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Confessions to intimate violence: FARC testimonies to sexual violations in the Colombian conflict

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ABSTRACT

This article examines a rare event: confessions to “intimate” acts of sexual violence by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Using a dramaturgical approach, it explores the transformation of “confessional acts” from silence and denial to excuses to eventual remorse and condemnation. It explains the shifts in the FARC’s narratives (scripts) in terms of who performed them (actors), when and where (stage and timing), audiences’ reactions, and the role of directors (FARC leaders). The article uses the unique FARC case to consider how confessional acts can break global patterns of denial and silence around sexual violence in armed conflicts. As sexual violence lacks heroic or military justification and has the potential to harm armed groups’ image, it is logical that leaders would attempt to manage what is said. Audiences comprised of the FARC’s opponents, former combatants, victim-survivors, and enemies influenced scripts. On alternative stages, new narratives acknowledged sexual violence and acceptance of responsibility for it. Over time, leaders lost directorial control over the original denial performance. Understanding this dramatic and contentious process, the article contends, holds the potential for helping to build a strong norm – shared by all sides of Colombia’s polarized post-war society – to condemn sexual violation whenever it occurs and whoever is involved.

KEYWORDS Sexual violence; FARC; Colombia; transitional justice; confessions

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Introduction

This article addresses a particular form of “intimate violence”: confessions to sexual violence in the aftermath of armed conflict.¹ It focuses on public admissions to such violence by former combatant leaders of the

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Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the largest armed group in Latin America, which signed a peace agreement with the Colombian government in 2016 to end over 50 years of armed conflict. Testimonies and allegations of sexual violence committed by the FARC surfaced well before the peace negotiations began.² While the FARC leadership initially dismissed such claims as enemy propaganda, over time certain truths about sexual violence became undeniable.

This study analyzes rare cases of “confessional acts” performed by four influential FARC leaders between 2016 and 2022. As exceptions to the norm of silence and denial, these cases methodologically constitute crucial case studies (Eckstein 1975; Flyvbjerg 2011; Gerring 2007); they reveal the set of factors that contribute to the acknowledgment of sexual violations during conflict. The study uses insights from Colombia to develop an explanation for how patterns of denial and silence might be broken with the aim of strengthening norms against sexual violations whenever they occur and regardless of the perpetrator. These performances were extraordinary and unique because they were media events that occurred in public spaces, broke a silence over past sexual violence, and frequently generated broad audiences. This study analyzes those public performances; it does not elicit new confessions, but rather uses those that have already reached the public stage.

The article uses the dramaturgical method of analysis adapted from Erving Goffman (1959) and Leigh Payne (2008). Goffman (1959, 128) argued that “frontstage” performances are carefully curated to manage how a performer is perceived by the outside world, and to achieve personal or collective objectives through public acts. He found that these performances require consistency and “dramaturgical discipline” to be effective (Goffman 1959, 216). Performers, therefore, “must take care to enliven their performances with appropriate expressions, exclude from their performances expressions that might discredit the impression being fostered, and take care lest the audience impute unintended meanings” (Goffman 1959, 66). Payne (2008) refined and built on this framework to examine perpetrators’ confessions to violence as performances. This approach considers the interaction of five performative elements: the script (the confessional text); the actor (who confesses); the stage (the setting where the confessional act occurs, including media interviews, truth commission hearings and trials, and acts of reconciliation); the timing (the political moment and context in which the confessional act takes place); and the audience (the general public, family and colleagues, and enemies, who engage with the confessional act and react to and influence the performance). To this set of dramatic features, we add a sixth: the role of the director, assumed by a certain individual or group, to manage the confessional act.

The performative analysis of the scripts of these crucial case studies – FARC leaders’ confessions to sexual violence – reveals that such confessions are challenging for armed groups to make, or at least to make effectively. While armed groups risk severe sanctions by admitting to other violations of international law, crimes against humanity, and war crimes – such as the conscription of child soldiers, kidnapping, and killing non-combatants (see for example *90 Minutos* 2019; BLU Radio 2019a; *El Tiempo* 2021; *Semana* 2020b) – admitting to sexual violence is qualitatively different. Lacking in military justification, sexual violence is associated with moral and social depravity. Association with sexual violence threatened to erode the FARC’s legitimacy as a popular army that struggled against oppression and for social justice, including gender equality. Directors of confessional performances – FARC leaders – thus initially engaged in damage control through denial.

What, then, explains the shift in FARC narratives about sexual violence from denial to (at least some) acceptance of responsibility? We argue that it is the interaction of actor, stage, timing, audience, and director. Directors of denial performances lost control over confessional acts; they could no longer stop other actors and audiences from seizing the stage, disrupting the original denial narrative, and demanding acknowledgment of sexual violence. Responsive to audience demand, and in a changing political context of eroding support, some FARC leaders began to accept limited responsibility. The Colombian case thus provides insights into how acknowledgment of sexual violence might be possible in other post-conflict contexts. It has the potential to reveal the factors that could contribute to stronger international norms against conflict-related sexual violence.

To set the stage for the analysis leading to these findings, the first part of the article provides a brief backdrop to the confessional performances: the stage and political timing of FARC confessions to sexual violence. The second part situates such confessional performances within a comparative framework. The article then analyzes four confessional performances by FARC leaders, underscoring the particular scripts, actors, directors, and audiences. The article concludes by reflecting on the potential of confessional acts in reinforcing norms against sexual violence.

Backdrop to the FARC’s confessions to sexual violence

The FARC began in 1964 in Marquetalia (Tolima). What started as a peasant self-defense movement for social justice grew into a powerful organization with active influence throughout Colombia (Ferro-Medina and Ramón 2002). At the top of the command was an all-male Secretariat, composed of seven leaders (Ferro-Medina and Ramón 2002). Many of the Secretariat members were also block commanders, in charge of overseeing the actions

of FARC commanders and troops across large designated territorial areas. Below block commanders were commanders of smaller FARC fronts, who could rise to this rank after two years of membership of the FARC and a history of good conduct (Ferro-Medina and Ramón 2002). Below the commanders were rank-and-file combatants, including forcibly recruited child soldiers.

