Foreword: A City on Display

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Can a city be in love with itself?

To wonder whether this can be, whether a city can be in love with itself, is not like asking whether people love their city. For that is a rather banal question. Of course they do. That is, many, many citizens feel strongly about their city. They know it, its streets, parks, stores, stadiums, theatres. Their homes. Many grew up there and have memories, long and short. They know their life through their city. They fall in love and marry, have children, bury their parents, go dancing. They know the smells of the city.

To say that people love their city is not to say that they do so all the time, or that their love is unconditional. It cannot be, not for a person, and not for a place. They can get angry and exasperated at their city and at their experiences there. Their love can ebb. They can be angered, even feel betrayed by their city, yet another sign that they are so deeply attached to it. Some can be indifferent, of course, and if so, they do not love it. But what is so striking is how very rarely we run into people who are indifferent to their surroundings, to the spaces in which they live. People attach themselves to spaces.

That the citizens of Bogotá are forever expressing their deep affection and their pride in their city to June Carolyn Erlick should thus not come to us as a surprise. But it does of course, especially to those who have not been there, and perhaps all the more so to those living in the United States. The State Department tells Americans that they should not travel there, for the city and the country are too dangerous. I cannot organize a study-abroad program there for students at the University of Virginia. Even if the government and the university were to allow it, I am sure that many of my students' parents would object. And understandably so. The newspapers here in the United States tell of homicides and bombs and crime and cocaine and paramilitaries and guerril-

las and wars there. And they are right. All that is there. And Bogotá is in a poor country, so its citizens are almost certainly mainly poor. Bogotá is a city with a great deal of poverty. We know that without ever having been there.

Virtually all the titles of books published in the United States that seek to reveal what daily life is like in Colombia express tales of doom and destruction: *The Saddest Country*; *More Terrible Than Death*; *Walking Ghosts*; *Counting the Dead*; *Evil Hour in Colombia*; *The Dispossessed*; *A Genocidal Democracy*; *My Colombian War: A Journey through the Country I Left Behind*; *Colombia: A Brutal History*; *Law in a Lawless Land*. And there is the book by former senator and presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, *Until Death Do Us Part: My Struggle to Reclaim Colombia*. Betancourt, also a French citizen, was held captive in the jungles of Colombia for six long years, until she and fourteen others were rescued in a spectacular military mission on July 2, 2008. Her melancholy face broadcast to the nation, together with her searing letter to her family published in the last days of 2007, had brought the cruel realities of kidnapping to all Colombians and to many others throughout the world. Her book was a best seller in France when it appeared in bookstores there, and she now spends her time campaigning for peace. Her book, as all of these works, speaks to critically important realities in Colombia. They are also blinkered looks. These texts make me wonder what it would be like if I introduced Colombians to contemporary life in the United States with Dickensian texts like *In Search of Respect: Selling Cocaine in the Barrio* and with *Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble, and Coming of Age in the Bronx* and *American Ruins* and *The New American Ghetto*. *American Pictures: A Personal Journey through the American Underclass*, a pictorial and textual history by a Danish photographer is the most traumatizing book I have ever held in my hands.

Occasionally a title published in the United States will reflect something a bit different, as, for example, *Inside Colombia: Drugs, Democracy and War*. Some less immediate works, texts of history, do as well, as does *Between Legitimacy and Violence: A History of Colombia, 1875–2002*, and *Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself*. Still

others, in English, are *Democracy in Colombia: Clientelist Politics and Guerrilla Warfare*, and *The Politics of Coalition Rule in Colombia*. So too do we have a book by a French historical sociologist that has not been translated into English. Its title is *Order and Violence*. And there is another recent book that is not in English: *La Nación Soñada: Violencia, Liberalismo y Democracia en Colombia*, written by a Colombian historian who keeps insisting that his nation is not such a bad place at all. And on Bogotá itself, there has just appeared *Gorgeous Monster: The Arts of Governing and Managing Violence in Contemporary Bogotá*. The city is a monster, to be sure, but a gorgeous one. There is violence, but it appears that it is being managed, at least to some degree. And governing in Colombia can be seen as an art.

