hyper-)sexualize and racialize, hence to further dehumanize the “Other” by trying to render Black and Indigenous women invisible and non-existent. This facilitates the production of profit for TNCs, drug traffickers, the state, and paramilitaries, and helps to foster a continuous relation of structural and often overt violence in “post-conflict” Colombia.
In order to unpack the nexus between violence, transnational capital, gender, and race, the next section draws on the conflict experience of one of my interviewees.

**María’s conflict experience in Colombia**

In the early 2000s, a paramilitary group entered a remote community in the department of Chocó in the west of Colombia. It is a region in which multiple actors, including visible ones – such as paramilitaries, drug traffickers, guerrillas, the military, and the state – and less visible ones – such as the TNC Anglo-Gold Ashanti with its gold-mining project – were locked in violent conflict over economic and political power (Oslender 2007; Richani 2012). The armed actors attacked, captured, and murdered men and women, particularly from Afro-descendant and Indigenous groups in the village. My interviewee María was one of the many women who was raped and displaced by a paramilitary. She identifies as an Indigenous woman from the Emberá Katío community who used to live in Alto Andágueda in the department of Chocó. María owned a small farm where she cultivated all kinds of crops and together with her family raised cattle. Access to land not only allowed her to gain economic resources but also served as a form of empowerment within the often violent, gendered system. Yet, as María explained to me, the violence largely disrupted these patterns along gendered and racialized lines:

> I was threatened by the paramilitaries, I left my village, lost my house and my dignity. What, however, strikes me most is that they attacked me sexually because I am an Indigenous woman. (María, interview, 2017)

While María accused the perpetrator of being a member of the paramilitary group Black Eagles (*Aguilas Negras*), she simultaneously pointed to AngloGold Ashanti as perpetuating local power relations that contributed to political violence through financing the paramilitary group. This, in turn, forced the largely Indigenous communities to hand over fertile land to the company and thus led to their displacement. According to María,

> the major displacements affect Black and Indigenous people because, in all aspects, it is the Black and Indigenous populations who have natural resources and displacement, as you know, is related to the control of territory by a particular sector, the transnationals. (María, interview, 2017)

Shortly after the incident, María fled to Cartagena de Indias, a city in the northern department of Bolívar on the Caribbean coast. Her forced displacement to one of the most marginalized neighborhoods was marked by pain. Not only did she leave her family members, her feminist network, and all of her material belongings behind, she also encountered new challenges in terms of access to resources, the labor market, and schooling for her children. María has
been constantly afraid. At first, she lived in a socio-economically marginalized neighborhood, which she described as a melting pot of victims, paramilitaries, guerrilla fighters, and organized crime. In addition, a partner in her new community abused her once again after the trauma of rape. As a result, she fled to yet another barrio next to Cartagena, where I eventually met her. She survived the war and now has a family with children, but she has been severely traumatized. This anecdote has left me with great despair and sadness, not least because María’s experience of violence and oppression is neither exceptional nor coincidental. Rather – as this article will elucidate – intersectional power relations based on transnational capital, gender, and race systematically produce violence.

In 2016, Colombia had the largest internal displacement crisis in the world. Sexual violence constitutes an integral part of displacement and disproportionately affects Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities, particularly women, exceeding an impunity rate of 98 percent (Meertens, Viveros, and Arango 2008). The violence has been so significant that the United Nations (2016) officially referred to displacement as a form of racialized discrimination. Colombia has been described as “one of the most prominent examples of human rights violations within the framework of an armed conflict to which transnational corporations have a direct link” (Martin-Ortega 2008, 9). Despite these observations, the links between sexual violence, displacement, and TNCs have yet to be fully explored, and the 2016 peace agreement has not yet accounted for these structural issues that likely present an obstacle to peace for all. In Colombia, violence has not only been normalized as part of everyday life but also instrumentalized to favor the interests of elites through a particular gendered and racialized political economy. It is thus of utmost importance to produce critical knowledge that disputes classical understandings of war, political violence, and global capitalism. The next section provides a critical reading of the relationship between Colombia’s history of colonialism and the war, the relevant actors, and the neoliberal economic restructuring that had to be enforced through reliance on militarism and enhanced security measures (Meger and Sachseder 2020).