Despite the all-male Secretariat, the FARC had a reputation for having a high number of women in its ranks; approximately 33 percent of FARC troops were women (UNacional 2017). While women's participation was initially restricted to domestic duties such as laundry, cleaning, and cooking, from 1985 onwards they joined as guerrilleras (Ferro-Medina and Ramón 2002, 66) and the FARC adopted the notion of "insurgent feminism" (Cano 2018; Salazar and Buitrago 2019). The FARC offered women opportunities that were otherwise unavailable to them in the remote Colombian countryside. Its professed gender equality in rights and duties further attracted women to the armed group (Ferro-Medina and Ramón 2002; Herrera and Porch 2008).³ Accounts of sexual abuse exist, therefore, alongside stories of guerrilleras who flourished in the ranks, escaped mistreatment in their homes and communities, and achieved fulfillment, empowerment, and solidarity as part of the FARC (Londoño and Valdivieso 2006; Weber 2021).

Despite the FARC championing gender equality, only in rare cases did women achieve leadership positions (Herrera and Porch 2008, 619). This study includes analysis of confessional performances by four commanders: two men and two women. The two men were members of the high-ranking FARC Secretariat. Three of the leaders (one woman and two men) represented the FARC in the peace negotiations and participated in the FARC's post-conflict political party (one of them – the woman – subsequently left the party). Throughout this article, we use the term "FARC" to refer to the guerrilla group (as opposed to the subsequent political party or the dissident group that formed in defiance of the peace process).

After five decades of armed conflict involving the Colombian armed forces, paramilitary groups such as the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), and rival guerrilla groups (such as the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)), the FARC and the Colombian government negotiated a peace deal. Over 10,000 members of the FARC demobilized and gave up their weapons (Pappier and Johnson 2020). A controversial part of the peace negotiations involved the incorporation of demobilized groups into Colombia's political process. The FARC formed a political party in 2017 called Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común, FARC-Comunes (simply Comunes since 2021). Further tensions in the peace process over FARC impunity for past violence led to the establishment of restorative justice – the Colombian Truth Commission (CEV), which published its final report in 2022 – and retributive

(trial) bodies – the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), which is mandated to conclude its work by 2037. Both institutions have recognized the use of sexual violence by the FARC, as well as other guerrilla, military, and paramilitary forces.

In September 2023, the JEP opened a macro-case investigation into conflict-related sexual violence.⁴ It attributed 33 percent of such cases to paramilitaries, 6 percent to the FARC, and 3 percent to state forces, with the remainder unattributed (Jaramillo Bernat 2023). The Truth Commission also found that the AUC paramilitaries were the greatest perpetrators of sexual violence, followed by guerrilla groups. It located the FARC's "crimes such as rape, sexual harassment, [and] forcing people to witness forced sexual acts and sexual slavery" primarily in Cauca, Antioquia, Valle del Cauca, Sucre, and Nariño (CEV 2022, 79). It further found that the FARC forced abortions when women combatants became pregnant, though the practice varied "depending on the block and front in which the guerrillas were located" and the leadership in charge (CEV 2022, 73). The country's Constitutional Court also recognized the victim status of former FARC combatants subjected to sexual or reproductive violence (Giraldo-Gartner 2020; Ramírez 2020).

These official bodies' findings followed reports on the FARC's sexual violence produced by human rights organizations, women's rights advocates, media outlets, and scholars. In 2007, for example, Colombian human rights group SISMA Mujer published a volume on conflict sexual violence and found that "despite being prohibited in their regulations, the FARC and ELN guerrillas are responsible for crimes of sexual violence against women in the country" (SISMA Mujer 2007, 56). In 2009, Maria Clara Galvis chronicled survivors' descriptions of sexual violence committed by the FARC for a Corporación Humanas publication (Galvis 2009). The international organization Women's Link Worldwide submitted a 2019 report to the JEP with the testimonies of 35 women in the FARC who were forced to abort and use contraceptives (Women's Link Worldwide 2019).

Victim-survivors of the FARC's sexual violence – both from within the armed group and from communities affected by the conflict – have also mobilized to share what happened to them and demand justice and reparations. In some cases, they have formed victims' organizations. Yolanda Perea, for example, a civilian survivor of FARC sexual violence, leads a group of other women survivors (Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres) in demanding justice, particularly at the JEP (Herrera Valbuena and Lugo 2023). Corporación Rosa Blanca has also demanded justice for FARC sexual violence. Originally formed in 2017 by 25 women who were forcibly recruited as child soldiers into the FARC and who faced sexual violence, it expanded to include a broader array of 1,200 women survivors of sexual violence during the conflict (Apuleyo Mendoza 2019; CNMH 2022).⁵

Right-wing activists have assailed the FARC for sexual violence in a campaign to discredit the armed group. Natalia Herrera and Douglas Porch (2008, 610) documented a historical pattern in which the Colombian Ministry of Defense claimed that the FARC “treated [women combatants] as virtual sex slaves ... to keep the men entertained.” They also quoted a former United States (US) special forces colonel with a long history of working in Colombia during the conflict, who stated that FARC women combatants were “just passed around” among their male colleagues (Herrera and Porch 2008, 610). In their academic analysis, Herrera and Porch (2008, 610) also noted Colombian soldiers’ view of the FARC’s treatment of women combatants “as prostitutes.” These types of allegations from the FARC’s enemies continued during and after the peace process. Conservative journalist Vanessa Vallejo (2019), for example, wrote that “everyone in Colombia knows that the FARC guerrillas [who are lawmakers today benefitting from a pact of impunity] recruited and raped minors for decades.”

While the right focused on the FARC, the armed group was not alone in committing sexual violence or in avoiding discussion about it. Indeed, the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (CNMH) (2017, 11) found that

[n]ot one actor has honestly admitted to having violated, raped, or forced into prostitution any victim. It is much easier to confess to land grabbing, forced displacement, and even killing. But a deep moral weight prevails over sexual violence that makes it a horrendous crime, that denotes the dehumanization not of the victims, but of the victimizers.

In line with this conclusion by the CNMH, our survey of the existing evidence found that confessions to sexual violence by Colombian armed groups such as the military and paramilitaries were rare or non-existent.⁶ Unlike the military and paramilitary forces, however, the leaders of the FARC began to speak out publicly about sexual violence crimes. Eventually, the demand for truth about the FARC’s sexual violence from investigative bodies, victims, and journalists led the organization’s leaders to make confessions, almost unknown in other contexts of armed conflict.

