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#### About [Silvana Paternostro](#)

Silvana Paternostro is the author of two books, most recently *My Colombian War: A Journey Through the Country I Left Behind*. Her other work has appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, *The New Republic*, *Newsweek*, *Paris Review*, and *Bomb*, where she is a contributing editor. She was an associate producer of Steven Soderbergh's two-part epic film about Che Guevara.

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## Her Silence, Her Voice

### Silvana Paternostro



#### *Even Silence Has an End: My Six Years of Captivity in the Colombian Jungle* by Ingrid Betancourt, Penguin Press, 2010

#### I. On How She Was Silenced

When Ingrid Betancourt was taken hostage on February 23, 2002, by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or the FARC as this fifty-year-old nationalist and peasant movement is better known, she was a feisty, outspoken, and rather unknown senator running for president under the banner of Oxígeno, the Green Party, that she founded four years earlier. The party was known as Ingrid's party—in Colombia, she is Ingrid—and she was making news more for her political methods than for her track record. For her senatorial race, she handed out condoms for “protection against corruption” and Viagra to “reinvigorate” voters. She staged a hunger strike and named the names of those she thought had ties to the paramilitary and drug lords during congressional sessions. As a Colombian-born woman, I welcomed this new female face in the political arena. She spoke differently than other Colombian women in politics, dressed differently, moved differently. She walked a fine line between feminist and feminine. She seemed more modern than the others. We exchanged greetings once at a forum in New York City in 2000, and I noticed she had an ankle tattoo. I didn't know then that in addition to being Colombian, she was also French.

That Betancourt was taken hostage by the FARC was nothing out of the ordinary then. An average of six or seven people were being kidnapped every day. The movement that began as a splinter of the Liberal party during the civil conflict in the fifties known as La Violencia with the determination to vanquish the oligarchy—defined by them as the Conservatives, the military and the landowning class—with whatever means necessary, was still at it. They had added abduction and drug trafficking to their tactics, making them the world's leading kidnappers and perhaps the least popular revolutionary movement in Latin America's history. Nothing would stop them. Their argument was that the government had betrayed other revolutionary movements when they turned in their arms for ballots. Every rebel turned civilian, they argued, had been killed after the amnesties. What guarantee did they have that this wouldn't happen to them? So they continued arming, recruiting men and women of all ages, indoctrinating them, feeding them, making them feel important in a country that provides little opportunities, especially in the southern

Nadia Shira Cohen talks to the camel drivers who rode into Tahrir Square.

#### **Cairo Journal: February 4**

##### **Elliott D. Woods**

Elliott Woods reports from Cairo.

#### **Cairo Journal: February 3**

##### **Nadia Shira Cohen**

Nadia Shira Cohen reports from Cairo.

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countryside where they were king.

Betancourt's book, *Even Silence Has An End*, the recently released memoir about her six years in FARC captivity, is a harrowing and admirable tale of her survival but it's also a devastating window into the organization's ways and the socially and economically divided Colombia that allows them to persist. To be stopped at a FARC checkpoint in 2002 was as normal as stopping at a red light. That was how Betancourt felt when her van was detained as she was trying to make her way to San Vicente del Caguán, a hamlet whose mayor was the only victory for her party. "I had been stopped before," she writes, "but things had changed in the last 24 hours."

What had happened was that President Andrés Pastrana who had been trying to be the first conciliatory president in Colombia's history, had gone from dove to hawk overnight. Pastrana, the son of an ex-president who like Betancourt was a member of the capital's political elite, had won the elections with a platform for peace. For the first time, the government and the FARC had agreed to negotiate a peace process. Pastrana, showing good faith, demilitarized an area deep in the jungle for the FARC to settle. This was before 9/11, when Colombia's civil war held an important place in President Clinton's foreign policy agenda. In fact, under Pastrana, Colombia quickly went from pariah to partner. Soon after the two presidents met, the US was sending Colombia a huge military aid package, third only to Israel and Egypt. Around the world many showed interest in helping the revolutionaries out of their jungle lives and into modernity. Ambassadors and officials from the UN and the Vatican visited to mediate. Betancourt visited the camp more than once. Foreign journalists flooded the FARC's press office with interview requests. The camp was so outsized that, to put it in perspective to their readership, reporters always described it as being larger than Switzerland and they also always noted how young and pretty the guerrilla girls were.

