

The Production of Gendered Knowledge of War

Women and Epistemic Power

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Insurgent war knowledge? Silences and embodied epistemic agency in insurgent women's postwar militancy in Colombia

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Introduction

To change our name was to adapt to a reality, a Colombian reality where we are seen as terrorists. [...] For us, it used to be important to recall the memory of our *camaradas* [...], but I think we have lost the historical memory, and with it, clearly, we lost some parts of the *fariana* culture.

(Interview with Antonia, Bucaramanga,
Colombia, March 22, 2022)

This chapter is about the production of war knowledge from a particular point of view, the narrative of ‘insurgent’ women. By insurgent women, I mean women who have been involved in leftist contentious politics (Nieto-Valdivieso 2020), either taking up arms in order to oppose the State or engaging in clandestine militancy to mobilize for the same sake. In this chapter, I will place a particular emphasis on the narratives of women militants¹ who have been involved in the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (Farc-ep²), mostly *ex-guerrillera* fighters and *ex-clandestine* militants.

What knowledge is being produced by insurgent women? What does the category of insurgent woman mean for post-peace agreement Colombia? How does war knowledge produce a different type of knowledge for feminism? What role does the ‘insurgent’ figure play in the production of knowledge about women’s agency? If the analyses of these questions go beyond the scope of this chapter, it is from these interrogations that the chapter takes its points of departure.

As such, wishing to respond to the introduction’s provocation about “what we can learn about women’s experiences of war” (Björkdahl and Mannergren this volume), the chapter draws upon fieldwork conducted in 2019 and 2022³ with the *farianas*⁴ – broadly women *ex-militants* from the Farc-ep – in the northeastern region of Colombia. Based on *farianas*’ testimonies, this chapter argues that their political militancy and gender work in reincorporation⁵ troubles the knowledge of war and peace, blurring the lines between the position of victims and perpetrators of violence but also bringing new considerations about agency through their embodiment of the insurgent women. As such, my main objective in the chapter is twofold. First, I reflect on the epistemic silences and absences that surround the

category of insurgent women in two particular ways – through the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda and feminist praxis and in the Colombian context. Second, against the idea that reintegration programmes are the beginning of a ‘new life’ and a normalization of the ‘combatant’ subject into a civilian one (Dietrich 2017), I contend that the figure of the ‘woman combatant’ (Boutron 2018, 2019) troubles our way of knowing wars and transitions to peace.

After a brief context on the current political situation in Colombia, I propose two notes: one on methods and one on theory. Then, in the fourth section, I engage with the epistemic silences and absences, especially focusing on why insurgent women do not totally fit into the WPS agenda knowledge production about war and postwar. In the last part of the chapter, I flip this narrative and introduce what I contend is a form of embodied epistemic agency (Björkdahl and Mannergren Introduction to this volume). I do so by exposing three ways in which *farianas*’ war knowledge contests typical understandings of reincorporation and peace, reclaiming both epistemic and embodied forms of agency: by recovering their posture as insurgent women, by proposing their own feminist views in reincorporation and by narrating their insurgent memories. In doing so, I investigate how their narratives circulate in the post-peace agreement setting and how their agency as insurgent women should be central in analysing knowledge production about war and peace. My wish is not to bring a ‘truth’ about *farianas*’ war knowledge but to contribute to the conversation on peace work by insurgent women and the importance of challenging dominant narratives about their political engagement.

The context of knowledge production: post-peace agreement Colombia

Colombia has been through a recent set of events that have changed its contemporary history at a fulgurant pace. In 2016, the Colombian government signed a peace agreement with the most important guerrilla force in the country, the Farc-ep. Since their foundation in Marquetalia in 1964 and their latter conversion into an offensive army (Gutiérrez Sanín & Carranza Franco 2017), the Farc-ep has opposed State violence and land dispossession, making the countryside a key site of their revolutionary struggle.

The history of the Farc-ep – as each testimony of urban and rural militants shows – is linked to the State repression and criminalization of leftist activists and politicians. The production of knowledge from the left was always seen as a threat to the State and, to a large extent, still is. Yet, the signing of the peace agreement has opened a new window of opportunity for leftist politics in the country, as opposed to its historic criminalization (Hristov 2009). On the one hand, it has led to the election of the first left-leaning president in its history, Gustavo Petro, a former M-19 *guerrillero*, and the first Black woman as a Vice President, Francia Márquez Mina (Anctil Avoine 2022a). On the other hand, it has slowly contributed to the changing of perceptions and imaginaries on leftist politics, opening a space for women like the *farianas* to start taking a more public stance. In fact, women, feminist and LGBTIQ+ organizations have played an essential role during

the 2011–2016 formal and informal peace negotiations between the Farc-ep and the Colombian government (cf. Corredor & Anciaux 2024; Vargas Parra & Díaz Pérez 2018).

