

Women Writing for Other Women in Colombia's Current Armed Conflict

María Mercedes Andrade  
*University of los Andes*

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**María Mercedes Andrade,**  
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**Abstract:** In her article "Women Writing for Other Women in Colombia's Armed Conflict" María Mercedes Andrade compares Patricia Lara's *Las mujeres en la guerra* (2000) and Patricia Tovar's *Las viudas del conflicto armado en Colombia: Memorias y relatos* (2006). Andrade's objective is to compare how these texts of *testimonios* deal with the question of representing women's experience and of turning oral testimonies into writing. Lara, writing for a popular audience, edits her material in order to make it more literary and mixes fictional accounts with the *testimonios* she collects. In contrast, Tovar writes for an academic public and reflects about the implications of the editorial process in ways that signal the oral character of the original material. In spite of their differences, Andrade argues that both texts are valuable attempts to represent the experiences of Colombian women in wartime.

**María Mercedes ANDRADE**

### **Women Writing for Other Women in Colombia's Armed Conflict**

During the last fifteen years Colombia has experienced a boom in the publication of life stories by both participants and victims of the country's sixty-year long armed conflict. A specific subset among them is that of *testimonios* by women or about the experiences of women. The aim of my article is to discuss the ways in which women's voices are presented and represented in two of these collections of first-person testimonies. After a brief historical contextualization, I analyze Patricia Lara's *Las mujeres en la guerra* (2000) and Patricia Tovar's *Las viudas del conflicto: Memorias y relatos* (2006), two collections of women's oral accounts of their experiences of war during the late 1990s and early 2000s written for a popular and an academic public. I compare how the books use different strategies when dealing with the question of "translating" oral testimonies into writing and address the differences in the way the voice of another is presented and/or represented in them, as well as their reception by the public. Although the genre of *testimonio* has often been viewed as a vehicle through which those "without voice" can make themselves heard, the question of who speaks on behalf of someone else and how this is done has not been analyzed sufficiently in relation with the Colombian texts which belong to this genre.

In order to understand the context in which both books appeared, a brief overview of Colombia's current armed conflict is necessary. The armed conflict includes a series of violent events perceived as continuous in spite of their various manifestations which have their roots in the violent struggle for land ownership from the 1940s until the 1960s. Marco Palacios and Frank Safford have identified the origin of the current violent conflict in the period known as *La Violencia* (640), which took place from the early 1940s until the early 1950s. During this time, the political strife between conservatives and liberals led to an undeclared civil war in the countryside, which resulted in 80,000 to 400,000 dead, and liberal guerrillas arose as a result of the assassination of Liberal sympathizers by conservatives. The following period, between 1954 and 1964, was characterized by the rise of criminal enterprises with economic objectives as both Liberal and Conservative landowners used violence in order to expel small landholders. The third and longest stage, approximately from 1961 to 1989, marks the beginning of what is commonly known as "the armed conflict," a period identified by the rise of revolutionary guerrillas in the countryside. The main guerrilla groups during this period were the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias Colombianas (FARC), and Movimiento 19 de Abril (M-19). The period from the 1990s to the present includes the advent of the drug trade and the rise of organized crime, the involvement of guerrilla groups in drug trafficking, and the creation of extremely violent paramilitary self-defense groups which were also involved in the drug trade, such as the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC[1]).

The effects of the Colombian armed conflict since the 1960s are staggering: between 1958 and 2012 over 218,000 deaths have been reported as a result of it, of which 81% were civilians (see Centro Nacional), and, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Colombia has approximately 6 million internally displaced people, a number almost equal to, but only surpassed by, the recent Syrian crisis, (see "Global Figures"). Women are disproportionately the victims of this violence, as stated in a report published in 2013 by the NGO Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres which, based on interviews with 1000 women across the country who had been affected by the country's armed conflict, found that 82.6% were victims of torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment; 72.6% were victims of forced displacement; 54.4% had been subjected to psychological abuse, and 12.74% were victims of sexual violence (see *La verdad*). As the Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos reports, the number of women who experience violence is probably higher, since violence against women is a strategy used by all actors involved in the armed conflict in order to control people and territories (<[http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/news/newsid\\_1305000/1305451.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/news/newsid_1305000/1305451.stm)>).

