

CONDEV SMGP Report – December 2019

Ricardo Velasco

<https://www.culturalecologiesofmemory.com/>

The Student Media Grant program from the Center for Conflict and Development at Texas A&M University supported my research exploring the links between culture, reparation and reconciliation in the context of Colombia's transitional justice process. I traveled within Colombia, to Bogotá, Medellín, Cali and Islas del Rosario (Rosario Islands), to document different cultural initiatives using symbolic strategies to promote peace, memory construction and reconciliation. My project focused on exploring the potential of these cultural practices for mending the social fabric, promoting justice, revitalizing community ties and building lasting reconciliation among vulnerable communities.

Working within this conceptual framework, for my project I documented a few examples of what I call the "cultural ecologies" of memory and symbolic reparation: the complex assemblage of memory initiatives that have proliferated in the current transitional justice conjuncture providing creative approaches to the symbolic reparation of the victims of the conflict: from symbolic acts and exhibitions by which state institutions restore the dignity of victims, to grassroots processes promoting peaceful coexistence, sustainability or the recovery of urban space formerly occupied by violence through urban art.

Street Art in Medellín.

In Medellín, I visited "Comuna 13" to show the transformation that urban art has brought to a marginal neighborhood that became an epicenter of the armed conflict from the 1980s through the early 2000s. Caught in the crossfire, the community had to exercise many forms of resistance and resilience during this period. For the youth in this area, street art emerged as a way to denounce violence, reaffirm human dignity, honor and remember those whose lives had been taken by violence. During the last decade, and in conjunction with inclusive urban development projects, impressive arrays of murals and street art have started to attract tourism, creating positive change within the community.

While many social problems persist, with forty thousand visitors every month driven to see the mural, small businesses are thriving benefiting many families and changing radically a past landscape of terror and despair into one of hope. The murals and the youth movement in Comuna 13 have been fundamental in ending the stigma of a violent neighborhood. Moreover, as a young musician told me "now a young kid can dream of being an artist, an entrepreneur or of working in a bank, when before the only model were the gangs". The murals of Comuna 13 are an example of the power of creativity, resilience and community organization to ignite processes of change.

Sustainable Settlements for Peace Program.

In Islas del Rosario, I documented the development of *Sustainable Settlements for Peace*, a program designed by the organization *CASA* (Council for Sustainable Settlements of Latin America). Through action-based and transformative education projects, and in dialogue with local knowledges, *the program* aims to accompany and support historically marginalized communities in their achievement of their goals of autonomy and sustainable development, and to contribute to the construction of peace in rural Colombia by recovering local traditional knowledges and sharing practical skills for sustainability and peaceful coexistence.

Sustainable Settlements for Peace has been implemented in collaboration with the Local Council of Black Communities of Isla Grande through different pedagogical and community engagement processes that include the recovery of historical memory, agroecology and conflict resolutions workshops, as well as organizational efforts for improving the eco-tourism economy. This local economy has been intrinsically linked with ongoing struggles for territorial autonomy in a context of state neglect. I witnessed first hand the differential impact the program is having within the community and how it mobilizes the potential of local human and natural resources for fostering peaceful coexistence. Beyond the documentation of the initiative, my involvement with the community included teaching basic documentation techniques to youth leaders so that they can share and learn from their own experiences, recover local traditional knowledges, and have better communication strategies by leveraging the potential of new media.



Peaceful Protest in Cali.

In the city of Cali I followed the organization of a collective manifestation entitled "Plantón por la paz", which was coordinated in various cities throughout Colombia. The purpose of the manifestation was to protest against the escalation of violence and assassinations against social, human rights and environmental leaders that has taken place since the signing of the Peace deal with FARC in 2016. The manifestation mobilized artistic initiatives to give visibility to the problem through the creative languages of music, performance and other visual strategies.

Several organizations were present, including the newly formed political party of FARC, but also youth, and ordinary citizens who wanted to share and express their solidarity with the cause.

Symbolic Strategies for Memory and Social Justice

Lastly, in Bogotá, I continued my engagement with an initiative developed by a group of women who use fabrics to narrate their stories of violence and displacement and their struggle for justice. The Group called “Unión de Costureros” worked on a symbolic strategy to make visible their claims by covering a monolith monument at the Center for Memory, Peace and Reconciliation in Bogotá.

Nested within a highly symbolic historic cemetery, the monolith was erected as a visible structure that signifies the growing responsibility of state institutions for the victims of the conflict and the type of actions taken in order to restore their dignity in the context of the second stage of transitional justice that followed the passing of the Law 1448 “of Victims” in 2011. A process of cultural activism started by the group of women led to a symbolic act of intervention based around this central monument between September 21st– 23rd, during the celebration of the International Peace Day. The initiative of covering the monolith with fabrics representing a plurality of voices of those directly affected by the armed conflict, constitutes the first stage of a symbolic claim for justice that is planned to reach its final goal in 2020 with an intervention at the National Palace of Justice.

The collective intervention, led by a forcibly displaced Afro-descendant woman and cultural activist from the South Pacific Region, does more than merely interrupt current official initiatives of commemoration and reconciliation through a temporal symbolic strategy. Counteracting what she and her collaborators see as a “monolithic” approach to memory construction and peace building, the intervention articulates a pluralistic vision. It proposes new inclusive forms of participation in memory construction through collective practices that, beyond the restricted circle of victims’ organizations, are able to engage diverse sectors of the citizenry, inviting them to inhabit and transform public cultural institutions as spaces for civic engagement, human rights activism and post-conflict community building. It is a powerful act that symbolizes the challenges of democracy and inclusion in post-conflict/transitional Colombia.