

## Ciudadanías en escena. Performance y derechos culturales en Colombia, edited by Paolo Vignolo

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*Ciudadanías en escena. Performance y derechos culturales en Colombia.* Paolo Vignolo, ed. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, 2009; 600 pp. + 120 photographs.



This 600-page collection of papers, essays, news accounts, artistic reflections, song lyrics, stickers, and political statements is the result of the enormously popular *Cátedra Manuel Ancizar* of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia (UNAL) in Bogotá carried out in 2008 in preparation for the hosting of the 7<sup>th</sup> *Encuentro Hemisférico* of the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics in August 2009. Nearly 170 texts produced by academics, activists, artists, students, journalists, lawyers, and diverse collectives make up this compilation, which its editor and one of the coordinators of the *Cátedra*, Paolo Vignolo, calls an “exercise in active citizenship” (20). Just as actual practices of citizenship and the semantic use of the plural (*ciudadanías*) in the title suggest, this is indeed a diverse and wide-ranging collection of analyses, commentaries, demands, and artistic interventions positioned on the intersection of politics and culture in contemporary Colombia.

The purpose of the semester-long sessions at the *Cátedra* was to deepen and advance the field of Performance Studies in the Colombian academic and artistic contexts. The designated hosts and organizers of the 7th *Encuentro*, along with an interdisciplinary team of scholars at the UNAL, chose to focus thematically on the relationship of performance and cultural rights. Simultaneously, as the *Cátedra* began developing in

# EMISFÉRICA

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mid-October 2008, the largest indigenous protest of the last four decades began in southern Colombia. Tens of thousands of indigenous peoples culminated a 43-day march called a *Minga* in the very grounds of the UNAL, which acted as host during the weeklong stay in the capital city, Bogotá. The demands of the indigenous communities condemned violence upon indigenous leaders and communities by legal (state) as well as illegal (guerrilla and paramilitary) armed groups and also integrated discussions about rights to territory, resources, mourning, and cultural practices. Both the content of the demands as well as the very performative characteristics of the protest could not and did not go unnoticed during the Cátedra sessions; week after week, news, testimonies, and denunciations of attacks and assassinations became fundamental part of the Cátedra. One of the sessions, on non-violent protests, was held outside of the UNAL after indigenous marchers arrived to campus grounds and the University's Rector decided to shut down the campus during their stay.

*Ciudadanías en escena* sought to maintain the connection between the Cátedra and the Minga by including some of the reports, accounts, and proclamations of the march in most chapters of the book. The result, however, is less dialogical and integral than Vignolo claims in his introduction. In fact, this connection often hinders a more ample and critical discussion on the question of rights, including the category of "cultural rights." The complex relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, as well as within indigenous communities, remain largely unquestioned, except as marked by the violence exercised upon indigenous groups. This violence is undoubtedly significant, yet a more textured reading could be given precisely by using performance as an analytical lens.

The book is divided into twelve chapters. All chapters were built upon sessions at the Cátedra except the first, which brings together more theoretical pieces on performance and politics with a discussion of rights and citizenship. The remaining eleven chapters comprised different sessions coordinated by an interdisciplinary team of scholars and artists. The Cátedra was held in the León de Grieff Auditorium situated next to the emblematic Plaza "Che" in the heart of the UNAL campus. None of the sessions followed a traditional classroom format, and each included a "performatic device," which was carried out throughout the sessions inside the auditorium and also in the hallways and adjoining campus spaces. Each chapter of the book reflects this unconventional academic arrangement by opening with a brief description of a "scene" that explains what happened before and during the session and lists the "actors" that played roles in it. The book does not necessarily reproduce the exact text that was read or acted during the sessions; in some cases it appears that authors have worked on more polished pieces suitable for a written narrative. Each chapter also incorporates additional materials such as news pieces, interviews, or short essays relevant to the subject, and some also selectively transcribe parts of debates held during the session either among the presenters or, in a few occasions, with members of the audience. This eclectic combination of styles and formats makes reading this large volume enjoyable and, occasionally, even welcoming, considering the harsh subject matter. However, for the traditional scholar or those seeking an in-depth analysis on the diverse topics treated during the Cátedra, this strategy could appear gimmicky and limited. Indeed, in

# EMISFÉRICA

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some cases, the more conventional texts that follow a formal style work best within the limitations of language and narrative style of the book.

Chapter Two, “On Laughter and Power”, includes the opening remarks to the Cátedra by the Dean of Arts, Jaime Franky, and the Dean of Human Sciences, Fabián Sanabria. The chapter focuses on the mordant humor of assassinated comedian, Jaime Garzón. Chapter Three explores the meanings of “Colombian-ness” through an analysis of the “uses and abuses of national symbols,” namely the campaign “*Colombia es Pasión*.” This commercial promotion has as its logo a stylized abstraction of Jesus’s Sacred Heart to which Colombia, as a nation, was officially consecrated through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is one of the most engaging chapters of the collection since it effectively explores the more performatic aspects of nation-building and its contemporary neoliberal collusion with largely exclusionary market practices. Chapter Four, “The Exile of Memory,” centers on two unfortunate procedures widespread throughout Latin America: on the one hand, the systematic employment of killings and massacres by state or parastate actors and the deployment of mass graves throughout vast parts of territory; and, on the other hand, the denial of the right to mourn. The comparison of two cases, one that explores Mexico and Argentina and the other from the Peruvian experience, serves to highlight how insidious these practices are in Colombia. Chapter Five delves into the world of *corridos prohibidos*, a musical genre based on the traditional Mexican *corrido* that explores the illegal drug trade and highlights the lives of drug traffickers. The actual session featured *narcocorrido* star Lina Fernández, who performed several songs and signed autographs on pirated CDs. From this chapter emerges one of the key themes for the entire collection, which questions and explores borders, margins, and the relationship between the legal and the illegal.

