



A selection of "proof of life" Photographs: Robinson Salcedo, Carlos Duarte Rojas, Jorge Trujillo Solarte, Luis Moreno Chagueza, José Forero Carrero, and Luis Arturo Arcia. These are six of the last ten servicemen released by the farc in april 2012. [Source](#)

A Sensorial Archive of the Colombian Conflict

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A significant amount of scholarship as well as everyday knowledge on Colombia has focused on the complex set of events that are commonly associated with and bundled under the label “the Colombian conflict”—an intricate series of social, political, economic, and historic factors which have been the concern of politicians, activists, scholars, artists, and common citizens for the last seventy years. These involve armed actors (guerrillas, paramilitaries, common criminals, armed forces), illegal activities mostly connected to the drug industry, struggles over material and symbolic resources, and a whole range of national and international policies developed to address the nature of this ongoing conflict or, more appropriately, series of conflicts. This discussion does not seek to question the existence of this trope though its bounded characterizations could also be a good subject for critical inquiry; rather, in this piece I assume its existence and its overwhelming influence in creating and reproducing a national identity. Here I focus on a particular aspect of this conflict and the narratives about nation that are produced in a very specific practice associated with it: long-term kidnapping and one of its many products, the radio program [Las voces del secuestro](#) (Voices of kidnapping), which broadcasts messages from the family members of the kidnapped

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during its 12-midnight to 6a.m. Sunday slot on Radio Caracol, a commercial radio station. I speak to the categories that kidnapping has created and the ways in which these are organized to generate a certain taxonomy of the conflict. More precisely, I discuss the sensorial categories that are evoked in the narratives about kidnapping and the manner in which these occupy, create, and reinforce a national imaginary.

Only a few days after his astonishing escape from captivity in October 2008, the more than 60 year-old former Conservative Party Congressman from the Department of Caldas, Oscar Tulio Lizcano, recounted his eight-year ordeal as a hostage of the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia/Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) in a two-hour long radio interview in *Las voces del secuestro*. Lizcano told of his dramatic experiences following his kidnapping in August 2000, during which he was constantly moved around from one precarious site to another through rough terrain in Colombia's western jungles. He was essentially kept in isolation during most of his time in captivity, as the guerrilla guards were forbidden from establishing conversations or developing personal contact with him. Other hostages, including several politicians—among them former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt—were kept by the rebel group in the eastern and southern parts of the country and thus kept apart from Lizcano. Lizcano recounted how, in order to break his solitude, he frequently recreated a university classroom by assigning names of his former students to sticks and delivered lectures to this imaginary audience. He also read and reread the few books that were made available to him, he evoked from memory favorite poems and wrote some as well. But most importantly, he said, he was kept alive by the voice of his beloved wife, Martha, who, sometimes daily and guaranteed weekly, sent him radio messages through *Las voces*. Like other former hostages and survivors of kidnapping in Colombia, Lizcano highlighted the importance of the radio broadcasts for his survival and minimal wellbeing.



Proof of life of Óscar Tulio Lizcano. [Source](#)

The images of Lizcano on his release showed a debilitated, worn-down, and aged man. His speech paused and slow, impaired after bouts of poorly treated malaria and continuous exposure to other tropical diseases. Despite his weakened state, Lizcano insisted on participating in the 6-hour-long radio show *Las voces del secuestro*. After two hours of interview, the creator, director, and host of this program, Herbin Hoyos—himself a survivor of kidnapping—ceded his seat to Lizcano who, for two more hours, greeted and encouraged each

caller as they prepared to send a message to a family member still in captivity. The callers, in turn, welcomed Lizcano and congratulated him, his wife, and sons as if speaking to an old friend. Startlingly, Lizcano knew personal details of nearly all the callers and especially of those to whom the messages were directed—people who Lizcano had never met or been sequestered with, but, after eight years of listening to radio broadcasts, had come to know intimately through the voices and stories of their loved ones. He applauded General Luis Mendieta's daughter for finishing her degree in veterinary medicine, he thanked Kike Marquez's father for his succinct weekly report of major political events, he praised Captain Guevara's mother for her persistent demand to recover her son's body, and incessantly told mothers, fathers, partners, and children how their personal stories and their love had given him, a complete stranger, a will to live. Lizcano's words of encouragement and the degree of familiarity were touching. He also forcefully defended the demand made by most family members of the kidnapped that the government negotiate with the guerrillas for the release of hostages rather than rescue them militarily, a practice of war that puts hostages' lives at even more risk. Furthermore, Lizcano insisted on the need to acknowledge the humanity of the individuals within the ranks of the guerrillas and the importance of recognizing the complex circumstances that often lead these disenfranchised, excluded, mostly young people to join the guerrilla. Past the anecdotal or factual elements of this particular broadcast, the radio show demonstrates the importance of this medium in producing a particular narrative of this incredible, surreal-like, yet recognizable and relatively quotidian aspect of Colombian life.

