

International  
Institute of  
Social Studies

*Erasmus*

**Working Paper**  
**No. 616**

**Colombian women and U.S. servicemen**  
Encounters and experiences from Melgar, Colombia

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February 2016

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\* ISS MA Research Paper Award winner for the academic year 2014-2015

ISSN 0921-0210

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## **Abstract**

More than 50 years of armed conflict in Colombia have permeated the entire society with a culture of violence and war, which have left few citizens untouched. A crucial decision in the history of the conflict was to invite U.S. to take part in the Colombian war. What did this mean at local and interpersonal levels? This study – the first scholarly treatment of transnational relationships between Colombian women and U.S. servicemen – considers the case of Melgar, the location of two Colombian military bases with a permanent presence of U.S. military personnel, to explore through locals' narratives the implications of U.S. intervention in the conflict on the daily lives of Colombian women. It addresses this topic by focusing on the sexual and/or romantic relationships that have developed between local women and U.S. servicemen in relation with notions and practices of gender, sexuality, race, nationality and class.

A key finding is that participants' experiences defy traditional frame-works for analysing the relationship between women and war, as well as op-positional constructs that split and give an incomplete interpretation of women's lived experiences such as the private/public divide. This paper offers an account of the multiplicity, fluidity and complexity of women's lived experiences in militarized contexts, by concluding that local women that participated in the research embrace militarization by understanding their relationships with U.S. servicemen as beneficial and desirable. In doing so, they contribute to the maintenance of oppressive social orders and reinforce militarization.

Furthermore, beyond serving military ends in the context of the militarization of Melgar, the experiences of participants are the product of the simultaneous interaction of the international and the local, the North and the South, the material and the emotional, the private and the public; and women's social, economic and physical security and support, as well as their informed consent and agency to desire, enjoy their sexuality and make decisions while navigating within the constraints and possibilities of their gendered, militarized, racialized, sexualized and nationalized realities.

## **Keywords**

Colombian conflict, U.S. servicemen, women, gender, Melgar, sexuality, race, nationality, transnational relationships, power relations, intersectionality.

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## **Acronyms**

CACON 4	Comando Aéreo de Combate No. 4 (Air Combat Command No. 4)
ICBF	Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (Colombian Institute of Family Welfare)
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—Ejército del Pueblo, FARC–EP (The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army)
SSM	Snowball Sampling Method
PKOs	Peacekeeping operations
UN	United Nations
U.S.	United States

# Colombian women and U.S. servicemen<sup>1</sup>

Encounters and experiences from Melgar, Colombia

## 1 Introduction

More than 50 years of armed conflict in Colombia have permeated the entire society with a culture of violence and war, which have left few citizens untouched. Both in rural and urban areas, the people of Colombia have been immersed in a ‘deeply militarized socialization’, through which the ‘consciousness of each and every member of society has been militarized to some degree’ (Mazali 2004: 50). Decisions made either in the presidential office or in the meetings of the illegal groups have not only affected the dynamics of the conflict, but they have also directly influenced the daily lives of Colombians in many complex ways.

A crucial decision in the history of the Colombian conflict was the ‘explicit and conscious decision to invite external actors—mainly the U.S.—to participate in the Colombian war’, especially during the administration of President Alvaro Uribe from 2002 to 2010, known as the internationalization of the conflict (Borda 2007: 67).

Such a strategy strengthened and expanded the already existing presence of the United States in the conflict, especially through military assistance. According to the Colombian National Center of Historical Memory (2013:54) ‘There is no doubt that the United States has been the country that has most influenced the Colombian conflict. (...) Its influence has been marked by political tutelage as well as financial support.’ Colombian scholars (Vega 2015: 1; Rojas 2006: 39) have supported this claim by stating that due to its prolonged involvement, the United States cannot be considered just an external influence, but rather a direct actor in the conflict.

The case that best exemplifies the internationalization of the conflict is the strategy known as Plan Colombia, a policy that ensured the continuation of the U.S. intervention in Latin America and the reconsolidation of its power in the region (Petras 2000: 4617). Launched in 2000, it was a multibillion-dollar program designed to ‘end Colombia’s long armed conflict, eliminate drug trafficking, and promote economic and social development’, mainly by military means (Veillette 2005: 1). But in practice it was, on the one hand, an unsuccessful anti-drug trafficking strategy that ultimately fuelled the already wide-spread human rights violations in Colombia (Amnesty International n.d.), and on the other hand, a manoeuvre that led to the ‘proliferation’ and ‘decentralization’ of U.S. military presence in the region (Lohn 2009: 71).

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank my supervisor Dubravka Žarkov for her invaluable support and guidance, and to the people in Melgar, especially the participants who trusted me with their intimate experiences. Without their voices this research would not have been possible. Sincere thanks to my second reader, Helen Hintjens, for her support and helpful comments, and to all ISS lectures for exposing me to new knowledge, full of mind blowing and inspiring ideas.

At the time, Plan Colombia made Colombia the third biggest recipient of U.S. military aid after Israel and Egypt. 'From 2000 to 2007, Colombia received unprecedented levels of U.S. aid totalling more than US\$5 billion, more than three-quarters of which went to the Colombian military and police for counterinsurgency and antinarcotics operations and oil pipeline protection' (Bouvier 2009: 5). In addition, the strategy 'dramatically increased U.S. military involvement in Colombia' (Lohn 2009: 84). For instance, by 2009 U.S. military personnel were 'capped at eight hundred' (Bouvier 2009: 6). All were granted diplomatic immunity, which ultimately gave them a position of impunity.

In 2009 the U.S. military's lease of its base in Manta, Ecuador, expired. In order to keep its presence in the region, the U.S. government signed an agreement for cooperation and technical assistance in defence and security with its best ally in 'the neighbourhood'—Colombia, which had previously 'offered to host operations being run out in Manta' (Lohn 2009: 89). The agreement allowed the U.S. the use of seven Colombian military facilities located around the country, where U.S. military presence is 'more politically acceptable' (Lohn 2009: 89). Shortly after, the Colombian constitutional court ruled the agreement unconstitutional. However the ruling did not affect U.S. military missions in Colombia covered by earlier agreements still in force, such as the bilateral agreement of 1974 that authorized the presence of U.S. military in Colombia in order to provide permanent consultative and technical assistance to the Colombian army, navy and air force (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Colombia 1974: 1).

Yet, the effects that the presence of U.S. troops in Colombian territory has had on the population, especially on women, has been largely undiscussed. As stated by Enloe (2014: 8) 'issue-making is a political activity'. The militarized experiences of women need to be taken seriously, particularly when the costs are less visible. 'To invest ones curiosity solely in women as soldiers is to treat the militarization of so many other women as normal' (Enloe 2000: xii). In fact, just by making 'problematic what is conventionally taken as "logical" or natural' it is possible to expose militarization and make sense of its implication on women's lives (Geuskens 2014: 4).

This research considers what, in the minutely studied Colombian conflict, has been treated as normal, trivial and 'imaged to be without explanatory significance' (Enloe 2014:8). It is concerned with the role that the presence of U.S. servicemen hosted in two bases located at the edge of Melgar, a touristic town of Colombia, plays in the lives of women. Inasmuch as 'sexuality is central to the complex web of relationships between civil and military cultures' (Enloe 1993: 150), the research focuses on the relationships that have developed between local women and U.S. servicemen hosted at the Colombian air base CACON 4 and the military base of Tolemaida. To be precise, I will look at how the notions and practices of gender, sexuality, nationality and race intersect to inform and shape the relationships of local women with U.S. servicemen in the context of the militarization of Melgar.

These relationships have included prostitution and various forms of sexual violence, but also other experiences that are often overlooked in conflict and militarized settings, such as consensual and romantic sexual encounters.

Sexuality, as Schneider (1993: 399) states, ‘may simultaneously be a source of women’s experiences of victimization and oppression, and a site of women’s agency and resistance’. Not all military men are sexual predators, not all women are simply victims or passive sexual objects. Approaching women solely as victims will not only reinforce ‘binary divisions between men and women’ as argued by Mohanty (1988: 64) but also deny ‘women sexual agency that is critical to their humanity and dignity’ (Simic 2012: 53).

Accordingly, just by ‘thinking beyond the box of victimhood’ it is possible to understand the complex and sometimes contradictory women’s experiences that coexist in the context of armed conflict and militarization (Simic 2012: xii). Thus, in order to avoid falling into what Schneider (1993: 389) has called the false dichotomy between women’s victimization and women’s agency, this research shifts the focus from the dominant characterization of women as victims by considering women’s sexual agency as an equally important focus of analysis. In doing this, I aim to put in evidence the multidimensionality, fluidly and complexity of women’s experiences, and to explore women’s space for action under constraints of militarization and violent conflict.

This research is divided in six chapters. Chapter 1 gives an account of the general aspect of the research, such as background, research questions, methodology and methods. Chapter 2 reflects on the main theoretical insights that support this study, revolving around ideas about the militarization of women’s life; militarized spaces as gendered and sexualized places of power; transnational heterosexual relationships, and studies regarding race, sexuality and gender in Latin America. Chapter 3 and 4 explores the meanings of locals’ narratives in light of militarization theory and intersectionality. I begin with a discussion of the particular conditions that create these narratives; then I explore the forms that guide and give them shape. Chapter 5 discusses participants’ motives to relate with U.S. servicemen. Finally, chapter 6 presents the conclusions of the research.

## **2 Contextualising the research problem**

### **2.1 Background**

Recently the issue of the presence of U.S. military troops in Colombia has been placed in the national spotlight following the reporting of 54 cases of rape and sexual abuse of women and girls by U.S. military personnel hosted in two Colombian military bases between 2003 and 2007 (Vega 2015: 46). The military bases are located at the edge of Melgar, a touristic town of 31.920 people, which profits from visitors’ and locals’ consumption primarily of alcohol, entertainment and sex. This tropical-weather town, located three hours by bus from the capital city of Colombia, Bogotá, has been the ideal rest and recreation place for the military personnel stationed in the two bases, CACOM 4 (Air Base Luis F. Pinto) and Tolemaida. Founded in 1954 by Colombia’s dictator, General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, the Tolemaida Military Fort is the most important military training base of the Colombian National Army, and it



is an international centre for training in counter-insurgency warfare (Finn 2014: 1).

The cases of sexual violence were cited by the Colombian scholar Renan Vega, one of the authors of a report that was published in February 2015 by the Historical Commission on the Armed Conflict and its Victims in Colombia, jointly formed by the Colombian government and the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army). The hope of the Commission is that the input of the report would 'contribute to a better understanding of the conflict, which is a necessary condition for overcoming it' (Comisión Histórica del Conflicto y sus Víctimas: 2015).

The report cites the cases in the section that considers the international dimensions of the armed conflict, specifically the direct and indirect intervention of the United States. In the report Vega states that the U.S. soldiers filmed the sexual abuses and sold the films as pornographic material (Vega 2015: 46). Yet, there is not a preponderance of evidence backing these claims. Only one case has been litigated and no pornographic videos have been found directly related with the cases (Contravía 2011).

In Melgar, the stories of the victims have become an urban legend, although Vega has confirmed that he does not have testimonies or other documents to support his claims. Even if the figure may be inaccurate, Vegas' statement has made visible sexual violence, one of the often-silenced aspects of the presence of the U.S. military troops in Colombia. However, hardly anything is known about how the presence of U.S. servicemen in the Colombia has altered women lives.

