Liminality and Third Spaces as Negotiation Sites: Identity and Diasporic Social Movements

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The Roots and Aim of My Encounters

On a visit to London this year, I was able to observe a group of women members of the Colombian 'Truth, Memory and Reconciliation Commission' (TMRC), a female-orientated grassroots movement. They sought to ameliorate women's experiences of forced migration through the recollection and sharing of their violent pasts, empowering them by providing a self-reflective process through which they can acknowledge their agency in the process of forming and coming to terms with their current identity. I noted that the meetings enabled them to become subjects of transformation and forgiveness, learning to see migration as emancipatory, a quest for progress and change reflected in the renegotiation of identities meaningful to them and their community.

A central component of the peace deal signed in September 2016 between the government and the FARC (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) was the reconstruction of Colombia's historical memory. Through the Commission, the women engaged in this personal and national process abroad, hoping their voices as migrants would contribute to the kind of future Colombia (and they) would have, despite the effects of the conflict which, years before, had forced them to leave.

My interest in this solidarity ritual derives from my own experience as a Colombian migrant to the UK (though I was never forced into exile) and the uncertainty and anxiety that came from feeling 'in between' cultures, where loyalties, beliefs and values - the very basis of what one is - are in constant flux. Meeting these women made me realise that migration is an international mode of existence, a multidimensional rather than a one-directional process, a positive renegotiation of the values and identities of both the places we call home rather than a zero sum game between two different national identities.

From my five different encounters with women from the TMRC, I focus on 'diaspora' as a form of migration to understand the negotiation and reconstruction of these women's identities as influenced by their geographical and temporal migrant experience which, in some cases, has restructured their basic sense of self. I reflect on the disruption of their identity through separation from their home country and integration into their new host nation. I focus particularly on the condition of 'liminality' or 'in-between-ness' as a stage of identity reconstruction involving third spaces as sites for counter hegemonic discourses pertaining to gender stereotypes. I argue that the Commission acts as such a Third Space as it enhances women's empowerment and their validation of their new hybrid identities, which in turn contributes, through the sharing of their experiences, to the deconstruction of previous, oppressive and dominant narratives.

Methodology

For this research, I combined a series of interviews with instances of participant observations at Commission encounters between Colombian political refugees. I sought to share their experiences of political exile resulting from state-led persecution for their involvement in left-wing politics or as indirect victims of the violence between

the army and the guerrillas. Among the women I interviewed were student activists, human rights advocates, lawyers and doctors. My meetings with them were in London either in their home or workplace. I started by telling them about my interest in the Commission and my overall idea of the project, and then let them create their own narratives. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and lasted around three hours in an informal setting always involving food, which created an atmosphere of familiarity, trust and security facilitating a mutual exchange of confidences.

Fleeing Violence

The 1980s in Colombia saw a surge in violence as insurgent groups like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the M19 fought for social justice. This increase in violence facilitated social, economic and political inequality and was exasperated by the lack of state intervention in rural regions of Colombia. These guerrilla forces were resisted by state-sponsored right-wing paramilitary groups charged with "clearing the area" of anyone with Marxist-Leninist sympathies, resulting in 'assassinations, massacres and forced displacements which terrorised the local population' (Shiraz 2014). Gonzales (1989) refers to conflict migration as a 'movement of population that is stimulated by violent conflict in the home society' (Brettell 2008: 151). 'The Diaspora' is how the women I interviewed identified themselves; they are part of Colombia living outside their homeland, connected through an embedded nostalgia. Horton (2009) focuses on how migrants' subjectivities and identities change as they change social contexts: the dialectical construction of self-agency and structure 'places cultural and identity processes within a new, embodied experience as the migrants transcend borders' (Horevitz 2009: 754).

This spatial and temporal rupture was expressed to me by Salome, a human rights lawyer, who said that ever since she could remember she had always wanted to be the 'saviour of the world' (la redentora del mundo) this was her passion. She loved Colombia's countryside, cultural life and rural lifestyle, but while defending peasant communities against intrusive multinational projects in an area where the FARC and paramilitary groups were active, acts of violence occurred between the local community and security forces and she received constant death threats.

"for me, leaving my country was very hard; I did not want to leave; I resisted. If it had not been for my mother's words - 'I prefer to have a daughter that lives far away than one dead here' - I would not have left...it is to lose a sequence in your life, to stop; it is to lose moments of development, of sharing with your family, incalculable losses. It is to lose the embodied experience of who you are. It is not just the money, but about what you love to do and what you lose. You cannot complete your education; you disempower yourself because you lose all the strength surrounding you and then you have nothing. Being strong is not enough; it is a shock from the start."