Confessions to sexual violence in comparative perspective

The occurrence of sexual violence during armed conflict is not unique to Colombia. It has been systematically analyzed in truth commission reports (Anania 2023). Scholars have studied its variation across conflict situations, factors that explain when it occurs or not, and the form that it takes (Cohen 2016; Nordås and Cohen 2021; Wood 2009). Colombian scholars and researchers have also extensively studied sexual violence during the country’s armed conflict (see for example Fajardo Arturo and Valoyes Valoyes 2015; Fiscó 2005; Galvis 2009). However, few analyses of where, when, why, and how armed actors confess to sexual violence exist.

Scholars have tended to find that even when faced with overwhelming evidence from survivors, witnesses, and investigations, leaders of armed organizations rarely admit to such acts. Jo-Marie Burt (2019) reported that perpetrators remained silent or explicitly denied accusations despite incontrovertible evidence of sexual violence in Sepur Zarco during the Guatemalan Civil War. In other countries, military, paramilitary, and rebel forces' leaders confronted with accusations of sexual violations have also tended to issue outright denials. When faced with unambiguous evidence, they blame rogue or deviant individuals, thus denying the systematic or widespread practice of sexual violence. Bosnian-Serb leader Radovan Karadžić, for example, claimed that he did not know of any "systematic rape anywhere in Serb-conquered Bosnia," adding "[w]e know of some eighteen cases of rape altogether, but this was not organized but done by psychopaths" (Gutman 1993).⁷

In Goffman's (1959) terms, leaders deny systematic sexual violence to "save face" for themselves or their organizations. Such violence is not heroic, brave, courageous, patriotic, just, or self-sacrificing; it cannot be justified as advancing a military cause in the same way as other wartime behaviors. Vivienne Jabri (2020, 604–605) noted that "[w]ar breaks down taboos against killing and the deliberate and direct infliction of suffering against fellow human beings." Sexual violence, however, does not fit her notion of a standard war narrative: "the construction of a mythology based on inclusion and exclusion ... [that] sharply contrasts the insiders from the outsiders who are ... the deserving enemy" (Jabri 2020, 604). It is, instead, deviant: moral, social, and cultural wrongdoing in any context.

Researchers have found more confessions to sexual violence among lower-ranking soldiers, albeit rarely on public stages. Soldiers sometimes admit to what they did, or were forced to do, privately to researchers (Cohen 2013; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2009). These private confessions do not always express a sense of wrongdoing or an obligation to follow orders, as Roos Haer, Tobias Hecker, and Anna Maedl (2015, 623) found in their study of 24 combatants in Democratic Republic of Congo who admitted to sexual assault. Soldiers sometimes express positive emotions resulting from the *esprit de corps* of gang rape, as Alexandra Stiglmayer (1994, 153–154) discovered in her interviews with a Bosnian soldier. They may equate rape with sex, rather than a criminal act, or use the third-person voice to avoid personal responsibility, as Jelko Boesten and Lurgio Gavilán (2023) found in interviews with Peruvian soldiers. Anette Houge (2023) noted that rapists' guilty pleas at the International Court of Justice ask for forgiveness, but without specifically naming the criminal act itself. These accounts by lower-ranking soldiers suggest that off-stage performances may reveal more about sexual violence than public performances by leaders. On public stages, soldiers' fears of stigma and guilt, or the explicit

or implicit cues from directors of the performances (their commanders), tend to block confessional acts.

Directors of confessional performances, however, often fail to create or promote a single effective narrative about sexual violence. Sara Cobb (2020, 622–623) noted that while “stories matter” to conflict resolution, some stories are “toxic for peace.” Confessions fall into this category, particularly in Colombia’s polarized society, where each side uses sexual violence as a weapon to legitimize their own actions and delegitimize the actions of their enemies. Yet these confessions hold the potential to address and condemn sexual violence, precisely because it was widespread and used by a variety of armed actors within and outside the state. Following Cobb (2020, 628), we explore when and how it is possible to mobilize “language and stories toward preferred outcomes and relationships.” We seek to understand how confessions to violence might reinforce norms against sexual violence in conflict and its aftermath. We suggest that the FARC, given its commitment to gender equality and sustainable peace, is best situated to initiate that process.

In light of the comparative context, it is not surprising that FARC leaders initially denied sexual violence. What is unexpected is the leadership’s shift from denial to admission. This article explores how that happened. It also considers the potential of confessions to sexual violence for building stronger democracy and human rights cultures. We argue that contentious stories of sexual violence provoke “new ways of thinking,” challenge “prevailing view[s],” and begin to break the “silence and denial of violence” (Payne 2008, 283). They also make it impossible to “easily ignore evidence” that contradicts beliefs (Payne 2008, 283). These contentious stories, we argue, hold “the possibility of building consensus around democratic values,” albeit through “messy” processes that expose “uncomfortable facts and perspectives” (Payne 2008, 285, 292), to establish stronger democratic and human rights norms against sexual violation in peacetime. The puzzle behind this article is how to advance such a process in Colombia and beyond.

Confessional performances

To tease out that puzzle, we analyze four confessional acts and the contentious processes that they provoked. We conducted an in-depth search of FARC leaders’ confessions and focused on critical confessions to sexual violence made by FARC commanders in public spaces. The script categories range from the expected denial and excuses, to unanticipated remorse and condemnation. The analysis of these acts explores the factors that could contribute to norm building against sexual violence in Colombia and other post-conflict contexts. Specifically, we consider who confesses (actor), in what

context (stage and timing), under whose control (director), and with what response (audience).

Denial: Pablo Catatumbo

Pablo Catatumbo Torres Victoria produced the kind of denial performance anticipated by comparative analysis. Catatumbo's leadership position in the FARC, moreover, put him in the role of director of the organization's confessional performances, guiding the presentation of a denial script on public stages to manage the FARC's reputation in the aftermath of armed conflict. He was a key member of the FARC Secretariat during the armed conflict between 2008 and 2017, represented the FARC in the Havana Peace Talks, and currently leads Comunes and serves as a national senator.