It is important to highlight that in an informal conversation in CACON 4, a Colombian serviceman instructed me about the complex hierarchy of the military, which in Colombia maintains a direct relation with the social class structure. He also made it clear that U.S. servicemen hosted in Colombian military bases are not "rank-and-file" soldiers. As he explained, they are lieutenants, which means that they have a comparatively high rank in the military hierarchy and do not have the same training as the privates. Nonetheless, I will refer to all U.S. military men in CACON 4 and Tolemaida as U.S. servicemen to avoid giving inaccurate information.

## **2.2 Methodology**

Inasmuch as 'feminist analysis make women visible in ways that make men's assumptions about their own manliness visible' (Cockburn and Enloe 2012: 550), I followed a feminist-standpoint approach. Accordingly, women's concrete experiences are the point of entry of this study.

I follow Messias and DeJoseph (2004: 45) by assuming on the one hand that women's realities are 'multiple, multi-layered, and fluid' and as such, 'are constantly shaped' by the specific context in which they are located, as well as by notions and practices 'that include, but are not limited to' gender, sexuality, race, class, nationhood, culture, politics, and economics. On the other hand, based on a standpoint feminist epistemology, I suppose that in a research process 'the relationship between knower and what is to be known are

subjective and interactive'. Accordingly, the findings of this research are the result of an interactive process of data creation between the locals, especially the women who participated in the investigation, and me as the researcher.

### **2.3 Methods: observing, listening and interacting**

In the interest of collecting sufficient data I spent 35 days in Melgar, from August 8 to September 12. During this time I conducted an observation exercise in order to have a broader understanding of the context in which the relationships between local women and U.S. servicemen take place. The observation was conducted every day at different times, mainly in the commercial zones of the town, as well as recreational places, especially pubs and nightclubs. The observation was unstructured because this format permitted more flexibility to take the notes I considered most relevant, and it was informal, as it was conducted mainly in the streets and entertainment zone of the town, where it would have been impractical to inform the people passing by of the reason of my presence. As I lived with a local family most of the time during the fieldwork, I was able to become immersed in the social dynamic of the town and learn some cultural signs that later worked in my favor while negotiating access and interviewing locals.

In addition, acknowledging that women 'are the true experts on their life experiences and express authentic subjectivity and agency' (Roets & Goedgeluck in Sosulski 2010: 36), I interviewed six local women that have related sexually and/or romantically with U.S. military men; two of them have children as a result of these relationships. Interviews were informal and semi-structured in order to best open lines of communication with the interviewees.

Though I initially planned to audio-record the interviews, once on the ground I sensed the fear of exposure and the general mistrust of the people who I met, which led me to abandon that idea and rely solely on my fieldwork diary notes. Some of the women asked me if I was recoding before they started answering my questions. They were clearly more willing to participate and disclose information thanks to the fact that I did not record the interviews. To make individuals feel more comfortable talking to me I also assured them of confidentiality and agreed to conduct the interviews in the place and at the time most convenient to them.

Following the lead of feminist researchers (Riessman 1987; Messias & Dejeoseph 2004) instead of asking a list of pre-established questions I encouraged interviewees to talk freely about their relationships with U.S. servicemen. In the process the interviews took the form of 'guided conversations' vis-à-vis the research questions, which ultimately allowed 'for a free flow of thoughts' (Messias and Dejeoseph 2004: 43).

Due to the difficulty I encountered to locate and access the women I wanted to interview, I did not have to select them. Rather, I interviewed the few women I was able to reach, who were willing to talk. Interviews took between one and three hours.

Inasmuch as the Snowball Sampling Method (SSM) 'directly addresses the fears and mistrust common to the conflict environment and increases the

likelihood of trusting the researcher by introduction through a trusted social network' (Cohen and Arieli 2011:423), I relied on this method aware of the challenges I would encounter on the ground in gaining access to the women. The SSM technique helped me to enter into a social network and generate the cooperation needed to locate, access and get involved with a group of local women that were willing to share their experiences with me. Some of the women did not want to be interviewed alone and came to the interview accompanied by a friend who also participated in the interview. However, not all the women I interviewed were part of the same network.

Furthermore, I had around 20 informal but substantial conversations with people living in the town, including local authorities, women and men I encountered in different places, and Colombian military personnel. These conversations helped me to better understand the context in which local women related with U.S. servicemen and to grasp the general perception in the town about these relationships and the women.

The interviews took place in different settings. Some were conducted in a pub owned by one of my gatekeepers and others in more quiet places. Although conducting the interviews in the pub was a good opportunity to know how the women interact with local men and other women, it was hard to maintain focus on the interview because the music was very loud and friends of my interviewees were passing by.

After the media sensation caused by the report about 54 Colombian women and girls allegedly sexually abused by U.S. troops, some of the women I interviewed had a bad experience with an international media channel that went to the town searching for news about the U.S. military. The channel secretly paid a woman to film other local women's activities with their American friends, according to the women I interviewed, to manipulate the information and damage the reputation of the military. As a consequence, I faced a highly suspicious attitude at the beginning of fieldwork and had a difficult time persuading my gatekeepers to engage in my research. However the rapport between the interviewees and me was not a problem once I gained their trust. I was able to find a common ground with the women I interviewed appealing to my Colombian identity and my own experiences in transnational relationships. As a woman interested in hearing their stories and willing to share my own experiences, I was able to talk with my respondents in a friendly and open way.

It is also worth noting that my position as a Colombian student coming from a European institute influenced in a positive way my research, as people seemed to take me more seriously because of the fact I was studying outside of the country. My gatekeepers introduced me as a Colombian student coming from Europe and my interviewers were curious about my personal life.

Due to the fact that this research is based on a very small sample of the local women that have engaged in sexual relationships with U.S. servicemen, I cannot generalize the experiences of the women of Melgar or claim that they are representative of a wider population. I also recognize that – due to lack of official information and the generally negative image of the U.S. military as presented in the Colombian and international media – I expected to encounter

experiences of sexual violence. Yet, the women I spoke with told a different story.

Nevertheless, according to what I learned on the ground, stories of sexual harassment, abuse and exploitation do exist, but the women involved have left the town, have been silenced for shame and public ridicule, or are not interested in recounting their experiences. It is also important to mention that during the fieldwork locals insisted on the sensitiveness of the topic due to their relations with the U.S. army and the Colombian military. Some people openly told me they would not get involved, and others avoided my invitation to participate in the research or did not reply to my requests for official information, such as those in the town's municipality and in the Ministry of Defence.

## **2.4 How the interviews with the women were obtained**

As anticipated, it was very difficult to gain access to the women I wanted to interview. In order to do so, I had to go through more than one gatekeeper, which was a very slow process that demanded a lot of patience and persistence.

One of the contacts that I worked with on the ground, a tattoo artist that is known for tattooing U.S. military personnel in the town, was the first gatekeeper with whom I worked. I contacted him before my arrival and his support was very valuable, but he did not have direct access to the women I was looking for. Once I got on the ground he introduced me to different local people who shared their knowledge with me, as well as what they had heard and thought about the presence of the U.S. servicemen in the town and their relationships with local women. But none of these conversations led me to identify the women I was interested in interviewing. However, by getting involved in the tattoo artist's social network I was able to gain the trust of the people that ultimately would introduce me to some of the women.

After 15 days of fieldwork I was troubled because I had not been able to talk with the women I wanted to interview. I did observe a group of them in a nightclub accompanied by U.S. servicemen, but I had not had the opportunity to approach them. Thanks to one of the many informal conversations I had with local people, I learned about a pub that was run by a couple that some years ago owned one of the most popular nightclubs among the U.S. servicemen. I decided to visit the pub and introduce myself to the patrons of the bar.

The owner, Carmen,<sup>2</sup> a friendly young woman, told me that when the old nightclub was running she did not pay attention to the attitudes of U.S. servicemen, because her role was to serve them well and get a good tip. When I asked her about the women who accompany the U.S. servicemen, she replied that local women are lazy and are only interested in the presents and money that the Americans give them.<sup>3</sup> While talking with Carmen a young woman

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<sup>2</sup> All the names in this study are invented to protect the identity of the people involved.

<sup>3</sup> Informal conversation with Carmen (August 2015).

came to the bar. Carmen told me she was one of the women that I was looking for. Later that same night, Carmen asked the woman to approach the bar and I seized the opportunity to introduce myself and inform her about my research. Her name was Clara, and she agreed to talk with me.

I met with Clara late at night in front of the church of the town and we walked together to Carmen's pub. Our conversation was amicable and felt authentic. Thanks to Clara I met Camila, who agreed to talk with me in Carmen's pub accompanied by Clara the following day. During Camila's interview I was introduced to Maria. I met with her days after also late at night at the same table in Carmen's pub. Maria is a bartender in one of the nightclubs most frequented by the U.S. military, and has a group of friends who like to go out with them. Even though we had a very agreeable conversation, I was unable to persuade her to introduce me to her friends. She said the U.S. servicemen were very good friends of her, and that she and her friends did not want to affect them in any way.<sup>4</sup>

Time was running out and I felt frustrated, but I was determined to exhaust all my possibilities. I decided to use my field notes on the physical appearance of the women I had seen accompanying the U.S. servicemen to locate them on Facebook. Thanks to a tattoo, I was able to identify one of the women. I wrote her a short message to introduce myself and to explain my research. Luckily she replied. Though she found it strange and even amusing that I was interested in her relationships with U.S. servicemen, she agreed to talk. She met me accompanied by one of her friends, who was also part of the group that I saw in a nightclub, and we had a group discussion. Talking with them I realized that Maria was part of their network. Though she did not directly introduce me to them, she had given them positive references about me and the way I had conducted the interview with her, which ultimately influenced their decision to participate in my research.

Aware of the limitations that the SSM technique has by relying on referrals, such as 'the likelihood of excluding individuals who do not belong to the specific network being accessed', and the possibility of 'enlisting respondents of relatively homogeneous affiliation' (Cohen and Arieli 2011: 428), I was lucky to get the contact of a Colombian military men stationed in CACOM 4, who introduced me to a different setting in which I was able to access a woman who did not belong to the initial network. Marcela was my last interviewee just a day before I left the town.

## **2.5 Obstacles faced during fieldwork**

Since the beginning of the project I understood that the topic was complicated and I assumed that conducting interviews with local women about their private relationships with U.S. servicemen was going to be a very challenging task. On the ground many people told me that my topic was highly sensitive, and some even advised me to change it radically or to totally forget about it. I encountered a culture that prefers silence to scandal, but as stated by Alonso

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Maria (August 2015).

and Koreck ‘maintaining the silence is to cede terrain’ (in Fine 1992: 221); it is to let the oppressive, discriminatory and violent material manifestations of militarism to further get entrenched in the town; it is to embrace militarization. This, along with the secrecy with which some people talked about the U.S. military and their relationships with locals – rather than making me doubt the relevance of my research – led me to believe that there was a substance in the topic, and it motivated me to continue.

