

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

## Fifty Million Shades of Gray: Recent Approaches to Colombian History

Richard Stoller

Pennsylvania State University, US  
rjs27@psu.edu

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This essay reviews the following works:

**Mapping the Country of Regions: The Chorographic Commission of Nineteenth-Century Colombia.** By Nancy P. Appelbaum. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. Pp. xiv + 304. \$34.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781469627441.

**The Colombia Reader: History, Culture, Politics.** Edited by Ann Farnsworth-Alvear, Marco Palacios, and Ana María Gómez López. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017. Pp. xiv + 619. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780822362289.

**Colombia**, 6-volume history, edited by Eduardo Posada Carbó.

**Tomo 1, Crisis imperial e independencia, 1808–1830.** Edited by Adolfo Meisel Roca. Madrid: Editorial Taurus and Fundación MAPFRE, 2010. Pp. 311. ISBN: 9788430607976.

**Tomo 2, La construcción nacional, 1830–1880.** Edited by Beatriz Castro Carvajal. Madrid: Editorial Taurus and Fundación MAPFRE, 2012. Pp. 311. ISBN: 9788430608423.

**Tomo 3, La apertura al mundo, 1880–1930.** Edited by Eduardo Posada Carbó. Madrid: Editorial Taurus and Fundación MAPFRE, 2013. Pp. 360. €15.00 paperback. ISBN: 9788430617357.

**Tomo 4, Mirando hacia dentro, 1930–1960.** Edited by Malcolm Deas. Madrid: Editorial Taurus and Fundación MAPFRE, 2014. Pp. 351. €15.00 paperback. ISBN: 9788430617364.

**Tomo 5, La búsqueda de la democracia, 1960–2010.** Edited by Jorge Orlando Melo. Madrid: Editorial Taurus and Fundación MAPFRE, 2015. Pp. 311. €15.00 paperback. ISBN: 9788430617623.

**Tomo 6, Colombia a través de la fotografía, 1847–2010.** Madrid: Editorial Taurus and Fundación MAPFRE, 2015. (Not reviewed here.)

**Territorial Rule in Colombia and the Transformation of the Llanos Orientales.** By Jane M. Rausch. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013. Pp. x + 186. \$69.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9780813044668.

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Over the last fifteen years Colombia has moved from ostensibly failed state to emerging market and tourist destination, providing Nobel-endorsed evidence that peace and reconciliation are possible after decades of brutalization. But while Colombia may no longer be the country that former president Ernesto Samper described in 2002, where governing was like trying to pilot an airplane in a storm while the passengers were rioting, neither is it the wonderland depicted in official propaganda.<sup>1</sup> Many Colombians live badly;

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Pedro Medellín Torres, *El presidente sitiado: Ingovernabilidad y erosión del poder presidencial en Colombia* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2006), 36. For a visual summary of presentable Colombia, see the 2014 official video of the national anthem: Presidencia de la República—Colombia, “Himno Nacional de la República de Colombia,” YouTube video, 2:15, August 7, 2014, <https://youtu.be/SrvKADxxsqg>.

many more, well into the nominal middle class, live precariously; and still more structure their lives around minimizing their chances of falling victim to crime—something the poorest are unable to do. Unhappiness about the present and pessimism about the future are rampant across the social scale, focused precisely on those themes the Juan Manuel Santos government (2010–2018) touted as successes: the peace process, “social inclusion,” and infrastructure and public services.<sup>2</sup> Colombia may be more governable than it used to be, but not because the passengers are happier with the pilot—with the qualified (and to many Colombians highly suspicious) exception of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).<sup>3</sup> This is the latest installment in “Colombia, Land of Contradictions,” familiar to Colombians through cliché and lived experience and to others through a still relatively sparse but improving English-language historiography. The books reviewed here represent four approximations to the complexities of the Colombian past and, more or less explicitly, the present. One is a multivolume survey history, one a dense collection of readings, and the other two are monographs on subjects of great historical and current relevance. With Colombia firmly installed as the world’s second-largest Spanish-speaking country,<sup>4</sup> those complexities are of utilitarian and not just humanistic interest to the rest of the world.

The MAPFRE “América Latina en la historia contemporánea” is an enormous project involving four hundred authors over nineteen national histories.<sup>5</sup> In its prominent but editorially unobtrusive corporate sponsorship, its uniform periodization (and titling, e.g., 1930–1960 as “Looking Inward”) and chapter organization, and above all its scale, the project is very much of our times. The Colombia collection, coordinated by Eduardo Posada Carbó of Oxford University, brings together scholars—mostly but not all Colombians, and not all historians—who fulfill their charge confidently but in a historiographical vacuum.<sup>6</sup> References to what we don’t yet know, used to think of differently, or aren’t in agreement about, empirically or interpretively, are scarce and sometimes arbitrary. Thus the collection is temperamentally closer to the 1960s *Historia extensa de Colombia* of the Academia Colombiana de Historia than the early 1980s *Manual de Historia* of Colcultura, or the late 1980s *Nueva Historia de Colombia*.<sup>7</sup> The *Historia extensa*, aptly named at twenty-four titles over forty-one volumes, represented a handsome last gasp of traditional historiography; the later titles represented, respectively, the official and popular triumphs of the *nueva historia*, a critical and broadly materialist reinterpretation of everything. Posada Carbó promises that the collection will offer a “novel contribution” (1:16), a promise fulfilled by some individual authors (Posada Carbó included); but the collection as a whole does not offer a distinctive interpretative framework. Given the modular organization of the collection, this review proceeds not by volume but by topics across volumes: political life, Colombia in the world, the economic process, population and society, and culture. This ordering, in particular the primacy of politics, offers an implicit rebuke to the devaluing of politics during the early waves of Colombian *nueva historia*, and perhaps carries the same message for the other national histories.