In that directorial role, Catatumbo has publicly accepted responsibility, and asked for forgiveness for FARC violence, but not for sexual violence. In a September 2019 radio broadcast (*90 Minutos* 2019; BLU Radio 2019a), Catatumbo admitted to the murder of 11 deputies from Valle del Cauca in 2007, stating:

What happened to the deputies should never have occurred. I don't want to make excuses, but they were under our responsibility. I was not there, I had nothing to do with it, but as a commander of the FARC I assume that responsibility. I am ashamed – those are not the principles that inspired us, [and] unfortunately it happened. The only thing I can say to you is that I am sorry.

Catatumbo's willingness and capacity to recognize wrongdoing for certain acts of past violence, but not for sexual violence, is striking. He has responded to accusations of FARC sexual violence with denial. As early as August 2015, before the peace accords were formally signed, he read out a prepared statement denying all accusations of sexual violence committed by the FARC, describing such accusations as lies constructed by the FARC's enemies:

We emphatically reject the ongoing media campaign against the FARC-EP⁸ that aims to demonize it, presenting [its members] as systematic violators of women's rights. It is illogical that an insurgent organization that has resisted one of the strongest military offensives in Latin America and the world for more than 51 years would harm the civilian population [on which it depended], and even worse, sexually abuse its own guerrilla forces and the women in the communities, as the Prosecutors Office has falsely claimed. (Telesur 2015)

To reinforce the FARC's innocence, while simultaneously acknowledging the seriousness of sexual violence crimes during the conflict carried out by all armed actors (not only the FARC), Catatumbo called for "a serious and independent investigation that should describe the entire range of victims of sexual violence in Colombia and determine the manner, time, and place in which [the crimes] occurred" (Telesur 2015). Catatumbo concluded:

"We categorically affirm that in the ranks of the FARC-EP there is no room for violence against women; there is only room for love, camaraderie, respect, and recognition towards them" (Telesur 2015).

Catatumbo's denial of sexual violence within the FARC is shared by "FARC feminists." In an interview conducted by Kiran Stallone and Julia Zulver (2017), a woman in the process of demobilizing shared: "I have never heard of a case of sexual violence within this block. Stories like this just try to undermine the good work that the FARC does." FARC commander Judith Simanca Herrera, also known as Victoria Sandino Palmera, told the researchers that "much of this information [on sexual violence was] invented" by women combatants who abandoned the FARC, turned themselves in to the military, and fabricated stories so that they could get benefits and avoid imprisonment.⁹ Elsewhere, Sandino (*El Tiempo* 2016), fellow FARC leader Alexandra Nariño, also known as "La Holandesa" (*Semanario Voz* 2015), and others within the Mujer Fariana group (Salazar and Buitrago 2019, 11) have also argued that an early gender equality struggle within the FARC was over the right of women to serve as combatants; that equality necessitated family planning, and the right to abortion if contraceptive methods failed. They denied that these methods were imposed on women in the FARC (Salazar and Buitrago 2019, 11).

Indeed, another form of denial identified the FARC's women combatants as so powerful that they would not put up with exploitation. They were men's equals, trained for combat, and – in the words of a lower-ranking woman combatant – *berracas* (brave, tough, gutsy) (Herrera and Porch 2008). As an example of this form of denial, Sandino stated that

if someone is going to harass [a FARC woman] or approach her at night or is going to do something to her ... this [FARC] girl is armed. She is not going to let herself be fucked with ... And I say that because they are fierce (*bravas*). Our women are very fierce.¹⁰

This denial narrative, in other words, attempted to preserve the image of the movement. It evoked the FARC's commitment to gender equality, training of powerful women combatants, and inclusion of feminist leaders to cast doubt on claims of sexual violence. However, it had the unintended effect of denigrating women's experiences.

Excuses: Victoria Sandino

As more testimonies to sexual violence emerged, a more nuanced narrative – with a feminist perspective – recognized sexual violence committed by the FARC, but excused it as a sexist or misogynist trait in Colombia that even the FARC could not escape. This alternative narrative came from Sandino, who initially denied that sexual violence was committed by the FARC, telling an interviewer in 2016: "It is absurd to think that those of us who

have acquired a revolutionary anti-patriarchal consciousness are going to allow ourselves to be mistreated or to allow anyone to be mistreated in the ranks or outside of them" (*El Tiempo* 2016). However, in 2020, as evidence against the armed group continued to mount, she provided comments that constituted "the first time that a party member admit[ed] that women and girls were abused within the guerrilla organization" (*El Espectador* 2020).

Sandino did not, however, uniquely charge the FARC; rather, she referred to sexual violence as a Colombian problem, not specific to any one type of man, organization, or context of war. She claimed that the armed conflict merely exacerbated deeply entrenched *machismo* in Colombia (API 2020). Raised in that culture, FARC members were not immune from the attitudes that produce endemic sexual violence:

It is true that [the FARC-EP] had tremendously rigorous norms. The first thing to start with is that if these rules were so rigorous, as I knew them to be, it is because these events came to light in one way or another, because they are men and women who come from the same society – a society that victimizes women and girls in particular ... I also recognize that these events occurred within the organization. I do not know the events in depth, but they must have happened and I am sure they occurred because we were in the context of the conflict and they also had weapons and they were macho, patriarchal men. (Caracol 2020a)

In a separate interview with the Colombian news outlet *El Espectador* in the same month (Gómez Polo 2020), Sandino further elaborated on the FARC's susceptibility to deeply entrenched sexism in Colombian society before, during, and after the armed conflict: "In this country, men beat women and rape them, so one cannot think that when [these men] joined the FARC, from the very beginning, that [such practices] were going to be left behind."

With these words, Sandino changed the narrative. She did not deny the FARC's sexual violence. However, her admission fell short of an acceptance of responsibility. She claimed not to fully understand the dimension of the crime and its impact (*no conozco a profundidad los hechos*), but nonetheless normalized the acts as the consequence of a pervasive Colombian trait. As such, Sandino excused the FARC troops for the sexual violence endemic to the country. She further excused the leadership for its inability to control or stop insidious acts of sexual violence.

Sandino's excuses had a powerful impact because of who she was: the only woman negotiating for the FARC in the Havana Peace Talks, alongside Catatumbo; like Catatumbo, a senator for Comunes; and, as such, a member of the National Commission on Women. Sandino and others left Comunes in 2022 due to frustration with the lack of inclusion, representation, and democratic debate (*El Colombiano* 2022).