**Contextualizing Colombia’s armed conflict within the colonial power matrix**

Colonization disrupted and dramatically changed the configuration of Colombia’s society. While Colombia consisted of various communities before the violent invasion in the late fifteenth century, new identities, represented by labels such as “Indigenous” and “Afro-descendant,” were created under the gaze of the Spanish colonizers that were racialized, colonial, and negative, subsuming all people into an essentialized entity: the “Other” (Quijano 2005). Only men could be civilized, whereas women, Indigenous peoples, and enslaved
Africans were “classified as not human in species” (Lugones 2007, 743). Women were racialized as Black or Indigenous and portrayed as grotesquely hypersexual and constantly willing. At the same time, they were considered uneducated, poor and tradition-bound, and thus were victimized. These notions impacted configurations of the self, identity, and subjectivity for both the colonizer and the colonized, instigating a “coloniality of being” (Maldonado-Torres 2007) and the colonizers’ sense of superiority (Dussel 2007). While these identity formations and power structures between civilizers and those to be civilized are rooted in colonial practices of domination, they still exercise power today in the political economy of capitalism and war (Rojas and Meltzer 2005, 164). They not only place the “Other” in lower positions within Colombia’s social, political, and economic structure, but they also make them more vulnerable to and exploitable through violence during the armed conflict.

The Colombian war can be traced to the period of contemporary history known as La Violencia (1948–1964) that resulted from the coloniality of power (Quijano 2005) of the Colombian elite and the adoption of a Eurocentric model of civilization (Gómez 2016). Colombia has considerable deposits of natural resources, including coal, petroleum, and gold, and is one of the biggest producers of illicit commodities such as cocaine and marijuana (Hristov 2014; Oslender 2007; Richani 2013). Over several decades, actors with major economic interests fighting each other for control over the illegal drug trade and/or land have fueled the armed conflict.

Drug trafficking and natural resource extraction, particularly in the mining and oil sector, have been frequently related to human rights abuse and environmental destruction. In Angola, Sudan, and Congo, they have also been identified as major drivers of armed conflict (Leatherman 2011; Meger 2011; Nordstrom 2004). Similar patterns can be observed in Colombia, where the armed conflict has been exacerbated by the efforts to clear fertile land, perpetuated by a “globalized war economy” that is heavily dependent on foreign and external resources (Hartsock 2006). In contrast to many other conflicts that emerged during the Cold War era and ceased with the end of the US–Russia confrontation, the Colombian armed conflict intensified in the 1990s while the country underwent significant neoliberal restructuring (Maher 2015). The shift from principles of import substitution industrialization to export-led development in particular put renewed emphasis on a process that Richani (2013, 66) calls “internal colonization.” New neoliberal policies, including the privatization of land, cheap labor, low taxes, and reduced protections for the environment, opened up a favorable business environment for TNCs, transforming them into principal actors within Colombia’s economy and its conflict. To enhance its position in international competition (Harvey 2003) and to maintain its own authority/power, the Colombian state largely operated to protect the economic interests of domestic and transnational capital and played a key role in the reproduction of neoliberalism.
as a regime of capital accumulation. This “positive political economy”\(^6\) (Richani 2013, 39) served to absorb surplus capital and provided low-cost resources for foreign direct investment (FDI). As a result, FDI increased fivefold between the 1980s and 2000s and became one of the most influential factors in Colombia’s economy (Maher 2015; Richani 2013).

While Mbembe (2001, 75) has focused on the political economy of the “African postcolony,” the insight that there may be a direct link between “de-regulation and the primacy of the markets … and the rise of violence and the creation of private military, [or] paramilitary” speaks to Colombia’s armed conflict and specifically to the development of paramilitarism. The FARC are also connected to the struggle over resources but not – like the paramilitaries – in the interest of a political-economic elite (for example, global corporate actors) (Hanson 2008; Meger and Sachseder 2020). The 1990s also coincided with an increase in violence against the marginalized in areas with geostrategic value given their wide biodiversity and proximity to natural resources.

Because the presence of guerrilla forces in such resource-rich areas posed risks to the TNCs’ capital-intensive activities, they required guarantees and security for their operations, personnel, and infrastructure. They therefore “ma[de] direct payment into national and local security budgets to have police or military troops guard their infrastructure” (Guáqueta 2013, 10) or contracted with paramilitaries who worked to “subjugate the entire region and make it succumb to the modernizing project” that meant the exploitation and appropriation of land (Hristov 2014; Oslender 2007; Richani 2013, 11). As a result, paramilitaries competed with the FARC to reduce the guerrillas’ political-economic influence among Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities in order to seize their valuable lands for resource extraction or for the cultivation and trade of drugs, often through displacement and/or sexual violence. Considered as a “highly murderous punitive force” (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008, 6), paramilitaries prove particularly useful in protecting the interests of the state, of drug traffickers, and of TNCs by making available for exploitation the terrain of people who represent a challenge to their interests, “such as unionists or popular leaders, who disappear[ed] or [we]re being killed” (Hristov 2014, cited in Meger 2017, 385). They are effective because – compared to an army-like Marxist organization such as the FARC – the paramilitaries consist of a broader network for the provision of “security” (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008). They are also more permeable to external (capitalist) influences, such as legal and illegal businesses, and are not only supported by but deeply implicated within state institutions, which is why Hristov (2014, 127) understands them as the “state’s unofficial extension.”