The situation women face in Colombia's current conflict is combined with previously existing patriarchal ideologies. Particularly rural women are subjected to a continuum of violence that juxtaposes the violence of war with other types of violence against women which already exist in times of peace (see Ruta Pacífica 30). The combination of multiple levels of oppression, namely those in place in a patriarchal culture and those that are the effects of war, makes it difficult for women affected to be able to tell their stories. One of the most immediate barriers they face in order to be able to make their experiences known is their lack of or limited access to formal education. As Pierre Bourdieu has noted, the linguistic field is not a neutral zone, but a place where power differences are played out and "speakers lacking the legitimate competence are *de facto* excluded from the social domains in which this competence is required, or are condemned to silence" (55). In varying degrees, many women affected by Colombia's armed conflict either do not know how to write or can write only precariously and are thus unlikely to be able to write their own life stories, let alone find a way to have them printed, so that the question concerning who is able to tell these life stories is not merely a theoretical one. The difficulty Colombian women living in the armed conflict face in order to make their life stories known calls to mind Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's discussion in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in which she analyzes how the experience of a marginalized female subject is represented and considers the term "representation" in its double sense: as *Darstellung* (the way the experience of another is transposed into writing) and as *Vertretung* (the ways of political representation) (279). Spivak reflects about whether the experience of a subaltern "other" can be represented in writing and asks who has the right to stand for and speak for her. She is aware that the idea of "letting the other(s) speak for himself" (294) is a naïve appeal to an impossible immediacy and she demonstrates that the subaltern subject's experience is over-determined and overwritten by the discourse of others.

Although Spivak's conclusions that the experience of a subaltern female subject remains inaccessible and that "the subaltern cannot speak" (308) are compelling, rather than reading her analysis as a disavowal of any attempt to approach these experiences, I am interested in the kind of ethical and political demands she outlines and that have been decisive in the context of discussions concerning the Latin American *testimonio*. Even if one accepts that the life stories of underprivileged women in a context of war are always mediated, certain strategies are more respectful of their experience, in regards to the way these narratives are transcribed and to how they are published.

The ethical and political implications of *testimonio* have been the subject of debate among Latin Americanists. For example, John Beverley contends that the genre allows subaltern subjects who have traditionally been "excluded from direct literary expression" (17) to bear witness, and, regarding the question of representation as *Vertretung*, to speak for an entire community. In contrast, Elzbieta Sklodowska proposes that the *testimonio* does not present the authentic voice of an individual subject or a people, but rather is still a discourse of elites speaking for others (see "Hacia una tipología") and regards the *testimonio* as a refraction twice removed from an original experience, since it is first mediated by the witness's memory, intention, and ideology and later by the intention and ideology of the writer and editor who transcribe, edit, and select the material ("La forma" 379). Sklodowska's analysis opens the way for a discussion of how the process of writing oral life stories acts as a transposition, a translation from an oral to a written medium, a fact that Latin American *testimonio* scholars have often acknowledged. Margaret Randall provides a thorough description of the process of producing a *testimonio* from the background preparation and the design of questionnaires to the transcription of oral interviews and, finally, the act of writing it down. Still, she claims that the genre allows the experience of an individual and a community to become known ("27"). In contrast, Alessandro Portelli, working in the field of oral history, discusses how transcribing structures the speaker's words and shapes the narrative in order to give it a form accessible to a reader, and he points out that traits of oral communication such as tone, intonation, and volume range, which are bearers of meaning, are all lost in writing. Portelli also explains that written transcripts add punctuation, and transform or adapt the grammar of the oral text for readability in ways that may obscure the emotional function of a speaker (98). This reflection is illuminating for discussions on how the voice of an oppressed other is represented in a *testimonio*.

Lara's *Las Mujeres en la guerra* and Tovar's *Las viudas del conflicto armado en Colombia: Memorias y relatos* are two collections of women's *testimonios*. Both Lara and Tovar are speaking for other women, since they recorded and transcribed the life stories of mostly underprivileged women who would not have been able to make their stories known and in this respect both books constitute attempts to recover the voices of subaltern subjects. However, the way Lara and Tovar approach their task, the narrative strategies they use in presenting originally oral histories, and the way their texts have been presented in order to reach their reading public are different, and each text poses questions *vis-à-vis* the problem of representation in the double sense I refer to above. Lara's and Tovar's collections evidence the two alternatives Ruth Behar identified in *Translated Woman* for the transcription of *testimonios*: a seamless "novelistic style" that creates an illusion of realism, and a "dialogical style" that maintains the "stop-and-start style of oral storytelling" (13).