Sandino's confession to the FARC's sexual violence occurred before her departure from the party. She spoke as a defender of the FARC even as

evidence of its involvement in sexual violence proliferated. In that context, neither denial nor blaming deviants in the organization for sexual violence was credible. Her confessional act, therefore, acknowledged the fact of sexual violence while simultaneously excusing the FARC of bearing specific responsibility given the pervasive culture of misogyny. After leaving the party, and in response to the decision by the JEP to investigate the FARC's sexual violence, Sandino stated: "I hope there will be light shed on all of the victimization experienced by women, and not only those in which the FARC-EP was involved" (Bolano Senior 2023). She also mentioned her role in the sub-commission that made sexual violence a crime against humanity in the country, without the possibility of amnesty or pardon.

Sandino might have responded similarly to other FARC atrocities, attributing them to Colombia's entrenched culture of violence. She did not. Like Catatumbo, Sandino accepted responsibility for the FARC's kidnapping and murders, specifically of the deputies from the Valle del Cauca department. In July 2019, she spoke directly to Fabiola Perdomo, one of the widows of the murdered deputies: "Fabiola, to you and your daughter Daniela who are present here, I ask for your forgiveness for the pain we have caused you" (Caracol 2019b). Sandino explicitly acknowledged the harm and suffering caused by the FARC, and expressed remorse, stating: "I have felt shame with regard to the deputies and other events. I have felt pain. It should never have happened" (Tubarco 2019). Perdomo, in response, publicly forgave Sandino: "I have lived this war in the flesh, not on television, and I believe that forgiveness liberates and helps in advancing toward a decent and fraternal society" (Caracol 2019b).

By contrast, the Corporación Rosa Blanca victims of sexual violence did not forgive Sandino for her admission to endemic sexual violence in Colombia, including that committed by the FARC. They instead accused her of "washing her hands [of wrongdoing] by acknowledging that sexual abuse and rape did occur, but [she] says she did not know about or see it" (Corporación Rosa Blanca 2020). They demanded a confessional act that acknowledged wrongdoing, recognized harm, and expressed remorse; in other words, they wanted the kind of confession that Sandino was prepared to make about other forms of FARC wrongdoing.

While falling short of an apology, Sandino's confessional act nonetheless departed from her earlier denial by acknowledging victims' experiences and condemning the sexual violence committed by the FARC and others. The timing of her confessional act – after victims' experiences became (literally) undeniable – was crucial. Yet the context may also explain Sandino's reluctance to accept responsibility and express remorse for the FARC's sexual violence. Admitting to that responsibility would have stigmatized the organization. In a different context, one in which military and paramilitary leaders had begun to take responsibility for sexual violence, and in which Sandino was no

longer part of Comunes and subject to the party's control, she might have proved more willing to express remorse and to contribute to strengthening in Colombia the norm against sexual violence that she fervently endorsed.

Remorse: Timochenko

Rodrigo Londoño Echeverrú, or Timoleón Jiménez, also known as Timochenko, might be the least likely FARC commander to admit to, and express remorse for, wrongdoing. He was the last, and the only surviving, Commander-in-Chief of the FARC before the peace agreement was signed. As such, he led the peace accord negotiations. With his historic profile as military leader and peace negotiator, and his current role as the President of Comunes, Timochenko could be said to be the public face of the FARC. Like Catatumbo, he was the natural director of confessional performances, particularly those that denied responsibility for sexual violence.

Yet, over time, even Timochenko admitted to the FARC's involvement in sexual violence. He moved from denial in 2019 to acknowledgment and remorse in 2020. Timochenko attributed that change to slowly becoming aware of the violations. He was remorseful that such acts occurred. His acceptance of responsibility was limited; however, he regarded instances of sexual violence as isolated incidents that were severely punished when they were discovered.

How Timochenko negotiated the shifts in the narrative of sexual violence reveals much about the loss of the FARC's directorial control over confessional acts. In March 2019, Timochenko flatly denied the FARC's involvement in sexual violence, blaming the organization's enemies and the enemies of the peace process for the accusations: "It's about stigmatizing. It's about saddling the adversary with as many crimes as possible as a way to stigmatize in order to bring about a situation that does not allow for reconciliation" (Caracol 2019a). Just days after this statement, however, Timochenko admitted that FARC combatants had been involved in sexual violence, but declared that the organization had severely sanctioned the perpetrators involved in the incidents that occurred among the ranks (BLU Radio 2019b). He denounced the FARC's enemies for exaggerating wrongdoing for political reasons:

Sexual violence was one of the crimes most severely punished in [the FARC's own] war tribunals ... and of the cases I know about, yes, in our organization there were cases of rape and these cases were addressed by regulation ... And [the perpetrators in] the cases that I know of were all condemned to execution. This word sounds very tough, but this is how we responded. (BLU Radio 2019b)

When later asked to clarify and comment specifically on sexual crimes against children, he continued:

This [rape] was not a massive. Indeed, one of the aspects of the FARC that I most admire is the respect between men and women living together ... And I'm not

saying that there weren't ever gender violations, as they are called today, because at the end of the day we come from the same society, a machista society ... This is the greatest slander I have ever heard. This, truthfully, is infuriating ... To exploit such a sensitive issue ... to turn people against us and take away from us [our achievement]: the peace agreement. (BLU Radio 2019b)

By September 2020, Timochenko responded differently when speaking about forced abortion as a form of sexual violence. In a radio interview with Caracol (2020b), he recounted that after he had discussed the issue with women combatants, he could no longer deny the FARC's practice of forced abortion, or attribute such claims to politically motivated false accusations:

When I heard the very first time that the FARC required women to abort in the worst way, I said "That's propaganda, that's aimed at delegitimizing us." But as I was able to talk and investigate, I'm sure that, yes, in some situations ... that they forced women to abort, which seems to me to be a crime that has no justification or explanation ... This is nothing like the FARC that I joined.

Timochenko might have attempted to justify abortion and contraception in military and gender equality terms: ensuring that women were able to continue as active combatants. He did not. Instead, he acknowledged that forced abortions were a crime without justification. However, he fell short of accepting responsibility. Instead, he claimed that the FARC that he joined and led would not have committed such acts. Rather than direct denial, this was reluctant acceptance when faced with evidence from "talk [ing] and investigat[ing]" the crimes. In line with this, his earlier denial could thus be explained by lack of knowledge.