In addition, inviting women to participate in my research was a question for ‘disclosure’ that implicated the creation of a space where the existent power inequalities between them and me were identified, but as noted earlier, played in my favour. One of the more complicated moments I faced during fieldwork was the ethical dilemma when deciding whether I was willing to pay women in order to have them participate in the research, as one of my gatekeepers suggested. Discussing that possibility with Mr. Fabio, a local man, he said ‘If you pay me, I would make up whatever story for you’.<sup>5</sup> I wanted real stories, and most importantly, I wanted to develop relationships based on ‘mutuality and trust’ between the women and myself, and offering them money in exchange for information was clearly not the way to do it (Messias and DeJoseph 2004: 45).

## 2.6 ‘Making meanings of meaning-making’<sup>6</sup>

Personal narratives are ‘suitable documents for illuminating several aspects of gender relations’ and ‘are situated at the intersection of human agency and social structure’ (Personal Narratives Group 1989: 5). Therefore, in order to analyse the interviews, I used narrative analysis as a tool to ‘bring the experiences of women into knowledge’ and shed light on the ways in which militarization constrains women’s lived realities (Thorne 1990: 391).

To echo Fraser’s interesting analogy ‘narrative analysts may be likened to chefs who do not feel the need to adhere to recipes (...) perhaps the greatest difference between chefs and narrative researchers is, however, that the latter – especially those using a critical social work approach – have a keen interest in and an espoused commitment to understanding the politics of everyday life’ (Fraser 2004: 197).

In line with Messias and DeJoseph (2004: 44) I view ‘women’s stories as representations of their experiences’. Accordingly, I approach them as ‘the fundamental unit of knowledge’ for my analysis (Buford in Messias and DeJoseph 2004: 41). Yet, I acknowledge that by selecting and interpreting others’ stories I will be telling stories of my own. Thus, I am not hopping to produce ‘the right knowledge, or indeed, the truth’, instead I aim to give voice to an angle of interpretation among the ‘multiple possibilities for representing’ these stories (Fraser 2004: 196- 197).

As stated by Drewery and Winslade (in Fraser 2004: 182) ‘although we do not have complete control over the possibilities of our lives, we can only ever

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Mr. Fabio (August 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Title of a book on feminist research methodology by Wickramasinghe (2010).

speak ourselves into existence within the terms or stories available to us'. Hence, in interpreting participants stories, I follow Wood's (2001) statement that individual stories are personal accounts as much as they are social, which is to say that they are at the same time 'embodied in a specific person' (Frank in Wood 2001: 242) while 'culturally constructed, sustained, reproduced, and sometimes altered' (Wood 2001: 241). In other words, we all are embedded in 'ready-made narratives offered by the culture' in which we are socialized, which we use to 'experience and comprehend life' (Fisher in Wood 2001: 241; Wood 2001: 244). Following Wood, and in accordance with the research questions, I identified the themes that are prevalent in the narratives and then analysed how they are informed by the notions and practices of femininity and masculinity, in intersection with sexuality, race, class and nationhood.

The main stories around which the analysis revolves are those of six Colombian women between 22 and 38 years old, of middle-to-low class economic stature, brown skin and heterosexual, who have been in one or more sexual and/or romantic relationships with U.S. servicemen. Their ages at the time they were involved in their first relationship ranged from 18 to 26. I make a distinction between sexual, sexual and romantic, and romantic relationships in order to encompass the different types of relationships reported by participants. While all of the women reported being involved romantically with a U.S. serviceman, one stated that she has not being involved sexually with her partner. Most of the women (five of six) reported having more than one relationship. The number of relationships ranges between one and 'many', as one of the participants indicated. The length of the relationships varied: from three days, two months to three years.

### **3 Theorising militarization, transnational heterosexual relationships, agency, gender, sexuality and race**

The experiences of women in war have been widely researched. Yet, most of the feminist (and mainstream) literature about women, militarization and conflict, written in the last two decades, takes women's vulnerability and victim-hood as the starting point to inquire about the impact of the war in their personal lives. This chapter discusses different ideas about militarization of women's lives beyond the supposed association between femininity, sexual violence, and victimization, and explores some insights about heterosexual transnational relationships in war settings in relation with gender, sexuality and race.

#### **3.1 Militarization of women's life**

Regarding women and militarization, Cynthia Enloe is without doubt the most important feminist thinker. Enloe claims that governments exercise different pressures on women, 'pushing them, luring them to lend their emotional and physical labor to militarization' (Cockburn and Enloe 2012: 552). For instance, Enloe (1990:84) analyzes how women's sexual behavior is controlled indirectly by powerful political actors on the world stage 'for the sake of protecting

soldiers' sexual pleasures'. She approaches the topic of militarization and the role that military bases play in local communities, especially in women's lives, through the lenses of sexual politics. Particularly, Enloe (1990: 86) positions women around military bases as 'sexually available objects', as doomed to serve 'the social and sexual needs of military men'.

Enloe (1990: 195) concludes her argument by asserting a palindrome that, as she describes it, is one of 'the most disturbing feminist insights': the personal is international. In Enloe's words 'the personal is international insofar as ideas about what it means to be a respectable woman or an honorable man have been shaped by colonizing policies, trading strategies and military doctrines'. At the same time, 'the international is personal' due to the fact that 'government depends upon certain kinds of allegedly private relationships in order to conduct their foreign affairs', such as 'a steady supply of women's sexual services to convince their soldiers that they are manly'.

In 'The Morning After' Enloe (1993:3) argues that militarization is a gendered process that 'relies on distinct notions about masculinity' and sexual access to women. Enloe (2000: xiv) deepens these arguments in 'Maneuvers' by analyzing the tactics that have been strategically designed by the military to 'make ideas about gender work for military ends'.

Yet, Enloe's studies represent civilian women around military bases mainly as passive sexual objects, which lack control over their sexuality and desires (Enloe 1990: 91). Under this discourse women's agency fades from the analysis, while the different experiences of local women living around military bases are resumed in the category of 'military prostitution'.

Thus, Enloe's (2000: xiii) focus on how militaries rely on women, manipulating their hopes, fears and skills to provide sexual services to male soldiers overlooks woman's sexual agency and the possibility of other types of sexual relations that can develop between civilian women living around military bases and soldiers beyond the boundaries of abusive or exploitative encounters. According to Zarkov (2006: 219), 'the context of war – when a man is invariably defined as a soldier and a woman as an innocent civilian – further underscores the inevitability of female violability and powerlessness and allows for the erasure of women's agency.'

In relation to that, Olivera Simic (2012: vii) asks two crucial questions: 'why is it hard to imagine consensual states of desire during warfare? Is all sex under coercive circumstances rape?' In 'Regulation of Sexual Conduct in UN Peacekeeping Operations', Simic analyzes the different sexual relationships between peacekeepers and local women in Bosnia, in order to determine 'whether it was justified in the context of PKOs for the UN's zero tolerance approach to sex between peacekeepers and local people to include sexual relationships and prostitution' (Simic 2012: 1).

Rather than reinforcing stereotypes by representing all women engaging in sexual relationships with peacekeepers as victims, and all peacekeepers engaging in sexual relationships with local women as 'sexual predators who cannot treat local women with respect', Simic's (2012:53) 'sex-positive' analysis of women experiences acknowledge women sexual agency in conflict settings by recognizing the possibility for women to 'give meaningful consent in times



of war'. In doing so, Simic's work rejects the assumption that victimization is the 'ultimate destiny of women in war', and recognizes the possibility of the existence of desire and love among the diversity of sexual experiences in war contexts (Simic 2012: 54).

Though Simic is aware of the unequal power dynamics present in the relationships between peacekeepers and local women, she does not simplify the complexities of these dynamics by deeming all relationships between peacekeepers and local women as exploitative or abusive. Still, there are contexts in which the asymmetry of power relationships is such that local women are left with little or no control over their sexuality.

For instance, In 'The Bases of Empire: The Global Struggle Against U.S. Military Posts', Akibayashi and Takazato expose the shocking impact of the U.S. troops on the local women in Okinawa. According to them, since U.S. military landed on the island in 1945 women have experienced 'rampant and indiscriminate military violence that can be characterized as the abduction of one woman by a group of between two and six soldiers at gun or knifepoint for gang rape' (Akibayashi and Takazato 2009: 261). In such scenario it is difficult if not inconceivable to think about consensual sexual relationships, but if we want to get the big picture it is important to acknowledge that even when 'militaries relay in women (...) not all women experience militarization identically' (Enloe 2007: xiii).

In addition, Schneider argues that 'concepts of women's victimization and agency are both over simplistic; both fail to take account of the oppression, struggle, and resistance that women experience daily in their ongoing relationships'. Thus, in order to capture the complexity of women's experiences it is essential to acknowledge that on the one hand, 'the conception of both victimization and agency is too narrow and incomplete', and on the other hand, 'victimization and agency are not extremes in opposition; they are interrelated dimensions of women's experience' (Schneider 1993: 395).

However uncertain the boundary between forced and voluntary sexual encounters between soldiers and local women might be, some argue that love can happen (Zeiger in Goedde 2012; Nagel 2014), and that some of women's sexual involvement with soldiers are circumstantial, forced upon them by the unexpected and ambiguous economic and security circumstances of armed conflict settings, more than by the soldiers' uncontrollable sexual needs (Lee 2011: 169).

According to Nagel (2014: 295) women are usually sexually active in war settings, where prostitution, rape and sexual exploitation characterize women's relationships with military men. In Nagel's (2014: 296) analysis of the militarization of women's sexuality, civilian women under the radar of military operations constitute the 'traditional military-sexual' landscape of warfare. Women 'have consensual and coerced sexual relationships with the troops, work in sex industries servicing the servicemen, and are targets of sexual abuse and rape by armed forces'. In Nagel's (2014: 295) point of view, women's fate during armed conflict and war is to be victims of the military men's sexual predation.

This idea is largely accepted in women and war studies. In the article 'Sexuality and Women's Rights in Armed Conflict in Sri Lanka', Tambiah (2004: 82) argues that even though sex work has generally 'accompanied militarization and troops movement internationally', it is still a controversial and contested activity, inasmuch as 'armed conflict raises the level of danger' women face as 'it gives exceptional authority to armed men'. This ultimately produces asymmetrical power relationships between soldiers and civilian women, allowing abusive and exploitative relationships to take place. Following the same line of analysis, Motoyama (2008: 26) claims that in Okinawa, where three-quarters of the US military bases in Japan are located, there persists a 'twisted logic' according to which women and girls living next to the U.S. military facilities are expected to 'behave well and accept the danger of rape, for the sake of the safety of the nation'.

Yet, similar to Lee's (2011) reflection on the sexual experiences of young women during the Liberian civil war, Utas (2005: 425) argues that a proper analysis of women's lives in war settings requires viewing women as 'tactical agents engaged in the difficult task of social navigation'. Utas claims that women agency in conflict contexts 'is not a matter of "have, nor have not"', but rather it represents a 'range of realizable possibilities that are informed by specific social contexts as well as larger economic and political contingencies' (Ibid). In that sense, local women sexual encounters with soldiers need to be understood not merely as the result of servicemen's sexual desires, but also 'as a matter of (locals) constantly adjusting tactics in response to the social and economic opportunities and constraints (...) within war zones'. In that sense, Utas invites us to look at women in war zones as 'social navigators', and their experiences as the result of their context-specific possibilities and limitations (Ibid).

