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## “The war that lingers”: Construction and transformations of the body in the narratives and rhetoric of Colombia’s professional soldiers [1]

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**Abstract:** This article analyses the ways in which Colombian soldiers narrate their bodily experiences at the military school, the combat zone, and the Private José María Hernández Health Battalion (BASAN). To be precise, the article deals with the narratives in which the lowest ranks of the Colombian National Army express how they became warriors, wounded elements and patients who wait for the medical board to determine their percentage of disability while planning for a future. The study accounts for the ways in which the institution’s “expendables” (Butler, 2006) describe their corporalities. We refer to professional soldiers as “expendables” based on testimonies in which soldiers refer to themselves as the institution’s “cannon fodder”, as combatants that are easily replaceable, and as elements that the Army does not protect once their “useful life has expired”.

**Keywords:** body, Colombian army, war experiences, narratives.

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## 1. Introduction

This article analyses the ways in which Colombian soldiers narrate their bodily experiences at the Pascacio Martínez School of Professional Soldiers [2], in the combat zone and in the Private José María Hernández Health Battalion (BASAN), where their injuries are treated. To be precise, the study deals with the narratives in which the lowest ranks of the Colombian National Army express how they became warriors, wounded elements and patients of the BASAN, where they wait for the medical board to determine their degree of disability and plan for their future. The article accounts for the ways in which the institution's "expendables" (Butler 2006) describe their corporalities. We refer to professional soldiers as "expendables" [3] based on testimonies in which soldiers refer to themselves as the institution's "cannon fodder", as combatants that are easily replaceable, and as the elements that the Army does not protect once their "useful life has expired" (Personal communication, Ana María Forero Ángel, 2015).

The article is part of the Latin American reflections on the body (Pedraza, 2010 and 2014), which is understood as a material reality that involves technologies and discourses that endow it with historically and culturally located characteristics (Pedraza, 2010). In order to access this material reality, we will analyse the narratives (Brian, 2007; Lauren, 2007; Jimeno, 2016) that describe it. It is important to note that soldiers' testimonies address the materiality of their experiences, focusing on the following themes: the education they received at the School of Soldiers; their experiences in the combat zone; and their expectations after being injured, beyond irreparably, in the combat zone. We consider that the study of the ways in which the body is expressed in the narratives of Colombian soldiers, far from hiding the body under the mask of the verbal, allows its exhibition and its understanding as a vessel of the permanent "marks" of the war (Aranguren, 2011).

In this sense, we aim to explore the different discursive manifestations of a very common expression among Colombian professional soldiers: the war lingers in the combatant's body. An example of how this notion emerges in soldiers' narratives is the following fragment:

Esteban: [4] Yes, I spend eight days with a headache and the smell of gunpowder.

Roberto: *Sicosiado*. [5]

Esteban: ... Yeah, but smoke does come out of the barrel and the smell of gunpowder stays with you (Personal communication, Esteban, 2 December 2015).

When Esteban talks about the headache and the smell of gunpowder, Roberto immediately interprets his suffering as psychological (*sicosiado*). However, Esteban immediately remarks the physical level: the smell of gunpowder really lingers on the body. Thus, we can see that what is at stake for Luis is precisely the fact that physical suffering needs to find an expression of its own, because the experience of war is primarily a bodily experience.

To show how the war "lingers" on the body of the Colombian professional soldier, the article is divided in three sections: "The Army does not tolerate machos": building the combatant's body", which describes the transformations that the body of soldiers undergoes at the School of Professional

Soldiers, where they are trained to fight; “Narratives of survival: precariousness and vulnerability of the body in the combat zone”, which addresses the experiences of the body of soldiers in the different combat zones and in places for rest and recuperation; and finally, “Defeated bodies: Professional Soldiers besieged in their materiality”, which examines the ways in which wounded soldiers deal with their bodily incapacities in the Health Battalion (BASAN) and build a narrative about the future, in which reflection on corporeality is central.

## **2. Methodological considerations**

The article is based on the data collected in the research project titled “Daily life of soldiers: experiences in and out of the barracks”, which to date consists of 67 semi-structured interviews with professional soldiers and high-rank military officers, carried out in the Strategic Transition Command (COET, a joint command in which all the Armed Forces contribute to the construction of military memory), the School of Professional Soldiers (ESPRO, according to its initials in Spanish), and the Health Battalion (BASAN, the medical and rehabilitation unit of the National Army)[6].

The collected testimonies are very important because they refer directly to the materiality of the body. While we were not able to observe soldiers directly during their training and in the combat zone, the study of the narratives allowed us to access the materiality outlined in the introduction. It is worth remembering that, as Butler (2006) points out, performativity “is the power of discourses to produce effects through reiteration” (p.22). In other words, the discourses of soldiers and the discourse about them (articulated by their School instructors and by the general public) actively participate as producers of the materiality of their bodies [7].