This peace agreement has been hailed as one of the most well developed in terms of gender approach, with 130 gender provisions, including LGBTIQ+ rights (Boutron 2018; Hagen 2017). However, the lived experiences of women *ex-guerrilleras* from the Farc-ep contrast vividly with the overall institutionalization of gender mainstreaming in Colombia and the ambitious gender approach included in the acclaimed 2016 peace agreement (Barrera Téllez 2017). And, among numerous other structural factors, this is partly due to the fact that they do not entirely fit into the ‘peace narratives’ (Anciaux 2022b).

A note on methods: learning to be *insurrectas*⁶

The reflections I present here are at the intersection of the learning journey of discussing with women militants and my own feelings towards the production of knowledge about and around their place in the post-peace agreement setting in Colombia. I aim to propose a reflection on the silences – despite considerable efforts – that still mark both scholarship and collective imaginaries in the acceptance of insurgent women as actors of peacemaking.

My conversations with the *farianas* are open and still in construction. I, therefore, do not aim at ‘producing a truth’ about their war knowledge, most importantly because it is an evolving terrain as they themselves have different and changing views on their political militancy in the post-peace agreement. My methodology is based on ‘friendship as methods’ (Anciaux 2022b; Tillmann-Healy 2003), in which I engage with the women militants in a longstanding process. My positionality in this is therefore coming from a stance of ‘emancipatory research,’ where I aim to nourish a conversation and produce knowledge that will be, hopefully, useful for the *farianas* in their political militancy, self-critique, and peace activism, on learning how to continue to be *insurrectas* against the system of oppressions that has sustained the war.

But who are the *farianas*? This question is highly subjective. Insurgent identities are complex and diverse. I use the term *farianas* to refer to the persons who identify themselves as women and militants from the Farc-ep during its armed struggle. Broadly speaking, the *farianas* were either *guerrilleras*, which means they were armed combatants, generally in the rural areas of Colombia, or urban militants, which means that they were generally unarmed and in urban settings. They were operating clandestinely in urban and sometimes rural areas of the country. Also, some ‘urban militants’ were involved in more dangerous tasks than others, so their experiences of the conflict varied significantly. One common thing is that their involvement in leftist contentious politics made their lives highly insecure, particularly exposing them to state violence. Therefore, exploring *farianas* war knowledge is a relevant case for understanding embodied epistemic agency – which means, knowledge and forms of agency arising from this particular epistemic standpoint of experiencing war and armed violence.

There are, however, several debates regarding the category ‘*fariana*,’ which I explain in previous work (Anctil Avoine 2022b, 2022c, 2023), where I contend that I stick to the term for its historicity and for the reference to this identity that was made during the conversations I will mention in this chapter (cf. Devia López 2021 for a history of the term). For example, the term is contested inside and outside the political party of the Commons [*Comunes*⁷]. Women ex-Farc-ep are currently debating their collective identity, especially discussing whether they should continue with terms such as *farianas* or *insurgente* or if they would choose to represent themselves as *comuneras* or *las del común*.⁸ I opted for the word *farianas* because it was mentioned many times in our conversations as an important identity and because of its historicity in the internal struggle of the women of the Farc-ep. The category of *fariana* is, therefore, open to contestations and constant remaking. Despite the different existing definitions of the term *fariana* – by the militants themselves and the wide audience and mass media – the main characteristic is the attachment to ‘being insurgent’ or ‘women who resist.’

The reflections compiled here are based on two ethnographic fieldworks in 2019 and 2022 in the northeast of Colombia, especially in three departments – Arauca, Santander and Norte de Santander – either in the reincorporation zones or in the main cities of those departments. During these fieldworks, I have had several conversations with the *farianas*, and conducted participant observations (cf. Anctil Avoine 2022, 2023 for a complete account of the methods). I have interviewed 16 ex-*guerrilleras* and five ex-urban militants in 2019. In 2022, I conducted follow-up meetings with the urban militants and interviewed six ex-*guerrilleras*. Since then, I have tried to continuously discuss the evolving situation of the peace agreement with them – and in particular, their political militancy – through WhatsApp and joint projects such as talks and podcast episodes.⁹

Women ex-*guerrilleras* of the northeastern region have actively fought in the different fronts of the Farc-ep. They are commonly from rural communities, and before their involvement in the guerrilla, they usually lived in precarious socioeconomic conditions. They generally consider themselves *campesinas* (peasants), and they are from Afro-Colombian, Indigenous and *mestiza* backgrounds. They have all experienced the armed conflict personally and often continue to face its consequences. Most of the women with whom I had conversations joined the guerrilla before they were 18 years old, but all say that they did so voluntarily.¹⁰ Some of them also occupied mid-level command positions (*mandos medios*) or performed specific jobs in the insurgency, such as military cartography, mass-based education, nursing or radio operator.

The women urban militants who participated in the research were generally between 15 and 40 years old and lived in cities such as Cúcuta and Bucaramanga. They were in charge of the clandestine political work in those cities, mainly regarding logistical support and ideological propaganda. They were organized in cells (5–6 people), and each cell was attached to a front of the guerrilla in arms. Those militants were part of the *Movimiento Bolivariano por la Nueva Colombia* and the *Partido Comunista Clandestino Colombiano*,¹¹ the clandestine movements supporting the armed insurgency.