Underlying Salome's experience is the connection between time and place experienced within a context of displacement, showing how 'the notion of home is tied up to the notion of identity, which is not free-flaming, but limited by border and boundaries' (Rapport 1998: 55). These women felt that their belonging to an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) that connected their identity to a spatial location, shaping their social structure and position was stripped away from the natural constructed order of things.

This spatial dislocation was also articulated by Sofia, an activist whose husband - a

dedicated member of the left-wing M-19 - was kidnapped on the 22nd of January 1987 by the paramilitary DAS, never to be seen again. This led her to get involved in fighting for the legalisation of the crime of 'forced disappearance'. Sofia herself was subsequently kidnapped, beaten and imprisoned, prompting Amnesty International to advise her and her daughter to leave the country for their personal safety. Sitting in her home in London, drinking coffee and eating "arepas", which her grandchildren call "Colombian pancakes", with tears running down her face she told me:

"That was where my nightmare started; it is a nightmare that lives with you for ever. I started to look for [Felipe her husband], feeling frustrated and angry towards a murderous state. I totally lost trust in the government, my country, the police, everything. I surrounded myself with people like us and in time learned that I could find Felipe everywhere, in all the men and women who trusted in the struggle. I did not want to go. My friends and family told me to go, but never to forget to fight for the cause, that Colombia needed a change. When I got on the plane I wanted to die; I kept saying 'Felipe, speak to me; do not let me go.' I felt they had ripped me away from everything; I felt as if the plane was a huge animal that had eaten me. I looked through the window and it seemed as if I was in a rocket. I cried and said 'My life, my family!' I thought 'How I am going to look for Felipe?' I felt I was leaving him, not even knowing where he was. When I arrived here, my first years were terrible; I lived with crisis and anxiety, in and out of hospital."

These testimonies share a theme of displacement, exile and self-loss. They acknowledge the sacrifice of being forced to give up the place where you feel you belong, the acceptance that a large part of your life has ended and the sense of uncertainty at having to start to create a new beginning, always with the desire to eventually return home.

Liminality and Third Spaces

Turner (1967) conceptualises 'Liminality' as a transitional period lived in confusion, excitement and frustration because of the constant feeling of being 'in-between', of living in a hyphenated space that is stressful and ambiguous. It is through liminal practices such as experimentation, reflection and recognition (Watson 2009) that an ambivalent individual uses their agency to make connections across borders influencing their identity-reconstruction. These women's descriptions of themselves as 'Colombo-Británicas' illustrate their hybrid identity, a feature central to the 'diaspora phenomenon' in which 'strong ties are maintained with their home communities and identity is constructed and negotiated in the multi-localities in which these transnationals live' (Ybarrola 2012: 10). However, this process of 'gradual dawning' (Levi Strauss 1966), of 'coming to realise that things are different in response to a turning point, leads to a heightened noticing of a new meaning' (Beech 2011: 289). This may not occur when there is shock/anxiety and can be a very gradual process.

As Maria told me:

"I have lived and keep on living a duality: there have been stages; this has not been a process of one or two days. I remember that I used to buy a bottle of wine on the 31st of December and I did not talk to anyone; these were not the people I wanted to celebrate with; I closed myself up; it was just me, my memories and my computer; it was like being connected all day. But then I met my husband and started adapting myself to the society where I lived, knowing that this was my life now, understanding it, meeting people, learning the language. I

understood that I was not English, but just because London had received me so well I should not feel guilty about feeling good in a country that was not mine because I had always embodied Colombia, from head to toe."

To my understanding, Maria reflects how this gradual process of change in social identity is embedded in an agency-structure dialectic 'in which the individual agent constitutes and is constituted by their social setting and the discourses available to them and those around them' (*Ibid*: 286), as with time a more structured sense of self is re-constituted.

Salome remembers:

"One always has the hope of going back home, but the nostalgia changes with time. When I met my husband I told him 'Look, if we are going to have a serious relationship, you will have to go to Colombia with me because I am not staying here; that is how we started our relationship. However, later with a new family, in love, with two children, I started to see positive things, to realise that flowers also have colours here; before I had not found any beauty in London. The decisive moment was when I first went back to Colombia and tried to live there and realised that everything changes and you do not find yourself. I realised I could not destabilise everyone and everything I had started here. Soon after that, I bought a hairdresser's in Seven Sisters, learned English and realised that 'My Colombia' was inside me."

While listening to their testimonies, I realised that these women's participation in the TMRC had been central to their understanding of their liminality and how meaningful their re-negotiated identity was for them and their community. They told me how the Commission had helped them to understand their own history and to forgive by sharing testimonies in ritualised forms arranged around food using collective memory as a tool for personal and societal transformation. In fact, they had started to resist their feelings of perpetual liminality by looking at their hybrid identities as something positive.