Beyond that, paramilitary forces reflect the construction of a postcolonial state rooted in hyper-masculinity and militarism (Meger and Sachseder 2020; Rojas and Meltzer 2005), as recognized by Theidon (2009, 27), who traced a clear distinction between the appeals of different armed groups
for men in terms of gender and class. While the Colombian armed forces promoted enlistment in the military as an opportunity for social mobility, and, as in many other countries, tied being a soldier to the concept of citizenship, former members of the FARC said that they joined the group because they “lived in a zone controlled by an armed group and entering the ranks was quasi-natural” (Theidon 2009, 27). By contrast, paramilitary members decided to join the armed group due to limited life options and pervasive violence. Beyond the broader class dynamics – and while all armed groups in Colombia interiorized a certain form of militarized masculinity – it was paramilitary members who gave their primary reasons for joining as wanting to “feel like a big man in the streets of their barrios” and to “go out with the prettiest young women and to dress well” (Theidon 2009, 17). Through trainings and experiences in combat, they further learnt “to be hard and impenetrable, both physically and emotionally” (Theidon 2009, 17). Many paramilitary members were not taught to be “loving fathers” (Theidon 2009, 17), as they were socialized in violent and masculinist contexts. As will be elucidated in the article, these dynamics are a function and articulation of the global racialized hierarchy of masculinities that produces and naturalizes violence and the subordination of women in Colombia’s armed conflict.

Despite their official demobilization in the early 2000s, paramilitaries have continued to expand their networks in various political, economic, and social sectors due to their association with the state, drug traffickers, and TNCs that made financial contributions to them. The engagement of these entities with paramilitary groups is thus not exceptional. Rather, there are broader structural patterns of financing these extreme right-wing groups to maintain the “para-economy.” This not only enables legal and illegal businesses to evade labor laws and maximize their profits but – as this article will show – also produces displacement and sexual violence as means of appropriation and oppression.

**Toward a decolonization of the political economy of rape and displacement**

Critical (Escobar 2004; Harvey 2003) and feminist global political economy (Leatherman 2011; Meger 2016; Nordstrom 2004; True 2012) offer valuable insights into the linkages between displacement, sexual violence, and Colombia’s macro-economic setting, in which neoliberal capitalist competition encourages companies to seek cheap labor and deregulated investment conditions that maximize profits at both the local and the transnational level. In particular, the sub-contracting of violence to paramilitaries within postcolonial states constitutes an integral part of the globalization of capital and serves as a means of reinforcing structural inequalities that create a climate favorable to FDI (Chowdhry and Nair 2004; Meger 2016). Much of the recent feminist
literature on sexual violence and displacement has been embedded within the “new wars” discourse (Kaldor 1999). According to this discourse, violence is employed either:

(1) to force the population to supply armed actors that in the long run leads to the establishment of shadow economies “in which the use of violence and the exchange of goods are inextricably linked” (Meger 2011, 105);

(2) or, as the Colombian case shows, to displace people from their resource-rich territories to open up new markets for new production capacities, a process that Harvey (2003, 73) terms “accumulation by dispossession” (drawing on Marx’s concept of “primitive accumulation”).

As such, sexual violence is embedded in the global political economy “through systems of trade and commerce that are intimately connected to hierarchies of power and hegemonies, both political-economic and gendered,” and “serves as an outsourcing of both the means and labor of resource extraction and accumulation” (Meger 2016; see also Nordstrom 2004). Sexual violence is also linked to the institution of a militarized and socialized hegemonic masculinity, serving as an effective instrument of terror and dispersal, as well as of humiliation, punishment, and destruction of the targeted population (Boesten 2010; Enloe 2007; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2008; Turshen 2001; Wood 2009). While these insights are highly valuable for understanding how the prevalence of political violence relates to both militaristic constructions of masculinity and the globalization of capitalism, this article integrates decolonial and intersectional approaches – two crucial frameworks for theorizing the intersections of multiple power relations in the production of violence in the context of war and (post)coloniality.