The political chapters vary in their engagement with modern Colombian historiography. The two chapters through 1880, by Armando Martínez Garnica and Fernando Botero Herrera (from Bucaramanga and Medellín, respectively—the inclusion of distinguished historians from outside the usual Bogotá suspects is a praiseworthy feature of the collection), would not have been entirely out of place in the *Historia extensa*, given their narrative and institutional rather than structural or social approach. Posada Carbó offers a convincing rebuttal of the common view that the 1886 Constitution and what came afterward—the Regeneración and then the “Conservative Hegemony”—were highly authoritarian or even highly conservative, and he gives welcome attention to departmental (state) politics and the roles of the press and the Church. He summarily dismisses (3:40) class analysis of 1890s politics, a dismissal that seems to

<sup>2</sup> “¿Por qué hay tanto pesimismo en Colombia?,” *Semana*, March 22, 2017, <http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/encuestas-y-pesimismo-en-colombia/519665>.

<sup>3</sup> The maximum expression of this suspicion is the claim that President Juan Manuel Santos is “Comandante Santiago,” the FARC’s ultimate sleeper cell. Pacífico Paz, “Carta de un campesino a Juan Manuel Santos,” *Las 2 Orillas*, February 22, 2016, <https://www.las2orillas.co/carta-de-un-colombiano-al-senor-presidente-juan-manuel-santos/>.

<sup>4</sup> Instituto Cervantes, *El español: Una lengua viva: Informe 2016*, 5. <http://www.cervantes.es/imagenes/File/prensa/EspanolLenguaViva16.pdf> (accessed September 29, 2017). The United States surpasses Colombia if “limited competence” speakers are included (6–7), typically US-born children of Spanish speakers and those who learn it as a foreign language.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview see Javier Bravo, “Una iniciativa cultural pionera,” *La Fundación* 32 (septiembre 2015), <https://revistalafundacion.com/septiembre2015/historia/>.

<sup>6</sup> In this review I refer to the five volumes under review as “the collection,” and the overall MAPFRE project as “the project.” There is, as noted in the title list, a sixth volume dedicated to historical photography, not reviewed here.

<sup>7</sup> Academia Colombiana de Historia, coord., *Historia extensa de Colombia*, 41 vols. (Bogotá: Ediciones Lerner, 1965–1986), whose political history ends in 1910; Jaime Jaramillo Uribe, ed., *Manual de historia de Colombia*, 3 vols. (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, 1978–1980); Alvaro Tirado Mejía, ed., *Nueva historia de Colombia*, 8 vols. (Bogotá: Planeta, 1989).

include political economy approaches, for instance by Charles Bergquist, that are a staple of the decade's historiography.<sup>8</sup> Malcolm Deas, who like Posada Carbó would find politics interesting even if there were no state, continues the discussion of the "structure of politics" into the 1930–1960 chapter, adding to the mix military and economic interest groups (the future *gremios* whose power peaked after 1960). When Deas declares (4:35) that politics, even during this time of socioeconomic and ideological ferment, was in the end largely about politics itself (starting with the electoral system), we have enough context to take the claim seriously even if we are not ready to embrace it.

Posada Carbó's and Deas's chapters deal with armed conflict mostly by omitting it. The War of the Thousand Days (1899–1902) goes entirely missing, which limits our understanding of the fleeting but significant Republican movement: it was a reaction not just against the Rafael Reyes dictatorship but against partisan polarization and war. The Violencia is mostly a specter haunting Deas's chapter and indeed the entire 1930–1960 volume, of which he is the coordinator: he spends little time on it, and only as it relates to the challenges faced by successive presidents. This is a limitation of the rigid chapter structure of the MAPFRE project, which is not built for country-specific phenomena like the Violencia, but it suits Deas's long-standing resistance to making violence the focus of Colombian history. "Why do readers pick up books of national history like this?," Deas asks in his introduction to the volume (4:19). His answer, besides generic curiosity about the past, is positively framed: "What were the accomplishments of Colombia, and of Colombians, during these three decades?" The period 1930 through 1960 is, at best, challenging for that framing.

Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín's 1960–2010 chapter provides an agreeably structural overview of the bipartisan National Front (1958–1974) and its aftermath, and while he offers some mildly positive revisionism about the pact, like many authors he blames it for not passing more serious socioeconomic reforms (5:39), something which even the all-Liberal regime up to 1946 did not do. His account of the breakdown of the hegemonic parties culminating in Alvaro Uribe's victory in 2002, and his revisiting of 1990s electoral reform discussions, evokes the era: in a country "on the edge of chaos" (as an edited volume of the time was titled).<sup>9</sup> Congress really was preoccupied with electoral quotients. But his later discussions on policies, especially security, are insightful: Gutiérrez argues that military defeats under Andrés Pastrana, by allowing the FARC to believe that it could transition to a more conventional war of fronts and positions, in turn allowed Uribe to score decisive victories against them with relative ease. States usually win, and future historians may find Uribe's hard-line pacification less interesting than prior regimes' more varied approaches and results.

