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Drugs, Ethnic Profiling, and the American Perception of Colombian Immigrants, 1979-1990

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In 1979, Colombian news sources often featured the United States as a desirable tourist spot. Advertisements portraying Miami as an ideal vacation destination were common, and English-teaching institutes promised fast learning methods. An article published in *El Tiempo* on July 12, 1979, stated that 1979 saw a surge in international travel by Colombians due to lower costs and the prevalence of travel agencies. Additionally, 53% of Colombian travelers were bound to North America. While for some, travel agencies were simply a means to a safe trip back and forth from North America, for others travel agencies offered a one-way entry to the United States for the price of 70 thousand pesos and, possibly, their own lives. A series titled "Los Indocumentados" (The Undocumented) written by *El Tiempo* in July of 1979 concerned the more than 50,000 undocumented Colombian immigrants who lived in New York at the time. The different articles in the series describe the precarious trip of the immigrants from Bogotá to the Bahamas to Miami, by air and sea. Once in New York, the undocumented Colombian immigrants faced a plethora of difficulties, such as hiding from immigration authorities and working inhumane jobs. Although Colombians coexisted with immigrants of other nationalities, the growing significance of Colombian narcotrafficking in U.S. urban centers towards the end of

the 70s placed them in a particular position. *El Tiempo* writes, “the image that narcotraffickers have left behind turns every [undocumented immigrant] into a potential member of the Colombian mafia.”¹

As Colombian travelers and immigrants flocked to the United States in 1979, a major drug-related incident that would come to define the image of Colombians in U.S. media happened on July 11. During the “Dadeland Mall Massacre,” two armed men entered Crown Liquors and murdered two clients, wounding several employees in the process. The men were found to be involved in drug trafficking, and the murder was related to a money feud. Colombian media highlighted the story of Germán Jiménez Panesso, one of the victims of the shootout, who had been fleeing from the mafia for several weeks and was persecuted from Urabá, Antioquia all the way to Miami.² By contrast, major U.S. media sources such as the Miami Herald, the Washington Post, and the New York Times contemplated this incident as a part of the rampant drug-related violence perpetrated by Colombian and other Hispanic traffickers in recent years. The discourse surrounding the so-called “Cocaine Cowboy Era” was marked by the association between drugs, money, violence, and the presence of unauthorized immigrants from Hispanic countries who launched a “gang war” in South Florida.³ Bill Curry, who wrote a report on the Dadeland shooting for the Washington Post, described the event as marking the terror of “crazy Colombians” involved in the drug trade who had made South Florida a “free zone” for drug

* This paper is the product of an eight-week long independent project conducted under the sponsorship of the Summer Undergraduate Research and Prof. Sarah C. Maza at Northwestern University.

¹ Translated from Spanish by author from “Los indocumentados: 50 mil Colombianos sin papeles viven en Nueva York,” *El Tiempo*. July 16, 1979.

² “La Muerte de un Traficante: La Mafia Colombiana no perdona,” *El Tiempo*, July 18, 1979.

³ George Volsky, “KILLINGS IN FLORIDA OVER DRUGS ON RISE: 40 Deaths This Year Attributed to Rival Factions, Many Brought Illegally From Colombia 40 Killed in Gang War Once Run by Cubans Five Antagonistic Rings,” *The New York Times*, July 22, 1979.

activities.⁴ As the dominant ethnic group involved in drug trafficking shifted from Cubans to Colombians in the late 70s, the “Cocaine Cowboy” image came to represent Colombian drug traffickers and other participants who got roped into the drug trafficking complex. The movie *Cocaine Cowboys*, released in 2006, provides a look into how other participants, such as North Americans and other Hispanics, got involved in various steps of the Colombian-run marijuana and cocaine drug trade during the 70s and 80s in Miami.

The undocumented status of many Colombians who ran drug rings in the United States became a large focus of media portrayals. Baltimore’s *The Sun* reported on the violence in Miami in 1979 and stated that 2’000 out of the 20’000 undocumented Colombian immigrants in Dade County were involved in the drug trade.⁵ These Colombian nationals ran 4 to 5 drug rings in the area and were quickly replacing Cubans as the main distributors. *The Sun* stated that not only marijuana was coming in on charter boats and planes, but also unauthorized immigrants who would come to run the drug trade in Dade County. Colombian immigrants involved in the trade were not only distributors but also small-scale smugglers who worked as human couriers. The 2004 movie *Maria Full of Grace* exemplifies this practice by following a Colombian woman who enters the United States carrying multiple drug pellets in her digestive tract in exchange for financial compensation. Ultimately, Maria ends up settling in the United States as an unauthorized immigrant. This pattern was pointed out by Stephen C. Smith in an article for the *Detroit Free Press*, where he discusses the traffickers’ practice of “forcing” Colombians to enter the U.S. as drug mules.⁶ Smith also discusses how the DEA in Miami turned to “battle illegal

⁴ Bill Curry, “In South Florida: Money, Murders: Drugs, Money, Murders 'Crazy Colombians' Rain Dope on Florida, Feud Over Millions,” *The Washington Post*, Aug. 13, 1979.

