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“Narco-heritage” and the Touristification of the Drug Lord Pablo Escobar in Medellín, Colombia

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Medellin was particularly affected by the war that began more than fifty years ago, and the ghost of its infamous cartel still haunts Colombia's second-largest city. However, it is now often singled out as a transformed city, and tourism is rapidly developing. In this context, local guides are now leading tourists in the footsteps of the notorious drug lord, Pablo Escobar. These tours usually include sites in Medellín related to Escobar, such as his grave or some of his former residences, one of which has been transformed into an informal museum by his brother, Roberto Escobar, who was the bookkeeper for the Medellín cartel. Although the memory of Pablo Escobar is certainly part of Colombian history, these tours are controversial, especially for local authorities who are trying to promote the image of a city recovering from its dark age of violence. This article explores the touristification of Medellín's narco-related past, taking a close look at the diverse stakeholders involved and the different narratives they produce. Focusing on so-called narco-tours or Pablo tours, it will look at the way they contribute to shaping the notion of “the familiar” and “the strange,” which constitute the central theme of this special issue of the *Journal of Anthropological Research*.

Key words: Colombia, tourism, heritage, memory, Pablo Escobar, narco-trafficking, Medellín

Despite promising prospects for peace, Colombia is still one of the world's main actors in the production of cocaine and remains a key symbol of narco-business. Thanks to the infamous drug lord Pablo Escobar—founder of the Medellín cartel—the second-largest city in the country is closely associated with what is often referred to in the United States as the War on Drugs. Pablo Escobar has also inspired many television and cinema productions in the past decade, as well as the growing tourism sector of Medellín, where his infamous memory is now center stage.

In the past few years, despite on-going armed conflict between the government, crime syndicates, paramilitary groups, and leftist rebels, several initiatives relating to the war, such as memorials, museums, or artistic projects, appeared in different parts of the country. Tourism entrepreneurs are also part of the process, offering historical tours for the emerging tourism market related to the violence that plagued and still af-

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fects Colombia. Here again, Medellín is center stage, since many tour guides describe how the city moved from “the most violent to most innovative in the world” (Naef 2016a). In this context, many of them are also taking tourists to follow the footsteps of the drug lord Pablo Escobar.

“NARCO-HERITAGE”: REPRESENTATIONS AND ABSENCE

This article will explore the way Medellín’s drugs-related past is integrated into the growing tourism sector of the city. By looking closely at the stakeholders involved, it will show how different narratives attached to such an ambiguous figure as Pablo Escobar compete in this memorial arena. In addition to the worldwide impact of Escobar’s activities, it will focus on issues of interest specifically to anthropology, especially in subfields related to tourism, memory, violence, and postconflict resolution. Who are the tourism entrepreneurs behind the dissemination of narratives about Escobar and the history of drug trafficking? What aspects of Medellín’s drugs-related past are presented? What kinds of values are attributed to the Medellín cartel’s boss and other narco-traffickers? Historical facts related to Pablo Escobar are absent from school curriculums and are rarely mentioned in public museums. In addition, official agencies involved in Medellín’s tourism development are extremely reluctant to publicize this dark figure (Giraldo et al. 2014; Naef 2016c; Van Broek 2018). This article will demonstrate that this memorial gap, already filled by outlets linked to popular culture such as television, cinema, or literary productions, is now also being occupied by private tourism entrepreneurs selling “Pablo tours” or “narco-tours,” currently some of the most popular offers in Medellín’s touristscape.

This analysis will also contribute to the central discussion of this special issue of the *Journal of Anthropological Research* by exploring the relations between “the strange” and “the familiar” in the context of Medellín. It states that the touristification of Medellín’s narco-related past, although all too familiar for the local population, can constitute a marketable strangeness for the growing international tourism sector of Colombia’s second-largest city. From a theoretical standpoint, I introduce the concept of narco-heritage, which allows reflection on the management of a complicated and dissonant heritage (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996), looking at the different ways it is represented, from acknowledgment to reframing and covering (Naef 2016b; Rivera 2008).

I define *narco-heritage* as objects, sites, and practices embodying and representing the illegal production, as well as consumption, of narcotics. The current analysis deliberately presents a very broad conceptualization of heritage, ranging from tourism to popular culture and encompassing such objects as buildings, television series, movies, and graffiti. Heritage here is not limited to what is designated as such by official bodies (UNESCO, conservation institutes, museums, etc.); it includes all elements that embody memory and identity, and that are considered as heritage by actors in the field.