The chapters on foreign relations have a common thread, understandably since Colombia's place in the world has remained remarkably stable. Colombian diplomats did what they could, usually competently and sometimes quite creatively, to get the best deal Colombia could get in a world where it didn't count for much. David Bushnell, in his last significant publication, conveys the accomplishment of the new and very rudimentary Gran Colombia in securing not only nominal recognition from the North Atlantic powers, but significant private loans as well. Isabel Clemente Batalla's 1830–1880 chapter is a revelation, in that we typically see Colombian diplomacy during this period solely as keeping the warships at bay. Clemente describes how a very small group of Colombian officials worked in as much isolation from political turmoil as they could to propound doctrines of *uti possidetis* and equality of sovereignty both to the North Atlantic powers and to the rest of Latin America. Stephen Randall brings in relevant political and economic aspects of the pivotal 1880–1930 period—which, as he notes, is really two periods, before and after the loss of Panama. The enduring mystery of why the Colombian Senate unanimously rejected the Herrán-Hay Treaty, which could have preserved Panama as part of Colombia (albeit at a high cost in terms of sovereignty), is not addressed. Was it really Senator Joaquín María Uribe Buenaventura's eloquence? (3:100). Did they think Panama was lost regardless, and that rejecting the treaty would at least ensure their patriotic legitimacy as rulers of what was left? (In that case, why did the president not see it that way?) Did they think Theodore Roosevelt would stand down in the face of their resolve?

The 1930–1960 chapter, by Carlos Camacho Arango, is necessarily very busy, ranging from the lost world of the Leticia conflict with Peru in 1932 to the high Cold War, which saw Colombia send a combat brigade to Korea (one wonders what Colombians circa 1930 would have made of that). Rodrigo Pardo's chapter on 1960–2010 begins with the observation that Colombian foreign policy "was not particularly creative, nor could it be" (5:85). He blames this on the constraints of the Cold War, but in the context of the collection

<sup>8</sup> Charles Bergquist, *Coffee and Conflict in Colombia, 1886–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1978).

<sup>9</sup> Francisco Leal Buitrago and León Zamosc, eds., *Al filo del caos: Crisis política en la Colombia de los años 80* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia; Tercer Mundo Editores, 1991).

(and even the post–Cold War section of his chapter), it is more logically seen as a function of United States hegemony. Two curiosities of the chapter are that Pardo does not mention Europe or Asia even once, despite their increasing significance to Colombian diplomacy in the last twenty years of the period, and that he served as foreign minister at the low point in Colombian-US relations during the first three years of the Samper presidency (1994–1997) but maintains an anonymity that implicitly confirms the primacy of presidents, advised by former presidents, in the making of foreign policy.

Adolfo Meisel, starting off the economic chapters, comes down firmly on the side of Independence as an economic rupture rather than as “neocolonial” continuity, and sees apparent evidence of continuity (in the form of post-Independence economic stagnation) as proof that the war itself was far more devastating in its impact on people and production than suggested by Anthony McFarlane and other historians. Frank Safford adeptly summarizes a series of tropical export initiatives—supported by an elite political economy consensus by midcentury—and the challenges both physical and financial that accompanied them. Safford is the only author to note (2:130) that the constant lament about Colombia’s low standing in the Latin American table of exporters reflected distinctively elite notions of what constituted development and well-being. The chapter by María Teresa Ramírez on the economy from 1880 to 1930 leads with twenty pages about education and transportation premised on the contestable claim that Colombia’s low level of economic development during the period was largely a factor of low attainment in those areas (3:142–163). Coffee only appears halfway through the chapter, and it is unclear whether its limited presence reflects a revisionist argument that coffee was just an incrementally more effective insertion into the world economy than what came before, or the author’s greater engagement with other themes.

The 1930–1960 period is arguably the most dynamic in Colombian economic history, with a rich literature focused on the linkages between agricultural modernization and industrialization (with violence as the perverse accelerant). Carlos Caballero Argáez avoids overall characterizations of the period—save for noting the increasing state role—in favor of an encyclopedic approach, which again leaves the reader wondering whether short treatments, especially of industry, represent a revisionist downgrading or merely a stylistic preference. Miguel Urrutia’s 1960–2010 chapter privileges the macroeconomic and fiscal indicators that were his (as with Pardo, unmentioned) responsibility as head of the central bank from 1993 to 2004. While nothing in his account contradicts the rightly dominant narrative of Colombia’s movement away from import-substituting industrialization starting in the 1980s, he discusses it so subtly that it is not clear if he thinks the transition was real or especially noteworthy. (His reference to “the so-called economic opening” [5:152] adds to the ambiguity.) Colombians of a certain age can attest to how fundamentally different the country is, in the mix of what is made vs. imported, compared to thirty-five or more years ago, but the chapter conveys none of that. Urrutia also displays a bit of the morbidly comic focus sometimes ascribed to Colombian economists when he notes (5:167) that falling unionization rates toward 2000 reflected “increased efforts by the state and private business” to thwart it. However, there is an extensive, if largely nonscholarly literature about that.<sup>10</sup>

Marixa Lasso, who starts the population and society chapters, reinforces the first volume’s overall thesis that Independence was significant not as the overthrow of external rule but as the start of a regime of formal equality, albeit with significant exceptions. She emphasizes, perhaps ironically given that thesis, enslaved Afro-Colombian and *resguardo* indigenous populations that were the least addressed, juridically, by Independence and its immediate aftermath, even as they became a primary object of elite proto-liberal attention. (Besides, of course, women generally, who receive [1:244] one of the few acknowledgements in the entire collection that our current state of knowledge is deficient.) The demographically preponderant but less binary interior of the country receives much less attention, save for the at least discursive empowerment of higher plebeians such as (and, in the end, perhaps limited to) male urban artisans. Beatriz Castro Carvajal’s chapter on the 1830–1880 period similarly slights the rural mestizos of the interior, except when the latter pick up and move—either as a response to sudden export booms like tobacco around Ambalema at midcentury, or as part of the longer process of colonization that extended into today’s southern Antioquia, Gran Caldas, and northern Tolima.