While kidnapping as a weapon of war and negotiation or as an aspect of social conflict is not unique to Colombia's conflict, it has acquired particular dimensions because of its widespread use, the unbelievably lengthy periods of detention, the difficult conditions of confinement, and the spectacle that the abduction, custody, and release produce. Since at least the 1970s, armed groups of different political affiliations and criminal organizations have used kidnapping to intimidate, to influence policy decisions, to negotiate, to gain time, to secure resources through ransom, as well as to establish parallel systems of justice. In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, kidnapping became institutionalized and widely used mostly by the guerrilla groups ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional/National Liberation Army) and the FARC, supposedly as a way to tax the rich as well as a way to negotiate with the state, for example to demand the exchange and release of prisoners. Throughout this period, kidnappings became more common and they were directed at public figures such as members of Congress, servicemen taken as prisoners during combat, and heads of businesses and corporations—all obvious targets of the practice, yet it was also applied to middle class entrepreneurs, local politicians, bus travelers, and even entire Church congregations.

There are no clear statistics on the number of people who have been or are kidnapped, some NGOs and groups of victims estimate that over 20,000 people have been victims over the last two decades (Fundación País Libre, *Estadísticas del Secuestro a 2006*), with several hundreds still remaining in captivity.¹ Given this uncertainty and dispute over numbers, one of the central activities of *Las voces del secuestro* has been to

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register cases of kidnapping, abductions, disappearances, and sometimes deaths. The radio show, therefore, has become an archive of the conflict: it offers a space to register, to remember, to make demands, and ultimately to reconfirm the perverse identity produced through kidnapping. This task is carried out “on air” when new cases are presented by family members and the host of the program welcomes them to this circle of support, an auditory “family” united by violence and absences. It is a space full of drama where it is easy to distinguish newcomers, who demonstrate their desperation in their choked or weeping voices, from the veterans’ well-scripted and precise messages, which usually include greetings, prayers, and words of encouragement not only for their own family members but also for other long-term victims of kidnapping.



A selection of "proof of life" photographs: Robinson Salcedo, Carlos Duarte Rojas, Jorge Trujillo Solarte, Luis Moreno Chagueza, José Forero Carrero, and Luis Arturo Arcia. [Source](#)

Radios are one of the few “luxuries” made available during periods of long-term kidnapping and given its importance in keeping victims hopeful and connected to their loved ones; they are utilized by their captors as an instrument of control and discipline. As with everything else during forced confinement, radio equipment is authorized and afforded by the guerrilla commander in charge of the camp. Availability of batteries and hours of operation are highly regulated. Many of the kidnapped are able to secure a personal radio but the listening often occurs collectively especially during programs such as soccer games, talk shows, or *Las voces del secuestro*, when the kidnapped-audience of the radio messages often take turns waiting to hear their family’s message but also alerting others when they receive a personal transmission during the broadcast. Solidarity among families of the kidnapped is quite strong and significant bonds are created through the radio messages. The most constant participants in the radio program are recognized, appreciated, and embraced by the entirety of the listening audience both in and outside of confinement. Many of kidnapped upon their release or rescue have expressed their gratitude to the program and have emphasized the importance of the messages as a demonstration that they were not forgotten and that their lives mattered to someone. For the families and friends of the victims it is equally important to know that messages were heard and gives them hope that their kidnapped family member remains alive despite not having proof of life or signs of their existence for years. For many, abandoning *Las voces* would be equivalent to abandoning their loved ones. Of course, not all the kidnapped receive messages nor do all families participate on a weekly basis

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or at all, given the lengthy periods of kidnapping, the limited access to the program, particularly for families living in more rural or remote areas, and the uncertainty regarding the conditions of the kidnapped, and the negotiations for their potential release.

Beyond the obvious cruelty and terror involved in the practice of kidnapping and the solidarity that binds victims and their families, there are differences among the kidnapped that reflect broader social hierarchies. The kidnapped are initially classified as “exchangeable”—meaning they are potential objects of political negotiations, as in the situation of servicemen and public figures—or “extortionable”—as in the thousands of cases of people kidnapped for ransom and whose fate is negotiated privately or simply ignored. Implied in this differentiation is a form of public worth attached to certain victims, which is also reflected in the rank of servicemen or in the class, age, gender, or regional or ethnic origin of the kidnapped. These differences and the practices that pertain to them during, before, and after captivity are generally overlooked, uncritically re-affirmed, or subsumed under the official narrative that stresses the act of kidnapping as a practice committed by political and social outcasts against “true” Colombians. Though several accounts by former hostages or families of the kidnapped have expressed the tensions around these categorizations, the dominant narrative tends to dismiss these distinctions in order to reaffirm a narrative of the victims as united and homogenous. This narrative also serves to demonize the guerrilla captors, celebrate the role of the armed forces, and normalize the conflict.