Furthermore, heritage is seen as a contemporary and dynamic production with significant influence on today’s world (Ashworth 2012; Lowenthal 1985). Narco-heritage is impacting Medellín society in many ways—through the diverse representations it

produces of a figure such as Pablo Escobar, but also through the tourism market and the business opportunities it creates. Although tourism is the focus of this analysis, narco-heritage can be analyzed in many other segments of society. In countries such as Colombia or Mexico, "narco-aesthetic," "narco-architecture," "narco-cults," or "narco-language" are all domains that relate closely to the heritage of narcos and concretely impact the population. Yet, looking at narco-heritage through the lens of tourism offers pertinent insight on the ways some elements are integrated or rejected in what Bruner (2005) considers the "touristic master narrative." As he puts it: "contested sites raise the key narrative question of who has the right to tell the story" (Bruner 2005:12). Bruner reminds us that sites themselves are not passive and are given meaning by the narratives that envelop them. Examples of narco-heritage, such as buildings related to Pablo Escobar, would be nothing more than abandoned ruins without the stories behind them. This contribution will thus precisely focus on the touristic narratives associated with Medellin's narco-heritage.

Of course, narco-heritage as conceived here is certainly not specific to Colombia. Other examples around the world, ranging from the exhibition on the San Francisco opium dens organized by the Chinese Historical Society to the Hash Marihuana and Hemp Museums in Amsterdam and Barcelona fit into this conceptual frame. However, the particularity of the Colombian case is in the absence of any history of narco-trafficking in public institutions. According to Taussig (2004) there is a historical void about the cocaine trade, even though it represents an unavoidable part of the country's history. Taussig asks what a cocaine museum would look like, implying a denial of this heritage, as well as that of slavery in the gold mining industry.

In a burst of self-righteousness, I ask myself how come the world-famous Gold Museum of the Banco de la Republica in Bogota has nothing about African slavery or about the lives of these gold miners whose ancestors were bought as slaves to mine the gold that was for centuries the basis of the colony—*just as Cocaine is today?* So what would a Cocaine Museum look like? (Taussig 2004:13)

Beyond its criminalization, cocaine can also be associated with other uncomfortable topics such as corruption, paramilitary and guerrilla warfare, and even state crimes. This could explain the absence of any reference in public institutions (schools, state museums, tourism-related public bodies)—a historical gap that private tourism entrepreneurs and popular culture are filling. In this sense, narco-heritage—and more precisely, in the context of this analysis, elements related to the cocaine market—offers an appropriate conceptual frame to observe how an uncomfortable past is acknowledged or covered by stakeholders active in various segments of present-day society in Colombia.

Finally, representations and narratives related to famous outlaws are a field of study that remains underexploited. The main work on the subject was developed by Hobsbawm (1969), who introduced the notion of the "social bandit" to explore how figures

such as Robin Hood or Pancho Villa could transcend the boundaries between criminals and revolutionaries. Yet, anthropological studies of the touristification of outlaws and criminals are extremely scarce; this contribution aims to fill the gap by examining the way an ambiguous and notorious outlaw is presented on the tourist stage twenty years after his death.

This reflection is part of a larger study conducted in 2014 and 2015 on memorial entrepreneurs associated with the violent past of Medellín. For the present analysis, I deconstructed, during four months of fieldwork, the practices of tourism entrepreneurs dealing with Medellín's narco-heritage. I first participated in nine tours centered on narco-violence. Some of them directly referred to themselves as "narco-tours" or "Pablo tours"; others adopted a more general focus but were still oriented toward Colombia's violent past. I also conducted 30 semi-directed interviews with stakeholders such as tourist guides, museum collaborators, city employees, NGO staff, and artists. Finally, I analyzed the content of various sources, such as academic literature (mainly in the fields of tourism and cultural heritage management), popular culture outlets (movies, televised shows, and literature), websites (mainly tour operators' websites and travel blogs), and the media.

The Rise and Fall of Pablo Escobar

The life of Pablo Escobar certainly cannot be summarized in a few paragraphs. Many books and documentaries can be found on the topic, produced by individuals as diverse as his victims, his former employees, and his own family members (Bowden 2015; Escobar 2014; Salazar 2012; Velásquez 2016). Escobar was born in 1949 in a small village in Antioquia—the department encompassing Medellín—and was raised in an economically modest family. He arrived in Medellín in the 1960s and began to be involved in petty crimes. His career really took off a few years later when he began dealing in marijuana and then joined the cocaine business, the most fashionable drug in the United States during the 1970s.

His ruthlessness progressively resulted in a monopoly of the cocaine trade, and he founded the Medellín cartel, an organized network of drug suppliers and drug smugglers. He began to be involved in politics in the 1980s and launched a campaign targeting the economically deprived communities of Medellín, spending part of his huge fortune on social projects to gain the sympathy of the population and access to Congress. When he finally managed to be elected as a substitute deputy, his position was called into question by Rodrigo Lara, the minister of justice, who denounced him as a criminal. Escobar's political career was aborted and he declared war on the Colombian government. One of his first steps was to order the assassination of Rodrigo Lara in 1984.

