

María Victoria Uribe Alarcón. ***Hilando fino: voces femeninas en La Violencia***. Bogotá: Editorial Universidad del Rosario, 2015, 272 pp.

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The front cover of *Hilando fino: voces femeninas en La Violencia*, depicts seven women “of a certain age” peering into the crack rent by the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo in the concrete floor of the Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall in 2007, in her widely acclaimed installation *Shibboleth*. With remarkable eloquence and conciseness, the image on the cover distills the central objective of this important book by historian and anthropologist María Victoria Uribe Alarcón. By directing an attentive and dialogic female gaze towards the testimonies of the now elderly women who experienced the traumatic period of recent Colombian history known as *La Violencia*, Uribe Alarcón sets out to explore the fault lines created by this seismic historical moment and to sound out the silent void and the many ruptures left in its wake. A vast amount of historical, social scientific and literary scholarship has shed light on this period of violence, which was unleashed by the assassination of the presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948 and which persisted until the 1960s; still, this book takes a particularly attentive approach to the details of women’s lived experiences of the period, including the physical, sexual and psychological violence, dispossession and ongoing displacement, and the impact of disrupted families, social ties, and poverty.

*Hilando fino* presents the accounts of four women, now in their seventies and eighties, who were young girls and young women at this key moment in Colombian history which, despite informing Colombian political, social and cultural life ever since, has been laid to rest by a collective pact of silence, a break in intergenerational memory. Collected from interviews conducted between January 2013 and August 2014, these testimonies are illuminated by Uribe Alarcón’s insightful analysis, and supported by an interdisciplinary theoretical approach that draws upon historical, literary, and psychoanalytical sources. Yet it is through the author’s recourse to oral history and the prominence given to oral accounts—which occupy a significant proportion of the text— of Leonor, Teresita, Olga and María

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Teresa, that Uribe Alarcón is able to foreground the women's first-hand accounts and thus reinsert women's voices into "el universo fundamentalmente masculino de La Violencia" (p. 3). The most important accomplishment of this study is not only to bring these voices into the historical narrative, "voces apenas inaudibles en la trama narrativa que existe sobre La Violencia en Colombia" (p. 255), but also to demonstrate the kind of sensitive and empathetic acts of listening and dialogue that are paramount to bringing about such historical salvaging.

From the outset, the author establishes the central theoretical frame, based on Walter Benjamin's metaphorical figure of the "angel of history", which accounts for the generational silence that surrounds La Violencia. Uribe Alarcón draws a contrast between Benjamin's "angel of history", who turns its head and fixes its gaze on the events of history, witnessing and trying to understand, yet unable to repair the historical ruins, and Colombia, prevented from turning to face the events of history by an unrelenting race towards progress and modernity. Uribe Alarcón's historical contextualisation traces the gap between social classes, "una distancia casi insalvable entre las mujeres rurales que vivieron en carne propia La Violencia y las mujeres ciudadanas de clases altas, que la vieron pasar muy a lo lejos" (p. 256), by firstly presenting the testimonies of two women from Bogotá's upper class, Olga and María Teresa, which delineate a stark contrast with the way of life and concerns of Leonor and Teresita, two women from the countryside. An historical overview is offered through the examination of the consequences of the assassination of Gaitán, and the circumstances that gave rise to the armed agrarian resistance in the countryside in the region of the south of Tolima, the birthplace of the FARC in 1964, the same place where in 2016, representatives of the guerrilla organization forged an historic peace agreement with the Colombian government. With reference to the works of Dori Laub, Shoshana Felman, Kathy Caruth, and Hannah Arendt, the study draws out a distinction between the articulation of individual trauma and the experience of Leonor and Teresita, proposing the notion of "cultural trauma" as better suited to the Colombian context and, more specifically, to the quotidian and banalized experience of violence of women in the countryside.

The primary strength and main argument of the book is found in the testimonies of Leonor and Teresita who relate their lived experience of the years of La Violencia. Throughout, Uribe Alarcón forcefully underscores the fact that their accounts are not characterized by details of the acts or atrocities of the conflict's protagonists, but by descriptions of the struggle to find food, shelter, clothing, and medications for their children, mothers, siblings and for themselves. These women's experience of La Violencia is shown to be an effect of finding themselves solely responsible for the care of their families in the absence of the adult male members, after being driven out of their homes and away from their social networks, an experience frequently accompanied by ongoing, continuous displacement. In particular, Leonor testifies to the absence in her life of anything that might be said to resemble a childhood and to the disintegration of her relationship

with her mother, ruptures that are replicated in the next generation with her own daughter. Teresita describes responding to the extreme violence of the period by becoming politically engaged and taking up a role as community leader.

In *Hilando fino*, Uribe Alarcón offers an explanation for the historical pattern of women's tendency to break the cycle of violence and retribution that characterized La Violencia. The interviews with Leonor and Teresita debunk any essential explanations about women's relation to violence and testify to the sense of economic and emotional responsibility for others —children, parents and siblings— that led women to choose survival over vengeance. This book sits in interdisciplinary dialogue with significant literary works, such as Albalucía Ángel's *Estaba la pájara pinta sentada en el verde limón* (1975) or Laura Restrepo's *La multitud errante* (2001), that entwine historical and narrative discourses, to train a sustained and interrogative gaze on the interstices of historical narratives, amplifying the voices of elderly women who are thus projected into contemporary historical discourse, not as the passive angels of history, but as its agents.

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