In Colombia, it came to be known as FARC-landia, and its surrounding towns, once unknown destinations, became part of Colombians' geography. The camp was on the news nightly. Places like Florencia, the town with the closest airport where Betancourt had flown into that fated morning and San Vicente del Caguán, the hamlet to where she was heading, were now embedded in the country's collective memory.

Regardless of all the attention the negotiations were getting, the government and the guerrillas could not agree on one thing: kidnappings. The more Pastrana (and the rest of the commission) asked them to stop, the more the FARC would "retain" people (a term they used). There were three types of retentions: Generals, soldiers, and policemen were taken as prisoners of war. Landowners, big and small, were taken for money. They had recently added politicians to the list and had announced that they were exchangeable for their jailed comrades: one politico equaled five or six of their own. By the time Betancourt took the road to San Vicente, the FARC already had a handful of politicians as hostages, including two other women.

Pastrana's popularity rate was the lowest of any president in the country's history and Colombians were demanding that their President react. His patience ended on February 20, when FARC members diverted a commercial flight into the jungle abducting a senator who also served as a member of the peace commission.

Pastrana, his pipe dream over, announced on national television that he was sending in the troops. The peace camp as big as Switzerland had turned into a kidnapping farm. Two days later, Betancourt was kidnapped. The FARC had not singled her out and they had not gone looking for her. She fell into their lap.

Betancourt says one of the reasons she went to San Vicente del Caguán was because the town's mayor had called her when the peace process was suspended. Everyone in the area was scared of the consequences. People felt unprotected and he felt that she, as Oxígeno, but more as Ingrid, was the only person who could help. Please come. We need you here, he said. "The mayor was counting on the media exposure I would get as a presidential candidate to highlight the risk being run by his people," Betancourt writes. That appeal is what made her go, even if she was scared. "My presence would help shield them from violence." Few Colombians buy this version. They accuse her of going just to call attention to herself, as a media stunt, to gain votes. Colombians have always felt suspicious of Betancourt's motives and they believed she deserved whatever she got.

Betancourt's story is that with her ailing and adoring father's blessing, her government-allotted bodyguards and a few close advisers, she flew to Florencia's military base where "security forces confirmed" two armored cars and a motorcycle motorcade would take her to San Vicente del Caguán. Once at the base, the plans changed. A colonel offered to give her a ride in one of the many waiting helicopters, but rescinded his offer a second later: "It's an order from the top, and there is nothing I can do about it." She appealed to a higher-ranking officer but the "aggressive" officer told her, "There is nothing I can do for you. Please leave the runway!" She initially thought, he had not recognized her but no realized he had. She decided that the reason for his unpleasantness was "probably because of the debates in Congress where I had exposed incidents of corruption among high-ranking officials." She raised her voice. She tried to flex her muscle. She was an expert at this.

To add insult to injury, the general suggested that perhaps she should ask the President directly. He was about to land there, on his way to recapture FARClandia. But when she approached Pastrana brushed past her, "not even stopping to shake my hand." Betancourt and her family have always blamed Pastrana personally for her abduction. For years, Betancourt and Pastrana had been on the same side but were by this time estranged. She says she supported his campaign but stopped when he did not keep his word to act against "political corruption in particular by amending the electoral system." Betancourt, as was her style, had made that known. She also accused him of luring senators from her party, and she exposed his secretary's suspicious involvement in a contract to supply uniforms to the military.