⁵ “Violence in Miami increases as Colombians enter cocaine network,” *The Sun*, July 30, 1979.

⁶ Although this is Smith's wording in his article, the human courier phenomenon was often not a "forced" practice. When studying human drug couriers, it is important to note the low-income provenance of many

Colombian aliens,” as part of their anti-drug efforts. It was practices like the simultaneous smuggling of immigrants and drugs, as well as the joint crackdown by drug and immigration authorities, that blurred the lines between merchandise and person, thus placing undocumented Colombian aliens in a particular position of vulnerability. Smith quoted homicide captain Marshall Frank in stating that “when a body is found with a bullet in the back of the head, and the person’s an illegal alien and a Colombian, we make an assumption it involved a drug-related case of some kind.” This phenomenon caused undocumented Colombian immigrants to suffer much more adverse effects of the drug trafficking stigma.

The widespread portrayal of violence in South Florida became the basis of a drug trafficking stigma against Colombians which would continue to the next decades. The development of the drug stigma operated within a larger fear of the “Latinization”⁷ or “browning”⁸ of American cities as Hispanic immigrants created ethnic communities in urban centers such as Miami, New York, and Los Angeles. Major discursive elements in this anti-Latin sentiment included the fear of unauthorized immigration and the rise in crime that U.S. society attributed to the immigrants. Additionally, due to the crackdown against drug smuggling activities that ensued in Florida after the late 70s scandals, drug trafficking activities started moving to places like Houston, Virginia and Los Angeles.⁹ This geographical spreading of drug

participants and the decision-making involved in participating as a last resort. The “forced” aspect often came in when couriers were asked to make repeated voyages, since they already had experience, even if it went against the participant’s desires. For more on human drug couriers, see Jennifer Fleetwood. Stephen C. Smith, “‘Cocaine Cowboys’ are blazing away under the blazing sun,” *Detroit Free Press*. Nov 11, 1979.

⁷ Bob Dart, “The Latinization of America, Part II: 450,000 Cubans Make Miami Seem Like A Foreign Country,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, Feb 14, 1979.

⁸ Robert Lindsey, “I have nothing against a community trying to maintain, ethnic purity’: ‘Brown’ Power Arrives,” *New York Times*, Dec. 30, 1979.

⁹ “The Colombian Carousel: Persistent Marijuana Smugglers Caught Again and Again and Again on High Seas Mother Ships Nurse Colombian Pot,” *The Washington Post*, Aug. 14, 1979; Sandra Boodman, “Va. a Growing Drug Entry Point: Fla. Crackdown Pushes Smugglers to Virginia Drug Smugglers Find Virginia an Attractive Entry

smuggling activities created a perceived effect in Florida that anti-drug operations were successful when in reality smuggling activities had increased in number and spread out. Reagan's administration at one point claimed to have brought the drug smuggling operations "down to a trickle" by concentrating on sea and air seizures in South Florida¹⁰. Meanwhile, that same year, New York drug seizures saw a rise due to the rerouting of drug smuggling efforts, and the Kennedy Airport saw a record seizure of human couriers.¹¹

Along with the rerouting of drug smuggling activities came a spread of arrests and drug-related violence associated with Colombians to urban centers beyond South Florida. In February of 1982, two men were found killed in an apartment in Queens while the police investigated an earlier murder of a Colombian family of four. All murders were found to be part of the emerging "cocaine warfare" brought along by drug trafficking operations from Colombia.¹² The Wall Street Journal called Colombian Cocaine Cowboys "savage" in comparison to the Italian mafia, not only due to their violent practices, but also due to their ability to blend into the Hispanic communities in Queens.¹³ A big case of drug-related violence involved the murder of federal judge John Wood Jr. in Texas in 1979, known for giving maximum penalties to drug

Point," *The Washington Post*, Dec 26, 1981; Bill Farr, "Drug Seizure Was 3rd on Colombian Ship," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 1, 1983.

¹⁰ Janis Johnson, "Centerpiece: US armada fights war against drugs Task force of agencies, aided by the Navy, slows the flow of narcotics into Florida," *Boston Globe*, July 9, 1982.

¹¹ Ronald Sullivan, "New York Drug Seizures Rise with Florida Route Cut," *New York Times*, Aug 18, 1982.

¹² David W. Dunlap, "2 New Queens Killings Tied To Colombian Drug Traffic," *New York Times*, Feb. 3, 1982.