This idea of understanding women as 'social navigators' is close to Brennan's analysis of the 'transnational' experiences of Dominican women in the sexual market, where she argues that women who engage in transnational relationships are 'not simply engaging in survival sex, nor are they victims of rank exploitation. Instead, they are strategizing transnational advancement through their sexual labor' (Brennan as reviewed by Howe 2006: 118). In Brennan's point of view, women's sexual activity can be understood as a matter of 'social navigation', by which women look to improve their standard of living by hoping to find a foreign benefactor in the sex trade, who will ensure a better future for them.

Utas' analysis may be complemented by Jennings' (2010) approach to sexual transactions between peacekeepers and local women in Haiti and Liberia. In 'Unintended Consequences of Intimacy: Political Economies of Peacekeeping and Sex Tourism', Jennings pays attention to the needs and motivations of the locals in order to identify the types of relationships in which local women engage with peacekeepers. In doing this, Jennings is able to better understand these relationships, which are all different and far from simple. For instance, Jennings (2010: 233) argues that, in Liberia, women participating in sexual transactions with peace keepers can be identified as being part of one of the three following groups: prostitutes, hustlers or homegirls. While prostitutes

are women and girls who engage in sex work as a profession, hustlers are 'survival prostitutes' that sell or exchange sex 'in order to obtain the basics of life: food to eat, rent for the week or medicine for a sick child'. On the contrary, homegirls look 'for the 'contact', the relationship, the 'sugar daddy''. Their goal is to develop a sex or ideally love relationship with 'an international' to improve their standard of living (Jennings 2010: 234). In all cases, each woman's position in the socio-economic structure of the specific territory informs the dynamic of the relationships, which is expected to be mutually beneficial.

Despite of the transactional aspect that seems to be involved in the interactions between soldiers and locals, and the assumption that love rarely happens, romance has not been alien to these relationships. For instance, as America's foreign engagements grew after World War II, so did the romantic involvements between American soldiers and local women (Zeiger in Goedde 2012: 210).

For instance, in South Korea U.S. soldiers 'don't simply have sex with local women', but some marry Korean women who return with them to the United States' (Nagel 2000:161). Although some of these marriages may have been arranged for profit, 'some are matches made for love and romance' (Ibid). Still, Brennan argues that the role of love in transnational sexual encounters is performative, inasmuch as women's gestures of love toward their potential benefactors may be a tactical move to advance in the ladder of social mobility. (Brennan in Howe 2006: 118)

Stepping in the middle ground between intimate relationships for love and for money, Zelizer (2000) argues in 'The Purchase of Intimacy', that the intersection between monetary transfers and intimate relations is fluid, rather than fixed. In her view, 'monetary transfers and erotic relationships, then, have actually coexisted and shaped each other for centuries' (Zelizer 2000:822).

### **3.2 Militarized spaces as gendered and sexualized places of power**

Military bases are 'very heterogeneous and socially constructed' entities 'designed for the use of force' (Lutz 2009: 20; Lohn 2009: 89). Their presence in host communities is often normalized 'through a commonly circulating rhetoric that suggests their presence is natural (...) rather than the outcomes of policy choices' (Lutz 2009: 20), and as explained by Lutz (2009: 21) this means 'that they are thought of as unremarkable, inevitable, and legitimate'.

In "We're Never Off Duty" Empire and the Economies of Race and Gender in the U.S. Military Camptowns Of Korea', Gage (2013: 131) argues that 'most U.S. military installations are places of power, both real and imagined', with a reach that 'extend[s] far beyond the gates and fences of the bases'. Gage (2013:127) argues that the spaces around U.S. military bases where soldiers spend their off-base time, are racialized and gendered areas with their 'own inherent changing social structures and globalizations that intersect, collide, and recreate structures of power'. According to Gage these areas are 'borderlands' between the base gates and the local town, where the mentality

and structure of the U.S. military ‘are played out in off-base interactions (...) between U.S. soldiers and non-U.S. military others’.

Gage (2013: 121) claims that in off-base interplays ‘soldiers often carry stereotypes held in the United States, but also reinforced by their identities and training as U.S. soldiers’, which inform the type of relationships in which they engage with local women. Likewise, talking about military prostitution Nagel (2000: 162) claims that western sexual stereotypes of Asians directly inform the relationships that develop between U.S. soldiers and Asian women. Nagel argues that in the U.S. soldier’s ‘erotic meaning systems’, ‘the Asian female body is a spoken site of servile sexual availability’, which materializes in the brothels and bars off-base.

In Nagel’s (2000:159) point of view, Gate’s ‘borderlands’ are “ethnosexual” zones where the global meets the local in the pursuit of racialized sex and romance; ‘western fantasies of (...) female sexuality meet material manifestations’, and ‘the marriage of geopolitics and racial cosmologies is consummated nightly’. According to Nagel (2000:165) in these zones the interactions between local people and soldiers are ‘almost without exception ethnosexual, since women and men providing sexual services to the troops are invariably racial, ethnic, and national others’. These ethnosexual encounters, Nagel (2000: 165) claims, are usually ‘the only real interactions that occur between local people and foreign others’. Here it is worth highlighting that sometimes these encounters are initiated by what Nagel (2000:160) calls ‘ethnosexual invaders’, who ‘launch sexual assaults across ethnic boundaries, inside alien territory, seducing, raping, and sexually enslaving ethnic “Others” as a means of sexual domination’.

### **3.3 Race, sexuality and gender in Latin America research**

Race, sexuality and gender in Latin America have often been approached separately, or analyzed in relation with social class. However, recent research has paid special attention to the sexualization of race and the racialization of sexuality, where the intersections between race, sexuality and gender are explored taking into account the specific racial experiences of the region. A number of scholars (Wade 2008; Viveros 2006, 2008, 2012; Curiel 2007; Gil 2009) have written about the links between race, sexuality and gender as distinct but interrelated forms of difference and social inequality.

These studies share some common characteristics. To begin with, they recognize the importance of the historically unequal relations of race and gender that were incorporated in the region in colonial times by the processes and ideas of miscegenation. Secondly, they positioned the social groups under study in the socio-racial hierarchical order of their specific context. Thirdly, they recognize the impracticability of analysing one form of inequality, such as race, without questioning others, namely sex, gender, social class and nationality, among others.

As a central narrative of the national formation of most Latin American countries (including Colombia) miscegenation is an unavoidable aspect that has to be present when analysing interactions between race, gender and sexuality.

Miscegenation refers to ‘the extensive biological mixing’ of Spaniards, Native Americans, and Africans in colonial Latin America to produce a ‘hybrid race’ of ‘mestizos’ (Gutiérrez 2010:13). This was a gendered process that established a criterion for social classification based on race and the control of sexuality, which attributed a place of superiority to white people (Viveros 2006:16). However, ‘the experience of racial privilege varied according with gender’ (Viveros 2008: 177). At the core of this process was the promotion of racialized sexual relations that privileged a specific type of interracial mix, the one between white men with black and indigenous women, which some studies argue (Wade 2008; Viveros 2008), played a very important role in the construction of the sexual imagery of the region.

Peter Wade has studied issues of race in Colombia, specifically focusing on Colombia’s black population, and the interactions between race and class in the social structure of the country. He argues that ‘the categories of sex and gender have historically been set in relation to the category of race’ (Wade, in Viveros 2012:280). According to Wade (2008: 41) in socially hierarchical and racialized societies such as Colombia, a common technique of domination is the control over sexuality that can take place through sexual abuse, control over sexual behaviour, or the sexual objectification of racial “others.” From Wade’s point of view, gender and race are hierarchical categories that are simultaneously oppressive, and mutually constitutive.

In analysing interracial relationships Wade (2008: 46) claims that there is a market of value, which is ‘structured by intersecting value hierarchies of race, class and gender, and sometimes other hierarchies’ such as age and beauty. Under the logic of this market, skin colour, sex, body shape, and economic power are exchangeable values. For instance, a black man can buy whiteness with his economic power by engaging in a relationship with a low-income white woman. According to Wade this marketization goes beyond national borders, insofar as the conceptions of race, sex and gender have always been transnational in nature. For instance, ‘men who cannot find partners in Europe or the United States travel to Colombia (...), where they find women that are often eager to leave the country. These men use their status as “gringo”<sup>7</sup> and their economic power to attract women who often, as they say, make them feel like “men”’ (Wade 2008: 47-48).

In addition, Wade claims that these relationships ‘are based on a regulatory framework that gives official status to the white, the rich and the masculine, but also brings value to other elements’ that are seen as ‘subversive’, such as the supposed eroticism of black people (Wade 2008: 48). Wade’s argument is in line with Bastide (in Viveros 2008: 180) who states that interracial sexual encounters do not often occur based on respect and equality, but are the result of stereotypes about black women and men as ‘objects of pleasure and easy prey’ for white people. Similarly, but this time regarding transnational relationships, Acensio and Acosta (2010: 1) state that the Latin American women, or Latinas in the United States, have been racialized and exoticized in

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<sup>7</sup> Colloquial expression that make reference to U.S. citizens

pop culture, which has enabled the American society to fetishize Latin American women's bodies and reduce them to sexual objects'.

However, Wade (2008:49) argues that interracial and transnational relationships 'cannot be reduced to a simple market and power operation' but desire and eroticism also have to be considered. Regarding how desire may influence these relationships, Wade explains that it is a mistake to assume that the power position of white men is sufficient to explain sexual desire, because the sexual desires of colored people are not just a product of the sexual desires of white men (Wade 2008: 58).

Curiel (2007: 20) acknowledges the importance of the study of the relations between gender, race and sexuality in the Latin America context, arguing that these three categories occur in an articulated way and have material effects that produce oppression, subordination and exclusion. According to Curiel (2007: 21), the analysis of the intersections between race, gender and sex gives us the tools to understand the oppression of the Latin American women in a historical context, as it helps us to look at miscegenation as a nationalist and homogenizing ideology that was based on sexual violation of indigenous and black women by the settlers within a heterosexual order, which gave men the ownership of women's bodies and created the logic of the sexualization of race and racialization of sex.

Viveros (2006: 15) nicely synthesizes the previous arguments by claiming that, when talking about gender and sexuality in Latin America, it is necessary to acknowledge that they are given 'in the context of a history of colonization in which the pattern of domination was organized and established on the idea of race'.

Following Viveros' lead Gil (2009: 2) presents three claims that constitute the starting point for understanding the relationships between the different forms of social inequality. Firstly, sexism, racism and classism have common operating characteristics, which are the naturalization and the racialization of the Other, and the use of the pair nature-culture; secondly, that these social structures support and inform each other; and thirdly, that is not possible to understand gender and sexuality without paying attention to ethnicity and race.

According to Gil (2009: 2- 8) intersectionality is a way to analyze social inequalities and to understand social differences, taking into account that intersections between gender, race, class, and sexuality involve various forms of relationships. In order to identify these different relationships, Gil proposes the study of race, gender, class and sexuality on three different levels. First, we should look at how each category is expressed separately; secondly, we must explore the relationships between categories and how they interact with each other; and thirdly, we need to look at the modalities of relations between categories, which Gil clarifies are not always the same intersections. For instance, Gil argues that gender and race are not necessarily always related, 'one thing is to be black and another to be gay'. However, Gil (2009: 8) thinks that the categories of gender, race, sex, class, etc., as positions of subordination generate an accumulative effect. In that sense, being black, woman, poor and lesbian, are characteristics that are added in order to place the subject in a specific position in the system of asymmetrical power relations. Gil invites us

to be aware of the categories present in the situation we want to study, by identifying and analyzing the type of relationships that these categories create in a specific social context, and to be able to recognize when it is convenient to privilege one category over another or analyse them separately.