Currently, some of the *farianas* – both urban and rural militants – have resigned from the political party, arguing that it was not responding to their feminist aspirations or because of political differences after disarmament (Fieldwork notes, March 2022). Others have faced a return to their traditional roles, which echoes several research studies on the pitfalls of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration programmes globally (cf. KC 2019). But many of them are either continuing their political work outside the political party or building new alliances to work for peace and gender justice. Along the lines of a history of mobilization of insurgent women in Colombia and Latin America (cf. Dietrich 2017; Nieto-Valdivieso 2020), a lot of them are also fighting to keep their leftist activism identity alive.

A note on theory: women militants’ war knowledge against the war/peace binary

The research conducted acknowledges the gendered nature of narratives about war and peace. It also assumes that narrating one’s own story is a ‘political act’ (Parashar 2014) and that women’s narratives about their agency can trouble (Björkdahl & Mannergren Selimovic 2015) knowledge production in war studies as well as peace and conflict studies. As Martin de Almagro (2018, p. 322) argues, “[a]lthough individually performed, stories are always intersubjective and relational, as they are used to make sense of *experience* that goes beyond the individual *embodied* event in a particular *space*.” Narratives are, therefore, producing subjectivities and knowledge about war and peace. Moreover, in the case of the *farianas*, those narratives challenge the “war/peace binary” (Dijkema, Anctil Avoine & Koopman 2024) by reclaiming a war experience that did not only pertain to the domain of violence and can contribute to peacebuilding. As argued by Curtis, Ebila and Martin de Almagro (2022, p. 408), despite the contradiction inherent to the international circulation of the memoirs of ex-combatants, their testimonies “challenge binaries of victim/perpetrator, savior/oppressed and progressive/traditional that the WPS agenda has been unable to overcome.”

As such, in this chapter, I follow, theoretically, Feminist Security Studies and Feminist Studies on War to understand *farianas*’ narratives as a ‘social production’ that can have a prominent “role in knowledge production on security and peacebuilding” (Curtis, Ebila & Martin de Almagro 2022, p. 403). Not only women militants’ testimonies produce a “broader and deeper knowledge of war” (Björkdahl and Mannergren, Introduction to this volume), but they are also a promising way to understand the complexity of their political agency that can transform the pursuit of peace in a given conflict.

On the one hand, in what follows, I understand the ‘epistemic silences’ (Björkdahl and Mannergren Introduction to this volume) as the erasure – on purpose or by omission – of the knowledge produced by a certain group of people, here, women who have been involved in contentious (armed and unarmed) leftist militancy. Knowledge of war has been centred on the tactical, strategic and masculine points of view, and this has consequently marginalized women’s voices and experiences.

While I am conscious that the epistemic silences around women's contentious militancy are wider and multidimensional,¹² I will only explore succinctly two ways of silencing the knowledge brought to the fore by insurgent women, through the WPS agenda and in the history of the Colombian conflict.

On the other hand, I conceptualize 'embodied epistemic agency' as proposed by Björkdahl and Mannergren (Introduction to this volume), as being attached to the agency one can find in the push and pull of the norms that constitute oneself (Butler 1988) in which knowledge production has a particular place for the transformation of this agency. In the particular case I explore, I conceptualize this term as attached to the production of knowledge that is felt through the body, and within the matrix of war, as a particular embodied experience (Parashar 2014). I argue, in this chapter, that *farianas* are, in different ways, reclaiming an embodied form of epistemic agency through restaging the combatant identity otherwise, through feminism and memory building.

Epistemic silences and erasures about insurgent women

The difficult conversation with the WPS agenda

In many studies about armed violence and peacebuilding efforts, "female combatants remain on the margins of war related discourses" (Shekhawat 2015, p. 4), mostly because they are stigmatized for transgressing gender norms, or they are labelled as victims of their armed group patriarchal organization. Because of the underlying discourse about women being victims of violence, the WPS agenda has also tended to minimize the contribution of insurgent women to the building of peace (Henshaw 2017; Anctil Avoine & Santoire 2023).

The WPS agenda is, *per se*, constructing narratives and knowledge in the "frictional encounters between various actors and interests" (Björkdahl and Mannergren Introduction to this volume). Since Resolution 1325 in 2000, a substantial body of work has developed regarding the participation of women in war and peace, with a multitude of feminist contributions oscillating between two poles, "the radical revolutionary one which advocates a redefinition of the global order and is more skeptical (*sic*) of the agenda, and the pragmatist one accentuating the compromise towards the existing peace and security governance" (O'Sullivan 2019). Recently, the WPS agenda has been criticized by different scholars for being disconnected from the reality on the ground, for emphasizing mostly sexual violence as well as women as an essential category and for reconducting ideas about women as fragile, passive and naturally prone to peace (Basu et al. 2020; Manchanda 2020). Even though researchers and practitioners have been increasingly paying attention to the combat roles and violence of women, war testimonies of insurgent women do not fit easily into the general understanding of the WPS agenda as an anti-militarist agenda.