Marco Palacios, a born *ensayista* well suited to this format, observes that by 1930 Colombia looked more like today’s version than its independent debut—a provocative aside given the usual view that Colombia was premodern until the ferment of the 1930s or the violent dislocations of the 1950s. He renounces

<sup>10</sup> For a scholarly exception, see Daniel Mejía and María José Uribe, “Is Violence against Union Members in Colombia Systematic and Targeted?,” *Economía* 12, no. 1 (2011): 119–146. While the authors argue that violence against union members since 2000 is *not* a function of their union activities, their argument and data imply that the much higher 1990s rates of violence were related.

comprehensive coverage in favor of evocative pointillism, citing human and bovine censuses with equal enthusiasm. Some of his claims can only be taken on faith, for instance about the continuing rural essence of urban society (4:221–227), but his chapter is the first to give equal attention to core regions and to problematize regional versus national identity. The chapter on 1930–1960 by Rocío Londoño places ethnic minorities and immigrants before the default “rural Colombia,” even dwelling on two recent master’s theses on Jewish immigration, in a collection where even foundational contributions are rarely acknowledged. Lastly, Alejandro Gaviria, recently Colombia’s minister of health, gives fair warning that his chapter will be based on official statistics, which will not surprise Colombians, for whom the gap between those numbers and their personal experience epitomizes their current discontent. He follows Urrutia in rehabilitating the politically reviled 1970s and early 1980s as the apex of success in poverty reduction, and he provides ample data to show that subsequent deterioration was largely a function of violence and displacement leading to hyper-rapid urbanization.

The culture chapters would have benefited from a more explicit charge to the authors, as their different emphases go beyond the differing objective characteristics of each period. Victor Uribe Urán’s chapter on 1808 through 1830 is as close to social history as we encounter in the collection, with his regionally sensitive depictions of what people wore, what they ate, and what was in their houses. His discussion of patriotic ceremonies in the 1820s is especially interesting, and his only concession to more old-fashioned notions of cultural history is his title-heavy section on print culture. Gilberto Loaiza Cano’s chapter, largely based on his 2011 book,<sup>11</sup> effectively conveys that Liberal versus Conservative were two competing dogmatisms (2:250): thus the importance of primary education in the party struggle, even if real coverage was very low. Overall he sees the nineteenth century as the defeat of secular, universalist culture by Church-led conservatism, a plausible claim that raises the question of what was really important to elite Liberals in the end. If it was political economy and access to that culture for themselves (thus relegating the thorny question of what liberalism meant for subalterns), then it was a defeat many of them could live with.

Patricia Londoño Vega’s treatment of 1880–1930 could not be more different than the previous two, as she moves across genres with no attention to culture consumers (except toward the end as Colombia enters the age of mass media) and no interest in political culture. Renán Silva’s chapter is based on extensive research into government efforts to promote popular culture (and to popularize leading works of elite culture) during the Liberal regime of 1930 to 1946.<sup>12</sup> This focus bridges the elite/popular dichotomy that is visible in the previous three volumes. There are plenty of marginal notes a reader familiar with the period could make, not all of them in agreement, but that is welcome in a collection that largely avoids explicit argument. (And one has to admire his peremptory dismissal [4:250] of the *nadaístas* of circa 1960.) Lastly in the collection, Jorge Orlando Melo’s chapter ranges from cultural anthropology snapshots (married life, old age, games), to elite and popular culture across genres and media. (Like three of the four other authors in the final volume, Melo had an unmentioned official role in what he writes about, as head of the central bank’s important cultural office.) It is a dense panorama of much of what it has recently meant to be Colombian, as opposed to Latin American or pintoresque-local, but the encyclopedic approach for not-yet-vanished times permits some second-guessing about the specifics. For instance, Melo’s film discussion (5:265–267) emphasizes “quality” cinema, omitting the lowbrow national comedies that Colombians actually saw in large numbers, like *El embajador de la India* and *El taxista millonario*, and the *cortometrajes* (shorts) that were shown before foreign feature films as the sectoral implementation of import-substituting industrialization.<sup>13</sup>

The volumes each contain a visual appendix, separated from the main chapters by the index presumably for production reasons. The selections are sound and well explicated, but they are not referenced in the chapters even when the correspondence would be welcome. Apart from occasional repetition within chapters (particularly Randall’s), in addition to between chapters (especially about education, a high-level topic without a home), the collection is editorially very clean. The specialist reader will find the collection rewarding, and the nonspecialist with good retention will gain a useful acquaintance with two hundred years of Colombian history. What she will not get, as suggested earlier, is a sense of how our understanding of that history has changed over time, and relatedly, what the long-term continuities in that history might

<sup>11</sup> Gilberto Loaiza Cano, *Sociabilidad, religión y política en la definición de la nación: Colombia 1820–1886* (Bogotá: Universidad Externado de Colombia, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Renán Silva, *República liberal, intelectuales, y cultura popular* (Bogotá: La Carreta Editores, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Fairly complete listings of these shorts may be found at [www.proimágenescolombia.com](http://www.proimágenescolombia.com) and [www.cinecorto.co](http://www.cinecorto.co). FOCINE, the government’s film development agency, was founded in 1978 and dissolved in 1993, a compressed parabola of cultural *cepalismo*.

be. If there is some expressive totality to Colombian history, some plausible overall characterization of the juxtaposition of the unarguably bad (violence and inequality) and the possibly good (institutionalism and development), is it as simple paradox, duality, dialectic, or conspiracy?