Perhaps the works I have penned, one a historical monograph and another a memoir, *The Assassination of Gaitán: Public Life and Urban Violence in Colombia* and *Our Guerrillas, Our Sidewalks: A Journey through the Violence of Colombia*, might fit somewhat in this latter category of texts. There is an assassination and urban violence, but also a public life. There is violence in the title, but guerrillas and sidewalks are strangely tied. While one is largely about a riot and the other about a kidnapping, in both I am centrally concerned with *convivencia*, the abiding historical desire to live together in harmony that Colombians keep holding on to. *Convivencia* is a subject that permeates the pages of June Erlick's *Gringa in Bogotá*.

As I walk the streets of this city today looking for clues, trying to get a feel for it, watching its citizens walking to and fro, checking up on those sidewalks, I keep wondering about that assassination that took place in 1948. My mother has always said that I would turn out to be a bit strange, a historian, because of the horrible fright she suffered that afternoon. On the way downtown for her appointment with the gynecologist, she just managed to climb into a cab and get away as the crazed crowds were streaming in her direction. My father calmly ordered that the hardware store he was managing be quickly locked up when he heard the rumor that Gaitán, the most popular political leader

in the nation's history—but not someone he thought well of—had been killed just a few blocks away. He told his employees to make it back to their homes as soon as they possibly could, and he too started walking until he reached his house, five or six miles away.

Those crowds destroyed Bogotá in a few hours as no city of the Americas has ever been destroyed. I can't possibly imagine such a riot ever happening again, anywhere in Latin America or in the United States. The next morning, and for months to come, *bogotanos* could think only of London and Hamburg and Dresden, destroyed by bombs, as they looked aghast at what was left of their city. Few could imagine that the rage, the feeling of revenge, the sense of despair in Gaitán's mass followers could wreak such devastation.

That riot came to be known in Bogotá and throughout Colombia as *el 9 de abril*, the ninth of April, the date on which it erupted. In the rest of the world it became the Bogotazo. Has that afternoon percolated in the consciousness of *bogotanos*, leading them somehow over these years to treasure peace and understanding with an intensity that they might not otherwise have felt? I don't know. It's possible.

After *el 9 de abril*, the rural violence that had begun earlier, pitting followers of the Liberal and Conservative parties against one another, intensified horribly and would continue on for at least another ten years. By then, the lives of more than 170,000 Colombians had come to a violent end. During all those years, rural people streamed out of the countryside into the cities, and to Bogotá, seeking to save their lives, searching for peace, for some semblance of security. They left that rural past behind. We call this period La Violencia, with a capital V to distinguish it from all the other periods of violence in the nation's history, before and since. Did these displaced people, these frightened and forlorn internal immigrants, these impoverished peasants now without land or resources, come to yearn for a sense of togetherness, for that civility that now is so much of what Bogotá is about? Did they help bring it about? I don't know. It's possible.

What I do know over all these sixty years, and this may well be a form of evidence about what riot and violence have brought to the city, is that old *bogotanos* and new have hushed about those pasts. They have not wanted to talk about them, to remember them. *Bogotanos* have been thinking of the future, one that will be better for many of them. They have set about refashioning their individual and their collective lives.

When I was in Bogotá in 1988 negotiating for the release of my American brother-in-law, who was being held in captivity by the guerrillas who have been active out there in the countryside since the years of La Violencia of the 1950s, I kept running into fellow *bogotanos*, friends and strangers alike, who were moving forward with their lives while I was stuck trying to solve a human predicament that had started days, weeks, and months before. To me, the contrast between their lives and mine was jarring. Their outpouring of emotion at our travails moved me deeply. Their ability to distance themselves from my reality, and often also from their own public predicaments, struck me all the more. Over and over they said, “Don’t worry. This will all end well.” Over and again they talked and talked about themselves, about their nation and their history. They were not violent, they said. Colombia was a nation of hardworking people. *Bogotanos* talked about work. It is as though I had finally found the Protestant work ethic, and in a Catholic country. This was a people on the move. Some of those realities were those that I tried to capture in that memoir, a book that I have come to call, not the kidnapping book, but the side-walks book.