Betancourt takes her time building a case for how Pastrana and others threw her to the wolves. In Betancourt's world, you are either with Ingrid or you are against her. Pastrana not only snubbed her, but the captain assigned to protect her told her that he had "received a per-emptory command from Bogotá" and that his assignment to go to San Vicente with her had been "cancelled." The officer even admitted that the order came "from the president's office."

Helicopter or not, bodyguards or not, with a bruised ego and nervous about the potential danger, she decided to go on to San Vicente by road as was planned.

Betancourt, stubborn and defiant, was not going to let the military or the president or the FARC stop her from doing what she thought was the right thing to do. The trip to San Vicente, she writes, “was a matter of principle.” Everyone who lived in Colombia at the time of her abduction knew very well that to take country roads was risky, even foolish. But getting to know the Ingrid of her book helped me understand her decision. She is driven by a strange mix of moral righteousness and imperiousness. Colombians call her spoiled. I don’t agree.

I was in Colombia visiting family when Pastrana addressed the nation that night, giving the FARC an ultimatum. Glued to the television in my grandmother’s comfortable household on the Caribbean coast, I followed the events, petrified that war had broken out and that I might be trapped in Colombia—a country I had left behind more than thirty years before. I was the only one concerned. Everyone else went on with quotidian tasks—in Barranquilla where I was, it meant celebrating Carnivals—while praising Pastrana. Finally he had shown “to those barbarians” who was wearing the pants. The news about Ingrid Betancourt came and went, another kidnapping, another senator, end of story.

Why did Betancourt need to embark on this trip? There is no good answer to the question. The point is that she decided to go and was kidnapped. She spares us no detail of her ordeal. She gives a full account of what it was like to live as both a respected and hated hostage in the Amazonian jungle for six years—four of which she was chained. Betancourt is also setting the record straight and settling scores, as she does with President Pastrana, with Clara Rojas, the campaign manager who was abducted with her and with whom she becomes estranged, and with Keith Stansell, an American sub-contractor who was part of the group that shared the tight living quarters with her and who announced to the world that she was “the most disgusting human being” he had ever met. The book is a testament to this woman’s spirit and a lesson about strength and the complications of the human condition.

## II. Her Voice

Betancourt borrows the book’s title from a poem by Chile’s Pablo Neruda, but she chose to write about her harrowing and transformative experience in French. The English translation flattens Betancourt’s florid and fluent voice. For example, when her captors call her *vieja hijueputa*, it is literally translated as “old son of a bitch,” but the correct meaning would be more like bitchy hag. Despite this, the voice in the book is hers—intransigent, insightful, self-righteous, and playful, as well as vindictive and self-centered.

That she chose her title from a Spanish poem, but wrote the book in French sums up her persona and the way she lived: “As a teenager, I’d thought of myself as a tree with branches in Colombia and my roots in France. Before long I knew it would be my fate to try to keep my balance between my two worlds.” This duality is essential to understanding Betancourt’s experience. Her attitude, her behavior, the way she sees Colombia, the FARC, her relationship with the male commanders and the young women in the organization, the differences between herself and the other female hostages, between herself and the captive men in her group has to do with the fact

that she is equally familiar with Pablo Neruda and Marcel Proust. At one point, she refers to the smell of fried Colombian cornmeal as her madeleine. Betancourt's strength comes from her bicultural circumstances. The essence of who she is comes from her fragmented self.

Three months after she was kidnapped, President Alvaro Uribe replaced Pastrana. He was voted in because he promised he would never, ever negotiate with the barbarians. That stance got the country behind him. The feisty senator—la doctora as even her captors called her—feeling the Colombian government had abandoned her, finds solace in her love for France, especially after she heard the voice of Chirac's Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, her old prof at the Sorbonne, promise over radio waves that France would do everything to find her. This was both for better and for worse. Was she French or Colombian? "France had opened their arms to me with the generosity of a mother. For Colombia, I had become a burden. No longer recognizing my love for Colombia I no longer knew who I was or why I had fought or why I was in captivity."

