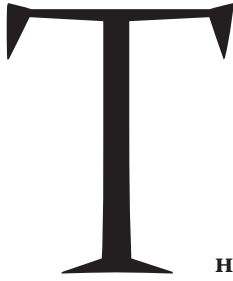

WINIFRED TATE. COUNTING THE DEAD: THE CULTURE AND POLITICS OF HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM IN COLOMBIA. BERKELEY: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 2007, 400 PAGES

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THE 1989 MURDERS OF THREE COLOMBIAN PRESIDENTIAL candidates and the end of the Cold War marked the beginning of another phase in this Andean nation's decades of civil strife. Since then, tens of thousands of Colombians have died and 3.8 million—disproportionately Afro-Colombians—have been internally displaced due to political violence. Much of the violence occurs in massacres that make the flesh creep. In *Counting the Dead*, Winifred Tate attempts to empower the victims of human rights violations in Colombia. She successfully accomplishes the goal of “making them count.” An unintended consequence of human rights (HR) activism is that the paramilitary death squads received training in international humanitarian law. Now, thugs avoid murdering more than four people at the same time and place, the international definition of a massacre. Instead they use chainsaws to cut up the victims, burying legs in different pits or in scattering arms across the landscape and along the rivers.

Tate has spent much of the last 18 years participating in and conducting fieldwork on Colombian human rights. The seven chapters and 40 pages of endnotes (some of the best writing of the book) reflect her thorough understanding of political violence in the Andes. The book provides an institutional ethnography of three types of Colombian activists and professionals—nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), state agencies, and the military. Secondary actors are Colombian guerrillas, *paras*, and police, and international NGOs and United Nations and government agencies. She examines a 30-year history of changes, identifying three phases: the start and consolidation of HR activism from the late 1970s to the end of the Cold War

(1989-91); HR professionalization from the rewriting of the Constitution in 1991 (creating new legal mechanisms such as *tutela* and an Office of HR Ombudsman) to September 11; and the period of the War on Terrorism to the book's completion in 2007. The main focus is 1989 to September 11, 2001 and the efforts by NGOs, government officials, and the military to classify violence and assign responsibility. Obvious, sensible, and always in need of repeating, her argument is that statistics about violent deaths are embedded in politics, cultural practices and traditions, and stakeholders' contesting the meanings of *why paras*, *narcos*, the Army, or the guerrillas annually murder hundreds of Colombians.

The author capably handles the book's key concepts—agency, discourse and frames, public transcripts, the troubling HR trade offs between individual versus collective and community responsibilities, impunity, genocide, “intermesticity” (international and domestic issues conflated as in what makes an NGO “international”), networks and nodes of activists (based on Manual Castells' essays), among several others. Her use of Michael Taussig's insights on the emotions and meanings of political death and terror in Colombia is as deft as it is subtle. One of the most superbly used concepts is political culture (pg. 35 and note 5). Mixing together the best of the reasoning of Sally Engle Merry, Eric Wolf, and others, with the brilliant writing of the Colombian maestro of history, Marco Palacios, Tate defines the concept as “how individuals imagine their relations to the state as well as the institutions that channel political power and participation.” This case study of Colombian HR is an excellent example of why political culture is still one of anthropology's most important theoretical tools.

A minor comment about the book is what Tate did not include but might want to in a second edition of this description of human rights, violence, conflict resolution that will influence future work in the field. One suggestion would be a chart with milestones that date when the groups listed in the abbreviations began or ended their noteworthy activities. Such a chronology might include names and dates of presidents and other major actors. It would benefit readers unfamiliar with Colombia and make visible at a glance the changes in political culture. A second suggestion is to include on the map more names of the major localities made infamous due to murders by the military, *paras*, and guerrillas or famous due to the efforts to create peace (Apartadó, Chengue, Maparipán, Puerto Elvira, Trujillo, etc.). A final suggestion is to describe more about the police and their recent participation in defending human rights in Colombia's big cities, the role of activists outside of Colombia such as the “Colombia Support Group in Madison, Wisconsin,” and the findings of Victoria Sanford on Colombian death squads and peace communities.

There is also some fuzzy writing and insufficient description of the interview methodology. The overuse of concepts such as “production,” “sites,” and “landscape” is distracting. Not all of Colombian impunity, refugees, and HR reports would seem to merit interpretation as “produced” nor perhaps should a United Nations Commission be described by Colombian HR activists (page 179) as “their ability to view this landscape as a locality.” Equally confusing, almost annoying, are descriptions of interviewees as “dressed in the uniform of a midlevel state official, pink shirt and blue tie and big watch (pg. 237),” “a lawyer, one of many in cheap suits and polyester ties (pg. 248),” “a petite blond ...with careful makeup and substantial gold jewel (pg. 272),” and “chubby, dark-skinned mestizo (pg.282).” Reliance on office waiting rooms “as rich fieldwork opportunities,” in which the types of posters (Che Guevara or international scenes) and furniture are the bases for interpretations of “class differences” among NGOs are not convincing (pgs. 153, 185, 237). A couple of sentences are incomprehensible: “My experience as the receptacle for fantasies of global connection was just beginning, however.” (pg.177).

Research methods involved a careful review of documents in archives in several countries, participant observation in public forums and conferences, and approximately 61 open-ended interviews (pg. 16-17). It is unclear whether Tate conducted the interviews with a questionnaire. This requires further explication. A questionnaire and responses that were described in an appendix or the endnotes, perhaps even tabulated to allow others to skim them for correlations, would highlight even more one of Tate’s fascinating findings about emotions, identity, and social movements. For example, most activists answered questions about why they were motivated to risk their lives with the word “*mística*” (mystique or otherworldliness, pg. 148). But what does this mean? Description of the questions and general background on the respondents would allow even greater understanding of the Colombians creating these social movements. Is “*mística*” more frequent among women than men? Older Colombians from small towns and rural areas or only those from big cities? Catholics, Protestants, or non-believers? College educated and having traveled outside Colombia or high-school educated with few visits to Bogotá or travel on a plane? Such information would give Tate’s analysis of Colombian social movements greater weight. More information about the questionnaire, respondents, and their answers would help decide which of Max Weber’s notions on the significance of congregational and ethical religion to broad sociocultural transformations are relevant. This ethnography clearly confirms some of Weber’s insights. More methodological rigor is necessary to decide on which notions the findings on Colombian HR activism cast serious doubts.

Readers most likely to benefit from this book are those interested in social movements, emotions and activism; religion and change; the military's relation to society and paramilitaries; and the unintended consequences of the Colombian and U.S. "war" on drugs and terror. All of them will agree with the author's policy prescription: Colombians need to rein in their security forces, bring more of the human-rights abusers to justice, and strengthen the rule of law. Such a "culture of lawfulness" would go far to ending the country's more than 60 years of violence during which plata o plomo, a bullet or a bribe, has made the rule of law a loser.

Overall, Winifred Tate has penned a persuasive history of a region and topic that have been both misunderstood and neglected. Her efforts to inspire—or, if necessary, shame—individuals, companies, organizations, and governments into honorable behavior are exhaustive and creative.*