¹³ Stanley Penn, "Cocaine Cowboys': Colombia's Syndicates Prove to Be Tough Foe For U.S. Drug Agents More Savage Than the Mafia, They Frighten Informers, Use Variety of Disguises Death on a Queens Parkway 'Cocaine Cowboys': Drug Syndicates From Colombia Prove to Be Tough Foes for U.S. Narcotics Agents," *The Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 5, 1983.

traffickers.¹⁴ The U.S.-Mexico border also came to be widely featured as a growing center for the smuggling of both drugs and undocumented immigrants. In 1985, the number of drug seizures coming from undocumented immigrants peaked in the San Diego area. Border Patrol reported a record number of human couriers and smugglers, as well as a substantial increase in border violence, with Colombians identified among the key nationalities.¹⁵ The geographical concentration of the U.S. anti-drug strategy, as well as the general increase in Colombian drug smuggling tactics, caused the “Cocaine Cowboy” image to spread across several urban centers.

The drug trafficking image not only pertained to Colombians involved in the drug trade, but it also came to influence regular Colombian immigrants in the U.S. The aim of this paper is to further understand how the drug trafficking stigma, popularized by the media’s portrayal of Colombians in the drug trade, developed during the context of the War on Drugs. The methods utilized for this study include the analysis of over 300 periodicals sources from major urban centers between 1979 and 1990, as well as several CIA reports regarding U.S.-Colombia relations. Additionally, the study looked at the major Colombian news source *El Tiempo* to earn a deeper understanding of how Colombian discourses compared to U.S. ones.

In order to accomplish its aims, this study will begin by looking at general U.S.-Colombia relations between 1979 and 1990 regarding the War on Drugs. This first part is essential in providing an understanding of how the perception of Colombia itself affected the perception of the Colombian community in the United States. Secondly, this paper will discuss the phenomenon of “ethnic profiling” and “othering” that Colombian immigrants, travelers, and merchants suffered as provenance from Colombia became a suspicious characteristic for drug

¹⁴ Joseph Reaves, “Texas-size murder trial in, ‘maximum’ judge case,” *Chicago Tribune*, Oct 10, 1982.

¹⁵ Joe Hughes, “85 drug seizures from aliens peak: [1,2,3,4,5,6 Edition],” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Oct 11, 1985.

smuggling. Lastly, this study will examine the “corruption effect,” which suggests that Colombian drug trafficking, along with the “othered” Colombian immigrants, came to be perceived as a menace to American society. Overall, this study will prove how the drug trafficking stigma for Colombian immigrants developed out of a complex relationship between international relations, national security, and American societal exceptionalism.

U.S.-Colombia relations and the War on Drugs

It is pertinent to note that the development of the drug trafficker stereotype during the 70s and 80s occurred within a context where the U.S. demanded of the Colombian government to be cooperative in anti-narcotic strategies. During 1978-1982, Julio César Turbay Ayala was president of Colombia. As discussed by a 1982 CIA report regarding the upcoming Colombian election, Turbay Ayala was generally perceived by the U.S. government to be cooperative and pro-U.S.¹⁶ In June of 1979, Turbay Ayala allowed for the placement of armed forces and U.S. Secret Service agents in the Guajira Peninsula. *The Washington Post* describes him as being more cooperative with U.S. backing in the War on Drugs than previous president Alfonso López Michelsen.¹⁷ However, earlier that year, an alleged case of military-backed torture under the Turbay administration received attention from U.S. media. After 34 students were arrested by Colombian forces in October 1978, the Colombian government saw itself involved in torture

¹⁶ United States Central Intelligence Agency Directorate of Intelligence Office of Global Issues. “Colombian presidential election: Impact on U.S. narcotics policy [includes map],” 1982:10.

¹⁷ Charles Krause, Washington Post, Foreign Service, “Colombia, with U.S. Backing, Mounts Drive on Drug Traffic,” *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*, Jun. 20, 1979.

allegations and controversies for its use of repressive practices on protesters.¹⁸ Although Colombia at the time was considered one of the last “democracies” in Latin America, Turbay’s government certainly raised controversies about a government that supported U.S. imperialism and mandated the repression of its own citizens.¹⁹ Still, Colombia’s presidents were often qualified by the U.S. in terms of how open to U.S. aid and intervention they were, especially in the War on Drugs. Belisario Betancur (1982-1986) received harsh criticism for his non-cooperation with the U.S. Government in drug-related efforts until 1984. After the murder of anti-narcotics politician Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, Betancur authorized the spraying of crops in Colombian territory and commenced extradition proceedings for Colombian drug traffickers to the U.S., which very much pleased U.S. politicians.²⁰ This open declaration of war against drugs by Betancur was one of the inciting events for the formation of Los Extraditables, a group created by drug lords in 1986 which would cause rampant terrorism and violence in Colombian urban centers.

The pressure of the U.S. government on the Colombian government to adopt anti-narcotic strategies was due to the so-called "Colombian Connection." By 1979, the CIA reported that 75% of the cocaine coming into the United States came from Colombia, as well as 70% of the marijuana, as Colombian marijuana took precedence over Mexican marijuana due to the recent spraying of crops in Mexico.²¹ By 1984, estimates by the *New York Times* indicated that 60% of

¹⁸ Penny Lernoux Special to *The Washington Post*, "Arrests Raise Torture Issue in Colombia," *The Washington Post* (1974-Current File), Jan. 12, 1979.