Operacion Jaque. [Source](#)

Part of President Alvaro Uribe’s (2002-2010) support for his cornerstone *Política de seguridad democrática* (Democratic Security Policy) came from the forceful condemnation of kidnapping and the rejection of the possibility of negotiation with the guerrillas, who the former president referred to as “delinquents,” “outlaws,” and “bandits”—thus stripping them of any possible political identity. At least in relationship to kidnapping, these labels are not difficult to attach since it is problematic, if not outright impossible, to justify the practice given its failure, politically speaking for the guerrilla groups, but also because of the overall brutality that kidnapping entails. During Uribe’s administration, the military conducted several rescue attempts, of which the 2008 Operación Jaque—in which Betancourt, three US military contractors, and 11 servicemen were rescued—remains a highlight of his presidency and of his approach. Uribe’s Secretary of Defense, Juan Manuel Santos, is now the country’s President; though there is evident distancing between the two politicians, it is

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clear that the fight against the guerrillas has yielded great political successes. A carefully crafted and controlled approach to handling policy discussions about kidnapping by delegitimizing opposition politicians' proposals to accept negotiations with the guerrillas or sending representatives of the different branches of the armed forces to speak at events—including *Las voces del secuestro*—has reduced the debate to a matter-of-fact military, more technical issue of strategy where politics and emotions are made to appear as biased and barriers for the resolution of the conflict.

The messages that are broadcast through *Las voces del secuestro* both conserve and contest this narrative. The existence of the radio program itself serves to normalize a highly abnormal practice and to regularize the conflict. Victims and their families do not have many other spaces in which to relate, socialize and discuss their experiences, thus the narratives that are heard over the radio move from the intimate and mundane to the extraordinary and heroic to that of demand and outrage. The radio offers a distinct public forum, different from the rational Habermasian public sphere or the highly controlled military discourse of the state, but rather a space which is traversed and saturated with affect. Precisely because of the deeply emotional demands it makes, *Las voces* is able to offer a language to in which to question the equally non-rational practices that envelop the conflict. On these commercial airwaves there is a constant blurring of the private and public spheres as parents, partners, children, and friends of the kidnapped send messages and tell stories in the hopes of keeping their loved ones within the fold of their regular daily lives. Callers to the radio show are coached neither to be over emotional nor to engage in highly political discussions, as this is assumed to upset the kidnapping victims who listen for the message. Nonetheless, some participants use part of their time on air to comment and critique official policies or to demand more attention to the plight of victims and their families and, even if marginally audible, create alternative narratives of citizenship, belonging, and nationhood.

Over the years, *Las voces del secuestro* has produced a collection of stories of daily life in Colombia; these narrative offer a register of daily politics, regional customs, celebrations, food, music, and the sights and sites that the families of the kidnapped might share privately with their loved one, but which, because of the nature of the situation, are made public. Clearly the experiences of the victims and their families are not homogenous: social, economic, and political hierarchies that exist in Colombia at large are reproduced in the events recounted, the tastes expressed, the professional successes celebrated, and the political news reported reflect the background of the victim and their families. Their habitus, as Bourdieu would suggest, transcends the circumstances of their kidnapping. Ingrid Betancourt's children sent messages from Paris and New York, where they were living during her captivity. They told her (and the general listening public) about activities in places most Colombians have never visited. Meanwhile, most of the families of policemen shared stories about favorite meals, local celebrations, and announced the scores of soccer games, sometimes in highly pronounced regional accents, yet these stories are recognizable and familiar to most. Thus, the public sphere created through these narratives is paradoxically equalizing since they share the same

fate and the same space while also reflecting and normalizing hierarchical differences of Colombian society.

The conflict is simultaneously placed at the center of political life and, as discussed above, stripped of its more controversial aspects, distancing the experience of kidnapping from the texture of everyday life and displacing the conflict to specific bounded sites. This specific placement is also produced by the linguistic and performatic elements contained in the media coverage of the conflict that evoke a whole range of sensorial categories. *Las voces del secuestro*, for example, starts by saluting those kidnapped “in the jungles of Colombia” and other radio programs that are known to be heard by the kidnapped regularly send greetings to “those held in the *cambuche* (a makeshift camp),” thus offering a specific topography for the conflict. Family members reinforce these notions by regularly offering empathic messages about the difficulties they imagine loved ones passing in unprotected, rainy, humid, and cold conditions. This topography is sharpened by the accounts of released abductees who speak of their bouts with tropical diseases such as malaria and leishmaniasis.

