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Engendering cosmopolitanism: Gendered narratives of instability and agency

Natalie Araujo

La Trobe University, Bundoora, VIC, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Borrowing from Becker's (1999) conceptualization of personal disruption, this article examines prolonged moments of instability in the lives of two Colombian migrant women. Such moments, it is argued, appear critical to the extent that they bring into focus assumptions about continuity in life, and encourage individuals to confront, reconcile or rearticulate narrative categories that guide them (Becker, 1999: 206).

It is on these terms that the paper engages the concept of cosmopolitanism: as a narrative trope meaningfully deployed within critical engagements and evaluations of self, society, and strategic resistance, and ultimately as an expression of agency, however liminal. The view taken here recognizes that such expressions are always shaped by the social, cultural, political and material predicaments through which individuals live their lives. This includes most especially gendered norms, expectations and practices. In doing so it recognizes that critical uses of cosmopolitanism are significantly gendered.

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In her essay *El Exilio* ("The Exile"), Colombian political activist Aida Avella (2007) reflects on the situation experienced by many Colombians living abroad. Describing in the final paragraph the painful effects of long-term separation from family, friends, and her beloved country, Avella writes:

To find Colombians in all countries helps to overcome this impasse. We have crossed Spain, Sweden, Austria, Italy, France, Cuba, Germany, Belgium, England, Portugal, all working, doing something for the country, trying to adapt, but not failing to think about the return. Life is full of challenges and difficulties, but there are always many elements to overcome these: if you have optimism, if you have projects, if you are aware that there are losses, but also gains. And sometimes we are at the summit and others not. (Avella, 2007: 37).¹

I first read Avella's essay while undertaking nearly two years of fieldwork with Colombian migrants and Latin American migrant organizations in London. At that time, the passage resonated both with my personal experience as a Colombian-US woman living in the United Kingdom and with the migrant life trajectories that I was beginning to encounter in the field. When I returned to those words a year later, as my fieldwork drew to a close, I appreciated more deeply still the effectiveness with which they capture the fraught ambiguities that often adhere to migrant life. In Avella's words a hopeful celebration of cosmopolitan freedom of mobility and human spirit is undercut by a profound ambivalence. This appears especially in the tension between

struggling to make a life in a new country yet always yearning for and reconciling oneself with home. Even so, these ambiguities also suggest that within the fraught space that exists between migrant losses and gains, fears and hopes, there also lies the potential for personal and collective action.

This paper examines the ways in which two Colombian migrant women, here referred to as Cristina and Angela, utilized narrative self-expression to navigate this fraught but productive space in gendered and embodied expressions of what I term "liminal agency". The article draws on life histories, field notes, and interview data gathered during ethnographic research from April 2007 to October 2008 in the domestic and institutional spaces, especially two migrant social service organizations, that the women frequented in London. The narratives reveal uncertain and at times contradictory ideas of gendered experience and desire, particularly in relation to the significant locations of their migrant imaginaries—Colombia and London especially—and to ideals of cosmopolitanism. Specifically, it is argued that these women used cosmopolitan narratives to contest or subvert the nationally bounded normative categories of femininity that they perceived to exist "at home" in Colombia. Such dilemmas and contradictions were mediated and constituted through internal dialogues and intersubjective communications with the researcher. These drew on complex imaginaries, and manifested in unstable and deeply conflicting emotional states including, most importantly, fear and hope.

As well as contributing to scholarship on gender and migration, this paper aims to make a double contribution to studies of cosmopolitanism. Through the title, and throughout the paper, I gesture toward the ways in which ideas and discourses relating to cosmopolitanism are produced by my migrant subjects as an expression of their liminal

¹ E-mail address: n.araujo@latrobe.edu.au.

¹ The translation here is the author's own as are the interview translations.

agency. In doing so such ideas and discourses emerge as one means among many by which my informants are able to make critical and constructive sense of themselves and the world around them. I also aim to demonstrate how such expressions of cosmopolitanism are themselves significantly gendered.

Cosmopolitanism

Far from being settled, the term cosmopolitanism is evoked and employed in diverse and sometimes contradictory circumstances. As Delanty (2006:26) notes, fundamental premises of cosmopolitanism “lie in an essentially moral view of the individual as having allegiances” that extend beyond the local community and “to the wider world”. In this respect, ideas of cosmopolitanism were inextricably linked to relations of power. In particular, such constructions of cosmopolitanism emphasize “the revolt of the individual against the social world, for to be a “citizen of the world” was to reject the immediately given and closed world of particularistic attachments” (Delanty, 2006: 26). In this sense, cosmopolitanism becomes imbued with what Beck (2006: 21) describes as “reflexive” qualities, of “self-conscious political affirmation.”

Recognizing that cosmopolitanism is utilized and evoked in political and intellectual projects, as in the lives of individuals, leads to an appreciation that instances of it rarely conform to the neat boundaries of its common definitions, of unrestricted belonging and freedom from national limitations. As Wardle (2010: 381) notes, “the truth is that “cosmopolitanism” currently provides an umbrella for conceptual, methodological and empirical insights that can sit together uncomfortably on close inspection”. Rather than seeking to resolve such inconsistencies myself, here I take the theoretical and methodological approach proposed by Miller (1995: 18) by examining how the subjects of my research lived out such inconsistencies in local practice. To do so, I draw on both thematic and dialogical analysis of field data alongside other broadly ethnographic methods.