¹⁹ "Letters," *The Insurgent Sociologist* 8, no. 4 (Winter, 1979): 110.

²⁰ Alan Riding, "SHAKEN COLOMBIA ACTS AT LAST ON DRUGS: [A WORLD OF DRUGS: AMERICA AS TARGET; THIRD OF SIX ARTICLES]," *New York Times*, Sep. 11, 1984.

²¹ Colección de DNSA: Colombia and the United States: Political Violence, Narcotics, and Human Rights, 1948-2010 "Colombia: An Overview of the Drug Problem," September 1979.

the marijuana, 90% of cocaine, as well as a significant portion of quaalude tablets, were coming from Colombia.²² In the case of marijuana, Riohacha and the Guajira Peninsula were the largest producing areas. In the case of cocaine, the producing areas were often in countries like Bolivia and Peru, and laboratories in Colombia turned the raw product into cocaine powder, which was then transported to the U.S. through air or sea, by smugglers or human couriers.²³ In this process, the U.S. is the consumer country, and before the cocaine powder reaches the hands of Colombians, it is often “cut” by distributors in U.S. cities to achieve a later purity. The identification of cocaine purity was an important method used in the tracing of major cocaine distribution centers, such as Central Falls, R.I. in the mid-80s.²⁴ In 1980, *The Atlanta Constitution* stated that drugs were the No. 1 Colombian export to Miami and South Florida, accounting for the recent rise in bank deposits, drug seizures, and murders in the area.²⁵ In 1982, the same journal declared that nine Colombian families controlled 65% of the cocaine and marijuana trade in the East Coast.²⁶ The “Colombian Connection” refers to the notion that a majority of the drug presence in the United States is related to Colombia, and therefore the Colombian government and people hold great responsibility in the anti-narcotic effort.

²² Alan Riding, Special to the *New York Times*, "Shaken Columbia Acts at Last on Drugs."

²³ Martin McReynolds, "Colombia Coast Region a 'Pot' Empire: COLOMBIAN MARIJUANA REGION," *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Sep 02, 1979.

²⁴ Bruce Handler, "FROM LEAF TO SNIFF: MILLIONS SPENT ON THE COCAINE TRAIL," *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Mar 07, 1979; Cory Dean, "Rhode Island a Crossroads for Cocaine," *New York Times*, Aug. 25, 1985.

²⁵ Sid Moody, "Drugs are no. 1 in Florida Sun: Colombian Payoff Puts Other Sources of Income in Shade," *The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984)*, Jan. 06, 1980.

²⁶ "'Colombian Connection' Supplies Pipeline for Drugs," *The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984)*, Feb. 15, 1982.

A further complicating factor pertains to the connection between Colombian drug trafficking and leftist guerrilla groups in the context of the Cold War. The general environment of internal violence in Colombia, perpetrated by guerilla groups (at the time, the M-19 and the FARC were most prevalent), drug traffickers, and rightist paramilitary groups, made for complex relationships where the profitability of drug trafficking often sustained violent groups. For instance, in 1979 the *Los Angeles Times* reported that narcotics organizations were selling weapons to “terrorist” groups in South and Central America as part of their profits.²⁷ A 1983 U.S. Embassy report describes a “cocaine boom” in the Llanos area of Colombia, where the FARC guerilla group had started to tax farmers on the usage of land for cultivating, and also recruiting farmers for their group.²⁸ Additionally, Colombian politicians and officials were also often accused of collaborating or accepting bribes from the Colombian drug trafficking groups. Drug money permeated many internal conflicts and dynamics within Colombia. U.S. officials often referred to the profitability of the drug trade as one of the reasons why the Colombian government may be unwilling to cooperate in its anti-narcotics strategies.

This multilayered structure of drug trafficking where narcotics operated in the connection between Colombia and the U.S. sparked a sort of “blame game” where public opinion debated each country’s responsibilities. Both governments often debated on issues such as legalization, spraying of crops, and extradition treaties for reasons of which country should take up more of the burden of the drug war. Colombian speakers at the National Association of Financial

²⁷ Tom Renner, "Guns-for-Drugs Trade Booming, Reports Disclose: Flow of Weapons to Terrorists in Central and South America, Mideast Cited WEAPONS-DRUGS TRADE GROWING ARMS, DRUGS TRADE," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), Nov. 15, 1979.

²⁸ Colección de DNSA: Colombia and the United States: Political Violence, Narcotics, and Human Rights, 1948-2010. “Guerrilla Involvement in Colombian Drug Trafficking.” United States Embassy. Colombia. Nov. 22, 1983.