Colombia is a country of castes and her family was part of the ruling class. Her father's post as Colombia's Ambassador to UNESCO gave her a lucky childhood in Paris. When she reminisces about it, she recalls moments in the Parc Monceau, a place only a handful of Colombians would be able to identify. As a young woman, she attended receptions with every Latin American luminary who passed through the City of Lights: her father's friend Pablo Neruda, and Colombians Fernando Botero and Gabriel García Márquez. She attended the Sorbonne where she met her first husband, Fabrice, the father of her children. As his wife, she lived in New Zealand and the Seychelles. When the marriage ended, she returned to Colombia "a cyclone," certain she could "transform my country with the strength and the stubbornness of a bull." She believed in her "lucky star" and was sure she would succeed. After all, no one had ever said no to her before. Colombians would be the first.

She took a job at the Ministry of Commerce. She and the minister, Juan Manuel Santos, developed a friendship. Santos served as Minister of Defense during the military operation that rescued Betancourt from the FARC after six years. Santos is today Colombia's President—thanks in part to the popularity he gained from liberating her. When she was freed she thanked him saying the rescue was better than any Holly-wood movie.

All was going well until Betancourt, confrontational and righteous, began stepping on the toes of Colombia's traditional political machinery. Her ardent fights and fixed ideas to "combat injustice, corruption and drug-trafficking" didn't sit well with her compatriots. Colombia needs to wage all of those battles, but Betancourt's antics were only appreciated or understood by a very few. A journalist friend wrote that Betancourt went from being a Joan of Arc to Juana, La Loca—a moniker given to Spain's first Queen of Castille and Aragón who was sent to a nunnery under the pretense of mental illness. In other words Betancourt was too much.

She has said that people wanted to silence her—that she received death threats. In 2001 she penned in French her first book, *La rage au coeur*, which translates into "the wrath in my heart." (It has a different title in English: *Till Death Do Us Part*:

My Struggle To Reclaim Colombia.) The book opens with Betancourt sending her children to live with their father after she determined it had stopped being safe for them. Nothing, not mother-hood, not death threats stopped the bicultural cyclone from reclaiming her Colombia. *La rage* was a bestseller in France, but in Colombia it was as unpopular as she was becoming.

She clearly had a sense of mission. When people began calling her the creole Joan of Arc, she seemed to like it. So what if she liked the spotlight? She was using it correctly. Her wanderlust and educated life gave her a very different perspective on politics, on being a woman, and on her native Colombia. She grew up like a woman of the First World trapped in the body of a woman of the Third World—or vice versa. The confusion caused by this dual identity causes her to misunderstand Colombians and Colombians to misunderstand her.

And yet it is exactly Betancourt's bicultural voice that makes her story more compelling than the thousands of other stories of captivity in the hands of the FARC. More than half a dozen memoirs have already been published creating a new and lucrative literary genre in Colombia's publishing industry—the kidnapping book. Those hostages who shared time with her all wrote their own stories with Betancourt as an important character. All except Betancourt were bestsellers in Colombia. Yet none have the universal appeal of her story.

I've read two, *Seven Years Kidnapped by the FARC* by Luis Eladio Pérez, and *Out of Captivity: Surviving 1,967 Days in The Colombian Jungle* written by three American contractors for the US State Department, Stansell being one of them. Pérez is a senator who Betancourt meets on her fourth year in the jungle. The two strike a very close bond. In his book, Pérez describes Betancourt in full-blown, over-the-top admiration, a boy with a crush. She too has words of affection for him. She calls him "my Luchini" and writes about learning how to treat his diabetic comas by stealing and storing the few hard candies and bags of sugar she could find, spending hours sharing a hammock and drafting a new social contract for Colombia. She certainly "adores" him but not in the same way he adores her. For Pérez, she is a goddess. Betancourt knows and likes the effect she has on men.