For several years, Escobar brought terror to Medellín and the rest of the country, ordering the assassination of whoever stood in his way. Many civilians were collateral victims of his actions, especially when bombs were set off around the city and elsewhere in the country. In 1991, Escobar agreed to surrender in exchange for the Colombian

authorities' promise that he would not be extradited and the construction of his own jail high above Medellín, a building called the "Cathedral." He spent a little more than a year there, still running his business; receiving relatives, lieutenants, and prostitutes; and even, according to his right-hand man Jhon "Popeye" Velásquez, inviting the Colombian national soccer team (Campagna 2014). In 1992, when he was warned of his possible transfer to another prison, he escaped. An 18-month manhunt involving military and police forces, but also some members of rival cartels, finally led to his death. Escobar was shot and killed on the roof of one of his Medellín hideouts on 2 December 1993. The drug lord thus contributed to the international fame of Medellín, where his memory is still vivid and controversial.

Pablo Escobar and Popular Culture

In Colombia, as in Mexico, numerous novels (*narconovelas*), songs (*narcocorridos*), soap operas (*narco-soaps*), and artistic productions depict the history of drug trafficking in these two countries, and they are viewed here as "narco-heritage." The huge success all over Latin America of the Colombian television series "El patron del mal" in 2012, and the more recent one on Netflix, "Narco," in 2015—both portraying the life of Pablo Escobar—illustrate the importance of this figure in popular culture today. As Delaney and Madigan (2016) point out, popular culture can contribute to providing a sense of identity for a given community, "bonding individuals to the greater society and uniting the masses on ideals" (2016:2). Yet, although popular culture enables large heterogeneous masses of people to identify collectively, some elements relayed by mass media can also clash strongly with other competing representations.

Cultural productions closely associated with an ambiguous figure such as Escobar are an example of representations widely promoted locally and internationally but rejected by a large part of the Colombian population. When narcos are commodified, the romantic and glamorous image that movies, narco-soaps, or narconovelas have promoted is subject to criticism (Larkins 2015; Polit-Dueñas 2013). In the Mexican context of Sinaloa, Polit-Dueñas (2013:90) calls into question the mythical vision of narcos that they disseminate: "However widespread and hegemonic the condemnation of the illegal drug trade, Sinaloans live the schizophrenic glamorization of the activity that local culture and media industries promote."

Popular culture is determined by people's everyday life, and people in Sinaloa or in Medellín talk about symbols of the narcos' violence as elements that constitute their daily life (Polit-Dueñas 2013). The abnormal conditions of life in countries plagued with drug trafficking and violence represent an extremely important source of inspiration for entrepreneurs in the fields of popular culture. Narco-violence rooted in everyday life contributes to building a modern mythology, linking the familiar and the strange in cities deeply affected by drug trafficking. As stated above, everyday life in certain places in Colombia or Mexico has a strangeness that is marketable in industries such as film, television, and publishing, as well as tourism, which constitutes the central focus of this analysis.

TOURISTIFYING NARCO-HERITAGE

As is true of certain elements of popular culture, tourism relies on strangeness (Cohen 1972); tourism entrepreneurs tend to cash in on events, practices, objects, and sites that detach the tourist from their own everyday life. Drug trafficking—already well covered by popular culture and diffused in Western tourists' imaginaries—can thus represent a certain source of estrangement for them. My research finds that the idea of leaving the tourists' beaten track in order to see media-featured sites and objects related to the War on Drugs can be a significant motivation for some visitors in Colombia and elsewhere. Research on narco-tourism is usually limited to the consumption of narcotics by tourists (Bordes and Labrousse 2004; Hoffmann 2014; Rudler 1995). My ethnographic research aims to go beyond this thematic and look at the way narco-heritage represents a tourism resource in a developing market.

Lab Tours: Consumption vs. Production

The starting point for the present reflection was in 2001, when I was exploring Colombia on a "sabbatical" year marking the end of my adolescence. During a six-day hike in the northern jungle to visit the "lost city"—an archaeological site of an ancient city in the Sierra Nevada, now one of the most well-known attractions on the Colombian tourism map—our little group stopped at a farm for the night. While wandering around the domain and talking to the residents, I noticed that I was being put up in a rudimentary laboratory for extracting cocaine paste. Some years later, I read in a blog (Round Picture 2008) that as the country was slowly opening to international tourism, some agencies offering tours to the "lost city" proposed for an additional nine dollars a visit to a similar cocaine laboratory. A practice that I had randomly encountered during a hike was unofficially entering the tourism market a few years later. Although these visits, considered illegal and dangerous, have been denounced by local authorities, the local newspaper *El Herald* reported in 2015 that Los Urabeños, one of the main paramilitary groups involved in the region, was still offering tourists visits to coca plantations and cocaine laboratories (Caro 2015).

