

## **Coca-lombia: The Story of a Drug and a Country**

*M. Camila Cisneros*

My mother fled from Colombia and escaped to Miami at the young age of 19. As she was checking in for her flight to Miami, she informed the American Airlines worker that she was flying alone. The worker placed an asterisk next to her name on the passenger list, with no other explanation. Once she landed, my mother was pulled aside and she, along with her belongings and luggage, were searched. After asking why she was being treated in such manner, my mother was informed that she was thought to be a drug mule carrying pellets of cocaine in her stomach, which explains why the asterisk was placed next to her name. Anyone who has seen the Colombian drama film *Maria Full of Grace* knows how common drug mules traveling to Miami and New York were during the 1990s, and my mother, according to the airline worker, fit the description perfectly. Not once did they consider that she could have been taking a vacation in Miami, or fleeing from a violent country that had a seemingly bleak future. To them, she was just another young Colombian woman carrying drugs in her stomach for money. Colombia and its people had one story, and one story only: cocaine. From being baptized as “Coca-lombia” by other Latin American countries, to continuously being denied visas by the United States as a “precaution” to prevent drug trafficking, Colombia has been pushed down and has been prevented from progressing. The one story that everyone seems to know fails to include the happy ending; Colombia has risen from the ashes and flourished.

The question is, why is it that to this day and age, one cannot speak of Colombia to most people without cocaine, Pablo Escobar, or violence coming to their minds. The media is a powerful tool that holds a level of influence that is hard to beat. It has the power of changing Colombia's narrative, but the way it has been used has further enforced the negative connotations that Colombia carries. An example of this is seen in an article titled "Colombia Hooked by Drug Documentary," published by *Variety* magazine. Just by reading the title, Colombia's single story has been reiterated. The choice of wording in the title suggests to the reader that this is all there is to Colombia: drugs and being addicted to drugs. It prevents Colombia the right to move on from its previous stigma and cruelly jokes about a topic that has caused much devastation to the country. From there, one can only guess who the article talks about -- the one and only, the ruling king of Colombia even through death, Pablo Escobar. The article discusses the documentary made by Pablo Escobar's son, Juan Pablo Escobar, who now goes by Sebastian Marroquín. The documentary follows him as he writes letters of apology to the sons of Pablo Escobar's victims and delivers the letters in person (Newbery). He attempts to make amends to redeem the sins of his father, hence the title of the documentary, *Sins of My Father*. It also tells the story of Pablo Escobar and how his drug trafficking operation led to him being killed, and his wife and kids fleeing the country. The documentary focuses on forgiveness and ending violence. However, the article sent the opposite message of what the documentary being discussed was trying to convey. The article was a reminder that Colombia rarely gets spoken of in American media, but when it does, it is regarding the same story of its brutal past. According to the article, "documentaries are rarely released in Colombia, and if they are, it is only on one print" (Newbery). Given this,

the author still chose to make a title poking fun of Colombian stereotypes, and as an effect, the readers missed the documentary's message on forgiveness and ending violence. *Variety*, an American magazine, further enforced the story into its readers' heads that there is only one noteworthy topic in Colombia. This is a story that must change.

Pablo Escobar, without a doubt, shook the foundations of Colombia, and changed its history forever. That is why when *Narcos*, an American crime show regarding Colombia's drug wars, first premiered on Netflix, Colombians were excited. Finally, the world could see their history and see the truth behind the drug wars. However, the stereotypes that Americans had in the 1980s and 90s regarding Colombia simply resurfaced. The show did not bring a new light to the other side of Colombia and its story. It seemed to resuscitate dying stereotypes. In the article "Five Reasons You Should Stop Watching *Narcos*," author Nick Brown talks about how cocaine is Colombia's single story, accompanied with a personal story about how he asked a friend what she wanted from Colombia and she responded with, "a pound of cocaine." It is small jokes like these that turn into common Colombian stereotypes. As the article states, stereotypes become so powerful that they begin to create an incomplete narrative, manifesting itself into the minds of those who do not know anything about Colombia (Brown). *Narcos* only shows one side of Colombia, a side that repeats the single narrative that the stereotypes are based on. It shows the worst of Colombia, which can be seen in the way the characters play the roles of either a "criminal, corrupt police officer, or a sexy woman trying to get ahead through sex" (Brown). These are commonly believed to be the three basic roles to exist within Colombian society. The trait they all share is the intrinsic motivation to work towards their own self-interest.

The problem with these stereotypes is self-fulfilling prophecy. By definition, self-fulfilling prophecy is the belief one has about others determines how one acts towards them, which then plays a role in determining the behavior of others. Colombians hear the same story about themselves, and this affects them psychologically, making them feel like they are not good enough to be anything other than what they hear they should be. They hear they are only good for cocaine trafficking, and therefore the thought manifests itself into their minds, influencing many to not want to reach for anything better because they are expected to be only that.

Colombia has been battling its stereotypes and has recently made obtaining peace a top national priority to remove the stigma of being a country full of violence. By achieving peace, the nation could gain closure from its bloody past, change the global perception of Colombia, and further prosper without being held back. One of the main reasons Colombia has been full of violence is due to the fact that it has the longest running civil war the world has ever known. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) has waged a war with the Colombian government for 52 long years. In the article "Colombia Signs Peace Agreement with FARC After 5 Decades of War," author Nicholas Casey talks about how the war "tore the social fabric of Colombia. Decades of fighting brought the rise of paramilitary groups who massacred civilians and burned villages" (Casey). To gain more wealth and power, the FARC became involved in the drug trade. According to Latin American affairs analyst June Beittel, "the FARC's involvement in the drug trade deepened to include all stages of drug processing, including cultivation, taxation of drug crops, processing, and distribution" (Beittel). With the accord, the FARC will hand their arms over to UN inspectors in order to begin their

lives as average Colombian citizens. In return, Colombia “will agree to a “transitional justice” system in which, according to President Santos, rank-and-file soldiers will be granted amnesty or given reduced sentences for crimes they committed” (Casey). Although the peace treaty was denied on a national referendum on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2016 due to lack of justice, Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos has made a revised agreement that will bring justice for the lives that were lost. The treaty has been approved by congress and is in the process of being implemented. This goes to show that Colombia is transitioning to a country of peace and is changing the lives of its people, as seen with David Oliveros, a 19-year-old from Bogotá who is studying biochemistry at Columbia University. When talking about the peace treaty, he said, “I’ve never lived in a country in peace, without war. It’s a moment I’ve waited for all of my life.” Colombia is more than just cocaine and drug traffickers, and the media only shows a story that will sell.

## Works Cited

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