### **3.4 Conclusions: ideas to build on**

Researchers have found that many of the transnational encounters between military men and civilian women occur between ethnic, racial and national Others in gendered, racialized and sexualized contexts. The link between the military and women's sexual availability is understood as an indispensable aspect of military operations and geopolitical asymmetries is thus expressed personally. Furthermore, research on interracial and transnational relationships argue that under sexualized and racialized conditions, relationships between ethnic, racial and national "Others" take place in unequal conditions where there is a market in which a complex exchange of values based on differences in skin colour, money, and social position come into play.

In addition, although militarization is a gendered process that exercises different pressures on women living at the shadows of military bases, the boundary between forced and voluntary, as well as, transactional and romantic sexual encounters between women and servicemen is fluid rather than fixed. As Sheneider (1993: 395) argues in relation with agency and victimhood, love and economic interest should not be understood as 'extremes in oppositions' but 'interrelated' aspects of women's experiences. In times of war, women desire, love and navigate tactically between the possibilities and constraints of their specific context.

Furthermore, studies on race, gender and sexuality in Latin America have shown that, due to the specific construction of race in this region by the colonial process of miscegenation, it is imperative to understand race, gender and sex as intertwined and constitutive hierarchical systems, and sexuality as the space in which these different ways of oppression are articulated and reproduced.

Intersectionality may be understood as an approach to study social differences and to make visible how oppressive categories such as gender and race interact to shape the multiple dimensions of individual experiences. I use intersectionality to study gender, sexuality, race, nationality and class as distinct but interrelated and mutually constitutive forms of difference and social inequality, as well as how they interact to inform participants' experiences. Yet, beyond studying the intersections between the categories and the outcomes of these intersections, such as in the sexualization of race, I pay special attention to the way these categories relate with each other, taking into account that, as Gil argues, they do not always relate in the same way.

Thus, in order to understand the dynamic behind participants and U.S. servicemen relationships on the one hand I identify the interconnections between the 'multiplicities of differentiations', which are neither always clear nor always intersect in expected ways (Piscitelli 2001: 3; Gil 2009: 2-8). On the other hand, I explore 'the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power'

(Davis 2008: 68). In line with Hopkins and Noble (2009: 815) intersectionality here is 'less about the alignment and crossing of (...) social categories and more about capturing the messiness of layered subjectivities and multi-dimensional relations' manifested in participants' experiences with both Colombian and U.S. servicemen.

#### **4 Colombian women and U.S. servicemen: transnational and interracial militarized encounters**

From the moment the gringos crossed the door of the bar and their eyes met, they with their blinking in Morse code, told them "I want you". There was no need to point at [women] with a finger; they recruited them with a smile' (Triviño 2011: 55).<sup>8</sup>

In accordance with Personal Narratives Group (1989: 261) 'when talking about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong. Yet they are revelling truths'. Not about the past 'as it actually was', but about their own experiences and interpretations of those experiences. I recognize each of the stories told to me by women as a 'dynamic representation' of an individual experience, which is determined by its narrator's specific location in society. The following analysis concentrates on the connections and overlapping aspects of the stories. As Messias and DeJoseph (2004: 47-48) describe, the common lines of women's individual experiences are part of 'women's "larger" life stories'.

Locals, with whom I spoke with informally, also told me stories; similar stories, over and over again, about 'leeches', 'lazy' and 'foolish women' who engage in sexual and romantic relationships with U.S. servicemen 'out of economic interest'. Locals' stories about women are important, as they are part of the setting in which women's experiences are given meaning. Yet, through the analysis, I privilege the stories told by the women, given that the research focuses on women as interpreters of their own realities.

These 'stories do not speak by themselves', and they are 'neither open to proof nor self-evident' (Personal Narratives Group 1989: 261-264). In order to understand what they communicate they need to be interpreted by 'paying carefully attention to the context that shapes their creation and to the world views that inform them' (1989: 261). This context is where the stories by the town's people come in. Accordingly, the following analysis revolves around the 'tricky ground between the context and the structures' in which participants' relationships with U.S. servicemen develop (Gorelick 1991: 459).

In this chapter I give an account of Melgar based on my field notes, and explore participants' narratives vis-à-vis locals perceptions about U.S. servicemen. I begin with a discussion of the particular conditions that create

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<sup>8</sup> Quote taken from 'Uncle Sam's women' a novel by Pilar Triviño based on a research about the sexual and romantic relationships between Colombian women and U.S. servicemen in Bogotá and Melgar.



these narratives, highlighting how the process of militarization is manifested in the town's culture and context. Then I explore the forms that guide and give shape to women's narratives, looking at how notions of gender, sexuality, race, nationhood and class relate with each other to produce these experiences, and no others.

#### **4.1 Melgar streets**

'The bases were here before the town' (Field notes 2015).

I arrived to the town the second Sunday of August. The place was crowded and it seemed small for the large number of locals and passers-by that walked down the streets.

Locals start the day early, either to go to work at the military bases, or to attend the many hotels, bars and other business that satisfy primarily the needs of the tourists staying in the town. Walking at different times in the day through the most important streets of the town, I noticed several places that sell alcohol everyday beginning very early in the morning, and the various shops of military accessories located in different parts of the town, particularly one that offers American style military clothes, military equipment as well as erotic accessories.

As the days passed, I realized how the colorful clothes of the local people mixed with official military uniforms, and military style pants, hats and backpacks that local men and women of all ages were wearing.

The streets were full of political propaganda for local elections. It did not surprise me to find that one of the candidates was a colonel of the Colombian Armed Forces' active reserve, whose name was one of the many on the list of the Democratic Centre Party candidates, led by former Colombian President Álvaro Uribe.

Although I did not feel particularly unsafe on the streets, sometimes I felt disrespected and harassed as I received unwanted sexual advances from men. In these cases, their language was not inappropriate but their intention clearly was. More than once, in my short journey from the house where I was staying to the nightclubs and bars, I was mistook as a prostitute for the mere act of walking late at night. Men would slow down their automobiles next to me, waiting to see if I was interested.

In Melgar the presence of the military bases is accepted as a given. As I was able to observe and hear, locals see the bases and their soldiers as a stable source of income for the town. Hence, locals value the military as 'good for their own well-being', as they have become dependent on 'base jobs and soldiers' spending' (Enloe 1990: 57). Indeed, the military and its symbols are part of the day-to-day social and political dynamic of the town.

## 4.2 ‘The Americans are the best in town’<sup>9</sup>: geopolitical privilege, whiteness and the internalized submission of the mestizo

U.S. military involvement in Colombia came hand-in-hand with the transnational mobilization of U.S. servicemen masculinities (Hopkins and Noble 2009: 815), which on the one side implies a rivalry between locals’ and foreigners’ notions of masculinity, and on the other side entails the ‘export of American ideas about what should be expected of a man’ and of a woman ‘in a soldier’s home’ as well as in a ‘militarized off-base disco’ (Enloe 2000: xvi). When in Colombia, U.S. servicemen play out their masculinity in a foreign space, where they situate themselves in the ‘male hierarchy’ of the host society (Lomsky-Feder and Rapoport 2003: 114), not only in terms of gender, but also in relation with other categories of differentiation (Hopkins and Noble 2009: 814).

Americans’ presumed superiority in participants’ stories rests on assumptions about gendered notions of race and nationhood that support one another and are grounded on an entrenched ‘colonial mentality’, according to which U.S. servicemen are believed to be more desirable as sexual and/or romantic partners (Santos in Yea 2005: 464). Following David and Okazaki (in Decena 2014: 2-9) colonial mentality is a ‘consequence of colonialism’ that is present in some social groups as a form of ‘internalized racial oppression’. The following statement, from a discussion with a group of Colombian soldiers, illustrates this point:

If there were a group of U.S. soldiers next to us, and a group of women came in the bar, they would not even look at us. We like to drink beer, the Americans buy whisky. We look very ordinary (pointing to his arm to show me his brown skin color), while they look different; you know they are tall, white and have green eyes. Plus, women like dollars; they go after the money offering themselves to the gringos (Field notes August 2015).

Here it is important to notice that the mentioning of the alcoholic drinks preferences denotes a disparity in economic power. For instance a national beer in Melgar is much cheaper than a glass of whisky, and one U.S. dollar almost triples its value in Colombian currency.

Similar remarks of both the interviewed women and local men are the manifestation of the colonial thinking of the mestizo, who as Roldan (2009: 4) argues, hold a ‘heavy baggage of traumas, complexes and frustrations’ that are the result of the ‘historic rape’ that was perpetrated during the process of miscegenation in colonial Latin America. The mestizo is the product of an imposed ‘biological mixing’ (Gutierrez 2010: 13) that took place through the control of natives’ sexuality, based on a racialized hierarchical order that placed white people on top (Nagel 2000; Wade 2008; Viveros 2008). As a consequence the mestizo was taught to admire and seek to imitate the white settler; and having internalized his/her assumed racial and ethnic inferiority, to

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Clara August 2015.

aspire to be 'white' (Roldan 2009: 4), which ultimately, entrenched 'the normativity and hierarchal privilege of whiteness' (Prividera and Howard 2006: 14).

As argued by Wander et al. (in Prividera and Howard 2006: 14-15) 'whiteness refers to a historical systemic structural race-based superiority', that "socially constructs privilege, power, and domination through" encounters with non-whiteness'. In that sense, by crossing national borders and walking out of the bases' gates, U.S. servicemen's race privilege afforded them a superior social status, which positioned them as more desirable partners than their Colombian counterparts (River-Moore 2012: 851). Yet, U.S. servicemen stationed at Melgar military bases are not all white. 'Some years ago, a troop of black Americans came to the town. That year was a year of rest for us', said Catalina and Isabel amidst laughter.

We didn't like them. They looked scary, like very big for us. They were different from the white and Latin Americans we had met. They looked like Africans (Fieldwork notes 2015).

This fragment illustrates how the internalized hierarchical social order imposed by the colonial miscegenation has constructed the sexual imaginary of the region in a way that participants not only understand the white as highly desirable, but also prejudices the black as something to avoid. Yet, regarding their race U.S. servicemen are all Americans, and their nationality is for locals an indication of economic wealth and political influence inherent to Colombian-U.S. bilateral relationships. As a bartender of a pub frequented by U.S. servicemen said:

People here think that gringos have a great deal of money, because they are Americans and have dollars, but that is not always true. People have taken advantage of them. Some shops and bars charge them unfair bills. Now when they come here they ask me for fair prices: 'Do not give us the prices for gringos, give us the real ones' (Fieldwork notes August 2015).

In fact, although race always matters for this research participants' decisions to engage in relationships with U.S. servicemen, it sometimes 'dilutes itself in the face of nationality' (Piscitelli 2001: 23). For instance Clara (August 2015) said: 'I am racist, I don't like black men (...) but once I dated a black American. He dressed and smelled very nice, not like Colombian blacks.'