Helga Flamtermesky (2014) the Commission's founder, explained that:

"The commission aims to heal the trauma cause by armed conflict and the migration process through an innovative mechanism that addresses the exclusion of women's voices. It uses a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) methodology focusing on 'emergence', the process of empowering women to decolonise their knowledge and bodies. The process is dialogue-based, reflexive and life-long, and women's experiences are its focus, starting with recollecting the obstacles they had to overcome from the point of view of valuing their own agency. The investigation's challenge: 'empower to decolonise' is illustrated by the 'mestizaje' [mestizo] identity that we all have as immigrants, with diverse knowledge and cultures resulting from our migration, in which our subjectivities as migrant women are transformed, adapted and re-affirmed. We see 'mestizaje' as a progressive form of perceiving and confronting reality, and a border as merely epistemological, serving as a reference point enabling us to avoid enforced categories."

Bhabha (1994) understands 'liminality' as a transitory 'in between' state characterised by hybridity, offering liberation from the domination of thought and power relations, and Third Spaces as interstitial spaces 'in which cultural transformation takes place and new discursive forms are constituted' (Chakraborty 1996: 144). I would argue that the Commission serves as a Third Space. The benefits of cultural hybridity are enhanced

when women share their testimonies, as it allows them to reflect on how they have moved on, 'making [them] increasingly aware of the construction of culture and the invention of tradition, allowing [them] to go beyond a patriarchal self-limiting culture' (*Ibid*: 150).

Salome reiterated:

"Arriving at the Commission helped me to focus on my humanity, to look at myself in the mirror, to think what is happening inside me, to live my own grievances. It was like therapy: while I was sharing my story, I started to rediscover who I was, how brave I had been overcoming my 'destierro' (exile). I am a 'berraca' (superwoman), I own my own business, I have worked as a solicitor defending Latin American communities, I have learned a language, I have built a life! I started to value myself, to feel empowered again; it felt like an awakening."

Salome shows how, as women enter new relationships and areas of activity - often concerned for their survival - through business or religious institutions, they embody 'new roles, and more inclusive images of gender are created, partly by transgressing conventional expectations' (Ødegaard 2006: 360) as Maria did:

"The Commission, as an imaginary bridge, has returned Colombia to me in a way, reconciling me with my Colombian side. It has helped me to value myself and accept recognitions such as being ordained as the first Colombian female Anglican priest, something that before would have made me feel guilty for loving it here so much."

How gender is related to geographical mobility and how migration may involve danger is expressed by Ana, a student activist who left Colombia as her husband, a member of M-19, had received death threats, was shot twice in the head and survived. She explained how the personal is political, and how through the commission, she challenges the discourses of private/women and public/man spheres of action that have resulted in women 'participation in social and political life being limited' (Garcia 2007: 571), as she was now being involved in the political process of re-building the Colombia of the future:

"I am very "patriotera" [patriotic]. I would love to go to Colombia if the situation changes, if there is less war, less violence and more peace. In the Commission, through the re-compilation of testimonies, we are trying to help reconstruct Colombia's historical memory and make ourselves visible. This shows that victims in foreign lands also have to be recognised, their ideas on what kind of country they want should be listened to, not only because it relates intimately to our futures, but because we are all stakeholders in this conflict, something that the government has never taken into account before."

As Sofia reiterates;

"By pulling together 'life narratives' we get a better context of what the conflict has been, how it has affected women. If each woman who has undergone forced migration had a voice, what solution would she like to have, what kind of country would she have feel protected in. This is all positive feedback filling in the gaps that a state has and showing how they can be amended. Our stories have to go back to Colombia because we left as a result of the conflict and there has to be an acknowledgement of everything that we have suffered or overcome as immigrants, because it is not as if we have come to paradise. It is a national shame that so many Colombians have had to leave for these reasons. This is how we send policies from the UK to the Gender Commission in Bogotá."

From a feminist perspective, these life narratives show how migration and settlement bring change to traditional gender expectations, and in fact view migration as 'emancipatory.' These women's valuing of their re-negotiated identities and society's responses to their behaviour are decolonising discourses, constructed through their embodied experience having more than one gender role, inhabiting diverse places at once.

Enabling Change

Through their agency as performative elements of identity, the women interviewed have empowered themselves by promoting alternative models that have allowed them to be politically included, reflected in their constructed subjectivities. This not only allow them to understand their liminality and the positive value of their hybrid identities, but have enabled them to re-construct their identities in a way which is meaningful for them and their communities. They united under the decision, with the support of the TMRC grassroots movement, to see migration as a positive quest for progress, and to transform traumatic events into sources of reconciliation, learning, memory construction and change. They have decided to use their voices again and hope to be heard this time.

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