That is one point of entry for *The Colombia Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, edited by the historians Anne Farnsworth-Alvear and Marco Palacios and the artist Ana María Gómez López. They begin by invoking a “kaleidoscopic” reality of “multiplicity and contradiction” (1), and while they do not promise to make sense of it all, they do propose to gather diverse voices over multiple axes—time, class, gender, region, ethnicity, and sexual orientation—so that we as outsiders can learn how Colombians have understood a reality in which they are obviously the most invested. The chapter organization is unique in the twenty-year history of the *Latin American Readers* series: while the other volumes proceed by period, sometimes plateauing in the near present with theme chapters, the *Colombia Reader* follows seven themes from conquest or early colony through the present. The book achieves maximum decentering-and-reorienting effect if read straight through, but students will likely digest one chapter at a time, so the headings are of interest: “Human Geography,” “Religious Pluralities,” “City and Country,” “Lived Inequalities,” “Violence,” “Change and Continuity in the Colombian Economy,” and “Transnational Colombia.” Notably absent is politics, an absence that largely extends to the readings themselves. The editors eschew a separate chapter on gender in favor of suffused attention throughout.

The introduction to the “Human Geography” chapter provides the standard regionalization of the country into five geographical (and more ambiguously cultural) areas, of which all except the Occidente (the western highlands from Antioquia down to Nariño) are referenced by the readings. That omission means the *antioqueño* colonization of the mid-1800s to early 1900s—arguably the most significant human geography phenomenon of the republican period, save for urbanization generally—goes unrepresented. The readings range from the conventional (the conqueror’s account, and not one of those liminal, sardonic conquerors) to the iconic (José Eustaquio Rivera’s *La vorágine*) and the anthropological (by Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff). A single reading combining a bill of sale for female slaves in the 1700s and the lyrics of Joe Arroyo’s 1983 salsa song “Rebelión,” with the refrain “Don’t hit that black woman!,” is provocative but potentially reductive. The final reading about the Colombian diaspora in Queens, New York, might be a more intuitive fit for the final chapter on “Transnational Colombia” than some of what appears there, but it does convey that Colombia’s human geography now transcends its borders.

The “Religious Pluralities” chapter, subtitled “Faith, Intolerance, Politics, and Accommodation,” comes by that addition honestly with readings that mostly ground religion and religiosity in Colombia’s earthly reality. The colonial readings reinforce modern understandings of the Catholic Church as pillar of repressive power based on hegemony but also micro-level mitigations such as San Pedro Claver. There are two vignettes of liberal anticlericalism, Tomás Cipriano de Mosquera’s 1862 aristocrat-to-aristocrat stare-down of Pope Pius IX in defense of the seizure of Church property (*desamortización*), and Rafael Uribe Uribe’s famous but relatively mild 1912 defense of liberalism as, merely, not a sin. After that, with the exception of Camilo Torres Restrepo’s 1965 literal call to arms only partly in the name of liberation theology, and the Jesuit priest Javier Giraldo’s more recent witness to state and paramilitary atrocities in Cauca, the readings are either novelistic imaginings of popular religiosity or accounts of identities and practices at the margins, within and outside of Catholicism. The message is that Colombia is now a religiously plural society. While that is undoubtedly true and significant, it is also a secularized society to an extent unimaginable fifty or sixty years ago, and one or more readings about that would complete the picture.

While the primacy of city over countryside is nearly universal, the readings in the “City and Country” chapter convey some distinctively Colombian characteristics. The harsh extractive regime that characterized not only the colonial period but the century afterward, at least in much of the highlands, is depicted in the Comuneros’ grievances of 1781 (written by town elites for whom faraway extractions limited their own power and accumulation) and some admirably forthright 1896 regulations by the mega-hacienda El Chocho. The rhythms of rural, small-town, and riverine life are conveyed, with inevitable randomness, by excerpts from Jorge Isaacs, Gabriel García Márquez, and Candelario Obeso, while readings about muleteers and Boyacá smallholders remind us that not everyone was in a seigneurial relationship. The pre-1960s city gets short shrift, but as Colombia tips demographically so does the chapter, including an excellent *testimonio* on the development of Bogotá’s Ciudad Bolívar gathered by Arturo Alape. The readings in the chapter “Lived Inequalities” suggest that if your country is unequal enough, almost any reading will illustrate it: they all succeed, but some of them are fairly generic. The strongest readings highlight what is, at least pending comparison, distinctively Colombian in how inequalities are defined, lived, and contested—especially that last point, in a country where colonial legalism has persisted to the point where even nonstate armed actors

adopt the forms and verbiage of the courtroom, as Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín has analyzed.<sup>14</sup> Manuel Quintín Lame's lifelong struggle on behalf of the indigenous communities of southern Tolima is very much a Colombian story, in his Conservative identity and uncredentialed mastery of legal appeals, and the readings convey that along with its cosmological underpinnings.

Is violence the elephant in the room of Colombian history and identity, or is it the room itself? In the *Colombia Reader* it is one room among several, but part of the original floor plan. It runs through the conquest, Independence, the civil wars of the nineteenth century, La Violencia of the 1950s, and the more recent cocktail of guerrillas, paramilitaries, cartels, and the state. The readings are sometimes by observers and sometimes by protagonists, sometimes about the violence itself and sometimes about efforts or at least aspirations to end it. The chapter introduction hypothesizes two continuities, a weak state and collective memory of atrocity. The first verges on tautology, and it becomes increasingly perverse as the state becomes an active agent of violence starting in the late 1940s; the second assimilates the nineteenth-century civil wars to a narrative of atrocity that, mercifully, they largely avoided. In the end, the most important long-term continuities of Colombian violence may be the product of historical contingency, otherwise known as bad timing. La Violencia wound down, leaving aggrieved and armed people, as the Cuban Revolution went hemispheric; and later the US-fueled drug trade both rescued the finances of the battered FARC and ELN, and produced the paramilitaries.