Clara's story suggests that although race and nationality are mutually constitutive, each category is not equally important in the outcome of their interaction. This implies that in Clara's narrative race and nationality intersect in a hierarchical relationship, in which one thing is to be black and another to be American, and being an American is more important than being black. Recalling Wade's (2008) market of value, participants' and U.S. servicemen's relationships take place in a transnational and ethnosexual space, where there is a market structured by intersecting categories of differentiation, in which skin colour, nationality and economic power are all exchangeable values; and their trade creates possibilities to move up in the ladder of social order. However, as Clara's statement illustrates, these categories do not hold the same value and their interaction produces a unique unexpected intersection. To be precise,

what this experience illustrates, in light of Wades' market of value, is that the American status and the economic power of the U.S. serviceman involved, plays as the bargaining chip to buy whiteness in a market in which being black is of low value.

In this sense, the U.S. servicemen's nationality diluted his blackness in Clara's racialized and ethnicized imagination, with visible material consequences. Yet, Clara representation of the black U.S. servicemen as men that dressed and smelled well also suggest the possibility of desire in her story, that although it is not evident cannot be ignored. To understand this relationship only in terms of a market and power transaction will be a simplistic and reductive interpretation of her story (Wade 2008:49).

Nationality also plays a role in the power balance of these relationships. According to Lutz, (2009: 31) 'the inequality of the nation-to-nation relationship' upholds 'the culture of militarism' in host territories. Thus, the normalized presence of U.S. troops in Colombian territory, as well as the development and outcome of these intimate encounters may be an 'expression of who held overwhelming power in that relationship' (Lohn 2009: 85). Hence, it is important to consider how Colombia's subordinated bilateral relationship with the United States is materialized at the local level (Piscitelli 2001: 4). The U.S. servicemen's higher position in the town social hierarchies is strictly connected to the position of Colombia vis-à-vis the U.S. in the geopolitical stage. Marcela's story is an illustration:

He told her he would take her to the U.S. with him at the end of his mission. Their relationship was so stable that they decided to have a baby. She got pregnant with a girl. (...) Shortly after the news he started going out with other women. Since then *'I always doubted about him'*. (...) She caught him in a lie. (...) She was very upset and walked to the house of the colonel of her boyfriend, another U.S. servicemen. The Colonel called her boyfriend and reprimanded him.

Days after Marcela's partner told her that the colonel needed a paternity proof, and that he had to leave Colombia in five days. The test results were positive. He gave the baby his last name in a notary. The day after, the colonel contacted Marcela and told her that they wanted to help her. *'He offered me money in exchange of my silence, but I refused.'* The colonel didn't like her answer. Later that day, Marcela's partner told her that he was going to take the baby with him to the U.S.: *'He said that everything was ready. I was very scared. I cried a lot. I thought he really could take my baby away from me'*.

She contacted a lawyer. He assured her that the American could not do that. *'He said that even if the mother of the baby was a prostitute he could not do that'*. Then he said he would like to talk with Marcela's partner alone. *'I was very naïve'*. After they met, the lawyer told her that the best thing she could do was to give up the baby. *'I was terrified. I went to the ICBF (Colombian Institute of Family Welfare) and they didn't help me. They said they could do nothing. I felt powerless to see that he could buy everyone (...) Nobody helped me. The same institutions that are there to supposedly help us were on their side.'* Fortunately, Marcela's partner's threats did not materialize. (Excerpts from the field notes Marcela 2015)

Thus, nationhood, being American or ‘gringo’ as a metaphor of economic and political influence, plays a central role in the dynamic of participants’ relationships with U.S. servicemen. Yet, in this analysis we cannot lose the sight of an essential aspect of these relationships: U.S. servicemen are not just regular Americans with dollars, they are military men stationed in a militarized town where being in the military is appreciated.

### 4.3 There are heroes in Colombia<sup>10</sup>

More than five decades of armed conflict in Colombia, where military service is compulsory, has placed the state’s military in the center of society and depicted the figure of the soldier as necessary and heroic. This representation takes shape within a discourse in which being a servicemen officially symbolizes ‘sacrifice, protection, and service to the state’; and operates ‘within a hierarchy that places the “warrior hero”, an ‘independent, disciplined, strong willed, physically imposing, and above all masculine’ men ‘on top’ (Prividera and Howard 2006: 137).

A famous Colombian Army slogan states that ‘there are Heroes in Colombia’, ‘flesh and blood heroes who struggle, dream and protect day and night the Colombian people’ (Revista ejército 2009). Colombian army servicemen are portrayed as archetypal ‘figure(s) of masculinity’ (Dawson 1994:1), whose stories are ‘tale(s) about the compulsion of conflict’ (Steedman, in Dawson 1994: 21); and whose duty is to serve the state by fighting the guerrillas. Yet, servicemen in Colombia have ‘killed civilians and reported them as combat fatalities’ in their war against guerrillas (Human Rights Watch 2015: 1), and have employed sexual violence against women as a systematic ‘weapon of war’ (Oxfam 2009). Thus, being a Colombian serviceman in this context is not an immediate synonym of protection and security, even when being in the military offers high social status.

As reported by locals, years ago it was very common to find groups of U.S. servicemen walking on the streets. They spent significant amounts of money eating and drinking in the different restaurants and bars, and buying all kind of presents for their local girlfriends. But their excesses did not go unnoticed. National media has informed about the case of a 12-year-old girl who, in 2007, was allegedly drugged and kidnapped in a nightclub, later taken to CACON 4 and raped by two U.S. servicemen. In a visit to CACON 4 a Colombian colonel described this case stating that the girl was not as young as is presumed and that she was a prostitute who made up the story of rape because the soldiers did not pay her what she requested for her sexual services (Fieldwork notes August 2015).

Locals and national media also reported that in 2010 pornographic videos of local women with U.S. servicemen were sold on the streets of the town and shared online. Many of the women involved, of all ages, and some married, were filmed without their consent. As a result many families moved out of the town to escape the public shame, marriages ended, and according to a popular

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<sup>10</sup> Colombian Army slogan ‘Los Heroes En Colombia Si Existen’.

gossip, one girl killed herself because of shame. The videos incident was a public scandal that people still remember with vivid detail. According to Mary (August 2015), a receptionist at a hotel, everybody in the town was curious about the videos, more because they wanted to know who were the women than because of interest in sex.

Due to the different allegations about the misconduct and violence by both Colombian and U.S. servicemen, when talking with local women I asked them how it is to live in a town full of soldiers. They replied 'It is just normal'. An informal conversation with a public prosecutor helped me to realize that what local women think of as normal, has many shady sides. According to the prosecutor, Colombian servicemen, especially low rank soldiers, commit most of the reported cases of sexual and domestic violence against women in the town. However, women do not denounce them because many of them understand as normal the ways in which their partners mistreat them. *'At the beginning the problem was visible but now it has been normalized and became part of the town's culture.'* Many women seek the company of a soldier for economic stability (...) *'Local women are used to being wronged, and when U.S. servicemen came to Melgar the situation worsened'*. Many families saw the presence of U.S. servicemen as the best thing that could happen to them. They wanted their daughters to engage in a relationship with them, rather than Colombian servicemen. *We know that there may be cases of sexual violence, but there are no legal cases related to U.S. servicemen* (Fieldworks notes August 2015).

For Gorelick (1991: 459) 'women's oppressions are a complex of many contradictions'. As she explains, oppressive ideologies are often 'internalized', while the underlying structures that create the conditions in which these ideologies take root stay out of the public sight, hidden under common sense assumptions.

## **5 Real men and proper women: staying within the given**

'They treat us like princesses' (Isabel August 2015)

The military is both a gendered and 'gendering institution' that 'reflects accepted notions of masculinity and femininity' and 'helps to create gendered identities' (Barrett 1996:141). Inasmuch as the idea of the 'warrior hero' cannot function without their feminine counterpart, the militarization of a population is 'inextricably linked to a gendered ordering with a subsystem of 'protector' and 'protected', 'masculine' and 'feminine' (Enloe, in Crockett et al. 2006:40). Accordingly militarization reinforces ideas about gender and sexuality that relegate women to roles that are 'necessary for the warrior hero to exist' (Prividera and Howard 2006: 188).

Indeed, Melgar constitutes an ethnosexual space where military bases and local communities interact producing multilayered relationships out of the bases' gates, in which women serve the servicemen as 'sources of labour, care, sex and entertainment' (Gate 2013; Nagel 2000; Gerson 2009). For what I was able to observe and hear during fieldwork, and as a Colombian women who shares many cultural codes with the locals, Cockburn's (2014: 34) claims about

women being socialized ‘to play their part in a society that values the ascendancy of masculine qualities, [...] do not rebel against the domestic burden, (and above all) [...] find the idea of male dominance erotic’ is applicable to the lives of women I spoke with. This traditional gendered socialization is evident in the qualities of manliness expressed in the following statement: ‘I have never felt forced (...) I go out with them because I like the way they look, I like their tattoos. They don’t dress or dance well, but they are very nice and treat you very well’ (Clara August 2015).

Women engage and develop relationships with U.S. servicemen driven by desires for idealized forms of romance, which are also part of gendered and heteronormative socialization. Jackson (in Schafer 2008: 194) argues that the concept of romance is ‘implicated in maintaining a cultural definition of the notion of love which is detrimental to women’. By stating that U.S. servicemen treat them as ‘princesses’, local women are signifying their experiences on a narrative in which traditional notions of heterosexual romance and gender dominate and overlap to create male heroes and damsels in need. In fact, participants’ romance narrative reflects the representation of Colombia by the U.S. pop culture. As Garcia (2015: 2) points out ‘Hollywood likes to cast Colombia as a backwater damsel in distress, ready for her gringo Prince Charming to turn up with a gun’. Or, as an interviewee stated:

I felt secure next to them. While they are going out with you they care about you and your family. They are very caring and generous (Camila August 2015).

According to Hoefinge (2014: 61) men involved in heterosexual transnational relationships with national, ethnic and racial Others are often affected by ‘hero syndrome’, ‘a latent form of neocolonial globalization whereby ‘privileged’ men from the global north make it their personal responsibility to ‘rescue’ underprivileged and impoverished girls from the global south (in a sub/conscious effort to control foreign lives and decisions)’. This idea is useful to illustrate U.S. servicemen supportive attitudes toward their Colombian partners. Yet, the hero role here is not a syndrome that U.S. servicemen have acquired only by getting in contact with people of the global south, but an inherent characteristic of their constructions as soldiers, which entails economic as well as physical protection, and gave participants a sense of safeness:

Waiting for a taxi on the street one night a drunken man tried to touch me. My boyfriend grabbed the man’s neck with his arms and threw him on the floor. The man was left lying on the floor unconscious’ (Camila August 2015).

All participants reported having at least one long romantic relationship in which they were in love with their partners. Yet, ‘we make sense of feelings and relationships in terms of love because a set of discourses around love pre-exists us as individuals and through these we have learnt what love means’ (Schafer 2008: 189). Accordingly, participant’s love stories take shape in a gendered, racialized and sexualized context in which being white means superiority and power, being American equals economic power, being a soldier is synonymous with economic stability and physical protection; and being in a love relationship entails getting economic support and a sense of safety.