Decolonial approaches (Grosfoguel 2006; Lugones 2007; Maldonado-Torres 2007; Mignolo 2002; Quijano 2005) expand the understanding of the globalization of capitalism as one integral part of the “colonial power matrix” that organizes capital “as a source of production of surplus value through the selling of commodities for a profit in a world market” (Quijano 2005, 1). This ideological and political matrix, established by colonization and taken up by global capitalism, includes power structures, such as colonialism, the gender system, and economic oppression, which configure specific relationships of power, such as sexism, racism, and classism. These structures do not operate in isolation but are profoundly interrelated and affect all subjects in diverse ways (Lugones 2007; Mohanty 2008; Segato 2014). They continue to naturalize domination and exploitation as part of the institutionalization of a complex set of gendered and racialized systems of classification of the world’s population that involves “the process of active reduction of people, the dehumanization” (Lugones 2010, 745, emphasis added).
To place specific emphasis on particular subjects, cultures, and practices that inform the understanding and enactment of sexual violence and internal displacement in the context of (post)coloniality, I draw on the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; Yuval-Davis 2006). As McClintock suggests in her analysis of British colonialism,

race, gender and class are not distinct realms of experience, existing in splendid isolation from each other; nor can they be simply yoked together retrospectively like armatures of Lego. Rather, they come into existence in and through relations to each other. (McClintock 1995, 5, emphasis in original)

Conceptualizing violence, coloniality, gender, and race as part of the same system or totality, the experiences of the marginalized are more than just a sum of oppressions. Rather, they manifest through complex and contextually contingent systems of meaning and power that are anchored in colonization and reproduced by the corresponding logics of capitalism in Colombia’s armed conflict. As these correlations have been made visible through women’s accounts of violence, in the following section I will outline my feminist decolonial take on ethnographic research.

**Toward a decolonization of methodologies: an ethnography of political violence**

Inspired by the emancipatory potential of local knowledge (Smith 1999; Spivak 1999), I focus on conflict experiences, conceptualized as micro-manifestations of broader social, political, and economic structures that are undergirded by a specific regime that capitalizes on the gendered and racialized hierarchy (Sylvester 2012). The data stems from my PhD research in which I conducted 60 narrative interviews and ten focus group discussions with male and female civilians, FARC combatants, and state military soldiers in multiple conflict-affected regions in Colombia during two phases of fieldwork in 2016 and 2017. The article focuses largely on women and their war experiences with the other interview data providing context. My access to interviewees was mainly facilitated through contacts with local feminist groups that I had established prior to my research stay in Colombia.

I chose to converse with Afro-descendant and Indigenous women under the assumption that the effects and dynamics of armed conflict are perceived differently with regard to gender, socio-economic status, the urban/rural divide, and race. Nowadays, Colombia often presents itself as an ethnically plural and culturally diverse country and usually frames the introduction of Afro-descendant and Indigenous peoples into national curricula as a signifier for the move toward a pluralist democracy (Wade 2009). This claim, however, exists in tension with the reality of power and privilege and reproduces the appropriation of Blackness and Indigenousness into the national
whitened arena. All of my interviewees referred to their experiences of violence as linked to their geographical location, socio-economic status, and personal characteristics, which already indicates the centrality of gender, race, and class in informing and structuring everyday lives in Colombia.

Most of the field research was conducted in the Pacific and Atlantic coastal areas in Colombia, such as La Guajira, Sucre, Chocó, and Bolívar. Given their wide biodiversity and proximity to natural resources, these regions were not only sites of previous violent colonization but also crucial for Afro-descendant and Indigenous people in terms of material and symbolic resources and survival (Holmes and de Pineres 2011; Oslander 2007). In order to support themselves and their families through farming or operate small local businesses, especially for women, the access to land and economic resources was crucial. It contributed to disputing traditional gender roles and racialized images as “weak,” “passive,” or “backward.” As I learned from my fieldwork, the armed conflict disrupted these patterns and affected women economically, socially, and politically, and it reinforced historical sources of inequality. The majority of my interviewees had been displaced and/or suffered sexual violence by paramilitaries between the 1990s and 2000s. This period coincided with the peak of internal displacement and the neoliberal restructuring, particularly in those territories with a geostrategic value that were characterized by a strong economic class of landowners coupled with a social base under the control of a clientelist political system (Hristov 2014). These presented particularly favorable conditions for an increase in paramilitarism, drug trafficking, and the implementation of mega-projects by TNCs.