The chapter "Change and Continuity in the Colombian Economy" is the only one that might benefit from a different framing and mix of readings. The permanent cleavage in postconquest economic history is between internal and external orientation, but overall only three readings reference the internal market—one colonial, one nineteenth-century, and one modern—which is a significant imbalance with the rest. (As noted earlier, there is a semi-vanished industrial Colombia, the wreckage and memory of which weighs heavily on current social crises and political debates.) Among the export-oriented content, perhaps the most interesting are paired readings on the US-based Chocó Pacífico's mining operation in the mostly Afro-Colombian department of Chocó: one a plausible paean to company-led progress, the other a local complaint (in a legal idiom, since it is Colombia) about the brutal dispossession upon which mining was and is based. The final chapter, "Transnational Colombia," combines more expected readings on immigrants (emigrants having relocated to the human geography chapter, as noted above) and the international appeal of Colombian popular culture, in this case the television series *Yo soy Betty, la fea*, with more idiosyncratic selections. Two examples of the latter are the lengthy excerpt from José Asunción Silva's novel *De sobremesa* (and who knew the iconic poet wrote a novel?), in which he strikes the pose of the modernizing, positivist dictator Colombia never quite had, and a 1969 US General Accounting Office assessment of foreign aid, which conveys the relative autonomy, internally and externally, of the Colombian state. Some readings are more cryptically relevant, such as the 2007 press release (for foreign consumption) by an indigenous organization about voluntary coca leaf eradication; but in the end all reaching beyond borders is aspirational and/or instrumental, so what first seems a jumbled or perhaps overtly modernist selection of readings turns out to have an illuminating logic.

The editors have a curatorial bias toward the obscure and/or subaltern, so that (for instance) travelogues and almost anything by "public men" are omitted. (Alvaro Gómez Hurtado would be surprised that his critique—entirely, it should be added, in bad faith—of the National Front appears here in preference to one of his father Laureano's tirades against the Liberal-Communist "basilisk.") While many insightful travel narratives of the nineteenth century are available in English, they are not so readily available that their inclusion here would have been unwelcome, and their varying imperial gaze eventually gets us to the GAO report. While some of the more recent violence readings are worthwhile, such as the confession of paramilitary Carlos Castaño and the testimony of "kidnapped" (or, to the FARC, captured) Colonel Luis Eduardo Mendieta, many engaging accounts about and by protagonists go untapped.<sup>15</sup> The quintessential

<sup>14</sup> Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, "The Courtroom and the Bivouac: Reflections on Law and Violence in Colombia," *Latin American Perspectives* 28, no. 1 (2001): 56–72.

<sup>15</sup> For the "classic" Violencia, the essential *testimonio* collection is Alfredo Molano, *Los años del tropel* (Bogotá: CEREC/CINEP, 1985), but a noteworthy pioneer is Gonzalo Canal Ramírez, *Estampas y testimonios de violencia* (Bogotá: Ediciones Canal, 1966). For the FARC and M-19 see among others Patricia Lara, *Siembra vientos y recogerás tempestades* (Bogotá: Planeta, 1986); Olga Behar, *Las guerras de la paz* (Bogotá: Planeta, 1985); Jaime Bateman, *Oiga hermano* (Bogotá: Ediciones Macondo, 1984); Carlos Arango Z., *FARC, veinte años: De Marquetalia a La Uribe* (Bogotá: Ediciones Aurora, 1984); Arturo Alape, *Las vidas de Tirofijo* (Bogotá: Planeta, 1989) and *Tirofijo: Los sueños y las montañas* (Bogotá: Planeta, 1994). One remarkable recent source is the 2015 interview by Valentina Obando and Juan David Laverde Palma of the then jailed FARC commander Helí Mejía ("Martín Sombra") and paramilitary pioneer Ramón Isaza: "Los dos patriarcas de la violencia que se reconciliaron en la cárcel," *El Espectador*, January 4, 2015, <http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/judicial/los-dos-patriarcas-de-violencia-se-reconciliaron-carcel-articulo-535992>.

novelist of mid-twentieth-century Bogotá lower middle-class life is not the included Augusto Morales Pino, but the excluded Alvaro Salóm Becerra, whose bedraggled hero Simeón Torrente briefly works for a judge honest enough in his corruption to post his prices for various outcomes on the door.<sup>16</sup> (Corruption would have been a worthy chapter in itself, with no shortage of continuities and readings.) Among the more dubious inclusions is a letter by the 1920s revolutionary María Cano, which contains mostly stale Comintern sectarianism rather than the promised feminist jeremiad.

*The Colombia Reader* deserves a wide audience and will doubtless find a place in many undergraduate courses, which raises—certainly not for the first time—the vital question of whether we can skip over conventional (if flawed) understandings to decentering, especially in a classroom setting. The Colombia that readers will extract from the book is a worthwhile supplement, or even corrective, to more mainstream versions, but a reader without much prior or concurrent grounding may understand Colombia *too* “kaleidoscopically” and therefore somewhat generically because, in the end, what country does not have a complex and contradictory history?

After the vast ambitions (or at least coverage) of the works reviewed thus far, pivoting to two recent monographs is like Eduardo Caballero Calderón’s account, in the *Colombia Reader*, of traveling from the capital to the small Boyacá town of Tipacoque a century ago. Just as Tipacoque was more interesting than it looked, and just as the production of a thousand Tipacoques made Bogotá what it was, the monograph is the basis for any wider understandings that would withstand scrutiny. These books, by Jane Rausch and Nancy Appelbaum, have some incidental geographical overlap but otherwise represent two very different projects that in their own ways contribute to our overall understanding of Colombia’s past and present.

