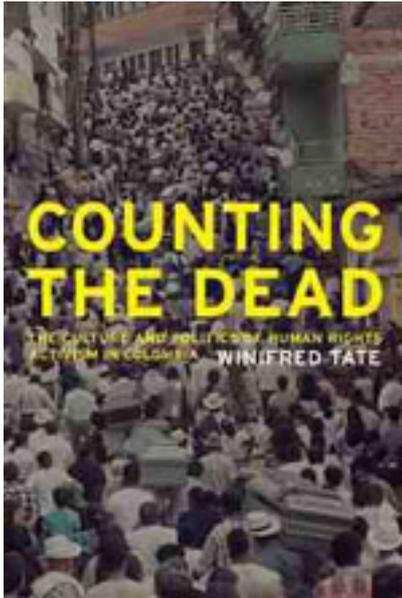


Winifred Tate's *Counting the Dead*

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Tate, Winifred. *Counting the Dead: The Culture and Politics of Human Rights Activism in Colombia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. 379 pages. \$60 cloth, \$24.95 paper.



The title of *Counting the Dead* derives from a sardonic phrase often used to depict the work of human rights activists in Colombia as the detached production of statistical accounts of the endemic violence that—to this very day—continues to pervade every sphere of the country's political and social life. However, as Winifred Tate acknowledges throughout her book, there is much more to this endeavor than simply counting and cataloging the thousands of deaths that result year after year from what she deems to be an endless crisis. For starters, there is an epistemological dimension to the production of figures and statistics. For as John and Jean Commaroff argue elsewhere, they constitute a medium of communication and a sort of commodified knowledge that give concrete meaning to otherwise incomprehensible phenomena. To unravel the institutional culture and politics behind this mediation between the unknowable and the axiomatic (to use the Commaroffs' terms) is precisely what Tate sets out to do in her book.

Thus, her work is premised upon the very productive recognition that human rights—understood as a concrete and professionalized epistemological framework—constitute a sort of political expedient, the use of which is shaped by the institutional culture and politics of the activists themselves. The book begins with an overly mainstream summary of the history of the Colombian conflict through the different categorizations of its violence (whether partisan, insurgent, counterinsurgent, or criminal), the assumptions of which Tate does not seem to question; as if the divide between these categories were not extremely murky and porous, and the alliances and interactions between the different actors were not almost impossible to

untangle. I believe this to be a fundamental flaw in Tate's mapping of the history and evolution of human rights activism in Colombia—a flaw that is, however, constantly reenacted by the activists themselves, whether they come from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the state, or the military. Hence, Tate's work seems to reproduce the unresolved tension between the activists' interventions and their underlying political motivations.

As a way to make these motivations explicit, Tate traces the origins of human rights activism in Colombia back to the radical leftist solidarity organizations that emerged in the 1980s and a decade later transitioned into professionalized NGOs. This transition led to very heated debates that remain unresolved, debates that hinge—as Tate judiciously shows—on very profound identitarian constructions rooted in the Communist and Catholic institutions that dominated early human rights activism. Furthermore, and at the same time as this transition was taking place, historical and political developments allowed for the emergence of two radically different types of activism, which in their turn were also shaped by their own institutional culture and politics. On the one hand, state human rights agencies have recast the human rights discourse in Colombia over the past decade while at the same time failing to improve the record of prosecution for human rights abuses. In this sense, Tate's revelation that the endless bureaucratic loop created by these agencies actually contributes to impunity is both insightful and valuable, and is something that policy-makers should take into account if they ever decide to enhance the state's performance as human rights activist. On the other hand, the military have also appropriated the human rights framework as part of their war strategy to harness civilian support.

What I find most interesting in Tate's work is her conclusion, where she discusses the way knowledge about political and social violence circulates in Colombia. As I have pointed out, human rights activism in the country has been shaped by the institutional culture and politics of the activists themselves. These underlying motivations move the discussion about violence from the realm of public secrets into the public transcript that shapes political life. I believe the interaction of these two categories—*public secret* and *public transcript*—to be a fruitful theoretical framework for examining human rights activism in other contexts, such as the United States's continued practice of torture in recent years. However, a note of caution is in order. For as Tate is keen to point out, and as the case of the United States eloquently shows, the inclusion of certain violent practices in the public transcript can have unintended consequences, as it contributes not to the reduction of violence itself but to the reconfiguration of these practices so that they escape being categorized as human rights violations.

Nevertheless, what human rights actually are and what they do is a question that largely remains unanswered. And therein lies their immense potential as a political expedient for activists of all sorts.

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