Indeed, that FARC leaders were initially unaware of the prevalence of sexual violence among the troops is not impossible to imagine. The command structure, after all, distanced senior leaders from lower-ranking troops' activities in the territories. Block control put power and autonomy in the hands of local leaders without oversight. Lower-ranking commanders, soldiers, and victims may have kept quiet about abuses owing to loyalty or fear of retribution. Blanket denial may have been sincere, therefore, and not purely an instrumental method of disassociating the organization from unjustifiable acts. It became untenable, however, against mounting accusations.

In another interview with W Radio (2020), Timochenko also admitted to "learning about cases" and "becoming aware of situations" that involved sexual abuse and forced abortions. His words reflect Elizabeth Jean Wood's (2018) distinction between armed groups' policy and practice. Timochenko emphatically asserted that sexual abuse and forced abortions were "not part of FARC policies," and that when such practices occurred, they were "severely punished" (W Radio 2020). FARC leader Alexandra Nariño also argued that

[s]exual violence in the FARC-EP is a serious crime ... Whoever commits this crime faces a war tribunal where he can be punished with death, if the guerrilla assembly decides it. For this reason, it has never been, nor is it, a war tactic for us; it is condemned among the troops. (Semanario Voz 2015)

She went on to say that she “suppose[d] there must have been cases in over 50 years of war,” but that she never knew of any (Semanario Voz 2015). By doubling down on the FARC’s intolerance of such incidents, these leaders seemed to suggest that there was no need to apologize for a *practice* that had been severely reprimanded, since there was never a *policy* of sexual violence.

Nevertheless, an apology came. In October 2020, Timochenko directly asked for forgiveness from Indigenous women victims of sexual violence committed by the FARC. The stage mattered: a 2020 CEV “Truth Encounter” on “Indigenous Peoples in Situations of Risk of Physical and Cultural Extermination: Dignity, Resistance and Support for Peace.” Speaking directly into a camera, Timochenko expressed his hope that the violated Indigenous community could find a way to “reconcile” even after the harms that it had experienced and the FARC’s role in perpetrating those wrongs (CEV 2020). He referred to a 1998 massacre in Murindó following days of fighting between the FARC and paramilitaries that included sexual violence. He said that what he was about to discuss was

very painful because it is so abhorrent – cases of sexual violence. I stand before you and permit myself to, on behalf of the organization, ask you to forgive us ... for the negative consequences of a struggle that from the beginning and to the end we believed, and I believed, to be just ... but unfortunately the way we developed it was through war. That war acquired its own dynamics that led us to commit those terrible mistakes. For all of those reasons, I ask for an opportunity for us to reconcile. (CEV 2020)

On a truth and reconciliation stage, a stage that the FARC had endorsed throughout the peace process, Timochenko expressed remorse. He abandoned denial and excuses; he admitted that the FARC had engaged in “terrible mistakes” for which he asked for forgiveness on behalf of his organization. What he left ambiguous was whether he was apologizing only for the incidents that took place in Murindó, or for all cases of sexual violence during the armed conflict. Ambiguity allowed for the possibility that Timochenko saw Murindó as an exception that defied the FARC’s policy against sexual violence.¹¹ Alternatively, Timochenko might have begun to acknowledge the FARC’s widespread practices of sexual violence, in violation of FARC policies, for which he sought forgiveness.

In 2022, Timochenko made a similarly ambiguous acknowledgment of the FARC’s sexual violence in another specific (kidnapping) setting: “I recognize that despite not having been a policy and a practice directed by the Secretariat, there were acts of sexual violence in the kidnappings carried out

within the exercises of territorial control” (Blanquicet 2022). The stage where this recognition occurred and the audience that heard it were both important. Timochenko made these remarks during a JEP hearing attended by victims of kidnapping and their family members – that is, an audience of people who had been directly impacted. His statement followed the testimony of a woman who was raped by members of the FARC while kidnapped and tied up. Unlike in an informal interview with a journalist, Timochenko had heard and had been forced to confront the evidence from the victims of FARC violence. The timing was also relevant; less than a month later, the Truth Commission would release its final report (*Mi cuerpo es la verdad* or *My Body Is the Truth*), which included evidence of sexual violence crimes committed by the FARC, as well as other armed groups (CEV 2022). The FARC was not uniquely to blame, and accusations were not only from the FARC’s enemies. Timochenko, nonetheless, left ambiguous whether his remorse extended to all cases of FARC sexual violence or only to supposedly exceptional cases.

Lack of detail and ambiguity were not evident in Timochenko’s other confessions to FARC wrongdoing. Like Victoria Sandino and Pablo Catatumbo, he made full and remorseful confessions for crimes that did not involve sexual violence. He did not deny, excuse, blame enemies for false allegations, or equivocally acknowledge other conflict-related atrocities committed by the FARC. In June 2021, for example, he made public his regret for all forms of kidnapping carried out by the armed group. At an event organized by the CEV in Bogotá, Timochenko stood at a podium before an audience that included victims of kidnapping to say:

To the kidnapping victims who were eventually released, to their families and loved ones, to all those who in some way felt the burden of the victims’ unjust deprivation of freedom, we express from the depths of our being that we are truly sorry and that we hope they can one day forgive us for the unspeakable harm inflicted. (*El Tiempo* 2021)

Timochenko unequivocally accepted full responsibility for all kidnappings committed by the FARC, whether accusations existed or not, and whether previously recognized by the FARC or not. He accepted kidnapping as a policy and a practice. As such, he asked for forgiveness for it. This blanket apology contrasted sharply with FARC leaders’ responses to sexual violence accusations: blanket denial delivered by Catatumbo in 2015, Sandino’s excuses in 2020, and Timochenko’s ambiguous apology in 2020.

The factors that shifted Timochenko’s performance from denial or excuses to remorse involve the stage, timing, and audience. On a stage oriented toward acts of reconciliation, at a time when the evidence of sexual violence was incontrovertible, and facing an audience of victims, Timochenko delivered a remorseful confession. In these circumstances, the original denial narrative was untenable, and the confession meant that it would no longer be

appropriate in any context. Directorial control had changed; it now allowed for the type of confessional act that could condemn certain acts as wrong, as unforgiveable, thereby contributing to a stronger norm against sexual violence. While such an act was limited – in seemingly addressing only isolated incidents of sexual violence – it nonetheless modeled how FARC leaders could play a role in norm building and initiate a process by which the FARC could accept responsibility for sexual violence.