According to Shafer (2008: 194), inasmuch as romantic love is a gendered 'modern construction, which tends to disempower women', it 'obscures and disguises gender inequality and women's oppression in intimate heterosexual relationships' (2008: 189). In participants' stories, their partners often kept them from information about their lives in U.S. Many of them were married men with families, who offered many empty promises. As argued by Mankayi (2008 38-39) 'the way soldiers regard sex and women's bodies appear to be part of their day-to-day normative thinking: that is, regarding the body as a weapon and a tool'. Accordingly, military 'men are encouraged to separate sexual intercourse from emotion', which suggests that embedded in a worldview of opposites, participants 'tend to offer men a "relationship" when what men really want is physical or bodily pleasure' (ibid). The personal effects of those gendered constructions of attachment was expressed in one interview:

I felt disillusioned, but never mistreated. After so many disappointments I wasn't surprised. I felt used. He lied and then went after me any time he wanted. He knew I would be there waiting for him (Catalina August 2015).

In addition, this statement shows an interesting contradiction, in which the interviewee reported never to have been mistreated, even though she felt emotionally used by the partner. This contradiction may be explained as a consequence of the normalization of the gendered roles in the heteronormative relationship, with 'waiting woman' and 'wondering man', but also of the general perception in which emotional abuse is not seen as a form of mistreatment and violence in the local context.

## **5.1 Domesticated Latina beauties: construction and self-construction**

They admire the Colombian women's beauty (Catalina August 2015).

While local men are 'devaluated' based upon participants' comparisons between them and 'dominant constructions of Whiteness and masculinity' (Guzmán and Valdivia 2004: 206), local women in participants' narratives are represented as exotic, domesticated and compliant, desirable partners for American soldiers. This exemplifies how militarized masculinities seek to be complemented by 'a vision of domestic femininity, at home with the children and requiring protection' (Dawson 1994:2):

Americans say that Latin women are beautiful. I think that's true if you compare us with American women, they are white and simple. We are exotic (Clara August 2015).

Participants' representation of themselves as 'exotic' may respond to an internalized racial and ethnical identity, that following Guzmán and Valdivia (2004: 206) is the result of the cultural construction of Latin women as feminine, brown, curved bodies, whose race 'falls somewhere between Whiteness and Blackness' (2010: 213); and who, through the sexualization and exotization of their bodies, are deemed as sexually available, proficient and desirable women (2010: 211). Accordingly, 'Latina beauty and sexuality is



marked as other, yet it is that otherness that also marks Latinas as desirable. In other words, Latina desirability is determined by their signification as a racialized, exotic others' (Guzmán and Valdiva 2004: 213). This construction is accepted and supported by the interviewees:

They say we are loving and caring. We have good family values and they like that. Latin women are beautiful and they care about their families and homes. We are different from the individualistic and demanding American women. That's why they appreciate what we do for them. They are very grateful (Maria August 2015).

Complying with U.S. servicemen's gender and sexuality expectations of Latina women, participants do their part in reinforcing militarization, as – through self-domestication – they allow U.S. servicemen to sustain 'their visions of themselves as manly enough to act as soldiers' (Enloe 1993: 145). Moreover, participants' insights not only made a distinction between Latin and U.S. women's beauty, but also about their femininities. By portraying American women's alleged individualistic and demanding attitudes toward men as a negative asset, participants' reinforce traditional gender roles that they understand as expected and desirable, such as being a good housewife, and a loving, caring and serviceable women.

According to Hoefinge (2014: 62) distinctions of this type have much to do with gender power asymmetries whereby 'western women are seen to deplete men's power in their efforts towards equality', while local women 'are seen to reinforce it by remaining submissive and subservient' (Ibid). This ultimately serves the ends of militarization, by assuring a 'steady supply' of exotic, caring, loving and obedient women willing to take their part as desirable partners for Uncle Sam's servicemen.

## **5.2 Good/bad women: how they see you, they treat you<sup>11</sup>**

Women I interviewed give meaning to their experiences by evaluating themselves according to the gendered roles that are socially expected from them. They differentiate themselves from other women that are not so worthy of Uncle Sam's charming heroes' attention by adhering to the norms of sexual morality. As stated by Fischer (2011: 40) 'sexual morality is not just about trying to control someone else's sex life. It is about claiming a morally superior position for oneself through stigmatizing others'. For instance, in a joint interview with two participants, one of the women stated, in the momentary absence of the other, that her experience with the U.S. servicemen was different than her friend's. She had only two boyfriends, while her friend had many relationships and very often just for a weekend. She concluded:

We are responsible for our future. It's up to us to take the correct decisions. We create our own fame. (...) The way they [US servicemen] treat you depends on how you behave. If they notice that you are easy they will treat you as such. It all depends on you (Camila August 2015).

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<sup>11</sup> Colombian popular saying 'como te ven te tratan'.

In this context, to be responsible and take the correct decisions means to behave within given norms of sexual morality, in order to be treated with respect, or seen as an attractive long-term partner:

They [US servicemen] have a chart with the photos and names of all the girls they have met in the town. And they gave the girls nicknames according to the way they behave. We are the recreationists (Isabel August 2015).

These stories ultimately show that participants conform to U.S. servicemen standards of morality in order to be noticed as good and worthy women, and use these standards to make sense of their experiences, and to evaluate themselves and other women's sexual behavior. Following Crawford and Popp (2003: 25), when women internalize socially constructed sexual standards they tend to 'sacrifice their sexual autonomy in exchange for social desirability'. What is more, they reinforce traditional gender roles and 'rules' that are 'covert means of controlling women's sexuality' (2010: 23). This is clearly illustrated by one participant's answer, when I asked her whether she is still interested in U.S. servicemen as future partners after the experiences she has had:

I would do it if I meet somebody I like, but I don't know. I don't really want to get involved with another American. That can reduce my chances to get back with the father of my daughter. They tell each other everything. They are like brothers. For them it is not good to know that the girl they are dating was involved with other men. That doesn't speak well about women (Isabel September 2015).

This entails that 'woman's source of integrity' as stated by Wardlow (2014: 1031) is based on 'her capacity for love of others, particularly love of one men, as this is expressed through monogamous sexual desire'. Accordingly, women that have different sexual partners motivated by physical attraction and not 'love' are immoral. In this sense, participants are faced with a local version of what Crawford and Popp (2010: 13) refers to as a 'Madonna- whore dichotomy' that dictates which sexual behaviours are acceptable and which are not. Under such dichotomy women either engage in love-based relationships with one boyfriend, or in short-term sexual relationships with different partners, in what local women refer as the 'three-days date'. In this rhetoric 'love is portrayed as legitimizing' women's sexual relationships with U.S. servicemen (Rose 2000: 318).

## **6 Money, sex and love: questioning oppositional constructs**

Chapters Three and Four indicated that dominant notions and practices of gender and sexuality, as well as race, mark both women's experiences with the U.S. servicemen and the ways they make sense of these experiences. Female domestication, exoticism and racism are all part of the militarized relationships. Still, those are not straight-forward stories, and women's narratives are full of contradictions. Perhaps the most evident is women's ambivalence to describe

their sexual and/or romantic involvements in relation to their partners' gifts, invitations and economic support. Indeed, these relationships involve an economic interest and a desire for social mobility, although those do not exclude the existence of romantic sentiments. Thus, I will argue in this chapter that the assumed contradiction between love—which here includes sexual pleasure and romance—and money, is inadequate to understand these heterosexual, militarized and transnational contacts; because this opposition reduces women's role in the relationships to 'objects of desire' and 'providers of affection' and takes these roles as naturally given (Yea 2005: 469).

An explanation of participants' motivations solely in monetary terms reinforces gender notions according to which women are the ones who 'withhold sex' and 'sell sex'. Following Wardlow (2004: 1027) under this assumption women are expected to 'bargain with the one chip they automatically have regardless of their conditions'. Yet, participants' narratives tell a different story. In order to look at the bigger picture and explore the complexity of women's experiences, it is crucial to take a reflective distance from dualistic approaches that view love and money as separate and oppositional. For instance, take Clara's (August 2015) answer to my inquiry about her different relationships with U.S. servicemen:

I don't do it for money. I work; I don't need to have sex for money. If I do it, it is because I like him and I am having fun.

Talking about her first relationships, Clara said that they met in a pub thanks to a friend that has experience in dating 'gringos' and understands English.

He approached the table and my friend asked him with which of her friends he would like to go out, and he pointed at me. He was very handsome and I was embarrassed, my cheeks were red.

Later, referring to a yearlong romantic relationship she added:

It was a very nice experience, he was very good with me and I was truly in love with him (...) He didn't leave me work or ask me to do anything. I had everything I wanted. I was living with him and he gave me money to cover the expenses of my son and myself. He bought me a motorbike. (...) While he was working I watched TV all morning (...) or went to swimming in the pool. (...) I was very happy.

Following the conversation, this time about the end of her relationship, she said that it was hard for her to go back to her ordinary life, and that it was not easy to accept the way their relationship ended.

After a year he told me that he was transferred back to the US. I was very sad about it. But I met a woman who told me that she was his ex-partner, and that he had a wife and 5 kids. He didn't deny it. It was very painful to realize that he had a family and he was leaving me behind after all that we shared together. (...) After he left, we kept talking for a while and occasionally he sent me money. He said he wanted to come back and be with me, but we lost contact (...) I'm still waiting for him.

Clara has had different relationships with U.S. servicemen. Some have been sexual encounters for pleasure and fun, and others have been romantic long-term relationships driven by desire, love and money. The other participants also reported feeling physically attracted to U.S. servicemen and engaging in short and long relationships motivated by soldiers' kindness and generosity. Thus, even though participants perceive their ex-partners as helpful economic benefactors, their motivations for engagement are not emotionally neutral (Piscitelli 2001: 3). In their narratives love and money are not opposite aspects; instead they are 'inextricably connected' (River-Moore 2012: 852). In that sense, participants' stories challenge the assumed dividing line between love and money, intimacy and the market, and the private and the public, by revealing a fluid boundary between their intimate lives and their economic interests. Nonetheless, locals' remarks about them tell a different story. As illustrated by Armando, a native of the town:

Women see it as the best business in town to have the children of military men, either Colombian or American. The women of the town do not want to study or work, they want to live from soldiers' money. They were used to that way before the Americans came to the town; once they were here, the women saw in them the best chance to have a better life. (...) So, they do it for the money. That is in fact the reason they get pregnant, to tie men up and live from their salaries (Fieldwork notes 2015).

Armando's remarks captures the general view of locals about participants, that I have heard many times, which is deeply entrenched in a 'hostile world view' between money and love that place 'rigid moral boundaries between market and intimate domains', and ultimately 'condemns any juncture' between monetary transfers and intimacy as 'dangerously corrupting' (Zelizer 2000: 823). Correspondingly, these remarks carry symbolic representations about money and love that oppose one another. While money is understood as 'the means for self-interested rational economic transactions', erotic relationships are perceived as 'sentimental', 'profoundly vulnerable' and 'the means for mutuality and emotional fulfilment' (Zelizer 2000: 822). It is important to notice that this assumed 'functional incompatibility' is a consequence of the public/private divide, through which sexuality and intimacy, understood as private and domestic matters, are a 'symbolic refuge from the market relations of capitalism', which belong to the public and social space commonly exclusive for men (Constable in Hoefinge 2014: 63).