The authors of this article believe in the need to advance in the construction of a topography of power (Lutz 2006), that is, to contribute to the understanding of the institutions that shape the destiny of nations. On this occasion, we will do so by dealing with the “expendable” bodies of the military institution, based on the narratives that are built ‘within’ the Army. In this sense, our article is in line, for example, with the works of Andrés Dávila (1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2016), who tries to understand the institution from an endemic point of view. The ethnographic component of this research follows in the footsteps of studies conducted in Latin America by anthropologists Sabina Frederic (2013, 2016), Rosana Guber (2001, 2016), Celso Cao (1990, 2009), Piero de Camargo Leirner (1995, 1997) and Massimo Badaró (2009). They have focused on understanding military institutions “from within” [8]. This research is also associated with the works of Catherine Lutz (2006, 2009, 2010), Kenneth T. MacLeish (2013) and George R. Lucas Jr. (2009, 2015). They all analyse the narratives different subjects use to make and justify their decisions from ethnographic perspective.

## **3. “The Army does not tolerate machos”: building the combatant’s body**

In June 2016 the commander-in-chief of the Pedro Pascasio Martínez School of Professional Soldiers (ESPRO), located in the Níle Cundinamarca, Colombia, explained its characteristics and *raison d’être*: The name of this School of Professional Soldiers is Private Pedro Pascasio Martínez (...), a peasant soldier who wore espadrilles, a poncho and a hat, a soldier whose role was to take care of the Liberator’s horses and in the Battle of Boyacá had the courage and greatness of rejecting an offer of gold coins in exchange for handing out the Liberator to Barreiro (who was then a Colonel of the

Spanish Army), and opened the path to reach Santa Fe de Bogotá and achieve the independence that everyone in history knows. That is why it the name of this soldier was used, and today this name represents a man of honour, sacrifice and loyalty to the Institution” (Personal Communication, 7 June 2016) [9].

In his discourse, the School’s commander established an analogy between the body of the squire and the body of the school’s graduates. The body of Pedro Pascasio Martínez embodied the moral characteristics that should serve as an example and point of reference for the formation of combatants. Once students receive the physical training at this school that bears the name of this soldier, the candidates become this “simple horse caretaker who knew how to set the conditions for independence” (Interview, Colonel Nossa, 7 June 2016). The transformation of the soldier’s body occurs there, where, after fourteen weeks, the soldier becomes a combatant.

A selection process has already operated in the imperfect body of the candidates. In this process the moral character of the candidate, his physical disposition and psychological strength are evaluated. In the School, the applicant must go through a new process in which he has to prove he has what it takes to become like Pedro Pascasio. The young candidate must demonstrate that he has a predisposition, based on the mastery over his body, to maintain a balanced management of emotions and that he has a ‘healthy’ family environment that protects that balance.

Following the narratives of the School’s commander, it is evident that technologies and discourses already operate on the candidates to shape their bodies and perfect their physical training and emotional control. During the fourteen weeks of training, physical and theoretical education become more demanding: each of the activities is designed to reinforce both the construction of a anaesthetised body [10] (McLeish 2012) and the ability to develop emotional tasks [11] (Frevert, 2016; Gill, 1999) to ensure rational decisions in times of stress (clashes in the combat zone, precarious living conditions, watching colleagues die).

The technologies and discourses mentioned by the commander of ESPRO become materialised in strong bodies and balanced emotions. Emotional and physical education are inseparable at school: “A soldier capable of controlling his impulses cannot reside in a neglected body” (Personal communication, Colonel Nossa, 2016). Likewise, the performativity (Butler 2002) of the official discourse of ESPRO is also expressed in the narratives of soldiers: for students, being a good soldier means having turned their body into a kind of “clock” that attends rigorously the discipline of the academy:

Here one becomes a little watch. One here learns that discipline is always going to be paramount. You know that at this hour you must do this thing, every day you are going to do the same thing at that same time. They are not going to postpone it for even one minute, because here they teach you a lot of discipline... Here you become a watch. “At four o’clock you have to get up and shower”, “then at this hour it is time to walk” ... No man, you already become a thing... you become a watch (Personal Communication, Edwin, 2 December 2015).

However, hours later and a few meters away from the office where the School’s commander described its operation and the rigour of military life, which was summed up in the expression “I did not come

here to tolerate machos”, we learned of the existence of *perradas*, which are the strategies soldiers come up with to evade the performativity of the official discourse on their bodies:

Here, you learn to say “Yes Sir” to everything while figuring out how not to obey. Did you know the Army is the most orderly way to mess up and do nothing? Here at ESPRO we become professionals, but of *mamar gallo* [12]. They send us to run, but we know that no one is counting these lapses, or the crunches. One learns to move so that our superiors think that one is doing more. Oh, and I was also wondering about classroom education. Imagine: we only receive high school education, but they expect us to behave as if we were college students. Here at ESPRO one learns to be on vacation, but in the combat zone it is different (Personal Communication, Edwin, 2 December 2015).