Institutions in 1980 brought to light the adverse effects of drug trafficking in Colombia, such as inflation due to the uncontrolled flow of money, violence, and the corruption of public officials, and therefore advocated for the legalization of marijuana.²⁹ The Reagan administration pushed for the authorization of the spraying of Colombian crops with paraquat, as drug operations saw themselves overwhelmed.³⁰ Later in 1983, the Reagan administration focused on the drug kingpin strategy, which aimed to identify drug lords to combat the drug trade.³¹ Part of Reagan's campaign also focused on the American consumers, as exemplified by Nancy Reagan's "just say no" campaign, which encouraged American citizens to combat drugs through their own acts. This focus on the consumer was also intensified after the emergence of crack cocaine around 1986, which particularly appealed to the public, and led to policies such as workplace testing.³²

Colombian critiques of U.S. anti-narcotic policy included lack of consumer accountability and overreliance on producer countries. In 1988, Colombian foreign minister Julio Londoño called for U.S. recognition of the country's many sacrifices against drugs. He stated, "Some people say Colombia is only about drugs, but they are mistaken."³³ The minister also announced President Virgilio Barco's intention to travel to the U.S. to fix Colombia's tarnished

²⁹ "Colombians debate 'pot' plan: COLOMBIANS," *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Oct. 31, 1980:2-a6.

³⁰ Robert Press, "US drug agents want paraquat used to kill colombian marijuana crops," *The Christian Science Monitor (1908-Current file)*, Apr. 09, 1981:5.

³¹ RJ Ostrow, "U.S. may switch tactics in war on heroin: Officials consider focusing on traffickers, not crops, smith says," *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Apr. 20, 1983:1-b10.

³² C. McGraw and B. Farr, "Drug enforcers losing nation's cocaine war: Massive government eradication efforts are 'overwhelmed by the bad guys,' official says first of two articles. DRUGS: Law officers plead for public aid THE FIGHT AGAINST DRUGS DRUGS: Law officers plead for public's help DRUGS: Uphill fight for nation's law officers DRUGS: Law pleads for public aid DRUGS: Law officers overrun," *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Sep. 21, 1986:6; Charlotte Saikowski, "White house crackdown on drugs: DRUGS," *The Christian Science Monitor (1908-Current file)*, Aug. 15, 1986:1

³³ Pamela GS Constable, "Colombia seeks US appreciation of its war on drugs," *Boston Globe (1960-1989)*, Jun. 09, 1988:3

image, which included an advertising campaign aimed at highlighting the role of Colombian “heroes” and asking for U.S. responsibility.³⁴ *The Washington Post* criticized Bush’s anti-narcotic strategy for its reluctance to tax American citizens in order to provide aid to Latin American countries. According to Hobart Rowen, the foundational problem which the U.S. should address is poverty, which leads to participation in the drug trade. In the second half of the 80s, as the Extraditables war produced an increasingly violent atmosphere in Colombia and so-called “narcoterrorism,” Colombian officials began to resent the U.S. lack of aid. In 1989, various leaders of Latin American countries, including Colombian President Virgilio Barco, called for a meeting with Bush for the discussion of U.S. aid. A 1990 report from the *Los Angeles Times* found that many Colombians blamed the U.S. for financing the drug traffickers that perpetrated narcoterrorism in Colombian cities. Ortiz, a university student, said that Colombia served as “a ‘scapegoat’ for the U.S.’s failure to solve the drug problem.”³⁵ Senator Alvaro Gomez, allegedly kidnapped by drug barons in 1988 and later assassinated in 1995, argued that the profitability of the drug problem could only be reduced on the U.S. end, and advocated for legalization.

Ethnic Profiling and “Othering”

American depictions of Colombia’s political state and involvement in the War on Drugs during the 70s and 80s influenced the portrayal of Colombians involved in drug trafficking. After

³⁴ “COLOMBIA BUYS ADS TO OFFSET GROWING IMAGE AS DRUG CAPITAL,” *The Seattle Times*, June 9, 1988: A7.

³⁵ William R. Long, “America from abroad: Colombians: We won't be scapegoats chafing under the stigma of 'narco-terrorism,' they accuse americans of creating the demand for drugs. and when it comes to enforcement, they say, washington is all talk,” *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, May 15, 1990:1.

the uncovering of the “Colombian Connection,” whenever a Colombian in the U.S. was found to be smuggling or distributing drugs, their nationality was one of the main emphases in their stories and reports.

One portion of arrest reports referred to Colombians caught by the Coast Guard while attempting to smuggle drugs into U.S. territory. These reports often emphasized the Colombian provenance of the vessel and the different stops along the way that the vessel might have made. Drug smugglers who transported drugs by air or sea to the United States rarely had the intention to settle there. Rather, they were individuals who traveled back and forth between Colombian and American coasts to deliver the cargos. Such is the case of a Colombian crewman who was apprehended on three different occasions between 1978-1979 while making smuggling trips from Colombia to the U.S.³⁶ Because he had been caught in international waters, the U.S. authorities only deported him back to Colombia. This report also emphasized the different routes through Caribbean islands such as Cuba and Puerto Rico that drug smugglers took. Another example pertains to the repeated interceptions of Gran Colombiana Line ships during 1983, which were found to be smuggling drugs into Los Angeles and the West Coast. This brought the Colombian shipping line under deep scrutiny for possible connections to drug trafficking.³⁷ The number of Coast Guard seizures of vessels carrying marijuana or cocaine, as well as the strategies implemented to catch these, made any import coming from Colombia immediately suspicious. As will be discussed later, this phenomenon would come to negatively influence regular Colombian imports to the United States.