Lara is a well-known journalist who has written for several influential political magazines such as *Alternativa* and *Cambio 16*, the latter of which she helped found. Her book *Las mujeres en la guerra* appeared in 2000 with Editorial Planeta, at that time the largest publishing house in the country. Published within the framework of the ultimately failed peace talks with the FARC guerrillas by President Andrés Pastrana, *Las mujeres en la guerra* was an immediate success: within one week it had sold 10,000 copies and a new edition had to be ordered by the publisher. To date, the book sold over 40,000 copies, an extremely high number by the country's standards (see "Autor/es"). Lara received the "Premio Planeta de Periodismo" under the category of "Historias de vida[2]" and, within a year of publication, she had adapted the book as a theater piece. Almost immediately after its publication, Florence Thomas, a feminist journalist and scholar who writes for *El Tiempo*, called it a "beautiful book" and stressed its deeply moving character: "no sé si es por el hecho de ser mujer pero este libro me tocó muy hondo" ("Colombia"

(<[http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/news/newsid\\_1305000/1305451.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/news/newsid_1305000/1305451.stm)>). Lara's book includes nine life stories, and one of the most surprising and unusual traits of the book is the way in which Lara chose to include the life stories of both victims and perpetrators. The stories of actors in the conflict are those of Olga Lucía Marín, a member of the FARC guerrilla group; Dora Margarita, a member of the ELN and M-19; and Isabel Bolaños, "la Chave," a woman affiliated with the AUC, while the stories of victims include those of María Eugenia de Antequera, the widow of a leftist leader; Maxelén Boada de Pulido, the widow of an army lieutenant; Myriam de Roa, the mother of a soldier; Gloria and "La Nena," a kidnapped woman and her mother; Juana Sánchez, a "desplazada"; and Margot Leongómez de Pizarro, the daughter and wife of army members and mother of two guerrilla commanders.

Although Lara presents *Las mujeres en la guerra* as a collection of *testimonios*, this classification becomes problematic if one considers that, as the author indicates in the introduction, one of the nine texts which appear in the book is a fictional account. In her introduction, Lara mentions in passing that the story of "La Nena" and her mother is a "creación literaria con nombres supuestos" (20), but she does not elaborate further. Additionally, Dora Margarita's life story is not a *testimonio* in a strict sense either, since Lara acknowledges that in order to write it she used the oral testimonies of two different women, Margarita and her friend Dora, and that she decided to combine them into one in order to be able to fill the gaps in Margarita's story, because "Margarita tiene un bloqueo y no se acuerda de la guerra" (19). The life stories compiled in the volume are varied and they narrate a spectrum of experiences which includes different social origins ranging from those of an upper class woman in Bogotá to those of a poor peasant woman from the town of Puerto Boyacá. The stories of

the women involved in the armed struggle focus on their justification for participating and they narrate the women's childhood, in Dora Margarita's case depicting a situation of extreme poverty, their growing political conviction, the hardships experienced in military camps, their clandestine work in different cities, the death of friends and partners, and, also in the case of Dora Margarita, the experience of being tortured. Some of the stories of the victims also narrate their lives from their childhood to the present such as in the case of Juana who recounts a childhood of poverty and the experience of repeatedly having to flee from one territory to another because of the violence. Other narratives focus on a crucial moment of the narrator's life such as in the case of María Eugenia de Antequera, whose narrative centers on the day of her husband's assassination while flashing back to how she met him and the history of their marriage in which anonymous death threats were a constant. Similarly, Maxelén Boada narrates her life with her husband, the moment when she received the news of his death in a struggle with the guerrillas, and the long wait for the body.