Accordingly, the presence of money in these relationships demeans their meaning before the eyes of the locals as inauthentic, defining them as merely 'instrumental transaction(s)', linked with the 'deviant underworld of prostitution' (Zelizer 2000: 823-824; Bernstein 2007: 110). And prostitution in this context, as Zelizer (2000: 823-824) nicely puts it 'implies suppression of affect and intimacy'. Amanda (August 2015), a local businesswoman, condensed in a nutshell the popular feeling in Melgar about women who have relationships with U.S. servicemen:

There is a group of women that hunt down U.S. soldiers; they are used to live from their American boyfriends' gifts and invitations (...) This is like prostitution. They know when the new group arrives and they go out to chase them. Some say that they are in love, but they are fools, they do not realize that the Americans do not want anything serious with them.

Interestingly enough, aware of their association with prostitution, participants reported not being concerned about the stigma:

Just because they (locals) see you going out with them (U.S. soldiers), people think that you are a prostitute. (...) They call us prostitutes. But we don't care about it any more. We are used to it (Isabel August 2015).

If it is hard to deny that usually 'soldiers and prostitutes go hand in hand' (Fieldwork notes 2015), as a group of Colombian soldiers told me during a group conversation, participants' claims reveal how often women in militarized settings are 'reduced to their sexual value' while their sexuality is ignored (Zelizer 2000: 825), which materializes every time they are depicted as prostitutes.

In addition, some participants stated that when U.S. servicemen have a weekend off base, they invite girls for a three-day date expecting sexual favours. However, as one of the participants reported, the presence of money in the way of invitations for diner and drinks is not a mechanical, un-negotiable give-and-take transaction (see also Nussbaum in Zelizer 2000: 838):

They will take you for dinner on the first day; to party on the second and if you want they will invite you to stay with them to the end of the weekend. They never force you to do anything. They are very straightforward and direct with you, they tell you what they want and you are the one who decides (Clara August 2015).

Besides, participants' relationships with U.S. servicemen go beyond sexual encounters. In fact, some participants reported having relationships in which sex was not involved. As one of them said: 'It is not always about sex. Sometimes they just want a friend and some companionship' (Maria August 2015).

Furthermore, under the premise of money and love dichotomy, women's feelings are called into question by denoting them as a 'performance of intimacy and affection', which implies that women's love gestures to U.S. servicemen are a tactical move to gain economic benefits from their 'benefactors' (River-Moore 2012: 864; Brennan 2006: 118).

The linkage between money and love that participants' narratives denote thus questions the perception of 'pure love', which under the money/love divide is assumed to be emotional, irrational, soft, feminine and 'expected to be displayed' by women (Fraser 2003 : 276). As Hamilton (in Hoefinge 2014: 63) argues, under this cognitive map, love has to be always 'uncommodified and detached from material expectations'. Accordingly, women in love are expected to supersede self-interest and conform to the roles set up for them by 'the romantic relationship script', which ultimately works to reinforce gender

asymmetries (Rose 2000: 318). As stated by Butler (1986: 511) 'binary opposition always serves the purposes of hierarchy'.

My findings show that women I interviewed 'burst the fairy tale bubble' (Constable in 2014: 10-11) of pure love by perceiving love as a much broader concept. In their narratives, women's understanding of love entangles sex, romance, respect, care, appreciation and material benefit. Here, it is important to notice that the overlapping of money and love in participants stories also reflects the culturally expected role of men as breadwinner. As Hoefinger (2014: 63) explains, this results in women's association of emotional attachment and material dependence. Therefore, love and money in participants' realities overlap and are 'even inseparable'.

In practice, intimacy and monetary payments 'do not constitute separate and impersonal spheres' (Zelizer 2000: 842). As argued by Nelson (in Zelizer 2000: 842) regarding the interwoven link between intimacy, care and money, focusing our attention to either love or money 'lead us to worry too much about the wrong issues, and not enough about the right ones'. Thus, a dualistic argument obscures that, although U.S. servicemen's dinner invitations, gifts and economic support to their Colombian partners constitute monetary transfers, money, sex and love are not mechanically interchangeable, and love and emotional attachments are not merely performative. As argued by Zelizer (2000: 818) 'people actually match their monetary transfers to their various social relations, including intimate ties,' and establish a different set of payments to each form of relationship. As such, the problem is not 'whether money and erotic relations can coexist', which they often do, but their 'interpretation' (2000: 823).

## **7 Conclusions**

In this study I argue that participants embrace militarization by understanding their relationships with U.S. servicemen as beneficial and desirable. I claim that militarization enforces and exacerbates notions and practices regarding gender, sexuality, race, nationhood, and class. This process creates the setting in which romanticized relationships between local women and U.S. servicemen take shape; where different categories of differentiation are deemed natural, and oppression and discrimination are normalized in order to keep women in their designed domesticated roles.

Yet, gender, sexuality, race, nationhood and class as political categories of differentiation are not natural facts but socially constructed assumptions, shaped by social relationships and opportunities across time and space (Butler 1986: 511). This indicates that, while militarization enables the context in which the gendered, ethnosexual, interracial and transnational encounters occur, once they develop, participants' relationships with U.S. servicemen are not straightforward. Whilst they reproduce the oppressive notions and practices about gender, sexuality, race, nationhood and class that allowed militarization to get deeply rooted in the local society in first place, they also create conditions for women's sexual agency and expose the limits of clear-cut oppositions.

Although militarism and notions of gender, sexuality, race, nationhood and class are 'imagined forms', they 'materialize (...) with real effects upon both women and men' (Dawson 1994: 22). Thus, while the vicious circle nurtures militarization and reinforces embedded structural notions and practices of oppression that interconnect to 'affect what can be thought, imagined or experienced' (Oikkonen 2013: 306) women negotiate the practices and meanings of their relationships within the contextual constraints of their setting.

This study has sought to extend research on militarization of women's lives by discussing the narratives of Colombian women regarding their relationships with U.S. servicemen. The exploration of the meanings of participants' stories uncovers the negotiated nature of their lived experiences, and the narrative dynamic that supports militarization. Militarization is a pervasive and oppressive process that produces and reproduces social inequalities and exclusion in order to preserve the existing social order, and in the process constrains women's possibilities for action. Still, participants' experiences are ultimately the result of participants' strategic social navigation between the ranges of realizable possibilities available to them.

However, as Sunstein (in Zelizer 2000: 836-837) notes 'we should agree that social norms play a part in determining choices, that people's choices are a function of their particular social role; and that the social or expressive meaning of acts is an ingredient in choice'. Thus, participants' experiences are better understood as the result of gendered, sexualised, racialized, nationalized and militarized decisions, which take shape 'in everyday negotiations regarding structural constraints and possibilities' (Oikkonen 2013: 306). To paraphrase Marx, 'women make their own lives (and life histories), but they do so under conditions not of their own choosing' (in Personal Narratives Group 1989: 5).

The analysis of participants' narratives demonstrates how ideas that are typically taken for granted play a central role in shaping certain experiences and not others, and falls in line with previous feminist research that assert that 'power and inequality are structural, historical as well as personal questions' (Oikkonen 2013: 306); that gender relations are causal in militarization (Cockburn 2010); that 'the global is gendered' (Enloe 1990: 196) and that the political is personal as much as the personal is political (Enloe 1990: 195).

Participants had sexual encounters with U.S. servicemen for pleasure, fun, economic and physical security and love; and praise their partners for generosity and gentlemanly ways, and for treating them like princesses. They perceive U.S. servicemen as attractive partners, who, in comparison with local men are the 'best in town'. They do not present their liaisons as straightforward transactional exchanges because they do not relate with U.S. servicemen 'for money'. However, money renders U.S. servicemen more attractive. Women acknowledge that locals call them prostitutes but they do not care much about it, though they differentiate themselves from other women who ignore traditional norms of sexual morals or 'chase gringos'. And, even though their relationships do not have a 'happily ever after', they 'don't really have anything bad to say' about their partners. At the end of the day, they were never 'forced'. They decided to engage sexually and/or romantically

with U.S. servicemen on their own will, for 'fun' and 'love', even though people say they are 'fools' and 'leeches'.

These relationships are neither solely motivated by sentimental attachments nor only by economic opportunism, but rather by both. Consequently, it is reductive to analyse women's lived realities from an oppositional perspective that validates one aspect while negating the other, if we are to give a fair account of the multiplicity and fluidity of women's experiences. Ultimately, the implication of the 'do it for love' or 'do it for money' dichotomy is not only that it generates incomplete interpretations but also that it sustains other gendered and sexualized dichotomies, such as private-public. In order to realize that the line between 'love' and 'money' is everything but fixed, reality needs to be understood in terms of transitions rather than oppositions (Nietzsche in Fraser 2003: 276).

All and all, these relationships are complex interactions that are mainly informed by locals' pre-conceived ideas about the servicemen and vice versa; locals' notions about love and romance; and the socio-economic possibilities of the locals and the U.S. servicemen within the context and structural systems in which they are embedded. Thus, participants' relationships with U.S. servicemen beyond being the result of manipulations to serve military ends are the product of the simultaneous interaction of the international and the local, the North and the South, the material and the emotional, the private and the public; and women's capacity to 'make decisions and act on them', to desire, 'seek out, and enjoy sexuality' (Duggan et al. 2006: 61), as well as social, economic and physical security and support, within the constraints and possibilities of their militarized, gendered, racialized, sexualized and nationalized realities.



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## Appendices

**Table 1**  
**List of informants**

<b>Interviewees</b>		
<b>Name</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Date</b>
Clara	Local Bar	26 August 2015
Camila	Local Bar	27 August 2015
Maria	Local Bar	29 August 2015
Catalina	Local coffee	7 September 2015
Isabel	Local coffee	7 September 2015
Marcela	Local coffee	11 September 2015

  

<b>Locals' Informal conversations</b>		
<b>Name</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Date</b>
Camilo (Tattooist)	Tattoo shop	Aug. – Sep. 2015
Amanda (businesswomen)	Tattoo shop	Aug. – Sep. 2015
Oracio (businessmen)	Local shop	Aug. – Sep. 2015
Alberto (businessmen)	Local shop	Aug. – Sep. 2015
Mr. Fabio (businessmen)	Local shop/ pubs	Aug. – Sep. 2015
Carmen (bar owner)	Local pub	Aug. – Sep. 2015
Group of Colombian 6 soldiers	Local pub	15 August 2015
Colombian Lieutenant	Military Base	21 August 2015
Colombian Colonel	Military Base	September 2015
Susana (businesswomen)	Tattoo shop	Aug. – Sep. 2015
Armando	Tattoo shop	Aug. – Sep. 2015
Bartender	Local Pub	10 September 2015
Mary (receptionist)		13 August 2015
Jairo	Local shop	Aug. – Sep. 2015
Tomas (Doctor)	Military base	Aug. – Sep. 2015
Katherine (informal worker)	Street	Aug. – Sep. 2015
Local prosecutor	Local shop	Aug. – Sep. 2015
Laura	Local shop	Aug. – Sep. 2015
Diana	Local shop	Aug. – Sep. 2015



**Map 1**  
**Location of Melgar in Colombia**