³⁶ Bill Curry, “The Colombian carousel: Persistent marijuana smugglers caught again and again and again on high seas mother ships nurse colombian pot,” *The Washington Post (1974-Current file)*, Aug. 14, 1979:2.

³⁷ Bill Farr, “Drug seizure was 3rd on colombian ship,” *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Feb. 01, 1983:2-cl.

Arrests to Colombians participating in the drug trade in urban centers were more likely to involve Colombians residing in the United States, especially those undocumented. Drug enforcement authorities often found drugs inside the homes of immigrants, or police raids revealed individuals in possession of drugs, with or without intent to distribute. Additionally, these arrests often linked Colombians to some other form of urban violence and crime, such as murders. In January of 1979, six undocumented Colombian immigrants were arrested as the DEA uncovered a drug and money cache in three Queens apartments while investigating a double homicide.³⁸ In July, the DEA uncovered a cocaine ring run in Queens by Colombian nationals. John Fallon, regional director of the DEA, suggested that the usage of weapons by the drug ring foreshadowed a rise in drug-related street crime, like Miami.³⁹ While most cases involved the deportation of the Colombian immigrants involved, as the War on Drugs progressed, punishment got harsher. In December of 1981, an alleged Colombian Baltimore County drug ringleader who conducted human courier operations was sentenced to 20 years in prison.⁴⁰ In 1983, Colombians in Bogota protested the death sentencing of Luis Carlos Arango, convicted of murder in 1980 after being found in a hotel room with drugs, weapons, and the dead body of another Colombian. Colombian public figures criticized this as an “exemplary punishment of a Latin by U.S. authorities.”⁴¹ The arrests of Colombians in the drug trade altered the image of Colombian nationals in several ways: they affirmed the eternal foreignness of

³⁸ “Six illegal aliens are picked up as cocaine is seized in queens,” *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Jan. 18, 1979:1.

³⁹ Judith Cummings, “Cocaine worth millions and arms cache seized,” *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Jul. 31, 1979:1.

⁴⁰ Bennett A, “Colombian tied to drug traffic given 20 years,” *The Sun (1837-1995)*, Dec 18, 1981:1.

⁴¹ Jackson Diehl, “Colombians protest U.S. sentence: Threatened execution creates controversy,” *The Washington Post (1974-Current file)*, May 03, 1983:1

Colombians through means of deportations and linked them to cases of violence and urban crime. Therefore, crime portrayals served as a means for the “othering” of Colombians in the United States.

The “othering” of Colombian traffickers through crime portrayals often expanded to the general Hispanic and Colombian communities in urban areas. The reports often pointed out the Hispanic communities in urban centers as hideouts that allow drug traffickers to “blend in” with the general population. In a report about the Colombian Connection in New York, Captain of Police James Englishby said Colombian traffickers are “taking advantage of the bond of race and language” in order to blend into larger Hispanic communities in the city.⁴² That same year, the *Wall Street Journal* also identified the difficulties behind identifying smugglers, considering that they often utilized false documentation and operated safely within Queens Hispanic communities.⁴³ These portrayals contributed to the understanding of Hispanic and Colombian communities as safe havens for crime, where drug traffickers could operate separately from U.S. authorities.

The repeated association by U.S. authorities of Colombian nationals with drug-related crime convened into a phenomenon of ethnic profiling. In material form, this of course manifested in the Colombian imports intersected by the Coast Guard, given that provenance from Colombian in itself was considered a risk factor. For Colombian individuals, this phenomenon of ethnic profiling often manifested at airports, where authorities attempted to catch human couriers carrying drugs in their bodies or luggage. Even though Colombians were far from the only

⁴² “Colombian connection' supplies pipeline for drugs,” *The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984)*, Feb. 15, 1982:1.

⁴³ Stanley Penn, “Cocaine cowboys': Colombia's syndicates prove to be a tough foe for U.S. drug agents more savage than the mafia, they frighten informers, use a variety of disguises death on a queens parkway 'cocaine cowboys': Drug syndicates from colombia prove to be tough foes for U.S. narcotics agents,” *Wall Street Journal (1923 - Current file)*, Apr. 05, 1983:1.

nationality that served as drug couriers, their representation and treatment by authorities were often much more negative than that of the Americans involved. When Jaime and Betulia, a couple of low-income Colombians were caught at the Miami airport in 1983 carrying drugs in their insides, they were referred to as “peasants” and “ignorant Indians.” Customs inspectors described that “poor, nervous, overdressed Colombians” who couldn’t identify “H₂O” as water were found particularly suspicious.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, a Miami lawyer quoted in the same *Chicago Tribune* article described Benjamin, a white American who worked as a human courier, as a “bright, frazzled, college graduate.” While Jaime and Betulia were sentenced to four years and five months of prison, respectively, and separated from their kids in Colombia, Benjamin was let go with a “self-imposed sentence of remorse.”