What unites the different narratives in the volume is the fact that they are the life stories of women in a context of war, a guiding thread that might suggest a feminist perspective. Lara, however, has openly disavowed the idea that her book has a feminist agenda: "No, yo no me considero feminista, yo creo que las mujeres valen no por ser mujeres sino por lo que lleven adentro" "Colombia" <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/news/newsid\\_1305000/1305451.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/news/newsid_1305000/1305451.stm)>. Nonetheless, both the title of her book and her decision to bring together in one volume the voices of both victims and perpetrators evidences the ideological underpinnings of her project and they reveal a generalization about women as a group. The problematic juxtaposition of the stories of those who have participated in the violence and those who have suffered it is justified in Lara's introduction to the book through an appeal to the "feminine" nature of the experiences recounted, beyond specific differences: "las mujeres no estamos hechas para la guerra. Así lo demuestra este libro ... La guerra nos la están imponiendo los hombres" (*Las mujeres* 17). There is, however, no unifying perspective nor a shared point of view regarding the relationship between women and war in the life stories which would allow her to make the claim that women are always opposed to war. Lara might have been able to argue that war is a masculine activity if she had focused on the lives of female victims, but by devoting more than half of a book almost three hundred pages long to the experiences of two *guerrilleras* and one paramilitary leader she seems to undercut her expressed goal. Additionally, as the story of the *guerrillera* Olga makes clear, almost 40% of guerrilla fighters are women (*Las mujeres* 115), a statement of fact that would warrant a discussion of the supposedly innate aversion of women for war.

It is true that at some point in their narratives the three women who participate as actors in the Colombian armed conflict express their lack of interest in weapons and that the two *guerrilleras*, Dora Margarita and Olga, state in almost identical terms that they do not like weapons (*Las mujeres* 42, 94). Similarly, Isabel, the paramilitary leader, ends her testimony with a condemnation of killing: "A mí pocas cosas me parecen malas: me parece malo matar" 192) and reiterates throughout her *testimonio* that she never participated actively in any of the killings by the paramilitaries because she focuses on education and community development. However, comments about how much they are ultimately opposed to war from female perpetrators are few and far between as the largest part of their narratives is devoted to explaining their conviction for their causes. Given that only Dora Margarita eventually returned to civilian life while the other two were either imprisoned or proselytizing for the guerrilla abroad, Lara's claim that women are by nature opposed to war is not substantiated. Lara's notion that women are innately against war also becomes questionable in light of what actually appear as justifications for violence by the women narrators. Isabel, for instance, defends the AUC by stating that they never committed massacres against the civilian population, but only attacked "military objectives," a claim that subsequently has been proven false by both the media and human rights organizations: "Este es un acto de guerra: los muertos que resultan de él son personas involucradas directamente en el conflicto" (186). Later on, Isabel speaks of the Mapiripán massacre in 1997, an event that gained international attention because at least thirty civilians were killed by the AUC with machetes and chainsaws and their bodies dumped into a river. Isabel claims that in this case the AUC "sí investigaron a fondo" (188) to make sure that only guerrilla members would be targeted. Another problematic approach to the question of violence appears in Dora Margarita's testimony when she narrates how she held a kidnapped hostage in an apartment in Bogotá, but insists that kidnappers are human too and "detrás del que tiene un arma hay un ser con sentimientos, una persona que se deja tocar" (55). When one juxtaposes these stories with the victim testimonies of Maxelén waiting for the body of her dead husband or of Myriam, the mother of a soldier kidnapped by the FARC, the effect is puzzling. Even if Lara is interested in humanizing the actors in the conflict, the asymmetry in the experiences she portrays is undeniable and the attempt to blur the differences by an appeal to a common femininity is, in my view, questionable.

Although Lara does not discuss the matter, it is clear that, in order to present the life stories of these women, she has made many alterations to the originally recorded materials, both in the narrative structure and the style of her text. In what regards the structure, she has chosen to begin all narratives, except for two, *in media res*. She chooses a significant moment in the life of the protagonist, such as when the new *guerrillera* arrives at the base camp for the first time, when the soldier's mother learns that her son has been kidnapped by the guerrillas, when the displaced woman learns from a neighbor that the paramilitaries have just burned down his house, etc., and then flashes back to the woman's childhood and the origin of her story. This strategy is clearly an attempt to make the stories more appealing and to create narrative suspense. In what regards style, Lara has normalized the language by erasing any signs of orality such as repetitions, redundancies or hedges and she shaped her material into complete sentences and structured paragraphs characteristic of a written, literary text. She also modified the vocabulary since there are no traces in the narratives of

any regional particularities, use of local terms, or colloquialisms. Although many of the women portrayed have had only elementary school-level education, the result is that in terms of style one cannot differentiate the story of a privileged woman from Bogotá from that of a *guerrillera* who grew up in the slums of Medellín. While this homogeneity is problematic from a stylistic point of view, one must acknowledge that Lara made the stories of all the women readable and accessible and that she has given the voices of underprivileged women the same status and importance as those of educated ones.