Edwin: ...when they say “eat, you have a minute”. The food is hot. The eggs are boiled because it is the typical meal of the region, and you know how to peel it and eat it hot. You know how to do both things. So, you put it in your pocket (laughs).

Carlos: That *paisa* was a cat. He was always a hunting dog, really.

Dideer: Yes, I do remember a person from Bogota: “no way I’m going to put it in my pocket”. He would take the juice, look at all sides, emptied it there and ate in a rush. That thing turns your stomach. That goes in. (Personal communication, Edwin, 2 December 2015)

At this point we can observe that not only the discourses and rules imposed by authority operate in a performative way on the bodies, but also that these bodies invent forms of resistance (Foucault 2002; Butler 2006). As mentioned, performativity is not an individual discursive act, but uses repetition to hide the rule that it states and in doing so per-form materialities (Butler 2002, p.34). However, precisely for this reason, it is also possible to invent new discourses and rules of resistance, which, when repeated, are established and per-form the body. *Perradas*, thus, emerge as ways to circumvent school routines. Students quickly learn techniques to avoid training demands and provide their bodies with an escape from institutional discipline (forms of rest, better nutrition, etc.).

Therefore, different ways of narrating the body coexist at ESPRO, and they account for the technologies and discourses that, performatively, give rise to the materiality of the soldier. According to the narratives of the School’s commander, the soldier’s body is anesthetic and possesses a balanced character, but the narratives of students account for bodily strategies that allow them to cope with institutional rules. The pedagogical tools of the School and the discourses and technologies that emerge to resist the impositions of the academy operate simultaneously on the body of soldiers.

#### **4. Narratives of survival: the precariousness and vulnerability of the body in the combat zone**

In June 2016, some of the professional soldiers who had been involved in combat shared their experiences:

I remember that the first time I joined the Army and had my first fight, I got there, and I got out very scared. Some soldiers said “no, I’m dropping out” while another soldier said “no, I’m

dropping out too”. The fight started at 4:45 in the morning, and at one o’clock in the afternoon we were still fighting... very strong. When then the battalion commander arrived, there were nineteen wounded. The commanders were wounded and there were dead soldiers, and dead combatants too [...] I was a new corporal and I didn’t know what to do. “Am I going to retire or not?” “God, what do I do?”. I was going to tell the battalion commander “no, my colonel, I’m going to retire from service”, but when I got to where he was, he came up to me, saw my face, and told me: “What? What the fuck do you want? Is this shit too big for you? Is the Army too big for you? Why the fuck did you enrol for” and he slapped me again. I think I didn’t retire from service because of the shit this man talked about me (Personal communication, Carlos, 2 December 2015).

The anesthetic body, the emotional work and *perradas* learned in ESPRO are insufficient. In the combat zone, soldiers must be aware of their fragility and their mortality. The body of the combatant is not trained in the school. The discourses, technologies and performativity of the battlefield will form the materiality and spirit of the combatants. In the narratives that account for bodily experiences, four topics emerge: hunger, learning to live in the jungle, mine blast injuries and the death of fellow soldiers. Military clashes are not the only source of anxiety and fear. The body of soldiers “endures hunger”, so it weakens and dehydrates. Carlos and Edwin narrated:

...You get to a point where you walk and you see a puddle, but you don’t see water anywhere else, and the puddle is all brown. And you are like “Damn, I am so thirsty”. So, you take a tablet [13] and drink it... (Personal communication, Carlos, 2 December 2015)

They put us in an area like guinea pigs. We lasted ten days without contact. We were close to the supply unit so that kept the morale high because we had been eating only lentils with salt for four or five days. Once we lasted five days without eating anything. (Personal Communication, Edwin, 2 June 2015).

The testimonies show the precarious food conditions of professional soldiers. Given the geographical characteristics of the combat zones, provision of supplies is not always carried out as scheduled. As we can see in the last testimony, the hope of receiving supplies soon helps keeping the morale of soldiers high [14]. However, such hope contrasts with the precariousness of food, because very often food comes without salt or is spoilt after been thrown to the ground from a helicopter:

One time, they stock up on food in Port-au-Prince, Vichada. There was nothing. There were two platoons and they supplied food without salt. They brought milk rice, only milk rice ... and some saline solution, which is salty, and whenever it was time to eat, it was always too simple. One was getting like yellow, because of the lack of salt... (Personal communication, Edwin, 2 December 2015)