The WPS agenda is still part of a global framework that tends to reproduce and reinforce "the (neo)liberal peacebuilding framework that fails to fully integrate local communities" (Boutron 2018, p. 119) and, in this case, the women who do not totally

fit into the ‘woman peacebuilder’ narrative. Insurgent women are expected to return to ‘civilian society,’ where oppressive structures are left mostly untouched, and their war agency is not recognized (KC & Anctil Avoine 2021). Especially, *ex-guerrillera* women are still represented as deviant bodies: against the ‘traditional femininity,’ they have adopted an insurgent identity that does not align with ‘peace’ as commonly understood. The overall framing of the WPS agenda around the notion of victim hinders a political perspective on the post-peace agreement militancy of insurgent women. In turn, this implies that many women *ex-combatants* repress their stories, and their war narratives are left untold, as Gloria [*ex-guerrillera*] points out:

[...] I never talked about it [her involvement in the guerrilla]. I feel like if I say it, I would be a monster to many people, and they will not understand. So, no... At the university, I had a double life. I don’t know how to say that, but a part of my story doesn’t exist for anyone, only for me. [...] The only option we have is to become stronger.

(Interview with Gloria, Bucaramanga, Colombia, August 22, 2019)

There are still many silences around the stories of insurgent women who “are always excluded in mainstream analyses of insurgent wars and political violence” (Parashar 2016, p. 51). In this sense, even though signs of progress have been made with the peace agreement signed in La Havana between the Farc-ep and the Colombian government about the political participation of women *ex-combatants*, they still do not ‘fit’ clearly into the WPS agenda. Most importantly, there is a gap in the literature concerning the link between the figure of the insurgent women and the WPS Agenda discourses and practices (Dietrich & Nieto-Valdivieso forthcoming).

The invisibilization of insurgent women’s war narratives in Colombia

I think that’s it; we have no memory. I mean, we don’t preserve it... We can say ‘a hundred and something people have died’. But what are the names? There is nothing. And that’s very strong. That’s very strong, and then we only have in our memory those who were commanders... But what about the others?

(Interview with Antonia, Bucaramanga, Colombia, August 27, 2019)

Insurgent women’s bodies are outside the norm. Often seen as ‘reckless,’ insurgent women contravene the hegemonic definition of femininity and are seen as ‘abnormal’ (Ibarra Melo 2009, p. 94). They have rebelled against the established system (the political norm) and femininity (the gender normative system). Their bodies do not respond to the combatant sphere, traditionally understood as masculine, or the civil sphere that conflates femininity with passivity: making sense of their war narratives, practices and lived experiences goes against the story of the ‘nation.’ It also confronts feminism at its core, especially anti-militarist feminist historical narratives¹³ against masculinity as a regime of domination of women’s bodies (Dietrich &

Nieto-Valdivieso forthcoming). As argued elsewhere, it still creates discomfort (Anctil Avoine & Santoire 2023). Moreover, remembering the narratives of perpetrators in armed conflicts remains controversial, women ex-combatants are thus often relegated to silence (Vásquez Perdomo 2011). In fact, Violeta, militant of the current political party, recalls:

In many contexts, families try to tell women ex-combatants to ‘forget’ or ‘to put that behind them.’ This means leaving behind the experience of the military scenario when, for most of them, it has been a big part of their lives.

(Author conversation with Violeta, Santiago de Cali,
Colombia, March 2022)

In addition, in the Colombian context, self-censorship about their narratives is very common: being categorized as a non-normative body also implies a refusal to speak out. Sometimes this refusal can be a protective reflex against stereotypes about their militancy or a political refusal in the sense of denying contributing to the historical memory of the state institutions. This is directly related to the different political battles surrounding collective memory in Colombia in parallel with an unprecedented context in the country to reconstruct the memory of the victims of the internal armed conflict – a highly necessary but also complex and controversial exercise (Elston 2020).

Very little is known about the narratives of the women from the Farc-ep, especially the low-rank soldiers. In addition, there is almost no trace of the stories of the *farianas* that have died in combat. In the research about the historical memory of the *Marquetalianas* – the women who were part of the first peasant insurgencies in the 1950s and 1960s – I found out that their narratives and stories were untold, undocumented and understudied. Violeta, who has also extensively investigated herself the history of *farianas*, affirms:

I am almost convinced that there is not much written [about the history of the *marquetalianas*]. Their origin and the participation of Miriam Narvárez and Judith Grisales are things that I began to see from Havana [peace process]. They appear as signatories of the agrarian program, which is the document that was generated at the time of the foundation of Farc-ep. [...] I remember that Victoria [Sandino] presented it in a document. Still, these are scattered things that are not gathered in a scientific document or a historical document that I could easily share with you.

(author conversation with Violeta,
Zoom March 15, 2020)

As Violeta points out, there is undoubtedly a recent and growing interest since the 2016 peace process in the figure of the woman combatant. It is indeed the first time that talking and meeting with the *farianas* has become ‘accessible’ and that they have been much more visible on social media (Anctil Avoine & Boutron 2021). A few years ago, it was almost impossible for an ex-guerrilla woman to speak

out in the public sphere without her life being systematically put in danger. At the time of writing, some of them openly claim to be revolutionary and feminist on social networks, as is the case of the ex-guerrillera and photographer Alexa Rochi (Alexandra Marín). In the northeastern region, and despite the threats to their lives, the *farianas* are trying to recover their memories and narratives of war to contribute to a more gender-just Colombia.