Given that *testimonio*[3], as Randall explains, always involves a literary reshaping of an oral text, the fact that Lara altered her original material would not in itself be problem if she had been clearer about how she had done it and about the criteria she used. That her book appeared as a work of journalism would also require an explanation of how she combined two different testimonies, those of Dora and Margarita, into a single text. Lara's explanation that she used Dora's testimony to fill in the gaps of what Margarita could not remember raises questions about the border between fact and fiction and the inclusion of the fictional story of the kidnapped teenager and her mother as a *testimonio* makes the issue even more pressing. Lara's only explanation about these questions centers on the function of the first person as a legitimizing narrative strategy and she states that she "adopted these ten personalities" ("asumí estas diez personalidades") in order to be able to tell a truth: "no me interesa juzgar a estas personas. Lo que me interesa es que salga su verdad" "Colombia" <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/news/newsid\\_1305000/1305451.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/news/newsid_1305000/1305451.stm)>).

The statement is puzzling because, since there are nine testimonies in her book, the only way to account for ten "personalities" is if one considers the characters in the fictional dialogue between the mother and daughter as two and one has to wonder why two fictional characters are placed on the same level as the women she interviewed. Additionally, one must ask how fictionalization becomes the means to give a voice to those who do not have one and by which means her authorial voice becomes an authorized representative for someone else's experience.

In contrast, Tovar handles the questions of authorial voice and the process of transcription differently in her ethnography *Las viudas del conflicto armado en Colombia*. The book was published in 2006 by ICANH (Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia) and Colciencias, the country's national institution for the advancement of scientific research and although it is not aimed exclusively at a scholarly community and can be understood by the general public, the fact that it was published by two academic presses already gives it a more restricted possibility of circulation. Tovar's study was cited mostly by social scientists and although it was received positively in this setting, it was, to my knowledge, never reviewed by the mainstream press. Tovar's *Las viudas* is a study of widowhood as a result of Colombia's armed conflict and she defines from the outset the criteria used in order to collect oral narratives and the overarching argument of her book is her interest in understanding "el otro lado de la violencia" (19), namely the experiences of the surviving women and children. Tovar aligns herself with those who are usually classed as victims of the armed conflict and while she makes clear that she does not view these women as passive victims who accept a fatal destiny, but as political actors, strategists, and negotiators (19), and her perspective implies an awareness that the experiences of those producing violence cannot be equated with that of those who must react and come to terms with it after having suffered its consequences.

The first two thirds of the four hundred page-long volume include Tovar's explanation of the pertinence of a study of widowhood in the context of the Colombian armed conflict, a methodological section in which she explains how she and her team carried out a series of fifty interviews and how she understands the role of the researcher and the ethnography itself. She also reflects on the historical context and the effects of widowhood for the women she and her team of researchers interviewed. The final third of the volume includes the *testimonios* of nine widows, which Tovar and the other researchers gathered between the years 2000 and 2003, only a few years after Lara collected the material for her volume. The women who were interviewed, and who belong to various social groups and have different political affiliations, included "displaced women, ex combatants or partners of those who were, of policemen and members of the armed forces, middle class women who were the partners of actors in the national public sphere, and of disappeared men" ("desplazadas, ex combatientes o compañeras de personas que lo hubieran sido, de la policía y las fuerzas armadas, de clase media, compañeras de personajes de la vida pública nacional y de desaparecidos" 35). The *testimonios* that Tovar chose to transcribe and include at the end of her book are those of Carlota, daughter and wife of military officers, Fabiola, daughter of communist militants and wife of an M-19 guerrilla fighter, Eneida, the wife of a disappeared M-19 *guerrillero*, Gloria, whose husband was a police officer killed during a guerrilla incursion in the town of Curumaní, Virginia, a displaced woman living in Bucaramanga, Mireya, the widow of a leftist political leader, Sonia, who witnessed the assassination of her husband, María, the widow of a union leader, and Cristina, whose husband was a police officer tortured and killed by the guerrilla.