As soon as the pilots show up, they throw the food, because that doesn’t take long. A helicopter throws six-month worth of rations; the sacks go down... we pray for the eggs and tomatoes not to break... And it all depends on that. Whether the chickens come dead or alive. Because sometimes they send them alive and so the chicken can’t be eaten today. Then, the chickens

come kind of rotten... and sometimes we ask them to send chickens alive and we can kill them here. (Personal communication, John, 2 December 2015)

The scene is vividly portrayed by the previous soldier, who, in the midst of laughter, refers specifically to the most fragile foods (eggs, tomatoes) to relate the delivery. Moreover, soldiers' allusion to their preference to receive live chickens shows the great difficulties of soldiers in the combat zone in preserving food. In addition to this, there is the forest, which adds to the aforementioned difficulties: natural hazards, diseases and wounds. Soldiers refer, for example, to long walks in the darkness amid risks of all kinds. The feeling of physical disorientation is noticeable in the following testimony:

And then we were going to walk. (...) And that, you walk and walk, and nothing. And we saw him over there, and wondered "when are we going to get there?" And... it looked it was close, "those men were close". But darkness... darkness is very deceptive, and no, "Man, we are about to get there" when you swim... and you with the team there. You have your rifle and are like "damn, what should I grab? I'm sinking" You feel like it is swallowing you, and you are like "Oh my God, what should I hold on to?" and you hold on to a branch, but it has ants that sting you (...) But you can't rest much because those behind you also need to rest. (...) You walk and when you feel the ground is loose and then your foot sinks. You take out your foot and the other one sinks too. And you feel helpless and feel like "What am I doing here? Doing what? I would be fine in my house..." You feel helpless because you feel that it is swallowing you or sucking you in and you feel like it is pulling you in. And you get desperate, and the more you feel desperate the more it sucks you in... "No, no, I don't want to be here, I don't want to be here" ... (Personal communication, John, 2 December 2015)

Physical disorientation increases when the soldier, first, fails to perceive their destination point through darkness, and feels that the guerrillas may be close; and second, when he begins to feel that the ground is moving and looks for a tree to hold on to, but it has ants that sting him; and third, when he realizes that, despite his efforts, he is sinking. It is worth noting that the testimony uses the second person pronoun ("you"), which is a rhetorical strategy that seeks the identification of the audience (other soldiers and interviewers) and the story. It is also important to recognize the narrator's use of repetition: the scene of the unstable ground and the sinking is narrated twice before reaching the conclusion, in which the soldier describes the feeling of general helplessness caused by not being able to control any of the physical aspects of the environment.

It is also important, in soldiers' narratives, to observe how they learn survival strategies in the combat zone: endure hunger, walk through the jungle, move in the dark. The discourses and technologies of the soldiers with the longest experience in the combat zone become critical. The example and expertise of those who have been patrolling for years is passed down from generation to generation, it is perform in the combat zone. In this way, the bodies of the "expendables" are trained in the rigor of the combat zone, where "war lingers, where you become the true warrior, focused on your own survival and the survival of your fellow soldier, nothing more" (Field journal, June 2015).

To the aforementioned physical disorientation is, of course, accompanied by fear, with its bodily effects, and the tiredness produced by the long patrols and the carrying of the equipment:

They all reached the other side at four o'clock in the afternoon, and I was the last one, man. They came in at six in the afternoon and I was *solito* [15]. I took the equipment, set it aside (...), loaded my rifle, but my legs didn't respond anymore. And at about six-thirty, I heard people coming down and of course I got scared. I thought "it will be here... [where I die]", because you become psychotic... and are like "watch out because the guerrillas always hunt the last one". I was scared because they started saying "*Patiño, Patiño!*" so I knew it was them. They carried me because I didn't... you know what I mean? That was the first time I said "I'm leaving here" but no. This is what happens to all recruits in this area, because you have to hydrate every day, so your legs resist... So yeah, after that I take the *Frutiño*[16] with a little bit of salt, which becomes like a saline solution, every day in a canteen before I go to bed. (...) When I got the equipment, a cool guy with about ten years [of experience] said to me "come I will help you load the equipment" and when he started to pull out the ballast that I was carrying he said "You don't come here for a ride. You carry everything here in small sizes for... you know what I mean". Then, he asked "Who wants shampoo?", and everybody took some pods from a small container. It was one of those four-pods pack promo. I took four. He said "man, you're not going to bathe every day, so just take one", and he gave the shampoo pods away and stuff like that. So, I started to work out the team (...) and learned... (Personal communication, Mauricio, 2 December 2015).

In the physical education of the combatant it is essential to learn how to carry the right weight. The health of the combatant's body depends on knowing exactly what is essential for its survival. The body leaves behind superfluous things: shampoo, deodorants, perfume, changes of clothes. The combatant's body is austere.