In *Out of Captivity: Surviving 1,967 Days in The Colombian Jungle*, Keith Stansell declares that Ingrid Betancourt, the martyr whom the world had embraced, was selfish, greedy, and manipulative. Each of the three Americans has his own version of what caused the hatred between the two. What is clear is that they were at odds from the beginning. She has said in post-publication interviews that she believes in first-sight chemistry. "There are people you repel," she told Charlie Rose without mentioning names, but she surely meant Keith Stansell. His alpha-male personality comes through just by looking at his proof-of-life video. Seeing them both talking to the press, it's easy to see why their personalities clashed—the macho cowboy and the educated, entitled princess. Both are good looking, both are strong of character, but unlike her Lucho, Stansell was not going to be her dedicated lackey.

Betancourt, aware that her French upbringing was a problem even for the other hostages, writes that Stansell was jealous because France was doing everything possible to rescue her while the US government was doing nothing for him and the other Americans. That she is at times French and at times Colombian—most of the

time she is both—has always been her blessing and her curse. It made her stand out from the other hostages and in turn helped focus attention on the plight of thousands of Colombian families when she became world news. But the attention she got from newspapers, from the Pope, or from the people of Paris was not appreciated by her fellow Colombian prisoners or by Colombians. Even Stansell, whom she dubs the ugly American, reacted with the same negative attitude: Why is she so special? Why is she getting all the attention?

Betancourt's version of what thousands of Colombians have gone through is breathtaking and inspirational even if she is too obviously settling scores with Pastrana and Stansell. Betancourt is the voice of all the silenced men and women who have survived kidnappings by the FARC. The FARC still hold hundreds of hostages. Last November, a military general marked his thirteenth year in captivity. His son, a baby when his father was taken, spoke on national television demanding that the FARC send his father back home. But without Betancourt around, news of this and all other kidnappings remain strictly local.

Betancourt's book is an immense contribution to the very complicated collective memory of Colombia, even if Colombians have rejected it. Hers is a raw and brave example of both the beauty and the horrors of what we can do to each other. It is the story of how one woman lived it, survived it, and turned it around in order to keep on living, even if she had to give up her Colombia to do it. She has said to journalists that Colombians have treated her worse than they treated Pablo Escobar when they interview her about her book. "Colombia hurts me," she says sadly.

### III. Her Other Voice

Betancourt watched the news of her own abduction on a television at the first FARC camp and complained she was not given more play. "It was obvious," she writes, that they "would want to obscure the details as they could prove to be embarrassing."

When Betancourt saw that the armed men who stopped her vehicle were wearing rubber boots, she knew they were FARC—Colombian soldiers wear leather—but she didn't sense the danger. She had friends in the FARC's Secretariat: "I was led to believe that we had established a dialogue, protecting me from their terrorist actions. We had discussed politics for hours; we had shared a meal. How could these affable individuals be the same men who had ordered our abduction?" But after getting her own pair of rubber boots she came to her senses and made herself a promise. "I had just lost my freedom but I will not surrender my identity." In typical Betancourt fashion, she immediately began plotting an escape. It was the right thing to do, the only thing to do.

Betancourt convinced Clara Rojas to join her on her first two attempted escapes. But after Betancourt accused Rojas of refusing to follow her lead and causing their capture, the relationship quickly deteriorated and Rojas refused further attempts. Despite the loss of Rojas friendship, Betancourt didn't stop trying to escape. After her fourth attempt—she tried six times—the guard told her, in language reminiscent of the Brother's Grimm, that she should stop: "It was madness. What would I have to

do? Send the corpse to your children. I don't understand. You know you don't stand a chance." Betancourt, always articulate, replied, "It's my duty to regain my freedom, just as it is yours to prevent me from doing so."

She came to see her ordeal as a chance to build character—if only to improve her chances of escaping. "I understood that I was still such an ordinary, second rate human being," she writes about her second escape attempt, flagellating herself for fearing to jump into a river, afraid to be soaked, of being carried away, of losing her backpack and her food rations. She condemns this now as "cowardice." She set out to rid herself of all these "pathetic little fears" and the way she did it is quite extraordinary. Her endurance serves as an example to follow. But this gets complicated and she ends up writing a manual of self-improvement, sounding at times too much like the heroine of *Eat, Pray, Love*, rather than the woman interested in exposing "corruption, social injustice and drug-trafficking." I would have preferred that she had stayed true to her Colombian quest. The world needs more stories about the complicated reality of Colombia and fewer stories of pop introspection.