Like Lara, Tovar is interested in the experiences of women, but her reason for this choice has little to do with defending an *a priori* argument regarding femininity and more to do with acknowledging a Colombian social reality. As she explains, since men are generally at higher risk of dying a violent death, women are usually the survivors, a fact that has not been studied in the vast existing literature concerning the armed conflict. In the context of the current conflict, Tovar argues "la viudez es una experiencia fundamentalmente femenina" (20). She is, therefore, interested in highlighting the specificity of a female experience of war, and her criteria for selecting a subset of testimonies are founded on the current historical and social situation that makes widowhood due to war overwhelmingly feminine and on the fact that this situation had not been studied to date. This framework allows her and her team to include testimonies from a variety of women whose lives have been changed by war, regardless of their political sympathies. In her introduction, Tovar discusses

some of the difficulties associated with identifying subjects who fit the category that she was interested in studying. She explains how all soldiers in the Colombian army are required to be officially single, a fact that obscures the reality of common-law marriages. These common-law marriages are recognized by Colombian law and, in fact, 70% of the fifty women interviewed were in common-law marriages (37). She also discusses how, in some cases she and her team studied, childless widows are not considered as having the same rights as widows who are mothers, reflecting patriarchal traditions (31). She explains her interest in analyzing not only the psychological aspects of widowhood in this particular context, but also the social implications of the phenomenon, the legal issues concerning the ability or inability to inherit property, the survival strategies employed, and the social effects of being a widow. Although Tovar appears as the author of *Las viudas*, she is careful to qualify how her role should be understood. In the section of the book devoted to explaining how she carried out her ethnographical research, she takes pains to explain her position as a researcher, her awareness of the implications of the process of writing the testimonies she presents and of arriving at conclusions, and she frames her study within the context of contemporary anthropology and its concern with the difficulties implied by the task of studying an "other." Tovar refers to James Clifford's paradigm for a type of anthropological writing that is conscious of the way discourse works and of the dialogue that the anthropologist undertakes with those he observes.

This awareness includes knowing the methodologies "de la lingüística y del análisis literario, de la voz narrativa y del posicionamiento" (56). Tovar also acknowledges her debt to feminist anthropology, which posits that anthropological discourse must see itself as reflective form of writing that is conscious of how knowledge is produced and how experience is represented, and mindful of the fact that the truths reached are only partial and incomplete (57). Rather than give a set of answers, she asks whether being a "native anthropologist" and a woman allows her a privileged position for a study such as the one she has undertaken, as well as which theoretical and political implications her writing may have. Additionally, she acknowledges the incomplete nature of her findings, as she explains that the information she recovered in the *testimonios* can be viewed only as partial truth in the context of these women's lives. Further, Tovar explains how the process of interviewing widows of the Colombian armed conflict forced her to go beyond the separation between herself as a researcher and the women she studied, and to enter into a situation where both parties were affected. She recognizes that the experience of collecting and writing the women's *testimonios* was transformative for her, since her own writing was affected by the way in which the country's political violence had touched her family, and she recounts how some of the women she and her team interviewed were deeply affected when they told their stories for the first time. Additionally, Tovar narrates how she and her research team were moved to go beyond their role as neutral observers and attempt to find practical ways to help the women they were studying. She points to the therapeutic and cathartic effect of the process, both for the interviewers and for those interviewed, and her project suggests how the act of narrating one's experiences opens possibilities for healing and reconstituting a community. In what regards the transcription process for the *testimonios* included at the end of the book, Tovar speaks openly about the editorial process involved, explaining that the researchers approached the women with a set of pre-defined questions, and that the narratives thus obtained are already mediated by the their intervention. After a year of collecting interviews, the researchers transcribed and wrote down the interviews, turning them into what Tovar refers to as "life stories," and which she defines as follows: "la historia de vida es un documento oral extenso sobre la vida de una persona, que luego se edita y se escribe como si fuera una autobiografía" (62). Tovar's reflection concerning the difference between an original oral life story (albeit already influenced by the researchers' questionnaire) and an autobiography is useful in that it underscores the way in which an autobiographical text does not provide immediate access to a personal experience, but rather, is the result of multiple levels of selection, and her discussion alerts the reader to the displaced and mediated character of the *testimonios* that one reads in the book.