Insurgent knowledge: embodied epistemic agency

In this final section, I propose to flip the story and reclaim the insurgent body as an example of ‘embodied epistemic agency’ (Björkdahl and Mannergren, Introduction to this volume). To do so, I explore three ways in which *farianas* have contributed to changing the narratives on their participation in war and how this affects their reincorporation into civilian society. My goal is to show that their war and peace narratives, through the figure of the female combatant, the insurgent feminism and the insurgent memories, contest hegemonic views on war, reincorporation and peace.

Reclaiming the combatant body

In their narratives, the *farianas* do not reject their past as combatants. The narration of Carmen, ex-*guerrillera* from Arauca, is telling on the matter:

They want us to deny what we were doing for many years [...] while we know that it was right: an armed struggle. An armed struggle that we considered necessary for the change of society [...] It was not even for us because we were in the precarious conditions of war. [...] We cannot deny what we were. So, we fight for it.

(Interview with Carmen, Filipinas,
Colombia, September 11, 2019)

On the contrary to what society expects, the *farianas* generally associate the category of the *guerrillera* with positive emotions such as happiness, love and pride. According to Nieto-Valdivieso (2020, p. 100), “many women experienced the changes in their bodies as a positive and agentic experience that gave them self-confidence, because they became aware that they were able to perform the same tasks as male comrades.” In turn, from an analytical point of view, the figure of the women combatant changes the way we think about reincorporation, recentring the analysis on how war affects bodies and creates insecurities (Wilcox 2014).

Dietrich (2014, 2017) has conducted research on different insurgencies in Latin America, for which she developed the category of the *compañera militante* – the militant fellow, feminized – to highlight a particular positionality of women militant in these contexts. Thus, it is precisely the result of this participation in the armed struggle or clandestine militancy, different from mothers, wives or other role models, the *guerrillera* is a transgressive figure who displays political participation against a system that keeps women in subordinate positions (Dietrich 2014, p. 105). Thus,

even though involvement in armed struggle has led many women commanders to have to demonstrate traits associated with masculinity ‘to be respected,’ *farianas* are currently reclaiming this experience to think differently about their leadership in reincorporation: “[c]learly, this is not the model that we, the feminists, the *farianas*, the popular leaders, advocate for when we call for parity political participation” (Nathalie Mistral quoted in Devia López 2021, p. 17). On the contrary, it is precisely the recovery of their war narratives as *guerrilleras* that positions them as ‘political subjects’ [*sujetas políticas*] (Barrera Téllez 2017). This contests the hegemonic view of reincorporation as a ‘normalisation’ process where women should accept the normative citizenship generally associated with traditional femininity (Dietrich 2017). The figure of the insurgent woman thus poses the challenge of thinking of a reincorporation that would not be passive but insurgent – which means in opposition to the knowledge produced about women and peace.

Embodying feminist politics in the post-peace agreement setting

I’ve always been a rebel. I’ve always been a fighter. I’ve always been an advocate for women’s rights, but I did not call myself a ‘feminist’ ... I made the decision to call myself a feminist, and it was absolutely... I think it was as radical as saying, ‘I’m going to go guerrilla.’ And when I decided to go into the insurgency, it was an absolutely transcendental decision [...]

(Interview with Victoria Sandino, Bogota,
Colombia, October 31, 2019)

Drawing on experience, one can contribute to feminism... It is not that I have been a feminist since I came out of the *monte* [...] I declared myself openly feminist only since last year. [...] We [feminised] have been feminist in practice, without the theory, from activism, we have brought our grain of salt to the struggles of social movements. [...] I continue to be a rebel with a cause; I consider myself a revolutionary feminist.

(Instagram Live of Alexa Rochi,
March 25, 2021)

Farianas’ war experiences and narratives are at the core of their proposal to consider reincorporation from a feminist perspective. It is from their war experience and clandestine militancy that they are trying to forge a feminism that speaks to them. From this particular embodied location, they are producing different forms of feminist knowledge in the post-peace agreement context.

During the war, women *guerrilleras* experienced gender roles differently than in civilian society – which is not to say that patriarchy was not at play (Dietrich 2017). They were considered “units of combat” on the same level as men, and they could exercise command over mixed units, providing them with different views on gender roles than they were exposed to in their villages. Victoria Sandino states that “our women managed to be commanders of groups of men and women, and in

the end, this means breaking very powerful paradigms” (Interview, with Victoria Sandino, Bogota, Colombia, October 31, 2019). These experiences of combat and command are part of a collective conceptualization of struggle, reiterated in the idea of collective empowerment proposed by the *farianas* (Phelan & True 2021). It is based on this embodied experience of struggle, as well as the distinct functional gender roles of civil society, that the *farianas* attempt to think of a feminism in their own terms (Anctil Avoine 2023; Céspedes-Báez 2019).