Still, you have to admire her resilience and resoluteness, what she was able to come up with in order to escape, to do in order to free herself from those "pathetic little fears." She observed and observed and observed. She noticed that the change of guard happened at 6 p.m. every evening, and that for fifteen minutes the change in light made everyone blind while the cicadas, "like Swiss watches," started their "deafening noises" exactly at a quarter past. Betancourt deduced that 6:15 was the perfect time to escape. She encouraged Jhon Frank Pinchao, one of the few hostages to escape the FARC camp, to leave at this time during a storm. Before leaving, Pinchao confessed to her that he was petrified.

Betancourt writes of her advice: "Fear is normal. For some people it acts as a break, for others it is an engine. The important thing is not to let it control you. When you make the decision to escape, it's a cold rational decision. Preparation is essential, because in the midst of action, when fear takes hold of you, you mustn't think about it—you have to act. So you do it in stages. I have to take three steps forward, one, two, three. Now I start running. The movements you make must take all your concentration. You feel your fear, but you accept it and you put it aside."

When she was not trying to escape, like Sor Juana, the Mexican poet nun of the seventeenth century who chose to live in a convent—the only option left to a woman of words—Betancourt found solace in books and religion. She asked the Secretariat to send her a Larousse dictionary and a Bible, which she read for the first time in her life. She asked one of the women hostages to teach her how to move the beads in the wooden rosary that she spent months making. Would she have found religion if this hadn't happened to her? Reading about her newfound faith in her mother's Catholic example feels like another tactic she needed to hold on to for survival. She prayed but she also acted; she did not depend on the grace of God to get her out. Instead she focused on knowledge, on science, on experiments. When Pinchao found the instructions on how to make a compass, she was the one ready to try it. The description of how the two of them made a working compass—by putting a needle inside a water-filled deodorant bottle—is one of the most exciting moments in the

book. Victories like this one kept them alive and hold the reader in complete admiration.

There are exciting stories of true adventure as she encounters piranhas, caimans, tigers, scorpions and bees that make honey overnight in her socks. At one point she witnesses the young FARC recruits give a pet monkey a military crew cut. Later they shoot it to death. When Betancourt complains she is told her attachment to the animal is a bourgeois feeling. At roll call when others were ready to be referred to as a number, she kept yelling out her entire name. She did whatever it took to keep her dignity and preserve her identity, even if at times that meant putting the rest of the group in danger. She lied about having a radio to her fellow mates, an incident that could have gotten them killed. And although she was not able to get over her disgust for the putrid dugout latrines, she did find the courage to hide her first stolen machete inside one. She learned early on that the passport to freedom in the jungle is a machete to open paths, to kill jaguars and tarantulas, and to prepare food to keep from starving. She risked everything to steal machete after machete. Her character was her lifeline, and stealing machetes became her obsessive need to not be subjugated—better to die. Where does one get that strength in character, that strong voice that refuses to be silenced? There are certainly lessons in self-preservation here.

We accompany her year after year, as she goes from one circle of hell to another. Throughout, she gives voice to a complicated chorus. Through her eyes we see a brutal Colombia, a beautiful Colombia. We learn, as she does, what happens inside the FARC, particularly the opportunistic price of being a pretty woman in the organization—the out-of-touch, hierarchical, macho, indoctrinatory, and bellicose organization. Women are to have sex as a sign of revolutionary solidarity. They need authorization to have relationships or they are ordered to have them, and permission for a pregnancy or an abortion. We also learn what happens among captors when they let the worst in them take over, as when they fight over the carcass of a pig that is fed to them.