In the case of Colombia, the drug trade, in its multiple and complex features, is clearly a significant phenomenon that has marked individual and collective identities, determined national and international policies, and single-handedly established a range of conflicting symbolic and material conditions that affect entire populations. Chapter Six, one of the most comprehensive chapters in the book, focuses on the exploration of some of these phenomena through a discussion of the cultural, political, and economic uses of the coca plant. Scholars, journalists, activists, and artists explain the difference between the cultural uses and traditions of coca leaves and the chemically altered by-products created from coca such as cocaine and crack. Official repressive drug policies ignore this difference, irrationally criminalizing not only a plant—as demonstrated in a Colombian government’s campaign that uses a child’s voice to sorrowfully ask to “stop cultivating the plant that kills” (“*no cultives la mata que mata*”)—but also all cultural expressions associated with this plant. In her text, sociologist Aura María Puyana powerfully summarizes this discussion: “Not all that is illegal is illegitimate” (p. 255).

Chapter Seven spotlights a paradigmatic performative act—walking as political action. This

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chapter colludes two recent distinctly Colombian events: first, the abovementioned indigenous Minga; and second, the heroic 1,138 kilometer march carried out in 2007 by schoolteacher Gustavo Moncayo, from his home town in southern Colombia to Bogotá, in order to seek the liberation of his son, who was kidnapped in 1997 by the guerrillas of the FARC. The long-term practice of hostage taking by armed groups in Colombia is a cruel and peculiar action left effectively unresolved by different governments and only worsened by President Alvaro Uribe's adamant rejection of any negotiated outcome. The 1985 assault of the Palace of Justice by members of the guerrilla group M-19 and the consequent brutal attack by government forces to re-take the building is another tragic and similarly un-negotiated episode in Colombian history that serves as the basis for the discussion on impunity and memory of Chapter Eight. The texts and performative acts described in this Chapter point to the incredibly painful memory of this unresolved event and the deligitimizing political consequences due to the lack of justice in cases of human rights violations.

Chapter Nine addresses issues of identity and ethnicity by engaging with the notion of *mestizaje*. Some of the texts in the first part of this chapter are among the most scholarly in the book. However, the second part discusses the highly controversial performance entitled *Mucho indio* that was carried out during the session. The texts and discussion suggest the ambiguous position that Colombians have in relationship to their ethnic and racial identities, encapsulated in one of the chapter's subtitles: "Identitary postures and impostures." Chapter Ten, which corresponded to the session held outside of the UNAL after the indigenous marchers arrived onto the Bogotá campus, focuses upon the indigenous movement. The chapter is framed by the notion of "cultural agency" as a non-violent form of social struggle, a position associated with former Bogotá mayor Antanas Mockus, who participated in the session. Complementing and deepening this approach is the 2007 essay by Human Sciences' Dean Fabián Sanabria, in which he offers an interesting cultural and civic alternative to what he calls "para-institutionalism" in Colombia.

Chapter Eleven concentrates on struggles around natural resources, namely water. The chapter poignantly connects cultural, natural, and economic rights and features some of the most poetic texts of the book. Finally, Chapter Twelve re-engages with questions of nationalism by looking at matters of sovereignty, independence, and authenticity through the contemporary revamped uses of Latin American War of Independence hero Simón Bolívar. This chapter and the book end on a juxtaposition, which in fact permeates most of the text, between the depressing news of the attack by the Colombian army on indigenous leader Aída Quilcué (in which she was severely injured and her partner was killed) and the overall hopeful balance of the effects of the Minga on Colombian citizenship practices.

*Ciudadanías en escena* is thought provoking, and part of its appeal rests on its diverse themes as well as its mostly non-academic tone. Yet this tone is also limiting. Analytically, I was left with a need to further investigate the very categories that the book invites us to explore. The texts unevenly incorporate performance theory and notions of rights, difference, and

citizenship. Various actual practices of citizenship and cultural rights are explored; however, the discussions are dominated by narratives of violence, impunity, and lack of rights. What becomes salient but remains largely unquestioned, then, is, how normal are the abnormal forms of citizenship in Colombia? Or, to use the Benjaminian thesis, how is the state of emergency more a rule than an exception? The denunciations of the repressive practices exercised by the Uribe government, along with the violent presence of paramilitary forces throughout Colombia, rightfully dominated the sessions of the Cátedra. Nonetheless, the text lacks a deeper discussion on the character of dominant performative devices that would enable us to better understand how these are constructed and deployed. There is also a bias in the tone of the condemnation of violence since it only marginally addresses the violent behavior perpetrated by guerrilla groups. While I do not believe all forms of violence can be equated, and I largely agree with the strategy presented in the book to critically examine dominant narratives that attribute violence only to the guerrillas, it would also enrich and make more complex our understandings of the Colombian context to better address all actors and their practices. These critiques, nonetheless, are not encumbrances for an enticing take on some key contemporary concerns on and in Colombia. The book, like the Cátedra that produced it as well as the 7<sup>th</sup> Encuentro, offers a stimulating and innovative intervention in how we study, understand, and implement culture and rights.

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