The objective here is not to propose an in-depth analysis of these tours but to present a practice demonstrating that the manufacture of illicit drugs can be an attraction for tourists. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) already considers visits to plantations and clandestine laboratories to learn about the manufacturing process as part of the definition of narco-tourism (Van Broeck 2018). However, a difference must be made between the consumption of cocaine and visits to a lab or a plantation. Visitors may be active on both sides of the spectrum—consuming cocaine and exploring its manufacturing—but this is not necessarily the case. Tourists genuinely interested in cocaine production are not always consumers. The strangeness associated with a cocaine lab deep in a South American jungle and the secretive dimension of cocaine production can constitute a motive for tourists unrelated to narcotics consumption.

Cocaine laboratories are part of Colombia's narco-heritage and have along the way become tourism products. In Medellín, some guides will informally offer visits to sites

related to cocaine and marijuana production in the barrio Antioquia, a popular neighborhood known for its drugs market and micro-trafficking in other contraband (field-notes, May 2015). Nevertheless, the main attractions are the various sites associated with Pablo Escobar.

Touring the Pablo Escobar Legacy

Since 2007, an increasing number of guides and agencies have been offering what are often labeled as “Pablo tours” or “narco-tours.” They drive tourists for hours in Medellín’s traffic jams while the guide (who is very likely also the driver) recounts anecdotes about Pablo Escobar, using him as a guiding thread to narrate the city’s violent history. The tours are generally punctuated by stops in various abandoned buildings, such as the one where he was killed, and at Casa Monaco, which belonged to him. All of the tours take visitors to his grave in Montesacro Cemetery in Itagüí, a little town at the southern edge of Medellín (Figure 1).

These tours are organized by private entrepreneurs, generally young and well-educated individuals belonging to Medellín’s urban middle-class. Official entities involved in tourism tend to distance themselves from the practice, which they consider harms the international image of the city (Giraldo et al. 2014; Naef 2016b; Van Broek 2018). These tourism and memorial entrepreneurs are usually already invested in the tourism sector and looking for a new niche to develop. They are generally Colombians, with some exceptions, such as the company Palenque Tour Colombia, for which resident foreigners occasionally lead the tours. Most of the dozens of tour guides involved



Figure 1. A tour and guide at Pablo Escobar’s grave in Montesacro Cemetery in Itagüí (photo by the author, May 2015)

have studied in other countries, mainly in the United States, enabling them to speak English, or another foreign language, and to interact with the international tourism market that constitutes their central target. Their main promotion channels are their websites and Tripadvisor—where ratings are closely followed and publicized—and some have contacts with local guest-houses and hotels, which recommend them to tourists.

Because of the variety of actors involved in Pablo tours, a wide range of tours is on offer, contributing to the spread of diverse types of narratives. Most tours take place in Medellín but some last several days, starting in Bogotá and taking tourists to Medellín and other places such as Napoles, the former hacienda of Escobar situated between Colombia's two main cities. Tour prices range from twenty to several hundreds of dollars depending on the duration; they usually involve up to 12 tourists.

The knowledge corpus is put together informally by each guide, generally based on documentaries and Internet sources. Some, such as Camilo, the director of Medellín City Tours, have added to the content of their discourse by drawing on interviews and information gathered through interaction with other tourists: "I talked to police officers and I also got a lot of info from my mom, who was a judge. From Luz María [one of Pablo Escobar's sisters] I also got a lot of info" (fieldnotes, 8 May 2015). Personal memories represent a valued source of knowledge. Camilo often refers to his childhood, describing, for instance, what he was doing when one of Pablo Escobar's bombs exploded or when Escobar was killed.

"This Is Not a Pablo Tour"

Although most of the tours openly feature the drug lord, others try to distance themselves from this infamous figure by promoting tours of Medellín that emphasize the general history of the city and narco. Colombia Travel Operator, for instance, offers a "Do not say the name" tour to show the social and cultural transformation that Medellín has experienced since his death, as explained on their website: "During the whole tour we will concentrate on the history of the country in the 80s and 90s of the last century when the deeds of Pablo Escobar made Colombia one of the most dangerous places in the eyes of the world."¹ Palenque Tour Colombia, created by a German immigrant with a mixed staff of Colombians and foreigners, offers a similar tour and even quotes a former customer on their website who states that "this is not a Pablo Escobar tour."² As one Palenque Tour Colombia collaborator explains, the objective is to understand the context without falling into sensationalism:

You cannot talk about Medellín without talking about Pablo Escobar, but we definitely do not want to make a kind of "Pablo Escobar tour." A lot of people . . . the only thing they know about Medellín is Pablo Escobar. So, you have to catch them on that and then open up the perspective (fieldnotes, 21 May 2015).