There also are moments of human kindness and innocence. One December, Betancourt made a manger out of clay with the help of Yisbeth, one of her young guards who “wove a garland of butterflies with the metallic paper of cigarettes” to put around it. Together they glued the foil to the radio making a strand of Christmas lights. That night, captors and hostages exchanged gifts and sang Colombian carols. There were also a few dancing parties, even drunken moments and beautiful silver moons. But they didn’t last very long. When she complained about a young guard molesting her, the chain around her neck was tightened. They jabbed her in the ribs with the muzzles of their M16s. When she said she was thirsty, they told her there was no water for the “old hag.” When there was, they didn’t fill her glass, throwing to the ground what was left. There is only so much anyone—even Betancourt—can take. In despair, she retreated. She began to hear the Virgin speak to her directly. And spoke back.

I prefer the stories of resourcefulness to the conversations with God. I like the Betancourt who figured out how to fry an egg by turning a razor blade into a handle for her food bowl, who kept the plastic envelope containing her family letters and

pictures dry by sealing them with a sticky label she peeled off a tube of deodorant, who de-threaded old clothes to make new ones, who braided flowers into her hair. She was so resourceful she even found romance. After being separated from Perez as punishment for their attempted escape, she had to share a cage with the three Americans. She was drawn to Marc Gonsalves, the soft-spoken ex-Marine—Stansell's antithesis. Gonsalves and Betancourt shared a hammock ring and a chat one night after which she became another person. "I would have to find a pretext to come back and spend more time with him," she writes. For the next two years, she did. And for two hundred pages, Betancourt writes like an insecure teenage girl in love. She was "full of joy" knowing that he watched her bathe in the river and waited for "a meaningful fleeting look." The defiant cyclone, the "monster" that the FARC had turned her into, was now too "shy to go up to him" fearing he would find her "intrusive." Is this la doctora Ingrid, the rude and provocative hostage? When he called her princess, Betancourt came back to life. But like all star-crossed lovers they too were separated. She suggests now that the FARC felt threatened by her new strength. She chose that time and not others to submerge into an endless void: "I sought refuge from the attacks and contact with men. I spent twenty-four hours curled up in my cocoon huddled in my hammock, clinging to a silence with no end."

For the first time, Betancourt was stripped of her voice. Knowing that neither the government nor the guerrillas were giving in, she felt like "bottle corks bobbling in raging oceans of hatred" and took to isolation under her mosquito net. Being separated from Perez left her without "oxygen," but losing Gonsalves made her start "stroking death." She lost her hair, vomited blood, and fainted when they try to give her an IV. She called the guard over and, for the first time in her life, was not "ashamed to beg." She asked to be reunited with Gonsalves, "because you see the strength of love is always greater." The guard refused but she tried again. And when the guard didn't give in, she found a way to still outdo him. "He no longer had a hold on me because I had already accepted that I could die. There lay my victory. There was nothing I needed or wanted. My soul was stripped bare."

#### IV. Her New Voice

Even Silence Has An End is written in Betancourt's new voice—the voice of surviving captivity. She tells of her experiences while the world kept vigil demanding her release. Her former husband and her teenage children took to the Champs-Élysées with lit candles. After Villepin vowed to free Betancourt, the French Ambassador to Bogotá—who during the process married Betancourt's sister, Astrid—worked to secure her freedom. In the end, it was Colombia, not France, who liberated her, the three Americans, and ten other hostages, in a strange and theatrical military operation in which soldiers posing as humanitarian workers wearing Che Guevara T-shirts landed a helicopter inside the camp. Operation Checkmate was so successful that they even got two of the captors to voluntarily hop in the helicopter. The nation stopped to watch Ingrid regain her freedom. She spoke with her usual aplomb, thanking her friend Juan Manuel Santos and the Armed Forces of Colombia. For the first time ever, Colombia embraced Ingrid Betancourt.

The next day, Sarkozy sent a plane for her and she left for France. (Wikileaks now reveals that for President Sarkozy it was a PR stunt.) When she arrived in Paris she announced in flawless French that she was home.

