Creativity and resistance in Medellin’s comunas: toward alternate visions of peacebuilding

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Abstract

The two case studies presented here are situated in ‘Comuna 13’, notorious for its past guerrilla activity and repressed by military and paramilitary armed operations in the 2000s. ‘Galeria Viva’ (Living Gallery) and ‘Cuerpos Gramaticales’ (Grammatical Bodies) are two memorial initiatives conceived of here as resources for resistance. Through an annual commemoration event introduced in 2014, Cuerpos Gramaticales offers artistic and memorial performances in diverse public spaces of Medellin, enacting the partial burial of dozens of individuals to denounce the disappearance of their relatives in a mass grave in Comuna 13. Launched in 2017, Galeria Viva is a project that focuses on painting murals on the walls of the cemetery ‘La América’, representing teenagers that were assassinated; the paintings are generally co-produced with relatives of the victims.

Reference


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For more than a decade, Colombia has undergone a complex peace process illustrated by the demobilization of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia in 2016. Medellin, like several cities in the country, has witnessed a significant improvement of its security conditions and life is burgeoning again in many of its neighborhoods. Yet some peripheral areas of the second-largest city in Colombia – commonly referred to as ‘*comunas*’ – are experiencing new forms of violence and social control exercised by armed groups labelled ‘*combos*’ or ‘*pandillas*’, a legacy, in part, of the paramilitary structures that profoundly affected Medellin in the 1990s.

The two case studies presented here are situated in ‘*Comuna 13*’, notorious for its past guerrilla activity and repressed by military and paramilitary armed operations in the 2000s. ‘*Galeria Viva*’ (Living Gallery) and ‘*Cuerpos Gramaticales*’ (Grammatical Bodies) are two memorial initiatives conceived of here as resources for resistance. Through an annual commemoration event introduced in 2014, *Cuerpos Gramaticales* offers artistic and memorial performances in diverse public spaces of Medellin, enacting the partial burial of dozens of individuals to denounce the disappearance of their relatives in a mass grave in *Comuna 13*. Launched in 2017, *Galeria Viva* is a project that focuses on painting murals on the walls of the cemetery ‘*La América*’, representing teenagers that were assassinated; the paintings are generally co-produced with relatives of the victims.

It is held here that, through creative means, such as visual and bodily remembrance of violence, actors involved in these memorial initiatives attempt to challenge commonly shared and hegemonic narratives on past violence. They resist the descent of the many victims of disappearances into collective oblivion and offer alternate visions of peacebuilding and of the broader social transformation of Colombia.

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