The guide of the very popular Free Walking Tour Medellín, also named Pablo, mentions the absence of sources related to this disturbing history:

People complain because finally these tours are the only historical sources. We do not talk about Pablo in the schools and there is still a lack of academic research on the topic. People learn from soap operas and books. There is a problem with the form because many tours diffuse unverified myths. In our tour, we do not talk about Pablo unless people ask. I want to show that we can do a tour of four hours without mentioning Pablo. I usually start by saying: “My name is Pablo but this is not a Pablo tour” (fieldnotes, 15 October 2015).

The lack of research on Pablo Escobar mentioned by this tour guide needs some qualification: in 2017, the National Centre for Historical Memory (CNMH) released a report on Medellín’s urban war, looking closely at the actions of Pablo Escobar (CNMH 2017). Plus, a body of literature centered on the phenomenon of *sicaresca* (related to the term *sicario*, meaning “hitman”) emerged in the past decade, some focusing precisely on the drug lord (e.g., Lander 2007; Pobutsky 2013). Yet, this remark illustrates the desire of some memorial entrepreneurs to see public bodies more invested in the transmission of this dark memory.

In this ambiguous historical context, some tour guides distance themselves from the drug lord legacy, but others openly promote Pablo Escobar as their central focus, and competition is steadily growing. Paisa Road was one of the first companies active in this market and they clearly try to defend their territory, as their website shows:

Warning. People outside our company are offering a version of our original Pablo Escobar Tour. Paisa Road invites you to read the information below to help you take the right decision and avoid booking the wrong tour. . . . Our quality cannot be matched. That is why the other offers are poor imitation of our product! . . . We do not distort history, no praises and no critics. We rescue the memory and express objectively what happened. . . . We respect and accept other’s point of view and thoughts regarding cultural concerns. Besides the business, we have a social purpose. We assign a percentage of the income of each of our tours towards raising funds for social work. The tour is accepted and recognized by local people.³

This last sentence, a legitimization of the practice because it is “accepted” by local people, clearly demonstrates the discomfort that these tours foster within Medellín’s population. The local press is often critical of them, and many interviewees expressed their dislike, considering the practice “social pornography” or “drugs apology” (fieldnotes, May 2015). Several guides recalled occasional complaints from locals, and all agree on the almost total absence of Colombian tourists. As Camilo states:

They already had enough of that shit. But I mean you can't help it, he put us on the map! . . . They want to leave that in the past even though they watch every TV show. . . . I was not a victim of Pablo so I am not totally against him. But I guess you have to be sensitive with the local community, right? So, if we would have to stop it, we would stop it. But it is a big challenge because people keep demanding. This tour does not need advertising (fieldnotes, 8 May 2015).

Roberto Escobar and the Narco Viewpoint

Tensions also arise from the fact that the most popular of these tours is based on a partnership between tourist guides and Roberto Escobar, the brother of Pablo Escobar and the former bookkeeper of the Medellín cartel. Roberto Escobar spent close to 15 years in jail, where he was severely injured by a letter bomb, which left him partially deaf and one-eyed. He was released in 2003 and is now living in one of Pablo Escobar's former hideouts, where he has transformed the first floor into a museum dedicated to his brother.

Although this tour and informal museum is certainly not on Medellín's official tourist map, they have been featured favorably since 2017 on platforms such as TripAdvisor. It is also widely advertised in guesthouses and youth hostels in Medellín, and thus very popular with backpackers. After being shown sites generally included in Pablo tours (e.g., the capo's grave and one of his former properties), dozens of eager young travelers are taken every day to this house to meet Pablo Escobar's brother. With two or three tours daily, guides cannot guarantee the former cartel bookkeeper will be at home: the suspense of whether or not they will meet him is kept alive during the journey. For those lucky tourists who do meet him, Roberto briefly presents his museum and thanks them for their presence, adding that part of their financial contribution will be invested in HIV research. In very serious tones, Roberto Escobar reveals that he discovered a cure while he was detained in jail. Escobar's brother also points out a bullet impact on a framed picture on exhibition, adding, with the help of the guide's translation, that it was left by a group of thieves who attacked the residence convinced it housed hidden treasure. The bullet mark is well conserved and part of the visit; it is evidence of an act of violence carried out when the site was already a museum. Narco-heritage is a dynamic and transforming process in which a framed picture of Pablo Escobar becomes a bullet-marked symbol of the quest for his hidden fortune.