By no means are these constructions untrue—especially considering that most of kidnapping victims, unlike many of the members of the guerrilla, come from urban settings. Key visual and auditory records of the experience of kidnapping such as proof of life videos and pictures accentuate the sense of remoteness dominated by green war fatigue clothes and “wild” conditions. These notions are visually reinforced by the pictures of released or rescued hostages descending onto airport tarmacs wearing water boots, carrying their few belongings in small backpacks and sometimes bringing with them small jungle animals they have tamed as pets. In interviews and testimonies, many of the kidnapped refer to the spaces in which they were held as having an overwhelming “smell of green” and recount the loud noises of the jungle. The experiences of people held in more urban environments are not usually depicted. In these manifestations the place, sound, smell and sight of conflict is created within the boundaries of the nation and simultaneously suggested to occur “someplace else”, a sort of parallel and suspended Colombia.

Clearly the drama of kidnapping is one of suspension, a recollection of experiences of that which is not, an archive of absences. The condition itself of being kidnapped is ambiguous: the victim is not statistically counted among the dead or disappeared and traces of life can remain and continue over long periods of time. For example, several servicemen were held for fourteen years, a period long enough for important changes to have occurred within their family structures, including births and deaths, or in their professional lives such as considerations for rank promotions. Confronted with uncertainty, pleas and negotiations for the release of the kidnapped entail a constant and hopeful re-integration of the victim into everyday life. Making the person absent from the day-to-day, in many respects, victimizes them even further by excluding them from their “normal” family, work, and social environments and ultimately from the folds of the nation. And yet, they are absent, existing under abnormal conditions, which require a constant appeal to our senses in order to provide sense. The radio broadcasts serve

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to maintain the kidnapped person connected to his or her family circle and, at the same time, these narratives produce a “new” state of being within the most intimate circles as well as in the national imaginary that requires an adjustment and an acceptance of the normalcy of the abnormal. The practices enacted in and through the experience of long-term kidnapping and the narratives produced through radio messages gives us an unusual archive to the Colombian conflict that can be accessed to understand many of its intimacies.

Recording 1: ([click here to audio](#)) This recording from August 9 2009 begins with a brief, pre-recorded introduction by the program’s director Herbin Hoyos as well as a message from Ingrid Betancourt, recorded when she was freed, in which she thanks Hoyos and *Las voces del secuestro*. It is followed by the Juanes song “Sueños” (Dreams)—this always opens the program and is played during the first hour of the show. (Each hour has a different musical theme; except for the Juanes song, these have changed over time). On this occasion, the program is hosted by María Isabel Campos, who introduces her fellow presenters for the evening. (Although he is the director of *Las voces*, Hoyos does not always host, either because he is travelling or has received threats.) There is an announcement of sports scores and a general message of support for the kidnapped asking them to keep their strength. This is followed by the announcements the liberation of the España sisters, who were kidnapped for four years. The children of Hernán Bustos (Liliana and Hernán Jr.) are introduced (at 00:09:00); Bustos was kidnapped and thought to be alive but it is announced that he has been killed by the guerillas and his children have come to ask for the return of his remains. (At 00:12:30) Bustos’s daughter thanks *Las voces del secuestro* and sends messages to other victims of kidnapping and their families; her brother does the same (up to 00:15:20). Hoyos’s brother—Huber Hoyos, who also works on the program—explains that the *guerilleros* supply radios and asks that they wake up the kidnapped so that they can listen to the program. The first message of this show is from Amalia and Ismael Márquez for their son Enrique (Kike), kidnapped on February 11, 1999 in Bogota. Amalia and Ismael take part in the program every week and are among the most well-known and liked participants. Amalia sends religious messages of hope and support; she shares news of the family with her son and sends greetings to all the kidnapping victims and their families (at 00:19:54). Ismael Márquez always gives an update on current events; in this particular episode, he shares six pieces of news. The following message greeting is for Juan Camilo Mora, kidnapped on January 19 2006. The message is sent by his parents Myriam and Rafael Mora, also faithful weekly participants in the program and figureheads among families of the kidnapped (at 00:31:23). The host then speaks of the liberation of the España sisters until minute 39.

Recording 2: ([click here for audio](#)) This particular installment was recorded on Father’s Day (June 29 2009); it features Herbin Hoyos as the host. Hoyos’s introduction includes the usual message of support to everyone “held in the jungles

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and mountains of Colombia." On this occasion he also speaks directly to the *guerilleros* and suggests they too are victims. The first case discussed on this episode illustrates how kidnapping affects entire family structures: several children participate, as well as a grandmother and other relatives, most of them women. The second case is that of family from the region of Guarviare from which four members have been kidnapped.

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Notes

¹ In late February 2012, the FARC announced it was abandoning the practice of kidnapping by revoking the application of its "Law 002" and indicated it

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