Despite economically and socially precarious conditions, women have not only been victimized but have also acted as agents. Some of my interviewees identified as activists or advocates for women’s and land rights, or they were part of social peace movements. In the face of the extremely difficult and dangerous circumstances for activists, they organized regionally, built networks, and implemented measures at the local level to work toward preventing violence against women that has for so long imperiled the Atlantic and Pacific regions. Most of them explicitly adopted the expressions “Negro/Afro-descendientes” (Black/Afro-descendants) or “Indígena” (Indigenous) as part of a counter-discourse and a political qualification to transform the identity that had been negatively created into an empowering one. On this basis, the subject categories that I employ in this article have been developed together with my interviewees so as not to impose any concepts onto them but to follow their self-definition and give voice to the multiple forms of agency and resistance beyond a sole emphasis on victimization and oppression.

Power differences in this research are undeniable. When a female political science researcher from Europe interviews marginalized women with varying
levels of literacy and economically precarious backgrounds in Colombia, the interaction is exposed to multiple problematic influences and colonial power dynamics. To make sure that participation was voluntary, written or oral informed consent was obtained before the start of each interview. Narrative interviews and open questions were chosen to provide interviewees with the opportunity to speak freely and give voice to personal experiences. To acknowledge and address the risk of “epistemic violence” (Spivak 1999) and “epistemic extractivism” (Suárez-Krabbe 2013) as well as the potential for re-traumatization, decolonial and ethical considerations – including auto-reflexivity and no-harm politics – have been highly crucial throughout the entire project (Smith 1999). It has been imperative for me to recognize that my own analytical perspectives through which I viewed the participants informed the content of the conversations as well as the power hierarchies and that these perspectives could not be easily avoided, despite my attempt to challenge the colonial logic of studying the “Other” (Mignolo 2002; Spivak 1999). Yet, at the same time, my interviewees indicated that they found our conversations rewarding and that these conversations helped to promote emancipatory politics, as they allowed for a process of speaking openly about traumatic moments. After each interview and if desired, I offered to connect the women with local feminist organizations for psychological support that I had previously arranged. Overall, and as a result of these observations, I situate my relationship with the research subjects in the colonial power matrix (Quijano 2005) and regard the produced knowledge as situated, thus as partial, relational, and subjective (Haraway 1988).

The correlation between transnational capital and the production of intersectional violence in Colombia

In order to analyze the intersections between (transnational) capital, gender, and race in producing intersectional violence, this section shows:

(1) how transnational companies, drug traffickers, and the state hire paramilitaries to outsource violence to clear land for the production of profit;
(2) how, to achieve these ends, paramilitaries target those who are easiest to intimidate, including Afro-descendant and Indigenous groups and particularly women;
(3) that sexual violence is part of this intimidation and serves as a “fast and easy” strategy of displacement because it operates by exploiting colonial constructions of gender and race that dehumanize the “Other.”

To illustrate these correlations, the section focuses on the state of Bolívar on the Caribbean coast from which many of my interviewees were displaced and/or where they experienced sexual violence. Bolívar shows
high levels of violence that disproportionately affects Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities, especially women (COHA 2017). Paramilitaries are responsible for more than 75 percent of the human rights violations in Bolívar (COHA 2017). At the same time, it has a significant geopolitical value given its proximity to natural resources, which attracts local and global (economic) actors.

With the opening up of Colombia to the global market in the 1970s, mining became the principal economic activity in Bolívar. In particular, its abundance of coal as well as its ports made it an ideal hub for the international trade of licit and illicit commodities, making Bolivar a geostrategically relevant location particularly vulnerable to territorial contestation by paramilitaries (Petras and Veltmeyer 2014). While guerrilla groups are based largely in the south of the department, paramilitary groups are present in the majority of the municipalities and increased their economic and political power through their strategic associations with TNCs, drug traffickers, and the state.

Until 1991, Colombia’s central bank had had the monopoly on the purchase of coal in the country, but Act 9 of 1991 along with the implementation of a new constitution made gold and coal commercialization more flexible, increasingly allowing non-state and private actors to trade commodities (COHA 2017). These local developments coupled with globally rising prices meant that paramilitaries became interested in the mineral wealth of the region and in diversifying their sources of income beyond drug trafficking to include the mining business. Not only these local armed factions but also a Canadian TNC with its mining mega-project, Corona Goldfield, sought control over the land where small-scale miners had traditionally worked. According to one of my interviewees, a feminist activist named Audes, the entry of the TNC had been crucial to a significant shift in local power relations. It contributed to a series of violent disputes and a wave of forced displacement that peaked in the 1990s and early 2000s:

When the transnational corporations entered, the issue with the natural resources emerged again. So, the more transnational corporations came, the more people were displaced from their lands. The Black and Indigenous populations were majorly affected by the conflict. The big transnational corporations take everything and leave us with nothing. This is why women are particularly affected. (Audes, interview, 2017)

Despite irregularities in the ways in which transnational companies and paramilitaries had come to occupy and exploit collective Afro-descendant and Indigenous territories, the state operated to protect the interests of domestic and transnational capital to maintain its own authority/power and position in the international market. According to my interviewees, Ana and Tatiana, who were both raped in and displaced from Bolívar in the early 2000s, it was the
“government that supported such politics and continued to allow this implementation and violence of transnational corporations” (interview, 2017). Other sources have even found that state (military) officials were bribed by illegal gold miners to turn a blind eye on the operations of TNCs. They did not provide “protection to miners in rural areas with a high presence of criminal groups, leaving them open to extortion and intimidation” (OECD 2017, 17). Once bribing did not prove sufficiently effective, paramilitary forces were contracted to target and intimidate the already marginalized to get access to the resource-rich land.

Sexual violence has been part of this intimidation, and it served as a strategic weapon of displacement, particularly against those from Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities who lived in resource-rich territories or otherwise posed a threat to capital interest and to investment. Yuris, one of my interviewees, recognized this reality. She identifies as an Afro-descendant woman and had to flee as a result of sexual violence by a paramilitary hired to protect the interests of a TNC. Compared to the guerrilla groups that attacked the paramilitaries and fought against the implementation of mega-projects by TNCs, paramilitaries proved particularly useful for doing the labor of raping and displacing:

It is not the guerrillas, it’s even worse. You can’t walk outside because they attack you; the situation here is very bad. At least the guerrillas attacked these groups, and they did not rob us either. But now it’s very bad. … When transnational corporations want to buy land, they call the paramilitaries so that they bribe the people, and if the people do not sell their land, they are displaced and violated, leaving everything behind. This violence really benefits the accumulation of capital rather than the social transformation of the locals. (Yuris, interview, 2017)

As paramilitaries gained more autonomy and started to control political-economic life in Bolivar due to their relationship with TNCs, the state, and drug traffickers, they installed their own people or those affiliated with them in key positions and decided along gendered and racialized lines who was allowed to enter or even exist in the communities. To enforce such means of social control and discipline, paramilitary groups employed sexual violence as a form of “social cleansing” that was explicitly undergirded by a specific regime that capitalized on the gendered and racialized hierarchy in order to weaken, fragment, and ultimately displace the community. For instance, every woman who was not considered “female enough” or seen as “critical,” including human rights workers, trade unionists, and journalists, were at particular risk of sexual violence and displacement, especially in those areas with a political-economic value. Foreign reporters had to ask for permission to enter some of the zones and needed to declare for whom they worked, with what purpose, and for how long. Women who were racialized as Black or Indigenous were
particularly affected by these conditions. They were sanctioned if, for example, they met other women to mobilize against the violent regime. Isabella was one of the female activists who was raped by a paramilitary member and had to flee within a day:

At seven at night, we as Black women couldn’t meet anyone in the street, because the day after, we would be threatened to death, because who and what the paramilitaries find on the street, they would kill. (Isabella, interview, 2017)

The ways in which paramilitaries instrumentalized women’s racialized identity are linked to practices of dehumanization that have their roots in colonialism. Some of my interviewees told me how specifically Black women with their “curly hair,” “big breasts,” and “broad hips” were targeted. Such portrayals of women as sexually available suggest that they are susceptible to domination and therefore to blame for the sexual violence they experience. This not only served as a justification for violence but also as its rationale, as Natalia (interview, 2016) explained to me: “I think what happened to me was because I am poor, Black, and a woman.” Other women even referred to the construction of Black or Indigenous women as the reason for the experience of rape as part of forced displacement. For instance, Sofía, another interviewee, explained to me, “If [you] look at us Afros or the Indigenous, the woman is very discriminated against” (interview, 2017).