At the end of the short visit, tourists are invited to take a souvenir picture with Roberto Escobar in front of a "Wanted" poster of the two brothers, offering a 10-million-dollar reward (Figure 2). However, when one of the tourists asked the driver of the tour minibus if he could take a picture with him, his request was harshly rejected. As the driver explained to me later, while showing me pictures of himself at the hacienda Napoles in the 1980s, he is also a former lieutenant of Pablo Escobar and, unlike Roberto, he is not willing to be put onstage.



Figure 2. Roberto Escobar posing for tourists in the museum he dedicated to his brother (photo by the author, May 2015). Roberto Escobar stated that although recorders are not allowed, taking pictures of his house and himself is permitted. Several photographs of him have been published elsewhere (e.g., *CNN Travel*, 8 January 2013, and *The Mirror*, 24 September 2016).

Whereas tour guides attempt to stay neutral during the rest of the tour, Roberto Escobar himself clearly legitimizes his brother's actions during the museum visit. His arguments are essentially based on Pablo Escobar's role in providing social assistance to the poor instead of the "corrupted Colombian government." Roberto Escobar thus enjoys a double status. Now a museum and tourism entrepreneur cashing in on his brother's legacy, he contributes to the spreading of specific representations of narco-heritage. Yet, he is also part of this heritage. He is the main subject of this tour; pictures of him taken by international tourists and promptly launched on social networks serve as a representative illustration of this process.

The Tour of the Victims

Indirectly related to tourism, an initiative named Proyecto Narcotour was introduced in 2017 by Mauricio Builes, journalist, professor, and former press director of the Co-

Colombian National Centre for Historical Memoria, and 42 of his students from Eafit University.⁴ When I first met Mauricio Builes in 2014 in Bogota, he had reservations about the development of memorial forms of tourism in Colombia. For him, conventional tourism—such as coffee, jungle, or beach tourism—needed to be consolidated first, before touristifying the violent years of the country:

Unfortunately, people know Colombia for three main reasons: one for Gabriel Garcia Marquez, two for James Rodriguez—the soccer player—and three for Pablo Escobar. So, most people know the country for Pablo Escobar. This creates a kind of tourism that focuses only on a particular figure, but does not explain the damage he did to the country (fieldnotes, 25 November 2014).

Project Narcotour is a virtual tour, housed on a website and based on testimonies of 19 victims of the narco-war. It gives them a voice and presents alternative narratives to the ones spread by popular culture and the Pablo tours: “We only know one side of the story, thanks to Pablo’s and Popeye’s biographies, as well as all the telenovelas. However, to get the complete story we need to talk about the people who suffered” (*Silla Vacía* 2017). Builes considers memorial elements associated with what is conceived here as narco-heritage as taboo. The journalist and professor criticizes the silence of public authorities on this subject, giving as an example the absence of official organizations to provide support to victims of drug trafficking. Furthermore, Builes, as with many in Colombia, also points to the silence of public museums when it comes to the life of Pablo Escobar. In Medellin, the Casa Memoria museum, specifically centered on the armed conflict in the department of Antioquia, is the only official museum to briefly refer to events related to Pablo Escobar. For Builes this is far too little, knowing that “the character most looked up on Google by foreigners who visit the Museum Casa Memoria is Pablo Escobar and paradoxically it is a topic that the museum does not deal with” (Tavera 2017). In a country facing an institutional memory gap when it comes to narco-heritage, some, such as Julio, one of the owners of Colombia Travel Operator, even talk about “amnesia”:

We Colombians are suffering a problem of amnesia. We do not have memory. We do not agree on what has happened in the last ten years. Or we would rather forget. . . . We do not talk about History like specialists but like survivors (fieldnotes, 30 April 2015).

Narrating and Representing the Narco-scape

Depending on which memorial entrepreneurs are involved in the production and distribution of narratives on the drug lord and Medellin’s narco-related past, diverse and competing representations emerge. They range from the acknowledgment of a dark past to the legitimization of Escobar’s actions and the empowerment of drug-

trafficking victims. Different tales and anecdotes feature in Medellín's blurred memorial arena. Private tourism and popular culture are among the main vehicles for the dissemination of representations and discourses associated with Escobar and more generally with narco-heritage. This context encourages the relaying of many unverified facts, reinforcing particular representations attributed to this dark figure.