The book is full of Betancourt's complicated and contradictory traits—a crusader with a lot of personality, an educated woman with an entitled air, at home in Paris and ready to die for Colombia. She is a product of her upbringing, something so immovable as her resilience to fight till the end. For Betancourt, doing the right thing is about “dignity,” a way of life she owes to her father who died during her captivity. But her dignity gets her in trouble. It earns her enemies. She was as confrontational in the “tropical concentration camp” as she had been in the political salons of the traditional capital. Like President Pastrana, the FARC also had a problem called Ingrid. Two days before a military raid killed FARC leader Raul Reyes, he wrote a message to the entire Secretariat: “She has a volcanic personality, she is rude and provocative with the guerrillas assigned to guard her.” During her six years of captivity—regardless of chains, beatings, verbal humiliation, and inhuman physical distress—the FARC was not able to tame her. That's because Betancourt does not understand submission.

The book leaves no stone unturned. We learn it all: what she was doing, what she was thinking, how she was coping while life in the outside world—she calls it “the real world”—went on. Betancourt breaks the silence, but on her terms. In her verbosity, she is at both prosaic and poetic; she is as rude and provocative as Reyes warned his Secretariat; she is as generous, understanding, and humane as someone who has reached a higher sense of illumination through suffering, prayer, knowledge, and patience.

Betancourt has gone from being a pawn in the government-guerrilla chess game to global cause célèbre. She was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. She is a frequent speaking guest at universities across the US and is honored by human rights and women's organizations worldwide. “I became a celebrity in the jungle,” she told Charlie Rose during the same interview she explained her dislike for Stansell. Betancourt now speaks in the voice of her new persona. She is no longer Colombian, nor a cause. Now, she is simply a celebrity. She says she has abandoned Colombia and now lives between New York and Paris. She is received by dignitaries and feted by fashion designers. Diane von Furstenberg hosted her book party in New York. Oprah just loves her. Hollywood is on board to make Betancourt's story.

Colombians continue to cringe. It didn't help when she said she was suing the government for almost \$7 million for not protecting her when she set out to San Vicente del Caguán. A right every citizen has, she argued, and one that many kidnapping victims in Colombia resort to. But the backlash was so strong she dropped it within hours, accepting blame for the ridiculous amount she suggested. A Colombian friend tells me Ingrid is now called “In-Grate” and “In-greed.” There are Facebook groups rallying to ban her book. One is called “No More Ingrid Betancourt, Please!” Another one asks: “Is Ingrid Betancourt more French than Colombian? Would you like her to return to Colombia?” The comments are nasty.

Betancourt's mission is no longer to transform Colombia. This time, she wants to save herself. She is no longer that defiant woman ready to fight for a better country.

After her release, she chose to wear a mantilla and her jungle rosary when she visited the Virgin in Lourdes and the Pope. It's difficult for me to reconcile the clearly liberal woman I briefly met in New York, who spoke to me about a new country, with this devotee of the Virgin Mary.

Even so, the book is a testament to Ingrid's tenacious spirit, and to her ability to reinvent herself. She has gone from pampered daughter, to diplomat's wife, to political crusader, to celebrity without a country. In the end neither the FARC nor Colombia broke her spirit. She buried her Colombian rage and turned it into universal love. As a Colombian, I miss the old Ingrid, but I admire this new voice—and I wait to hear more.

**If you liked this, see. . .**

- [“The Education of Hugo Chávez: Unraveling Venezuela's Revolutionary Path,”](#) by Brian A. Nelson, Spring 2011
- [“War Thoughts at Home,”](#) by Robert Frost, Fall 2006
- [“The Octopus in the Cathedral of Salt,”](#) by Phillip Robertson, Fall 2007
- [“The Bones of Mendihuaca,”](#) by Matthew Fishbane, Winter 2009
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The Virginia Quarterly Review  
One West Range, Box 400223  
Charlottesville, VA 22904-4223  
ISSN 2154-6932

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