The city I briefly lived in then, almost twenty years ago, was not yet the city that June Carolyn Erlick joins in 2005. But it was almost certainly on its way there. Back then it was at some kind of midpoint between the dark, sad, staid, colorless, and often rude place that I grew up in during the 1950s and ’60s, and the city that is revealed to us in these pages. And when I return now to marvel at all that strikes my eyes and my senses, I am not there yet either, for I am caught somewhere between the past and the present.

Last summer I went downtown to join a massive demonstra-

tion against the guerrillas and the kidnappings. Once I was in the crowd, my body tightened up, and I looked with suspicion on all those around me, with surging anger at them as I was bumped about. That is the way I used to be as a kid in the city. We were that way in Bogotá, cursing easily at one another, lashing out, being disdainful of those below us on the social ladder. Slowly it began to dawn on me that I was not a stone in their river, that I kept getting in the way of others. The people around me who did not know one another, who had never been together before, were cooperating with one another, making room for the elderly, for mothers with children, sharing a space they had come to join. They were all breathing more deeply than I was. I kept trying to keep my spot, as though it were mine. I didn't see children being passed from person to person to allow them to get a better view, or to help their parents move about more easily, as Erlick does, but I am sure this was only because I was not at the right place, or because I left too early. And soon all those around me were noticing how knotted up I was. But they didn't say anything to me. Once I was in my home again, I felt grateful that they had not.

On rereading June Carolyn Erlick's pages about this city filled with polite soldiers, that is, with many soldiers and police officers, male and now female too, who treat the citizens of the city with politeness, I remembered how on arriving at that demonstration I glowered at a cop who was trying to quickly pat me down just to check, perfunctorily, for any weapons that I might be carrying. I blurted out some aggressive words at him, something about how my rights were being violated. I don't remember exactly what I said. He looked at me in surprise, his eyes wide open, as did many others around us too, as though I were a body from Mars. The city has changed. Bogotá is no longer the city I once knew.

It seems that in this city today even the most basic, individual act, even just walking from one place to another, becomes a collective experience. *El Tiempo*, the nation's major newspaper, runs a blog called *La ciudad jamás contada* (www.eltiempo.com/blogs/la_ciudad_jamas_contada/), where citizens are invited to write their histories in the city, their experiences, thoughts, and reflec-

tions. How fitting that people are now being asked to tell publicly about their lives in Bogotá. Soon, from *la ciudad jamás contada*, the city never told about, it will turn into *la ciudad más contada*, the city most told about. Here is Adriana Garcés, age thirty-three, an architect:

Camino por la calle y veo rostros que expresan todo tipo de emociones, cada uno tiene su propia historia y me imagino cuántos están viviendo la misma historia personal, cuántos comparten los mismos sufrimientos, las mismas emociones, y cuántos tienen las soluciones a los problemas de los demás en sus manos, es posible que yo misma. Sean el ángel guardián de alguien más, es posible que yo pueda aliviar ese dolor que otro sufre, es posible que yo pueda compartir esa dicha que a otro desborda, pero ¿por qué no nos damos cuenta de que en nosotros mismos está la respuesta a esa pregunta que todos tenemos en el alma?

[I walk the streets and I see all the faces expressing every emotion, each one has its own history, and then I wonder how many of us are living the same personal history, how many share the same sufferings, the same emotions, and how many have the same solutions right at hand to each other's problems. I might even have them. Even if they are someone else's guardian angel, it might just be that I could smooth the pain they suffer. I might be able to share in the happiness that overcomes another person. But why is it that we do not realize that the answer to the question that we all have in our souls is within each of us?]