However, there may be consensus on the veracity of many facts associated with the life of Escobar, such as the numerous terrorist acts he ordered. The bombing of an Avianca flight in 1989, causing the death of 110 civilians, is certainly one of his most notorious actions. Others are still the subject of vivid debates, and some have acquired an aura that categorizes them more as urban legends. His proposal to pay Colombia's external debt, his association with the guerrilla group M19 during the takeover of the Palace of Justice in Bogotá, or the events that took place during his captivity at the "Cathedral" are examples of facts, though far from being verified, that have been widely relayed through television, cinema, literature, and now tourism. These vehicles have helped to build the aura of Escobar, turning him into "one of the most alive of the dead in the world," as the Salvadorian newspaper *El Faro* stated (Navarro 2014).

History is also particularly blurred when it comes to some of the values attributed to Escobar, especially regarding his supposed good deeds on behalf of deprived communities in Medellín. Escobar certainly provided financial and material support for some families, but it was essentially influenced by his political aspirations. Moreover, the extent of this help has often been exaggerated, contributing to the construction of a romantic aura that depicts the drug lord as a modern Robin Hood providing assistance to communities neglected by the state. As Pablo, the tourist guide mentioned above, states: "Pablo would once offer lighting for a local soccer field, and it is now believed that he built the whole sports center" (fieldnotes, 15 October 2015). Camilo talks about the "maternal side" of Pablo Escobar, explaining that a lot of the charity work was accomplished by the women in his family:

It was like showing the good side, the protective side. On one side, he is setting car bombs, but during daytime his family is going around the city giving out groceries. You know some people they do not care about politicians. I mean: "go kill more politicians! It is actually the politicians who steal your water, your electricity. . . . Thanks to that politician you have to walk three hours to school instead of ten minutes. So he might as well kill all those politicians." They [people] did not care. It is not that crazy to think that Pablo would have been a good leader (fieldnotes, 9 May 2015).

The modest origins of Escobar and his self-made ascension are also features that strongly resonate in Medellín, where entrepreneurship is often looked on as a major attribute. Several tour guides related the huge success of the cocaine business to the strong entrepreneurship mentality that characterizes Colombia's second city, where the textile sector was flourishing before the appearance of the drug industry. Polit-Dueñas

(2013:17) points out that the stereotypes held in the national imagination of Colombians depict Medellín's habitants as "sharp businessmen and pragmatic technocrats." Everyone describes the *paisa*⁵ as a hard worker, a fighter, and someone very attached to material success. I talked to several people who on various occasions repeated a phrase typical for an Antioquian father: "Son, bring money from an honest source. If not, bring money anyway."

The idea of making a lot of money by any means available, legal or not, is also present in the statements of some tour guides. As Julio states:

In the eighties, narco-trafficking was not considered as something bad. You have to understand the context. They [narco-traffickers] were considered as very clever businessmen. The culture was to make money quickly and it did not matter if it was good or bad. This was in the whole society. . . . And it is part of our history (fieldnotes, 30 April 2015).

Escobar is also presented as a loving family man and devoutly religious, a view supported by the many financial contributions he made to the Catholic Church. Some narratives related to Escobar clearly contribute to the dissemination of unverified and disputed historical facts and lend support to a particular image of Escobar. A process of oversimplification (Naef 2016b) accompanying the touristification of Pablo Escobar helps to credit him with characteristics such as entrepreneurship, family, and religion, which some see as core values in Medellín's collective identity.

THE STRANGE AND THE FAMILIAR IN A CONTEXT OF NARCO-VIOLENCE

Urban legends and disputed truths fuel tourism narratives, which represent one of the main vehicles of knowledge associated with narco-heritage. Thus, a simplified and blurred image of Medellín in the 1980s is disseminated: a lawless place ruled by corrupt politicians and narco-traffickers who are viewed as smart entrepreneurs. This image is unfortunately based on a violent reality, and its construction takes on board numerous stereotypes. Comparable to the simplification process described here in the Medellín tourism sector, Polit-Dueñas points out the ambiguity that characterizes the film, television, and print media in Mexico when narcos are the subject: "The ambivalence, coupled with a lack of clarity of what actually happens within the world of narcos, foments a mythical vision of the narcos" (2013:90). In Colombia, as in Mexico, this simplified and stereotyped image fascinates some visitors, thus contributing to the romanticization and glamorization of the narcos. This is also what Larkins observed in the context of favela tourism in Rio de Janeiro: "Organized crime has become a source of fascination and fetish; a place where the allure of tropical Brazil merges with Rio's illicit narco-glamour" (2015:81). In the Colombian context, the fascinating aura ac-

quired by Pablo Escobar also turns him into an iconic figure for an international audience.