Rausch has spent decades carefully studying a single if vast place, Colombia’s eastern plains (*llanos*, more recently and officially known as Orinoquía), over the centuries, and her prior books constitute most of its English-language scholarship. In *Territorial Rule in Colombia and the Transformation of the Llanos Orientales* she takes the story from the 1930s through the present, as the llanos experience three waves of in-migration: the first spawned by land scarcity and the incipient Violencia in central Colombia, the second a more protracted influx of *colonos* with varying degrees of official sponsorship, and the most recent spurred by oil exploration and production starting in the 1980s. The book, which is engagingly written despite some editing errors and strange translation conventions,<sup>17</sup> begins with a region so sparsely populated that one wonders where her three previous volumes came from; she ends with a region that has one nationally significant city, Villavicencio, and several others that in population and appearance are like mirages on the still wide-open plains. Her focus on state presence and protagonism (“territorial rule”) sits squarely between old- and new-institutional approaches. Rausch makes reality-grounded assessments of the state’s initiatives, but she does not problematize the state nor does she inquire into who controls it. She begins with an efficient synopsis of history, based on her prior books, and an introduction to the four subregions. Each had a distinct profile, with Casanare tied to Boyacá, Meta to Bogotá, and Arauca and Vichada *faute de mieux* to Venezuela. Their sparse populations were poor and sickly by national standards, their indigenous inhabitants were subject to the whims of settlers and ranchers, and save for Villavicencio their towns were just slightly higher-density places of deprivation.

In discussing the Violencia’s impact on the llanos, Rausch cites terrifying statistics and episodes, but the chapter does not claim (or seek) any regional specificity to the causes of the phenomenon, and passing references to the interior origins of named and unnamed alike suggest but do not address important questions about the portability of partisan identities and hostilities. (That Eliseo Velázquez came from Líbano, Tolima, is one highly suggestive example [37].) There are similarly tantalizing and unelaborated references (47–48) to the contradictions of class and party identity among elite Liberals, calling to mind Bergquist’s study of a similarly brutal war fifty years earlier. The Gustavo Rojas Pinilla military regime of 1953–1957 gets its own chapter, given the centrality of his pacification and development efforts on the llanos to its legitimacy claims. Rausch treats Rojas Pinilla relatively generously, perhaps deservedly since his regional record is not marked by bloody betrayals (Rausch lays Guadalupe Salcedo’s murder at the feet of the junta that overthrew Rojas) or sponsorship of death squads as in northern Valle del Cauca.

The chapter on the National Front years practically channels 1960s official enthusiasm for reorganizations, and for reformism that extended precisely as far as entrenched interests permitted. (One curious omission

<sup>16</sup> Álvaro Salóm Becerra, *Don Simeón Torrente ha dejado de . . . deber* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo Editores, 1988 [1969]), 143–144.

<sup>17</sup> There is confusion about whether the region constitutes 1 percent or 3 percent of national population (viii, 133); and Neiva is not in Tolima (94). Spanish words are used unnecessarily (such as military ranks and universal weights), and some English translations are overliteral (“celebrating” contracts) or imprecise (*regalías* are royalties more than subsidies).



for the period, save for a passing mention [103], is the DAS Rural, the feared security force that presaged llanos paramilitarism.) Rausch's account makes for an interesting counterpoint to the settler *testimonios* gathered by Alfredo Molano, even if those are more from Guaviare;<sup>18</sup> in those accounts the state is never absent and never keeps its promises. The final chronological chapter is about the rise of oil production based on 1970s discoveries, the impact of tripartite violence (state, guerrillas, paramilitaries) underwritten by the drugs trade, and the 1991 Constitution's elevation of the four historical regions to departmental status, combined with administrative decentralization to the departmental and municipal levels. Despite Rausch's claim at the end of the chapter (127) that post-1978 governments "paid increasing attention to the Orinoquía region," the state has a lower institutional prominence as we reach the present. This apparent contradiction is consistent with the transition to a neoliberal model in which the state's role is to provide the conditions (starting with security) under which foreign and national capital can operate: this is another example of how Rausch discusses fascinating material in a way that permits the reader to make connections, but without much explicit guidance. One concept Rausch willingly explores, in her concluding chapter, is the frontier,<sup>19</sup> but her invocation of the Turner thesis is overshadowed by the fact that the llanos are a frontier of Turnerian significance only in area. Colombia made the llanos much more than the llanos made Colombia, but that only increases the utility of Rausch's study as a window on questions of state authority and intentions that remain very much unanswered for the country as a whole.

The story of the Comisión Corográfica, the government-sponsored (and therefore skin-of-its-teeth) expedition to describe and map Colombia's intermittently and colloquially known territory in the 1850s, is relatively familiar to Colombians.<sup>20</sup> For historians, the commission's direct and indirect products—the latter including paintings by Carmelo Fernández and Manuel María Paz, and the *Peregrinación de Alpha* travelogue of Manuel Ancízar—are important sources about everything from transportation costs to social relations. Nancy Appelbaum's *Mapping the Country of Regions* is not the story of the commission itself (although by way of context she provides the fullest account now available in English), nor a mining of its information toward regional history. Her main thesis is that the commission's project of establishing the documentary basis for building a prosperous and unified Colombia clashed with its actual findings of extreme heterogeneity, and that the ways in which its participants processed that encounter, textually and visually, both exemplified and influenced elite understandings of Colombian diversity as a problem to be resolved, perhaps coercively. That thesis is elegantly developed throughout, after introductory chapters on the commission's history and the chorographic method—a polymorphous and cheaper alternative to simple cartography with tantalizingly modern-to-postmodern resonances. The book is a model of organization within and between chapters and is editorially almost perfect.<sup>21</sup>