In the case of the New York airport, this phenomenon of ethnic profiling was described by customs officers as an “unexplainable suspicion” developed over years of customs experience. Customs officer Festa, however, mentioned racial composition, social status, and personal prejudices as factors taken into account when identifying potential smugglers. He stated, “anyone in a business suit [...] who says he’s coming back from a week’s vacation in Colombia makes us suspicious.”⁴⁵ Later in the decade, the effects of this phenomenon are more palpable. A 1986 *New York Times* article describes the difficulties that Colombians face in U.S. airports, such as suspicion upon showing their passport. The interviewed Colombians affirmed that U.S. Customs were “extremely sensitive to people coming from Colombia” and that it felt as

⁴⁴ J Zaslow, “Tempo: Invasion of the body packers: Twist in cruel cocaine trail tempo unwary colombians stomach extreme danger for cocaine smuggling payoff,” *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996)*, Apr. 26, 1983:2-d1.

⁴⁵ George Goodman, “A quiet suspicion: Looking for drugs in airport crowds: New inspectors for summer half of heroin entering U.S. prejudices and impressions range of chemical tests,” *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Jul. 01, 1980:1.

if they were carrying “the plague.”⁴⁶ In 1988, the State Department declared that U.S. customs would more closely scrutinize Colombian imports, thus delaying and potentially spoiling flower and seafood imports.⁴⁷ Therefore, points of entry such as airport and coastal customs were principal sites for the formation of perceptions of Colombians and their scrutiny, given their pre-established association with drug crime.

The “Corrupting Effect”

Yet another component of the “othering” of Colombians included the perceived corrupting effect that drug trafficking had on American public figures and international political figures. A case that received wide attention from the media was that of Lee and Jimmy Chagra in Texas. Lee Chagra was a famous, flamboyant gambler and lawyer in El Paso who gained acquittals for various drug traffickers. After he was killed in 1978, investigations began of his brother Jimmy Chagra, believed to be a major drug trafficker involved in the Colombian Connection and a major supplier to the Texas area. He was implicated in the assassination of Federal Judge John Wood Jr., who was supposed to conduct the trial. Jimmy Chagra was convicted in August of 1979.⁴⁸ Another case included that of Sharon Elizabeth Wright in 1982, a

⁴⁶ Alan Riding, “Colombians fight a 'plague' that won't let go,” *New York Times* (1923-Current file), Aug. 16, 1986:2.

⁴⁷ “AROUND THE NATION: GUN LINKS SUSPECT TO FAMILY DEATHS AT ARKANSAS HOME FBI PRESSURE ALLEGED COLOMBIAN TRADE SLOWED DEPORTING AIDS CARRIERS ADDENDA,” *The Washington Post* (1974-Current file), Jan. 06, 1988:1.

⁴⁸ “Judge in drug probe shot and killed in Texas: Drug case judge slain in Texas,” *Chicago Tribune* (1963-1996), May 30, 1979:1; “Chagra Guilty in Rackets,” *The Atlanta Constitution* (1946-1984), Aug. 16, 1979; Joseph A. Reaves, “Texas-Size Murder Trial in, 'Maximum' Judge Case”; “Illicit Drugs Pour in Via 'Crazy Colombians,’” *The Washington Post* (1974-Current File), Aug 13, 1979; “Lawyer Slain: Flamboyant Figure's Death Shocks Border Underworld by Lou Cannon Washington Post Staff Writer Murder of Flamboyant Lawyer Shocks Border Underworld,” *The Washington Post* (1974-Current File), Jan. 22, 1979.

Chicago beauty queen, where airport customs inspectors found cocaine in her luggage upon returning from a trip to Colombia. The model claimed to have been framed.⁴⁹ The “corrupting effect” of drug trafficking, which came to affect American citizens, was one of the main factors considered in the negative effects of Colombian trafficking in American society.

The “corrupting effect” not only pertained to American citizens, but also to a variety of international officials who were strategic to U.S. interests. In 1982, Colombian drug and weapons trafficker Jaime Guillot Lara implicated various Cuban officials, members of Fidel Castro’s party, in his testimony to U.S. authorities. The testimonies stated that Cuban officials allowed Guillot Lara to use Cuban territory as a landing and refueling spot in exchange for transporting arms to the M19 guerilla group in Colombia.⁵⁰ This led to the indictment of 4 Cuban officials in 1982 by the U.S. government.⁵¹ In 1981, “Operation Limey” ended after a single undercover officer identified a connection between the Bahamas islands and Colombian drug smuggling as a transshipment spot.⁵² Because this operation was conducted without the knowledge of Bahamian authorities, it caused backlash. Later in 1983, relations between the U.S. and the Bahamas tensed after NBC wrote a report on the involvement of Bahamian officials in Colombian drug trafficking.⁵³ The report accused Prime Minister Lynden Pindling’s government

⁴⁹ John O'Brien, “Chicago Beauty Says She is Frame Victim,” *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996)*, Aug. 20, 1982.