The concepts of race and gender thus thoroughly permeate these dynamics – a pattern that Lugones (2007) has termed the “coloniality of gender.” It not only determines access to resources and justifies violence by differentiating between “good” and “bad” women’s sexual behaviors, desires, and restrictions in the armed conflict; it also produces/constructs women as “spoils of war” to feminize, subordinate, and weaken those men who either resist expulsion from their territories or who deviate in their masculinity from the hegemonic ideal. As such, violence serves as a symbolic rape of the community and reflects on the entire group, creating shame, and resentment and imposing even stricter sexual norms and forms of controlling women’s bodies. This contributes to the weakening and increasing fragmentation of the affected communities, which leads to their displacement, as explained by Valeria:

Paramilitaries have committed sexual violence, using Black and Indigenous women as spoils of war. They used us to subjugate our men, they used us to force them to do things to us we did not want to. For all these things they have used us and so we ran away and fled. (Valeria, interview, 2017)

At the same time as the paramilitaries increasingly gained control over these regions in Bolívar by raping and displacing the local population, a TNC – Corona Goldfields – paid a Colombian lawyer to draft a reform to the mining code in favor of transnationals’ economic interests (US Office in
Colombia 2013). During the 2000s, another TNC, Kedhada Resources S.A., purchased the mining titles from Corona Goldfields, triggering further displacement, repression of social protests, and violence against women. After violent incidents had unfolded and begun to be investigated, Kedhada officially left the department of Bolívar but transferred all land titles to yet another TNC, AngloGold Ashanti, shortly after new gold reserves had been discovered (US Office in Colombia 2013). Such processes of land appropriation and domination by paramilitaries in the interest of (transnational) capital are not unique to Bolívar but are common throughout Colombia. Even the Constitutional Court has recognized the relationship between TNCs’ mining practices and illegal armed actors (Auto 005/2009). An in-depth investigation by the Colombian magazine Semana in 2009 specified that mining companies entered into special protection agreements with legal and illegal armed forces:

> These agreements are secret, where the army commits to guarantee the security of mining activities of companies [that] pay a yearly fee in return. The protection agreements are careful about not leaving a written record stating that the money given to the military cannot be used for offensive actions/attacks or to buy weapons or munitions … The Canadian Cooperation Agency and the then paramilitary-backed local politicians had allied to profit from pillage. An allegation supported by the fact that almost all of the House and Senate's Fifth Commission that approved the bill has been condemned for nexus with paramilitaries in recent years. (Semana, quoted in US Office in Colombia 2013)

Despite evidence and multiple witnesses testifying to the connections between local and global (political-economic) actors in exacerbating violence, such relationships continue to operate with impunity. Mining companies continue to deny any causal relationship between their operations and Colombia’s armed conflict even though “the situation ha[s] been taken advantage of by actors outside the community to exploit the territory on the cost of the reservation” (US Office in Colombia 2013). Yet, the violence produced for the purpose of facilitating and protecting investment in the service of (transnational) capital is hard to deny and thus needs to be accounted for in the current peace process.

**Discussion: the coloniality of violence as an obstacle to peace in Colombia**

What I described in the section above appears as late twentieth-century exploitation and violence but in fact has its roots in colonialism. Colonization implanted a conception about female and male Indigenous and Afro-descendant people that has been internalized and legitimized and is still embedded within today's relationships between women and men, exacerbated by the corresponding logics of capitalism and war in Colombia.
As such, the transition from the colonial period in Colombia cannot be regarded as a radical transformation of power structures, but rather a perpetuation of the colonial/modern ontology through the conquest of the “Other” or, as Fanon (2004) has termed them, the “damnés,” the “Wretched of the Earth.”

On the basis of the substantial evidence from my ethnographic fieldwork, corroborated by the reports of international organizations (Centro Nacional de Memoria Historica 2017; OECD 2017), the article has explored how it can be so easy to rape and displace – and get away with it. While there are fruitful feminist approaches that emphasize how gender constructions and associated power relations underpin the existence of rape within the global political economy, the article has expanded the understanding of sexual violence and displacement as violent forms of domination and appropriation systematically (re)produced by intersectional power relations that tacitly serve the interest of (transnational) capital. This relationship, which likely contributes to social and political-economic re-colonization, is what I conceptualized as the “coloniality of violence.” From this perspective, it is both the economic motivation and the symbolic and social gains through dehumanization that give legitimacy to violence and serve as its rationale.

The narrative insights gained through ethnographic intersectional analysis present powerful examples of this complex correlation. The extensive entanglement of global economic actors with local entities reveals the systematic link between neoliberal capitalist accumulation and Colombia’s armed conflict. This link has led to experiences of violence that many of my interviewees associated with the reproduction of colonial conditions of violence. The state, drug traffickers, and TNCs contracted paramilitaries to outsource sexual violence as part of a strategy of displacement. Paramilitaries proved particularly suitable for doing the labor because they display and reproduce a symbolic economy of masculinity that is deeply intertwined with coloniality and the political economy of material power and profit.