Condemnation: Karina

The confessions made by Elda Neyis Mosquera García, also known as Karina, in 2018 moved even further in that direction. Karina provided knowledge of her own and others' involvement in sexual violence, acknowledgment of wrongdoing within the FARC, and condemnation of sexual violence in war and in peace. Karina made this confessional act as a former FARC commander, someone known as powerful and fierce in that role, and with intimate knowledge of FARC policy and practice.

Karina's ability to make such a confession resulted in part from who she was and is. In particular, Karina had already broken with the FARC before the peace process (in 2008), had nothing to do with Comunes, and had no obligation to FARC senior leadership, nor did it have any directorial control over her then, if ever. Making her confession while serving a 33-year sentence (under house detention) also meant that she had little to lose. Karina confessed as a former FARC commander and both a perpetrator and victim of FARC sexual violence.

According to a widely cited *Vanity Fair* article about her (Orth 2018), Karina left the FARC under pressure; she suspected that there was a plot to murder her within the FARC. As a FARC commander, she had managed to evade a three-year search for her by combined US and Colombian forces, and their US\$1 million bounty for her capture. What eventually lured Karina out of hiding and into the hands of her erstwhile enemies in the armed forces were dwindling resources, the promise of being reunited with her daughter, and escape from her enemies in the FARC. Karina betrayed the FARC and turned herself in, disarmed, faced trial under the Justice and Peace prosecution, was found guilty of aggravated homicide, terrorism, rebellion, aggravated robbery, and criminal damage to property, and was sentenced to 33 years in isolation under house detention. During that time, she began a spiritual transformation and became a devout Christian. At the time of making her confession, Karina had no interest in being reintegrated into the FARC's post-conflict political life, even in the unlikely event that the FARC would forgive her betrayal and allow her to do so.

Not only was the cost of confession low (due to Karina's previous separation from the FARC and the fact that she was serving a long sentence),

but she was also positively motivated to tell her story. She inhabited a “gray zone” (Levi 1986) – not only perpetrator, but also victim. She could speak to the experiences of a victim of sexual violence, but also provide the details as a perpetrator. She could reinforce victims’ accounts. In so doing, she could regain some dignity.

Karina explained her reasons for voluntarily joining the FARC. She was a teenager who found the FARC’s ideology of equality and social justice appealing. After becoming pregnant as a combatant, her FARC commander ordered her to abort. When she became a commander, she too ordered women under her command to abort, even assisting in those forced abortions herself. She is the only FARC leader to admit to her own involvement in, and witnessing of, sexual violations within the FARC.¹² Contradicting claims that forced abortion was never condoned and severely punished, Karina stated unambiguously that “[a]bortions for [guerrilleras] are FARC policy. Even if the [guerrillera] does not want to abort, she is forced to do it ... The commander who does not uphold that rule is sanctioned as hard as the [guerrillera] herself” (Orth 2018).

Karina thus rejected the FARC leadership’s narratives of denial, excuses, and remorse for isolated events of sexual violence. She told a story of sexual violence as the FARC’s *modus operandi*. She acknowledged that some leaders within the FARC could claim that they did not know about sexual violence, because such acts were formally forbidden, and thus sometimes hidden. Nonetheless, Karina rejected the claim that knowledge of these acts – when they were discovered – resulted in punishment. Instead, she argued that sexual violence was frequently practiced and widespread, recognized and ignored as wrongdoing. She accepted responsibility out of a personal conviction that she needed to atone for wrongdoing and also to acknowledge what women victims like herself experienced. The confessional act allowed her to use her own wrongdoing to serve a higher purpose.

Karina attributed her willingness to admit to sexual violence to her confinement. Her detention gave her an opportunity to reflect on the atrocities that she experienced and committed. In a 2018 public letter, she joined victims in calling on FARC leaders to contemplate their responsibility:

The time has come when we, the FARC [women] combatants who were abused and mistreated, are denouncing the senior leadership loudly to the world. We are the same ones who were used and mistreated, the same ones who had our innocent girlhood taken from us, the same ones who were turned into sex slaves, who survived forced abortions and executions, the same ones who today want, and ask for, justice. I acknowledge that I was a perpetrator. I acknowledge what I did and what I was forced to do. And I have confessed, accepting and acknowledging all of the facts. And I have asked for forgiveness and I will continue to do so as many times as is necessary ... The criminal cynicism of FARC leaders pains me so much, that they say they are not perpetrators and they do not have to ask for forgiveness ... I am deeply remorseful for

having participated in this criminal organization. Yes criminal. Because they abandoned their ideals and principles many years ago ... To the girls of the Corporación Rosa Blanca ... who I respect and admire, tell them that their struggle from now and into the future will be mine too. (Mosquera 2018)

In her condemnation of past sexual violence, Karina also claimed that the FARC's refusal to admit to that practice reinforces impunity for and tolerance of sexual and other violations, a lost opportunity to change the country with the transition to peace (Mosquera 2018). Her capacity to perform such a confession was predicated not only on her unique role in the past and present as a victim-perpetrator but also on her betrayal by and of the FARC. The stage, timing, and audience also contributed to an alternative narrative; isolated under house detention, in a context of widespread demand for the truth about sexual violence from FARC victims like herself, and having undergone a religious conversion, Karina used her experience to condemn sexual violence.

The performative analysis of Karina's confession shows how unique this type of confession is. It took a particular type of actor, on an unusual stage, at a specific moment, with an audience eager for the truth, unconstrained by any directorial control, to produce the kind of confessional script aimed at strengthening the norm against sexual violence.

Conclusion: how to confess to sexual violence

In September 2023, the JEP opened Macro-Case 11 to investigate "sexual violence, reproductive violence and other crimes committed because of prejudice, hatred and discrimination based on gender, sex, identity and diverse sexual orientation in the context of the Colombian armed conflict" (JEP 2023b). A new stage has thus emerged for confessions to FARC sexual violations (Jaramillo Bernat 2023). How will this new stage shift the type of confessional performance? What type of director role will former FARC commanders and current Comunes leaders play on this new stage? What script will FARC senior leadership direct to save face? How might this process contribute to building norms against sexual violence?