As such, insurgent feminism of the *farianas* emerges from the reflections on their war experience as the following testimonies highlight:

[Insurgent feminism] was born from the peace agreement, as our own feminism and a class feminism, based on the experience of women ex-combatants, from the equality during the war, where there was no specific task for women, and there were women in command [...].

(Intervention by Antonia during a feminist meeting behind closed doors, Bucaramanga, Colombia, August 16, 2024)

Insurgent feminism, I relate it to what we, women, were during the war. [...] To what we were as women in the guerrilla and what the peasant women are. [...] the difference is that the *fariana* woman has the particularity of being ready to solve [...] she already has many tools from what she lived there [in the guerrilla], to have ways to get out of it, and also that she is different because we were in many things, many women participated in important things, some went to the front lines, others were in nursing [...], but the difference of the insurgent woman is that; the preparation.

(Interview with Yeni, Bogota, Colombia, September 16, 2019)

The *farianas* have strategically positioned their views on feminism during the peace negotiation in La Havana (Boutron 2020). One of the results of their work in La Havana first materialized in the launch of their webpage, *Mujer Fariana*,¹⁴ explicitly dedicated to the lives, narrations and work of Farc-ep women (Phelan & True 2021). This webpage, a site of knowledge production from the positionality of the *farianas*, was intended to be a space to “reconstruct [their] history, that [they] had to learn to look at things through [their] own eyes, through the eyes of women” (Devia López 2021, p. 16). It was launched in October 2013 from Cuba, and it helped “building a narrative around women, revolution, and combat” (Céspedes-Báez 2019, p. 61).

Thus, as the documentary *Nunca Invisibles* shows (Nueva Colombia 2018), the *farianas* evoke emotions, the materiality of war and the narrations about their daily life in the guerrilla to offer a more nuanced portrait of their experience in arms and how they intend to continue their militancy. Indeed, the insurgency is seen as “forming part of a transformative political identity that goes beyond armed struggle and involves the active role of insurgent women” (Elston 2020, p. 76). As such, insurgent feminism implies the “collective recognition of the historical subject of the insurgent woman,” which is, in turn, a tool to “strengthen the collective identity

of the organization [Farc] in the face of the transition to civilian life” (Farc 2020, p. 26). As recounted by Olga Marín:

And we have something very beautiful, which still needs to be enriched [...] It is the insurgent feminism, we must develop this feminist theory, to which we have given the nickname insurgent, because we are still insurgent even though we have laid down the gun, because we are still insurgent, raised against a system that oppresses the people and especially women.

(Mujer Fariana 2019)

Certainly, there are cleavages within the *fariana* community itself regarding the possibility of narrating war experiences, for example, between *farianas* of urban and peasant origin or those still in detention (see similar findings by Vergel Tovar 2012). However, it is about showing the political contributions “of revolutionary women who did not receive the deserved recognition” (Weber 2021b, p. 117) through a double contribution to their militancy: to stand out from their male comrades to talk about their “engagement in contentious politics” and to challenge the simplified representations of their insurgent narratives (Nieto-Valdivieso 2020, p. 92). In this endeavour, the recovery of memories is a central aspect.

Narrating insurgent memories

For a long time, we were more concerned with doing than saying. The work for subsistence, politics, the guerrilla struggle, peace have occupied our bodies and minds almost completely. The time has come to write, to accompany and enrich the practice with our stories, with the memory of what we have done and what we have learned. [...] We decided that our voice should come from the joy of daily life in wartime; from the challenges of being women in a world designed for men, and the infinite possibilities that peace opens.

(Violeta, public intervention, quoted in Comité de género de Caño Indio 2019)

Reiteratively, women ex-combatants from the Farc-ep talk about the necessity of remembering the *cultura fariana* and the war experience as important narratives for reconciliation and changing the collective imaginary about them – primarily associated with ‘terrorism’ in the public discourse. Thus, it becomes essential to open research spaces for ex-combatants to construct their memory, especially given the “significant absences, silences, and limitations of the ‘official version’ from Colombian government programs” (Vergel Tovar 2012, p. 244). *Farianas’* memories are at the heart of the post-peace agreement militancy of ex-combatants as a direct strategy for political reincorporation that involves multiple registers and the interconnection between “ideologies, politics, and affections” in the different narratives (Nieto-Valdivieso 2020, p. 97).

These female ex-combatants’ narratives of their lived experiences as guerrilla members suggest that the powers of affirmation and positive feelings

such as joy and happiness generated among members of politico-military organizations need to be taken into account in the process of memory building, the construction of polyphonic memories about Colombia's 60 years of armed violence and in future DDR processes.

(Nieto-Valdivieso 2017, p. 88)

Some *farianas* engaged in public activism with a willingness to show another face of what it means to have been a guerrilla in arms. Mariana, an ex-urban militant, recalls a meeting at a public university in Bucaramanga that broke down the stigma about *farianas*:

After watching *Nunca Invisibles*, what was interesting was that people expected to see 'rambo in a woman's body' when what they saw were 'normal, common women' talking about everyday life. Even many people took pictures with them [the women ex-combatants].