The centerpiece of Appelbaum's study is the commissioners' contrasting assessments, in words and images, of the interior regions of the northeast (highland areas of today's Cundinamarca, Boyacá, and the Santanders) and northwest (highland Antioquia) versus the largely Afro-Colombian lowlands of Chocó and the largely indigenous (and, in absolute terms, sparsely populated) llanos and Caquetá. While the population of the interior was depicted as relatively close to what Colombian progress required, in need mostly of better institutions, at the geographical margins the African-descended and indigenous peoples' only merit was that they thrived in settings that were "a grave for the White race." The Commission's leader Agustín Codazzi advocated for—or, given the constraints of the Colombian state, fantasized about—strong antivagrancy laws to force postemancipation Afro-Colombians into wage labor, with the eventual goal of transforming the physical environment to the point where whiter *antioqueños* could safely settle (101). For the llanos and Caquetá, Appelbaum focuses on the role of local informants (unlike the other regions, here Codazzi wrote about places he did not visit) and the tension between ethnographic detail and the visual depiction of the territories as devoid of population.

Appelbaum references a key ambiguity about halfway in (107): "Although this book is largely about representation, it is important to underscore that the Comisión Corográfica was very much a material project, not simply a representational one." Perhaps because she comes to this book via a previous local study of

<sup>18</sup> Alfredo Molano, *Siguiendo el corte: Relatos de guerras y de tierras* (Bogotá: El Ancora, 1989) and *Selva adentro: Una historia oral de la colonización del Guaviare* (Bogotá: El Ancora, 1987).

<sup>19</sup> Rausch notes that "frontier" has no equivalent in Spanish: *frontera* is about political borders (130, 141).

<sup>20</sup> The name of Agustín Codazzi, the Italian-born arrival from Venezuela who was the expedition's leading figure, graces the country's geographic institute and a now-significant town.

<sup>21</sup> The most recent Constitution is from 1991, not 1992 (211); "Savannah" is a curious translation of "Sabana [de Bogotá]" (*passim*); "trench," presumably from *trocha*, might reflect the outcome but not the intention (114); and "recurred" is an overly literal translation of a verb typically translated as "resorted [to]" (173).

how racialized language underwrote dispossession and disenfranchisement,<sup>22</sup> she takes an instrumental view of the relationship between these two aspects which causes her to view the commissioners' depictions of difference (especially local differences within putative regional homogeneity) as "contradictions" (a word she uses repeatedly) rather than complexity. Some of her interpretations of textual and visual evidence are jarring and always in the same direction: that the commissioners had a vision which some of the country fit well enough, but much of it did not, to their frustration.<sup>23</sup> This is undoubtedly correct to a degree—they would have preferred a Colombia whose landscape and people were more like highland Antioquia and Santander—and it is always risky to historicize away any form of racialized othering, but Codazzi, Ancízar, and Santiago Pérez were the Liberal *Right* of mid-century Colombia, and their views on race as depicted in Appelbaum's book would nevertheless have been considered utterly vanguard elsewhere in Latin America, and certainly in the United States.<sup>24</sup> Overall (and I have not referenced excellent chapters on the commissioners' views on economic progress, their conflated depictions of geology and indigenous history, and the *historia accidentada* of their production after Codazzi's death), *Mapping the Country of Regions* is an enormous achievement, but the author's critical gaze includes an awful lot of criticism.

It is enough to imagine an equivalent group of books about the United States to grasp both the promise and the challenges of robust *longue durée* interpretations—and to understand why none should be offered at the end of a review essay. But the questions raised, sometimes implicitly or by omission, by the titles reviewed here suggest promising lines of inquiry starting with the nature of the Colombian state, which appears variously as ploddingly benign, murderously indifferent, or worse, hopelessly beleaguered, or as a Geertzian "theatre state" that exists so parties will have something to fight over. Likewise the titles' varying levels of engagement with Colombian violence, while representing a healthy corrective to stereotypical understandings, suggest an opening for new interpretations that neither essentialize nor marginalize it. The prospect of Colombia becoming, in the near future, a country whose present can fairly be characterized without foregrounding violence may finally permit us to see its past, even its recent past, as another country.

### Author Information

Dr. Richard Stoller is Coordinator of Academic Advising and International Programs, Schreyer Honors College, Pennsylvania State University.

<sup>22</sup> Nancy Appelbaum, *Muddied Waters: Race, Region, and Local History in Colombia, 1846–1948* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> For instance, p. 65, where she reads against the grain of the famous watercolor of a light-skinned woman and dark-skinned man in Santander (see <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/9121/>, retrieved September 12, 2017) to find evidence of social distance; p. 81, where in my opinion she mistakes Santiago Pérez's *medio siglo* version of white liberal guilt for dehumanization, or at least overlooks the tension between the two; or pp. 127 and 180–181, where she problematizes the unremarkable fact that the commission did not study Bogotá and its people.

<sup>24</sup> See, for the United States comparison, Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), chapter 13. Certainly their views highlight the contradictions of Colombian and more broadly Latin American liberalism (104–105), but as is often the case in critical studies of liberalism, elites with far more malignant views get away unscathed.

**How to cite this article:** Stoller, Richard. 2018. Fifty Million Shades of Gray: Recent Approaches to Colombian History. *Latin American Research Review* 53(3), pp. 655–665. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.339>

**Submitted:** 13 September 2017

**Accepted:** 03 October 2017

**Published:** 28 September 2018

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