Erlick discovered a city different from the one I encountered in 1988. I wasn't looking for it, living deep in my own troubles, and truth be told, this city was just beginning to emerge. The city I saw was a city at work. I was waiting, sitting around, endlessly expecting the guerrillas to call, all the while walking the sidewalks of the city, with nothing else to do. Around me others were being productive.

Travelers know they will come and go. Erlick goes to see

whether she might stay, to decide whether this is a place where she might retire a few years hence. She is an outsider who wants to be inside. Travelers ask whether this is a place where others can live. Erlick records a city she thinks about for herself. Is this where I want to live the last years of my life? Is this my place? Can I make it my own? Can I belong? She writes less and less as an outsider without ever becoming an insider.

Erlick's city is a city at play. Bogotá is a city on display. In this urban space people hurl themselves onto the street. This verb is the key word of this historical and contemporary lived experience in Bogotá. This is the collective impulse that is captured in these pages. Hurl. To hurl. When we use the word, we usually think of an object sailing through the air, a projectile we have flung away from us. In the experience of *bogotanos*, their bodies are hurling. People hurl themselves. At the same time, they are not acting alone, so that the hurling is also more than they, something that impels them. It is a collective impulse. There seems to be something pushing people in the back, propelling them forward into the street. Thus, they hurl themselves and are hurled.

Erlick gets the word from the Spanish word *arrojar*. *Se arrojan*. They hurl themselves. In Spanish too we can more easily think of *arrojar* as referring to something being thrown, rather than ourselves. Erlick quotes a journalist who writes that "during 14 days tens of thousands of citizens hurl themselves [*se arrojan*] into the streets to respond to a collective act of participation in an immense celebration of the imagination." *Bogotanos* are participating in the yearly theatre festival that is taking place, with drama performed in theatres, on streets, in parks, in schools, in workplaces, seemingly everywhere.

I have joined crowds before, and felt all the better for it, somehow empowered, liberated, beyond myself. But I suspect that this Bogotá hurling is somehow different, and more than what I have experienced. *Bogotanos* are not just becoming part of a crowd, and not just part of the city. Once hurled, they are the city. They are performing Bogotá and all that it means to them.

Bogotanos appear to be forming into something akin to what

Elias Canetti in his *Crowds and Power* calls feast crowds. Erlick's readers will recognize them.

For the individual the atmosphere is one of loosening, not discharge. There is no common identical goal which people have to attain together. The feast *is* the goal, and they are there. The density is very great, but the equality is in large part an equality simply of indulgence and pleasure. People move to and fro, not in one direction only. . . . By common enjoyment at this one feast people prepare the way for many future feasts. . . . The feasts call to one another; the density of things and people promises increase of life itself.

Canetti's feast crowd is agricultural in origin, celebrating food and abundance. In Bogotá the feast *is* the crowd itself, and there are reasons for this indulgence. It is urban and urbane, civil and polite. It is the city itself as its citizens want it to be. It is the city on display. It is peace performed, *convivencia* lived.

The closest symbol of this crowd is the river. "A river," writes Canetti, "is the crowd in its vanity, the crowd exhibiting itself. This being seen is as important as the element of direction. . . . They have a provisional goal, but it is not really important. The important thing is the stretch which separates them from it, the length of street they have to traverse. . . . Hence the fact that their origins are sometimes taken more seriously than their goal." In Bogotá it is the origins that count. Hurling. Origins mean that *bogotanos* can come together, can be together, can exist together. The goal is the crowd itself. The crowd is *convivencia*. At one moment sixty years ago the city was a reversal crowd bent on destroying everything. Now feast crowds day in and day out perform a collective exuberance.