(Interview with Mariana, Bucaramanga, Colombia, August 6, 2019)

Making visible the narrative memories of female combatants is part of a process of representation and historicization of their participation in contentious and dissident politics (Nieto-Valdivieso 2020). In fact, as Clara Inés Guerrero, ex-guerrilla of the M-19 and member of the National Network of Women Ex-combatants of the Insurgency, stated in an interview with Elston (2020, p. 73), the idea of insurgent memory implies "a recognition that these women are political, that they took up arms as a political option, that they are conscious of what they do."

These memories, referred to as 'embodied memories' by Santamaría (2019, p. 154), are central to a post-peace agreement: they are the 'sensorial memories' of women ex-combatants that have historically been excluded from dominant narratives of war and peace. Väyrynen (2019, p. 3) argues, moreover, that memory is rarely even explored from 'corporeal angles' in peace and conflict studies; yet, it remains essential to account for the embodied memories of 'war bodies,' and thus, the affective dimension of armed conflict. Along this path, many *farianas* have decided to continue their militancy: as Deisy, ex-*guerrillera*, points out, "it is a very beautiful experience, and it is important that people really know what guerrilla warfare was like; it was not just shooting bullets" (Interview with Deisy, Bucaramanga, Colombia, August 12, 2019). Recovering war experience is framed as a necessary step to identity politics, as shown by Carmen, ex-*guerrillera*:

[...] we are expected to deny this history, as if we don't have a past [...] as if we must forget this past and anesthetize it [...], but we had this moment of resistance; we can't deny what we were, nor can we deny this identity.

(Interview with Carmen, Filipinas, Colombia, September 11, 2019)

Therefore, the fear of forgetting the armed struggle is at the heart of the militancy of many *farianas* in the northeastern region of Colombia. For example, Violeta asks: "Who will remember the common women of the 33 Front, killed in combat?"

The only ones who can do it are their *compañeras* of struggle” (conversation with Violeta, Zoom, September 5, 2020).

Caño Indio – a reincorporation zone in the Department of Norte de Santander – is a particularly telling case of embodied memory. In this region, the *farianas* retrieve their war narratives, experiences and skills to build projects with the support of the International Organisation for Migration, the Colombian Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization and the British Council. With the triple objective of fighting against gender-based violence, promoting women’s autonomy and recovering the memories of their front, they proposed various projects to collect narratives about their war memories and their transition to their ‘new life.’ They created a small book with these narratives, a productive project¹⁵ that helped them finance their gender committee in the reincorporation zone.

In 2020, they also created a series of questions seeking to trace the narratives of women killed in combat through visual pieces that they could easily share on WhatsApp. They asked their *compañeras*¹⁶ to reflect explicitly on how gender operated in the war and how gender relations could be transformed with this knowledge in the post-peace agreement era. Other questions were more oriented towards reconstructing the political memory of the *farianas*, such as: “Can you name a woman you consider an example in the guerrilla struggle? Why do you remember her? What activities did she do? What did you learn from her?”¹⁷ From there, they were explicitly asking which place would be allowed to their memory, as women ex-combatants: it is a “feminine look at the war” that allows thinking about other analytical categories in peace and conflict studies from the “construction of a feminine language” to narrate them (Londoño 2005, p. 72). It is a narrative of its own, without the mediation of researchers or journalists (Elston 2020).

Conclusions

We cannot let them take our memories from us.

(Interview with Mariana, Bucaramanga, Colombia, August 6, 2019)

In an attempt to open paths of reflections about embodied epistemic agency and war knowledge, this chapter started with insurgent women’s testimonies to show how they recover agency in the post-peace agreement setting. I argued that taking the narratives of insurgent women as a starting point and placing them at the heart of interrogations about war troubles the dominant knowledge about their reincorporation, and about war/peace binaries in general. By doing so, I have shown the necessity to question the silences that still exist on the ‘non-normative’ bodies of insurgent women.

Epistemologically, the analysis of women ex-combatants’ narratives changes the way we understand war and postwar (Björkdahl et al. 2023; Wibben 2010). The chapter highlighted the importance of the category of woman combatant for post-peace agreement periods. This open-ended and constantly contested category poses questions central to war narratives and knowledge production. It also questions our traditional view on female militancy in post-peace agreement settings.

Therefore, taking the example of the war and postwar narratives of the *farianas*, the chapter opens questions about the reclaiming of the insurgent identity and the importance of war memory in building peace. Ultimately, the chapter advocates for pushing further the theoretical and practical debates on the importance of insurgent identities and knowledge production for post-guerrilla militancy and peacebuilding.

Of course, insurgent women are still facing several forms of epistemic silences and erasures of their lived experience of war. In this chapter, I have explored some of them, namely the difficult conversation with the epistemic premises of the WPS agenda and in the history of the Colombian conflict. However, several other paths of inquiry in this regard would be important to delve into. First, there is still a lot more research needed in terms of recovering the memory of women *ex-guerrilleras* in Colombia, and Latin America generally speaking. Much of them have been reduced to silence, and many are afraid to speak or face security challenges when they try to do so. Second, as Weber (2021a) has argued in previous work, several forms of silences happened in the implementation of the gender approach and the Truth Commission in Colombia: women *ex-combatants*, at the intersection of victims and perpetrators, have silenced themselves in terms of gender-based violence for several reasons. Among them is the difficult position they occupy when it comes to speaking about sexual violence while not wanting to perpetuate the stereotypes about their organization.