The JEP is an institutional stage that the FARC endorsed during the peace process, and one on which the FARC has previously admitted to kidnapping and recruiting child soldiers. Through its ongoing investigation, the JEP will collect information and produce incontrovertible evidence of the FARC's involvement in sexual violence. Audiences of victims, who have already pushed the JEP for justice, will attend. On this stage, as on recent smaller stages where the FARC senior leadership has faced accusations of sexual violence, denial will not be appropriate. As FARC leaders have discovered, denial undermines the values of gender equality that the organization claims to hold; it denigrates the voices and experiences of women combatants and civilian women in conflict zones.

The FARC will also face other actors on this stage. State forces are included in Macro-Case 11, and they will develop their own confessional scripts. In such a context, and given that denial is not a credible response, the FARC could take the lead in advancing a narrative that condemns sexual violence, no matter who commits it. It could identify sexual violence as endemic across Colombian society and promote the recognition that such harms were perpetrated by all armed groups in the conflict. Yet the response to this kind of confession by Sandino suggests that the FARC leadership will need to go further to restore its dignity in the face of such acts. It will need to recognize its responsibility for failing to uphold its commitment to gender equality (the reason why many women joined the organization), thereby violating its own principles and values. It will need to condemn sexual violence not only in general terms but also in terms of its own practices. It will need to provide remedy for victims. In other words, the FARC leadership needs to go beyond what it has already done: the move from denial to admission to sexual wrongdoing and publicly asking for forgiveness. It has the opportunity to take a moral stance, make a commitment to recognizing the rights of victims, and condemn sexual violence in all situations, including the past conflict. It can call for full disclosure, and for truth, justice, and reparations for all forms of sexual violence and wrongdoing, and in doing so contribute to building norms against sexual violence whenever it occurs, by whoever perpetrates it, in Colombia and beyond.

This would be the ideal outcome of promoting a domestic and international norm against and condemnation of sexual violence through taking full responsibility for it. It would respect the legitimacy of the JEP as a tribunal. It would begin to model for armed actors in other contexts how to confess to sexual violence, breaking the pattern of silence, denial, and excuses.

However, this may be an unlikely scenario. The JEP's investigations may produce irrefutable evidence implicating senior leaders from the FARC Secretariat in criminal acts of sexual violence. Face-saving acts of accepting "general" responsibility and asking for forgiveness for sexual violence will not be enough for the JEP, the victims, or the general public. Confronted with evidence of individual leaders' responsibility, the commanding forces of the FARC will struggle to craft narratives to protect and restore the legitimacy of its political party Comunes, which has already experienced eroding support and electoral losses. It is unlikely that narratives blaming deceased leaders, claiming lack of knowledge, or maintaining relative innocence compared to other armed actors will prove convincing. Even if the JEP were to offer closed hearings to the FARC leadership, this might not allow for damage control; organized groups of victims might not agree to closed hearings, and cases would become public.

If the FARC fails to use the JEP space to promote truth and recognition of violence for the reasons above, there are still other symbolic spaces that may

offer this opportunity. The FARC leadership could promote acts of recognition and reconciliation, to encourage dialogue in safe and protected spaces in which victims of sexual abuse have their traumas and experiences acknowledged. The FARC leadership could work with victims and representatives to develop appropriate and effective acts of recognition and atonement, and restorative processes to benefit survivors of sexual violence. These combined efforts across such spaces could model ways in which the FARC leadership could contribute to the acceptance of responsibility for sexual violence committed by armed actors anywhere, and the development of national and global norms to prevent such violations.

Notes

1. Sexual violence is defined as “rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity” (ICC 1998, 4).
2. Non-governmental organizations working with victims, investigative organizations, and Colombian academics documented sexual violence committed by the FARC in the early 2000s (see for example Amnesty International 2004; Fiscó 2005; SISMA Mujer 2007). In 2008, the Colombian Constitutional Court acknowledged that sexual violence had been perpetrated by all of the illegal armed groups and the Colombian armed forces. It documented sexual violence during territorial advances, to obtain information, as a war strategy, against women informants, and as “sheer ferocity” (*de simple ferocidad*) (Corte Constitucional 2008).
3. Despite this promise of equality, women combatants regularly faced discrimination and sexual violence from male comrades, as documented in reports (see for example Amnesty International 2004; Fajardo Arturo and Valoyes Valoyes 2015).
4. The JEP “investigates, clarifies and punishes those most responsible for the most serious acts of the Colombian armed conflict” (JEP 2023a). Macro-Case 11, which opened in September 2023, focuses exclusively on “sexual violence, reproductive violence and other crimes committed because of prejudice, hatred and discrimination based on gender, sex, identity and diverse sexual orientation in the context of the Colombian armed conflict” (JEP 2023b).
5. Not all of the Corporación Rosa Blanca members were child soldiers or faced sexual violence at the hands of the FARC. Nonetheless, the organization is often linked to the FARC’s enemies on the right, owing to its criticism of the peace process on social media (Twitter) and traditional media platforms (Corporación Rosa Blanca n.d.).
6. Though coverage of such confessions is rare or non-existent in the media, prosecution hearings have documented these crimes. For example, in Justice and Peace trials (which focus on paramilitary forces’ criminal activities), magistrates have presided over cases in which former paramilitaries have recognized sexual and gender-based violence committed by members of their organization (see for example Sala de Justicia y Paz 2020).
7. For other narratives, see for example Inger Skjelsbæk’s (2015) analysis of sentencing judgments against sexual violence offenders during the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.

8. The “EP” after the FARC abbreviation stands for “Ejército Popular” (“People’s Army”).
9. This extract is taken from a private interview with Sandino carried out by Kiran Stallone and Julia Zulver. Parts of this interview can be found in Stallone and Zulver (2017).
10. See Note 9.
11. Timochenko has himself been accused of sexual violence. At the JEP, Luz Fary Palomar Quintero stated that he raped her when she was a 13-year-old child soldier and then forced her to have an abortion (*Semana* 2020a).
12. Karina has also been accused of encouraging the rape of a woman (*El Tiempo* 2022), but we have not found any responses from her about this specific sexual crime.

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