Erlick chronicles the change that I have not lived, from that hierarchical, exclusive, disdainful, and even rude political culture of my youth to a softer, more convivial, more inclusive, more egalitarian civility of today. Erlick perceives these changes taking place in all walks of life in the city, and perhaps nowhere more simply

than in language, from the use of the formal *usted*, with which I am still more comfortable, to the informal, more personal, more intimate *tú* as the forms of address that bring strangers together. So too with these crowds, conglomerations of people collectively engaged in a wide variety of public and personal pursuits. They are processions, but, far from the carefully organized ones from above from before, with the dignitaries of old at the start, they begin where they begin, in the tributaries, on side streets, daily, spontaneously. They begin by thousands of individual acts of hurling. These feast crowds have a whiff of democracy to them, a coming together with a sense of possible equalities that may well be more easily constructed and felt in public than they are in our daily private lives. The feast crowds express our better selves.

We write a lot these days about something called civil society. Often it is an abstract term, one with more theory in it than practice. Erlick's Bogotá is the detailed performance of just what might be meant by this civil society. We should not need to remind ourselves that civil society exists in a lived experience, in gestures. This is a book filled with such gestures, seen here and there, individually, on a bus, on a street, among strangers, between a soldier and a citizen.

And the wars out there in the countryside? What about that cocaine-infested violence, and the death squads, and the paramilitaries, and the massacres of impoverished rural people that have been such a central part of the nation's history since the 1980s? Do they not exist? Is this book too, from something like another side, yet another blinkered look at daily life in this city and in this country?

It is not. Erlick thinks continuously about those violent expressions of daily existence outside of Bogotá, in the countryside, in Colombia. More than that, Colombians in Bogotá are continuously telling her about that violence, about how it has affected them, their family, their friends, their society. *Bogotanos* don't let her forget about those violences that she cannot see in the city, but to which many of them are more personally connected than is she, as an outsider. And Colombians have come to Bogotá because of

that violence, hurled from the countryside, unwillingly. As happened back in the 1950s, they arrive as refugees, as displaced people, *desplazados*, country folk, people who do not belong, people who by sleeping on doorsteps tell *bogotanos* that they too live in Colombia. More often than we wish to admit publicly, once they are there, we treat these newcomers like scum, like those inferior provincials who do not belong in the city among us. This too is Erlick's Bogotá. The *desplazados* are not part of our feast crowds. They are hardly even its spectators.

Would the citizens of Bogotá that Erlick tells us about feel impelled to launch themselves onto the street, into conviviality, were they not surrounded by all kinds of violent behaviors? If the events of 1948 and of the 1950s may well be working themselves out in the civic culture of the city today, those of the 1980s to our very day must certainly be making themselves felt on the way in which *bogotanos* go about their lives. Would they feel that little shove on their backs if much that surrounded them was just fine and dandy? To be sure, through their behavior *bogotanos* are expressing a long urban tradition that begins at least with Spanish colonial power, a tradition through which people distinguish themselves from the countryside and from country folk. For the citizens of this city, that need is all the deeper, for theirs is a nation with Latin America's longest-running armed conflicts. I am quite certain that the violence occurring in the countryside impels *bogotanos* to demonstrate to themselves and to others that they are not of that violence. The conflicts in the distance shove them into the streets. They are conscious of this need, of this desire, and they are not. They tell us in these pages that they are constructing a new society of solidarity and understanding, and they also tell us that they are simply acting, getting together, joining one another, living the city.

Erlick is between my past and this present. She chronicles the change, the transformation of the city. This is a rare vision of a place, of a city. Travelers more often just come and go. They offer us one passing glance, however deep. Erlick went long ago, fell for the place, and has been returning ever since. Now she has

gone back for a year. Now she starts jotting down notes. The city won't let her just pass through. The city won't let her go. It is because it won't, because Bogotá is now Bogotá, that we have these pages. She wants to stay. She wants others, her readers, to know why. She writes.

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