The experience of numb or injured feet is associated with walks and weight. The following testimony humorously narrates the painful experience of having foot injuries caused by changing boots:

Luis: (...) we took a *very long walk* and climbed a fucking peak... and as I came here with new boots, because when one has permission to go out, those who have ripped boots say "leave me your boots because when you come back they give you a new pair" (...) So on that day I left my boots... and that day I came back with new boots... and climbing that peak... and here on the back of my foot I got a big hole that it almost looked like I had leishmaniasis and the front of my fingers were blooded up. I saw the people who had climbed to the other edge, the last one... and I was like, "if they catch me, they will kill me", but thanks God we got to a part, with better spirits (...) and I thanked God, I was in flip-flops and I stood guard in flip flops. They let me do it like this because It was busted... One ends up walking like a ballet dancer... and with some holes. Because the skin does not only peel off but also caves in and bleeds... and with my feet like this... they let me stand guard in flip flops... (Laughter). (Personal Communication, Luis, 2 December 2015)

The soldier intentionally uses several augmentatives ("very long walk", "big hole") and dramatic comparisons ("it seemed to have Leishmaniasis", "walking like a ballet dancer") to convey the intensity of his experience of pain. Again, fear is intertwined with physical pain in the narrative, because the soldier thinks that if he lags behind the rest of the group, he becomes an easy prey for the guerrillas. Thus, the body is seen, in different testimonies, not only as a source of pain, but also as an

obstacle to face or flee the enemy. The body is a burden but also an instrument of survival. In the previous testimony, there is a striking humorous contrast with the situation in which the soldier, already back in the camp, stands guard in flip flops.

The recurrence of the rules learned in the combat zone, in the narratives of the interviewed soldiers, causes them to develop certain “instincts” such as throwing themselves to the ground when a gunshot is heard and crawling [17]. They also learn all kinds of technical skills, such as hanging up the hammock and the mosquito net:

Luis: But one has experienced it there and says “oh this is...” you know what I mean? In my case, a soldier was moved to the battalion. He had 15 years of experience, and the man worked in Antioquia (...) And so the man got here and we told him “here it is kind of tough, for this and that, and we have to do this and that...” Well... the first night it was winter, the man was left in the squad, he was going after me. (...) And since it was the first night, we only greeted each other. It turns out that we had to hang up [the hammock] in a banana tree (...) And my friend tied the hammock from two banana trees and that was it. And that night water poured down, it rained very hard, brother. Turns out the banana tree cannot bear one’s weight and bends over. So, normally one ties it here, wraps it around two trees, if they are next to each other, right?... so that one can sleep relaxed. What? At about 12 o’clock that boy over there is screaming “brother, it rained, and it fell and now is wet”. The man is wet. Well, I don’t think that boy slept that night. That man, because he had been here for 15 years, just imagine, he had never stood guard. Well, the next day, the man is telling us the story... Thus, we started to help him and everything. (Personal Communication, Luis, 2 December 2015).

The soldier takes pride in the skills he has acquired in the combat zone by showing the contrast with another soldier, who apparently has many years of experience but does not understand the particularities of jungle survival. The end of the story is interesting because, although the soldier allows himself to laugh at the ineptitude of his new companion, he also makes it clear that after the episode he offered him help. Thus, technical learning is acquired in specific bodily experiences and with the help of other soldiers.

In the daily life of the combat zone, soldiers learn the skills necessary for survival. There they acquire the behavioural canons that will guarantee their good performance and this learning is possible thanks to their ability to mimic the behaviour of experts. The body of the professional soldier, vulnerable, violated, exhausted, proud to have learned to survive, knows how to move, how to listen and how to survive.

The combat zone is also the scene in which the combatant is wounded; where the body is forever modified. With humour, a group of soldiers narrated how they got their wounds:

You can call us *Mochos* [“amputees”]. We’re missing a leg or both or an arm. this is the nickname that we want to be used in this interview. *Mochos* 1, *Mochos* 2 and so on... I like the name of this group. We’re the *mochos*. (Personal communication, Luis, 2 December 2015)

*Mochos* number 1, 2, 3 and 4, amid laughter, introduced the discourses in which they coincided in the way of narrating the event: “When the mine [18] ‘is baptized’, when the mine is named after me, there is nothing to do: everybody surrounds it and one sees how they go one by one in a row through the same place and one does not know why one starts to sweat, like predicting that it is you who will step on it. That’s right. That was our mine. Each of the *mochos* evokes the day of the accident, the day on which their body was transformed forever. The professional soldier, unable to return to the combat zone, will begin to build his future with what he describes as a broken or defeated body (an issue that will be addressed in the last section).