Third, in the case of Colombia, there is a need for research in relationship with the different armed groups and how they have communicated knowledge with each other about women's war involvement. The case is particularly timely now that women from the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*) might have the opportunity to discuss further both with other militants from the Farc-ep and with the civilian society and women's / feminist organizations. Finally, the barriers to knowledge circulation are not only external, as women militants who participated to my research have pointed out, but there are also several ways in which they operate self-censorship, for different reasons: shame, stigma, fear or security.

Notes

- 1 I understand women militants in broad terms as those who have been part of armed and unarmed leftist organizations. I want to move beyond the idea that 'militants' are always armed and create a space to think about militancy in a wider perspective. As I discussed with the *farianas*, '*militancia*' (militancy) was a very important term that I try to stick to. In the context of this chapter, women militants of the Farc-ep were also armed *guerrilleras*, but some of them would identify as militants, but would not carry a gun.
- 2 Farc-ep stands for *Fuerzas armadas revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo* in Spanish.
- 3 This research has been funded by the Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship for my doctoral studies (Grant number CGV-151427), by the Vinnova/Marie Curie fellowship (Grant number 2021–02012) and by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Grant number 756–2021–0617) for my post-doctoral project. Ethics approvals were obtained by the Université du Québec à Montréal (Canada) and by Etikprövningsmyndigheten (Sweden).

- 4 My sincere gratitude to all the *farianas* that have agreed to enter into conversation with me during the last five years and, hopefully, in the years to come. I hope that my writings do justice to our conversations.
- 5 Reincorporation is a term used by the Farc-ep to characterize their process of laying down the weapons and returning to civilian status. They have decided to use the term reincorporation instead of reintegration to make their process different from the previous reintegration programs in Colombia. The distinctive features of this process are multiple, but the most important one is that the Farc-ep refused to ‘demobilize’ and emphasized the necessity to see reincorporation as political and collective.
- 6 *Insurrectas* stands for a feminized ‘insurrected’ in Spanish. It was used by several insurgent women in Latin America to highlight that they oppose systems of oppression and engage in contentious politics. It also refers strongly to the leftist insurrections and the continuity of the insurrection even when they lay down the weapons. I feel that, as a researcher, I have learned a lot from our discussions about how to stay uncomfortable with the oppressive structures we are living in.
- 7 At first, in 2017, the Farc-ep transformed into a political party named *Fuerza alternativa revolucionaria del común* – Common Alternative Revolutionary Force. Later, following several debates and because of social stigma attached to the Farc acronym, the political party became *Comunes* – The Commons.
- 8 *Comuneras* stands for ‘the commons’ but feminized. It refers to the women who are in the political party born out of the peace agreement (see their webpage: <https://partidocomunes.com.co/comuneras/>). Some of the *farianas* in my fieldwork would also name themselves as ‘the ones of the common’ – *las del común*. The important point is their conviction in attaching their feminist struggle to the popular masses.
- 9 See <https://www.facebook.com/Comuneras/videos/351388013552763/?vh=e&mibextid=WC7FNe&rdid=XFmMjAIBpfCa7P2K#>, and episode of podcast forthcoming in Lüvo-Leve, <https://open.spotify.com/show/10TVOQO3q2rOXslZXpThNa?si=5f31rv9tICWA1BvQc-Qg4g&nd=1&dlsi=78acb7949cc84d64>
- 10 The ‘voluntary’ character of involvement is to be nuanced (see Anctil Avoine 2022c): the question of child recruitment is highly complex in Colombia and goes beyond the scope of this chapter [see Higgs (2020) for a detailed analysis of child soldiering in the Farc-ep].
- 11 The English translations would be, respectively, the Bolivarian Movement for the New Colombia and the Colombian Clandestine Communist Party.
- 12 See conclusions for the possible other paths of inquiry in this sense.
- 13 It is beyond the scope of this chapter to analyse the relationship of insurgent women with the feminist movement, collectives and organizations in Colombia. For very thorough analyses, see Céspedes-Báez (2019) and Céspedes-Báez and Beltrán y Puga (2023).
- 14 *Mujer Fariana* was launched in 2013 in the middle of the peace negotiation, with a clear communication strategy (Boutron 2020; Devia López 2021).
- 15 More information is available on the Instagram account of Ixora, their clothing brand, <https://www.instagram.com/ixora.inclusivas.autonomas/?hl=fr>. A journalistic account of their journey can be read in Spanish in *Pacifista!* (Martin Laiton 2020).
- 16 *Compañeras* stands for feminized militant fellows in this context. It is usually used to describe another woman militant, but sometimes it can refer to an intimate partner.
- 17 Conversation with Violeta, September 2020.

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