Media, political discourses, tourism narratives, and popular culture all play a role in promoting certain representations of narco-heritage. These images are generally influenced by a process of oversimplification and are often driven by a Manichean perspective that situates narcos in opposition to public authorities. However, the reality is far more complex, especially in a country such as Colombia where the narco-business and other illegal activities reach into every segment of society, and where the distinction between victims and victimizers is not always clear. Thus, despite the propensity for simplification, certain tourist entrepreneurs also provide a window on gray areas and call into question the clear-cut boundary between good and evil, as Polit-Dueñas (2013) demonstrates with references to Mexican and Colombian literature. Yet, if some tourist guides in Medellín evoke a blurred context where politicians, magistrates, security forces, and narcos rub shoulders in various activities, moving between legality and illegality, a certain legitimization of narco-business is often put forward, justified by the social distress of some communities and the strong entrepreneurship dynamic that characterizes the city. Pushed to the extreme, it can help create a romantic vision of the narcos, glamorizing and glorifying them, and leading to the trivialization of violence.

Unfortunately, the Pablo Escobar legacy and narco-trafficking are very familiar elements to many people in Medellín. On the other hand, foreign tourists can associate this violent heritage with images of strangeness. The irrationality of narcos is set within a very realistic background of urban violence. Reminding her readers that the history of drug trafficking has strong links to personal and traumatic histories, Polit-Dueñas presents these narratives as "hyper-realist": "If reality has been shaped by myths, narco-trafficking has also become a vital part of many people's existence and has shaped the social fabric in the region" (Polit-Dueñas 2013:13). The opposition between the strangeness perceived by foreigners and the familiarity of some inhabitants of Medellín with this violent history creates dissonant representations of narco-heritage. The local authorities who are trying to move on from this dark past and to promote the transformation of Medellín clash with private entrepreneurs exploiting a new tourism market. In this hotly contested arena, some tourism entrepreneurs are attempting to legitimize their practice, such as Roberto Escobar or the tour operator Paisa Road, both of whom highlight the social benefits their tours are supposedly creating.

Although Cohen, in his founding work, insists on the importance of strangeness as an incentive for tourists, he adds that "not even the modern man is ready to immerse in a total alien world" (1972:166). Pablo tours provide a middle range where visitors can connect to violence and the strangeness of the narcos in a secure context. Despite the decrease in violence that it is experiencing, Medellín is still presented by some guides as a place characterized by its irrationality, a kind of exotic and dark elsewhere, where drugs and violence rule. The strategy is without any doubt working: Pablo tours are among the most popular in the city.

CONCLUSION

Narco-heritage is dissonant and disputed. Between Medellín tourism offices and private entrepreneurs, foreign tourists and locals, its representations range from promotion to erasure, and from fascination to rejection. Local private entrepreneurs promoting this dissonant heritage are responding to an increasing external demand influenced by many elements associated with local and international popular culture, especially recent movies and TV series. Although guides in Medellín are mostly locals, they are not part of any public entities in the fields of tourism and heritage management. They participate informally in the fabric of heritage and memory in Colombia, adapting to external forces and providing a disputed tourism product.

Tourism enables all sorts of elements to integrate the field of heritage; Escobar's famous hippopotamuses are a concrete illustration of this process. When the Hacienda Napoles, one of Escobar's most famous properties, and its private zoo were abandoned, most of the animals were either relocated or killed. Only a few hippos survived, in a climate that suited them perfectly. Today, the third generation of hippos is living in Napoles, which has been transformed into a hybrid safari park and museum in memory of Pablo Escobar. Like the objects, sites, and practices analyzed above, they are now also a living part of narco-heritage, glorified and feared by the population in the surrounding villages and actively promoted to visitors. The same can be said of Roberto Escobar, who, while an entrepreneur active in the development of Pablo tours, is nevertheless also part of this living narco-heritage. Like Pablo's hippos, he is put on stage, promoted, and photographed by an increasing number of tourists.

Although Pablo Escobar does not figure in official narratives, he still haunts the city and constitutes an integral part of the social fabric. This analysis has explored the competing representations that Escobar triggered in a blurred context of "quasi-post-conflict." Focusing on this iconic figure led us to consider the notion of narco-heritage, primarily elements related to tourism and aspects of popular culture. It has demonstrated that narco-heritage can constitute a tourism product, especially in an international market fueled with images of narcos propagated by popular culture.

NOTES

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1. Colombia Travel Operator: <http://colombiatraveloperator.com/tours/do-not-say-that-name-tour/> (accessed 3 October 2016).

2. Palenque Tour Colombia: <http://palenque-tours-colombia.com/> (accessed 3 October 2016).

3. Paisa Road: <http://paisaroad.com/tour-pablo-escobar> (accessed 7 October 2016).
4. <http://www.narcotour.co/el-proyecto> (accessed 11 September 2018)
5. *Paisa* is the name given to people living in the Antioquia region, including Medellín.

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