The *mochos* also talk about death, of how in the combat zone they learn to live with its imminence. References to the death of the *lanza* [19] are recurrent:

In the army, one always has a friend (...) [My friend] fell into an ambush, a mine fell on him and a shard hit over here and cut off all this, and another one hit him here... I took it out and when I took it out, he said, “Don’t let me die”. I put my hands here, but his blood was still pouring, and I was like “Don’t die on me”. And blood kept on coming out and I didn’t know what to do with it, so I just said, “close your eyes, don’t look at anything.” And he said “I feel like I’m going to die”, and I said “No, don’t watch”. Then I took him to a nurse and they administered an intravenous saline drip and he got better and stopped bleeding. He recovered and the helicopter arrived and “fun!”. About four days later, I went on leave. After a while I found him, and he was wearing a cast and had received about 17 stitches and he said “thanks for not letting me die” and I said “you are welcome”. (Personal communication, Luis, 2 December 2015)

A key part of the soldier’s survival is his awareness of the imminence of death. Not only him, but also his *lanza* or other companion, can die at any time. In Colombia’s armed conflict, death is not necessarily associated with combat, as soldiers can die at any time when they are patrolling, camping out or eating, due to the use of anti-personnel mines by guerrillas.

The following testimony is equally dramatic and emotional:

In my brigade I had many experiences. Well, thanks God I’m alive. (...) I saw my companions blow up and become *mochos* in the combat zone. I had to close their eyes, which is the hardest thing to do: close the eyes of your *lanza*, who eats with you in the *marma* [20], who *cambucha* [21] with you, who bathes with you (...) I didn’t... when someone died out in the wild, I remember that I would come in and throw my mattress next to my mom’s bed. And I would want to pee at night, and I wouldn’t go to the bathroom. I peed there in a pot as I was feeling very anxious, man. And one day they told me “grab a dead man with your hands and you’ll see that it takes away your fear,” and it did indeed... It’s like your mind, because I have a friend who’s a doctor and I said “man, aren’t you afraid to cut dead people?” and he said “no, that goes away after a while...”. You get mentalised to become like a stone. So yeah, that’s it. (Personal Communication, Luis, 2 December 2015).

The soldier here refers to how he manages to overcome the fear of death by coming into physical contact with the corpses. A survival strategy, then, is precisely the bodily coexistence with the dead,

the wounded, the sick. The analogy with the doctor's practice is useful, insofar as it shows that the soldier does not become familiar with the reality of death in the abstract, but only materially, through contact with the dead body. To survive in the combat zone, the soldier must learn to touch vulnerable bodies injured by war. His own body can eventually become one of them, as it will be shown in the next section.

### **5. Defeated bodies: Professional soldiers besieged in their materiality**

The José María Hernández Health Battalion (BASAN) is located in Bogota, Colombia. Its mission is to rehabilitate professional soldiers who have been seriously wounded on the battlefield or who have suffered some kind of accident that has left their health highly compromised, and thus their ability to continue to serve. This section deals with the bodily narratives of the soldiers who, after having been wounded in the combat zone, have arrived at the Health Battalion and, while receiving treatments for their wounds or chronic illnesses, expect the medical board to meet to determine their degree of disability and the possibility of continuing in the Army doing office work. Plagued by anxiety and uncertain about what will happen, soldier weave visions of a future in which the only thing certain is that they will have to learn to deal with an “expired body, a broken body, which will no longer be able to perform normally either in the military life or civilian life”. (Personal Communication, Luis, 2 December 2015).

The Health Battalion is described by some patients as “the toilet of the institution”, as “the limbo”, or as the place where “one realises that one is part of the Army only until it is healthy, until you can take a rifle and patrol. Afterwards there is no appreciation, and they make you feel you are worth nothing. You realise your real value for the institution” (Field journal, 2015). In the Health Battalion, combatants cease to be such a thing and their body is treated as material that must be quickly discarded, as a body on which any investment means an economic loss for the institution.

Edwin's testimony summarises the previous point:

It's very different here. It's like it's another Army. You don't count here, you are worthless. You remain waiting and waiting and waiting for them to decide what they are going to do with you. Whether they decide you have 30% or 70% of disability. And if this is the case you beg God that they let you stay doing office work. Or whether they send you home with five million and incapacitated for any profession. None of us here can work in construction, or chauffeuring. Our bodies no longer work, and the Army does not care. They send us back half-broken to civilian life. You know what I mean? Like those glasses you don't know exactly when they are going to break. (Personal communication, Edwin, 2 June 2015).

In the Health Battalion, the soldier complains that the Army has taken the best of them: their youth and their health:

Now, how many people aren't they kicking out? Anyone who has a common illness is deemed unfit, not relocatable. Go home! One loses his youth because one comes here well. That is why they do your medical examination when you enter. Didn't get 48% disability? Go home!