⁵⁰ United States Director of Central Intelligence, “Implications for the United States of the Colombian Drug Trade: Volume II--Annex E: Links between the Narcotics Trade, Guerrilla Groups and the Military”, 1983.

⁵¹ Mary Thornton, “Havana Said Haven for Colombia Goods: Four High-Level Cubans Named in Drug Smuggling Indictment,” *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*, Nov. 06, 1982.

⁵² Robert Coram, “Drug Traffic Laid Bare by 'Limey' and Agent 'Houdini': Florida Deputies Identify 60 U.S.-Registered Boats and 20 Planes in Bahamian Drug Investigation,” *The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984)*, Oct. 02, 1981.

⁵³ Reginald Stuart, “U.S.-Bahamian Relations are Straining under Drug Investigations,” *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Sep. 28, 1983.

of accepting bribes from traffickers and allowing Colombian drug trafficker Carlos Lehder Rivas to use Norman's Cay for his operations. The accusations presented a significant threat to the Bahamas' newly-achieved independent government.⁵⁴ One of the most significant cases is that of Panamanian dictator Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, accused of taking payments from drug smugglers, specifically the Medellin Cartel, to make use of Panama as a smuggling route to the U.S. and a money-laundering spot. He was indicted by the U.S. government in February of 1988 and removed from power in 1989. Drug trafficking, therefore, also interfered with U.S. foreign policy and became a menace to U.S. power over strategic countries. In other words, Colombian drug trafficking became a “menace” to the U.S. that went beyond the wellbeing of its society and into the global positioning of the United States.

Conclusion

The formation of the American “suspicion” against Colombians as related to drug trafficking operated within a complex model that involved larger U.S.-Colombia relations and resulted in the othering of Colombians in the United States. After the identification of the “Colombian Connection,” one of the agendas of the American government and society was to get Colombia to take more responsibility in the anti-narcotics effort. The media participated in this agenda by repeatedly pointing out connections to Colombian nationals and Colombian territory in drug seizures and drug-related crimes and violence. This perception of Colombians came to turn into an ethnic profiling phenomenon where provenance from Colombia in itself became a suspicion for drug trafficking, as affirmed by customs officers at U.S. entry points.

⁵⁴ Edward Cody, “Official Misconduct Alleged in Drug Probe in Bahamas: Officials Implicated in Inquiry into Drug Traffic in Bahamas,” *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*, Feb. 02, 1984.

Ethnic profiling, along with the portrayal of Hispanic communities as safe havens for smugglers contributed to the “othering” of Colombians in the U.S., as subjects somehow defiant of the law. Furthermore, the “corrupting effect” of Colombian drug trafficking on American society and international relations turned Colombian drug involvement, and by extension Colombian nationals, into a menace to the American project. This study, ultimately, elucidates how the stigmatization of Colombians in the United States is closely linked to the American political agenda during the War on Drugs. Identifying these origins is one of the first steps in dismantling the prejudices that the Colombian community faces, still, nowadays.

Appendix

APRENDA INGLES EN LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS.

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTITUTE fué establecido en 1947 y está ubicado en los campos de la UNIVERSIDAD DE SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI en Hattiesburg, Mississippi, una ciudad a 160 kilometros de la ciudad de Nueva Orleans.

El programa ha experimentado y sostiene los mejores métodos de enseñar el Inglés como un segundo idioma. No se necesitan calificaciones especiales.

Los niveles de enseñanza son: Principiantes, Medio y Avanzado. Disponible alojamiento y alimentación en los dormitorios universitarios en donde el estudiante tiene un ambiente verdaderamente universitario.

Sección de clases pequeñas y con atención individual. Para obtener información completa escriba a:

Director, English Language Institute
Southern Station, Box 5065
University of Southern Mississippi
Hattiesburg, Miss. 39401 USA

NOMBRE _____

DIRECCION _____

CIUDAD _____ PAIS _____



Fig. 1 and 2. Advertisement to learn English in the United States at the University of Southern Mississippi; Advertisement to learn English “extra-fast” from a language center in Bogotá, Colombia. Both were published on July 1st, 1979.

About the author

Hailing from Bogota, Colombia, Laurisa Sastoque is an undergraduate student studying History at Northwestern University in Evanston, IL. Her current research interests include crime and the War on Drugs, 20th-century Latin American History and race in Latin America, among others. Her aim is to get her research out into the world and to begin to contribute to the under-researched field of U.S.-Colombia studies. After undergraduate study, she hopes to obtain a PhD in History and continue exploring her research interests.

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