As this paper affirms, while cosmopolitanism is on some level about globality, as Appiah (1997) has argued, cosmopolitans are not necessarily “free from national limitations or attachments”. As here, they may be “patriots” whose self-identification is deeply interwoven with national narratives. Understandings of this “vernacular cosmopolitanism” have become closely associated not so much with those who actively desire to be “citizens of the world” as with those who have no choice but to be so; individuals whose life trajectories have necessitated simultaneous engagement with multiple local and global networks.

Envisaging the so-called “glocal” positioning of cosmopolitanism has presented a considerable challenge to clear and effective theoretical usage of the term. Indeed, frequent conceptual slippages occur within the literature, especially *vis-à-vis* the concepts “transnationalism,” “multiculturalism,” “globalization,” and even “conviviality.” Where cosmopolitanism is most clearly differentiated from those other terms is that cosmopolitanism demands that attention be given to individual consciousness as much as to communitarian practice. Rapport (2007: 223) has suggested that this focus on individual consciousness and embodied practice has important implications for the discipline of anthropology, as for the valuing of cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitan anthropology emphasizes the autonomy, agency, and liberty of individuals by positing that the individual exists “beyond particular communitarian arrangements” and is “capable of authoring personal identity and properly at liberty to exercise this capacity” (Rapport, 2007: 225).

Analyses of the experiences and narrative expressions of the individuals at the heart of this ethnographic case study likewise aim to contribute to an understanding of cosmopolitanism as an expression of self-identification and belonging, as a strategic form of resistance, and ultimately as an expression of agency. The particular view of agency taken here is one that also recognizes that individual agency is always significantly guided and constrained by the broader social, cultural, political and material predicaments in and through which people live their

lives. Following Bielsa (2014), it views cosmopolitan narratives as strategic acts of translation, which resonate with ambiguity and ambivalence, while standing in somewhat hopeful anticipation of subjective and intersubjective re-integration within the “spaces where culture has no unity, purity or fixity, and where primordial notions of race and nation have been replaced by a floating and hybrid existence” (Hubinette, 2004: 23; after Bhabha, 1994). Through these imperfect acts of self-translation individuals continually seek to bring about what is often colloquially termed “closure,” and return a sense of order and constancy to the “betwixt and between” of their disrupted lives (Becker, 1999).

Context

I met the women at the heart of this paper, Cristina Cortes and Angela Garcia, as fellow volunteers in a Colombian-led Latin American migrant organization in London that was dedicated to providing immigration and social welfare support to a largely undocumented population. Together we worked on transnational projects directed at the ongoing state and para-state violence that has plagued Colombia for nearly 70 years. At varying times during the course of my fieldwork we also worked to support London-based initiatives, including protests about UK immigration reforms that had affected both women. As my fieldwork progressed, I increasingly interacted with Cristina and Angela in private and domestic spaces—my home, the homes of acquaintances, and Cristina’s home.

As a US-born, Colombian woman conducting research among Colombian-born migrants my identity was that of both insider and outsider. I had lived in Colombia prior to fieldwork and shared with my key informants knowledge of daily life in urban Colombia and a sense of identity rooted in Colombian nationality, as well as experiences of migration and displacement informed by the Colombian political context. As is the case in the interviews analysed below, this at times led my informants to assume we shared experience or knowledge in ways that were problematic. In short, the expectation of shared intersubjectivity sometimes complicated its achievement. Further, as Glesne and Peshkin (1992: 23) have noted elsewhere this degree of “insider status” highlighted ethical dilemmas. In particular, it increased the likelihood for participants to divulge potentially “dangerous knowledge” (Ibid) on account of increased levels of trust stemming from the assumption of closeness. Given the nature of my fieldwork—including especially the role of migration status and personal life histories—and also given my role as a volunteer within the organizations, this was doubly so in my case. For this reason, and also following University ethics guidelines, I worked hard at attaining meaningful, informed, ongoing consent in all circumstances of research.

From the beginning my awareness of being a particular kind of “insider-outsider” directed the location and scope of this research. In no area is this clearer than in my decision to not focus solely on the economic migrants and workers who populate the works of Cathy McIlwaine or the Colombian migrant everyman of Luis Gaurinzo’s (2008) work. I paid close attention to the lives of those who, while counted among poor and acutely vulnerable groups within the larger migrant context of London, are best described as “elites” within the Colombian context. Close and reflexive attention to these dynamics of identity proved continually important in my comprehension of broader workings of power and understanding of the cosmopolitan narratives employed to strategically assert and subvert power, including particularly those pertaining to gender.

Though neither Cristina nor Angela specifically characterized themselves as refugees, like most Colombians, both had experienced the reverberating effects of violence in Colombia, though their experiences were largely secondary: migrations prompted by insecurity, anxiety and fear, including through acts of violence perpetrated against family members and acquaintances. By their own accounts this legacy of violence oriented these women toward the organization that was my

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