There's no pension. Take your \$30 million compensation [22]. What good does it do you? (Personal communication, Augusto, 2 June 2015)

All this [the sacrifices in military life] for what? I've already lost my youth. I'm already 30 years old ... I no longer have the strength to do the things I used to do before, like using a machete. And the Army? Well, "go away and that's it" (Personal Communication, Edwin, 2 June 2015)

A soldier, that is, the conception that the officers, commander have, is: "Ok, carry the equipment with 15 days of food". Ready! start! But, ah, he stepped on a mine! No problem! "Let's send him to the Health Battalion" "File his medical record and let him go". Because he is no longer useful for the institution. We are no longer useful for the institution. That is the reality of the Army, for commanders (Personal Communication, John, 2 December 2015).

I have faith in my God, and I know he's going to play hard. But I'm going to set up the business and I'll take care of it in a chair [laughs]. With His love, everything is possible. I put myself in the hands of God and He will not forget me. (Personal communication, John, 2 December 2015)

Professional soldiers, with bodies that have been irreversibly modified by war, experience fragility and vulnerability, no longer on the battlefield but within the battalion that, far from offering comfort and acknowledgement, emphasises the uselessness of its materiality. However, this does not prevent soldiers from projecting a "normal" future life:

Here at the Health Battalion, I realised that I am worthless, but thanks to my Army I have been able to save and send money to my family. That's when I connect with the real institution, not this crap. This is transient. I will buy another house and will rent it out and will make a living out of it (Personal communication, Edwin, 2 December 2015)

It is precisely these narratives which make reference to the distant future when the soldier reconciles with the Army and remembers that it is thanks to this institution that he managed to save money to build a life "away from the guerrillas and the paramilitaries". In them, the soldier optimistically imagines a future in which his defeated body is not an obstacle to act as a useful member of society.

## 6. Conclusions

This article dealt with the bodily narratives of Colombian professional soldiers, that is, with the ways in which they narrate the physical transformations that military life imposes on them. Understanding soldiers' discourses led us to deal with the strategies of the institution's "expendables", to deal with the education they received, the difficulties of the combat zone, the wounds that transformed their body and their stay at the Health Battalion.

In other words, this article delves into the understanding of one of the protagonists of the Colombian armed conflict that, for the first time in the Havana's dialogues, was elevated to the level of interlocutor: the soldier was recognised for his leading role in the construction of the Colombian social fabric [23]. Our interest was to analyse an institution in which the pain of its most vulnerable members,

who we have called the “expendables” is blurred in public discourse. In fact, the public rhetoric of war tends to hide the bodily pain associated with the damage caused by war, by means of discursive mechanisms that suggest that such damage is inflicted on abstract entities (for example, it is often spoken of the “wounds left by the war in the country”), which allows its perpetuation (Scarry, 1985, 63-81). On the contrary, by focusing the analysis on how particular individuals who have lived the war in their own flesh express their bodily transformations, their pain, wounds and deficiencies, the damage of war becomes material and the body regains its centrality in anthropological, sociological and historical studies.

It is important to remember, however, that the Army builds its public identity by staging the bodies of mutilated and sick soldiers, at times that are crucial to establish its historical reputation. The “expendables” only matter in military rhetoric and narratives, when in the fight for the historical memory the institution wants to give them the role of victim. We cannot forget that the national hero is built on the body of the professional soldiers. Thus, in the narratives of the high-rank commands, which will be analysed on another occasion, the amputated body or the body fallen in combat will serve to remember that the institution sacrifices those like Pedro Pascasio for the Fatherland, for the well-being of all citizens.

In the so-called post-conflict Colombia, it is important to study the narratives of the “expendables”, in order to advance the understanding of the context of the Colombian war, which is not yet over. These narratives account for the condition of expendable attributed to these soldiers and, at the same time, for their resilience, that is, their ability to overcome their injuries. These testimonies are, then, indispensable to design real peace-building strategies.

## Notes

- 1) This article is the result of the research project titled “Narratives and rhetoric of emotions: the war between professional soldiers”, led by Catalina González Quintero, Associate Professor at the Department of Philosophy of the University of Los Andes (Colombia), and Ana María Forero Ángel, Assistant Professor at the Department of Anthropology of the same University. The project also had the participation, as research assistants, of Simón Mateo Ramírez González, Felipe Zárate and Andrea Catalina Melo, all from the University of Los Andes.
- 2) “Professional soldiers” occupy the lowest rank in Colombia’s military hierarchy. They usually come from peasant families. They enrol in the school after having completed their high school education, but many of them read and write with difficulty.
- 3) In *Prearious life: The powers of Mourning and Violence*, Butler (2006) states that “the body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instruments of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has an invariably public dimension” (p.53). Butler adds that “this vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to those sudden accesses coming from places we cannot prevent. However, this vulnerability is exacerbated under certain social and political conditions, especially when

violence is a way of life” (p.55). With this in mind, the author proposes that, in scenarios of violence, there are bodies that become unrealistic and are characterised as expendable bodies that can be considered “as already dead” (p.65).