The strategies Tovar used in writing the *testimonios* signal the mediated nature of the text that the reader encounters. Unlike Lara's book, which obscures the difference between the original oral narrative and the written text by creating an illusion of transparency, the *testimonios* in *Las viudas* point to an original oral version that is lost to the reader, and, by maintaining traits of oral communication, Tovar avoids supplanting the oral original. The narrators of the nine life stories often use colloquial expressions that are not usually found in written texts, and consequently give the reader the sense of a speaking voice. For example, Carlota, the widow of a police officer, tells how, during her husband's funeral, "los soldaditos" (literally, "the little soldiers," 273) sang a song "which is to die for" ("que es para morir" 274). She also tells how her husband's weapon had disappeared and it was found only "después de que me vieron histérica" (273), which literally means "after they saw that I was hysterical," but which is, in fact, a common, if problematic, expression which indicates that someone is very angry. In another *testimonio*, Virginia, the displaced woman, tells how she met her first husband and she narrates how he had told her "that he wanted to be my husband, and such" ("que quería ser mi novio y que tal" 350). She later speaks about how this man was always dissatisfied with what she did, and how he used to beat her: her laconic parallelism "if the food was cold, bad thing, if it was warm, bad thing" ("si la comida estaba fría, malo, si estaba caliente, malo" 350), and the repetitive use of the term "bad" ("malo") are frequent patterns in oral speech used in order to dramatize or emphasize something. Virginia's frequent use of diminutives, a characteristic of Colombian Spanish, is also noteworthy: she speaks of her "little house" ("casita" 349) and "little farm" ("finquita" 449), expressions that are avoided in writing. The narrators also often use expressions and slang which identify them according to their social class, and show whether they are more or less educated.

Aside from colloquial expressions, other traits characteristic of oral communication appear frequently in the *testimonios*. As Walter Ong has explained, "redundancy characterizes oral thought and speech" (48), and this repetitive structure is maintained in many of the texts transcribed. In one case, the woman whose husband had disappeared tells how she went to a friend's house, and she comforted her by saying: "Eneida, look at things from this point of view, you have your baby, look at your baby sleeping there, look and you'll see that she is a little part of all the love you had with Lalo" ("Eneida, mire as cosas desde este punto de vista, usted tiene a su bebé, mire a su bebé ahí durmiendo, mire y verá que ella es la partecita de todo el amor que usted vivió con Lalo" 321). In this example, the repetition of "look" ("mire"), as well as the use of the deictic "there," invite the reader to imagine the actual moment when the speaker said the words. The effect of the combined use of these strategies is the impression of reading a text that echoes what may have once been said. Since the transcribed texts maintain some of the traces of orality, even if they have been organized and edited, the reader becomes aware that the written text is a representation that tries to approach the moment when a story was told. Although *Las viudas* is a book which explicitly addresses the questions associated with *testimonio* as a form of representation in both the political and aesthetic sense, it is perhaps at a disadvantage with Lara's *Las mujeres* in its possibilities of reaching a broad readership. Although, as I have mentioned, the language of the study is accessible and the *testimonios* are written in a way that signals their original orality, the analytical aspects of the book appeal more to an academic reader. It is clear that the strategies Tovar and her team of researchers use are more efficient in making the reader aware of the voice of an underprivileged other to whom we do not have immediate access.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that Lara's text was important in its time for the way in which it made visible, to a wide audience, the unknown life stories of Colombian women who had been affected by the armed conflict. Lara's blurring of the differences between *testimonio* and fiction, which is problematic from a methodological and literary point of view, and even the narrative strategies that attempt to generate suspense, can, on the other hand, be a way for a reader to become aware of the life experiences of disempowered women and to empathize with their situation. In that sense, although *Las viudas* seems to me a more accomplished representation in both senses of the term, one cannot deny that the popularity of *Las mujeres* also allowed it to fulfill an important political role. After reading both, I am left with the desire for an imaginary text that would have been a combination of the two.

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Author's profile: María Mercedes Andrade teaches literature and literary theory at the University of los Andes. Her interests include women's writing, twentieth-century literary theory, and material culture. In addition to numerous articles, Andrade's book publications include *Ambivalent Desires: Representations of Modernity and Private Life in Colombia* (2011) and *Collecting From the Margins: Material Culture in a Latin American Context* (2016).  
E-mail: <[maandrad@uniandes.edu.co](mailto:maandrad@uniandes.edu.co)>