Paramilitaries employed sexual violence as a “fast and easy” means of intimidation to clear land by exploiting the colonial logic of dehumanization through which women who had historically been racialized as Black or Indigenous were further denied to be fully human. It is this very notion of the non-human that is part of the colonial legacy and that helped to construct women as primary targets who could be raped and displaced to clear fertile land, something that has received inadequate attention from the international community or the media. This notion justifies violence in a way that “authorizes” armed actors to subjugate and re-colonize women and to fragment entire communities with the aim of clearing the land for investment without even getting sanctioned or sued by the state. As such, sexual violence and forced displacement not only reproduce the gendered and racialized hierarchy of subjectivities but also facilitate the exploitation and commodification of resources for profit in the global capitalist market. From this
perspective, the political economy of sexual violence and displacement is deeply entrenched and intersects with racist and sexist global ideologies, practices, and structures that are (re)productive of violence itself. Considering these correlations, it is – in the end – hardly surprising that insecurity and violence disproportionately affect the formerly colonized and enslaved in those areas that are in close proximity to geostrategic zones.

To conclude, Colombia is a prime example of how TNCs have become central actors in armed conflict leading to an increase in displacement and sexual violence. Their involvement in capital accumulation and land acquisition has been essential for Colombia’s political economy and its position in the global market. Their presence has also perpetuated local power relations that pushed already marginalized communities further into the cycle of violence. While feminist organizations have long pointed to violence against women as a fortification of femicide, the Colombian government has not yet shown sufficient commitment to protecting their rights and bodies. Quite to the contrary, the strong cooperation between state armed forces and its unofficial extension, the paramilitaries, works to protect large-scale TNCs that continue to directly and indirectly contribute to violence in Colombia. As the appropriation of land may further enrich local and global actors, they may have a vested interest in the maintenance of the state of violence despite the officially declared peace in 2016.

What emerges in Colombia’s armed conflict are thus forms of violence that are part of the colonial legacy to gain control over Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities and their territory as a means of accumulating and distributing licit and illicit commodities. These conditions contribute to the exploitative and repressive system that benefit the hegemonic class, and as modes of appropriation and inferiorization they further marginalize women and foster a relation of structural, often violent, domination and oppression. Such conditions and actions present a major challenge regarding peace for all in “post-conflict” Colombia.

Notes

1. Racialization is understood as the process of differentiation, categorization, and meaning-making. It constructs hierarchy and differential value on the basis of perceived dichotomies – rational/irrational, civilized/barbarian, us/them, and European/non-European – and builds upon and reaffirms hierarchical power relations embedded within the context of (post)coloniality (Stachowitsch and Sachseder 2019). Hierarchy is constructed and relational: those who are disadvantaged by race, including Afro-descendant and Indigenous women in Colombia, are racialized as inferior, deviant, and negative, whereas those who are advantaged by race are racialized as superior, the norm, and positive.

2. While in English-language feminism, there have been rich conversations about whether to refer to those who have been harmed by sexual violence, for
example, as “survivors” or “victims,” Spanish speakers use both “victim” and “survivor.” As in English, it depends on which aspect is accentuated: oppression or agency. In Colombia, scholars only recently started using the term “survivor” to generate alternative perspectives in the “post-conflict” period (Bustamante 2017). While acknowledging that women in Colombia are indeed survivors and active shapers of their own lives, I use the literal translation of “violada” (“violated woman”) as employed by my interviewees to refer to a woman who has experienced sexual violence in Colombia’s armed conflict.

3. To maintain the principle of anonymity for safety and ethical reasons, the names of the interviewees were changed unless a participant saw a benefit in disclosing her identity.

4. When speaking about “Afro-descendant” or “Indigenous” women, I do not imply homogeneity but acknowledge their diversity.

5. Drawing on my fieldwork, the terms “sexual violence,” “violation,” and “rape” are used to refer to the use of sexual, psychological, and physical violence against women by armed groups and civilians in both the public and private sphere. The concepts of forced and internal displacement are employed interchangeably. A displaced person in Colombia is any person who has been forcibly expelled out of her/his territory as a result of sexual violence, attacks on his or her economic base in a geostrategic region, or sympathizing (allegedly) with a rival armed actor.

6. According to Richani (2013), the term “positive political economy” refers to the accumulation of wealth and the expansion of the war activities of the paramilitaries, the guerrillas, and the state military that make the relative cost of peace higher than the cost of war.

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