- 4) This article uses the pseudonyms requested by the interviewed soldiers to protect their identity.
- 5) Sicosiado is a Colombianism derived from the term “psychosis” and refers to a state of psychological alteration, mainly characterised by permanent fear.
- 6) The testimonies on which this article is based were also used in the following articles: “Joining the army is not choosing to kill”: towards an understanding of the emotional narratives of Colombian professional soldiers” (Forero Ángel, González, Ramírez, Zárate (2018) and “The Colombian National Army and its wounds: an approach to military narratives of pain and disappointment” (Forero Ángel, 2017a).
- 7) In *Gender Trouble* (2006) and *Bodies That Matter* (2002), Butler develops the concept of performativity, which refers specifically to how the discourses on sex of a given society produce identity features. The repetition that contemporary heteronormative society makes of sex discourses creates feminine and masculine features, a duality upon which different sexualities are organised in a hierarchy. For Butler, performativity is “a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition” (2002, p.34). The way of understanding performativity is not limited to discourses about sex, since it also operates through discourses about race, body, specific social roles, etc. In our case, we will use this concept to refer to the reiterative and reference practices through which the discourses that educate and train soldiers produce anesthetic bodies (McLeish. 2012), bodies that know how to control emotions, bodies that know how to fight and mutilated bodies that long to build a future based on or despite of their wounds.
- 8) These authors address: 1) the adaptation of the Argentine Army to the democratic context (Frederic, 2015); 2) the way emotions shape the experiences of Argentine soldiers on duty in Haiti (Frederic, 2018); 3) the construction of the identity of veterans of the Falklands War (Guber, 2004); 4) the meaning that Argentine pilots give to their participation in the Falklands War (Guber, 2016); 5) the construction of memory and identity in the narratives of Majors of the Military Academy of Agulhas Negras, in Rio de Janeiro (Castro , 1990); 6) the importance of hierarchy in the Brazilian military, particularly in Brazilian Army Command and General Staff School (ECEME) (Leirner 1995, 1997); and 7) the construction of a military image and the initiation rituals of soldiers (Badaró, 2009). In Colombia, Forero Ángel (2014, 2016, 2017, 2018) has addressed, from an ethnographic perspective, how generals and professional soldiers perceive their work.
- 9) This testimony was used in the article titled “From the ideal soldier to the real combatant: an approximation to the narratives about military professionalisation in Colombia” (in press), written by Ana María Forero Ángel, Simón Mateo Ramírez and Federico Álvarez. This article analyses the discrepancies between the narratives of high-ranking officials and graduates that define professionalisation but, unlike our article, does not address corporality.

- 10) Kenneth T. McLeish (2012) proposes that the training of soldiers develops a particular way of understanding and feeling the vulnerability of their body. Thus, the military body, instrumentalised in training through discipline and control, is understood as a body capable of accomplishing any mission, even dying.
- 11) For Ute Frevert (2006), in scenarios where institutional links and networks are very strong, there is a greater need for emotional self-regulation (emotional work), i.e., a greater need to “control” different emotions to achieve a standard behaviour.
- 12) Mamar gallo is a very common Colombianism that means fooling around, making jokes, pulling someone’s leg, and evading obligations.
- 13) A water-purifying tablet that contains chlorine and whose effectiveness is limited. The most common tablet is Puritab.
- 14) As shown in Edwin’s testimony, “We were close to the supply unit, and that keeps the morale high”, for soldiers, “morale” refers to a positive mood, scenario, context or situation that raises the group’s spirits.
- 15) The soldier uses the diminutive form for solo (alone) to emphasise his loneliness. It can be read as “absolutely alone”.
- 16) A very popular soluble sugary drink in Colombia, especially among children.
- 17) “Luis: what happens is that you kind of develop (...) Mauricio: an instinct. (...) John: Yes, it becomes an instinct because you hear a shot, get on the ground, crawl and move forward.”
- 18) One of the main features of the Colombian armed conflict was the use of anti-personnel mines by guerrillas. They are a form of blast mines that are designed to injure soldiers or civilians when they are inadvertently stepped on.
- 19) Lanza is the companion assigned to each soldier. Given their close permanent coexistence in the jungle, the lanza becomes the best friend, almost the closest family member of the soldier.
- 20) A common way of referring to a marmite, the large metal pot used by soldiers to cook and eat their food.
- 21) Cambuchar means sharing the same cambuche, a miserable little room.
- 22) 30 million Colombian Pesos is the equivalent to approximately 10,000 USD.
- 23) The Havana peace process (2012-2016) was the first to include retired army members at the dialogue table and give them a voted in the negotiations. In other words, in the previous peace processes between the Colombian government and the armed forces the military was not directly represented.

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