9-2018

Territories of Contestation in Medellín: *Destierro,* Memory, the Youth, and the State

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TERRITORIES OF CONTESTATION IN MEDELLÍN:

DESTIERRO, **MEMORY, THE YOUTH, AND THE STATE**

by

JOAN CAMILO LOPEZ

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2018

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal
Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

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DESTIERRO, **MEMORY, THE YOUTH AND THE STATE**

by

JOAN CAMILO LOPEZ

Advisor: VICTORIA SANFORD, PH.D

Abstract:

[This thesis is partly a study of the social and political territories that are generated by the displaced as responses to the warfare tactic of *el destierro* (displacement); and it is also an exploration of how the state operates at the intersection between its imagined centers and its margins. This thesis attempts to look at the state from its imagined margins and to explore how displacement, the regulation of the movement of specific bodies within and across specifically defined regions of Colombia, has been a fundamental practice for, and not against, the formation of the Colombian "state" as we see it today.]

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Introduction:

This thesis is an attempt to understand the ways marginalized *barrios* in Medellin, Colombia have been constructed in relation to the Colombian central state, and vice versa, through collective processes of remembering. Moreover, this work attempts to bring attention to the root causes of *el destierro*, or displacement, in Colombia and the implications of forced displacement in the constitution of the State as we see it today. I draw from the literature that has been published in relation to forced displacement and the State, and also from my own anecdotes after working among youth community leaders for over 3 years. This thesis is organized as follows: It describes the recent history of Medellín. I provide an analysis of how "marginal" sectors of Medellín are continually produced and reproduced by forced displacement and the systematic regulation of the movement of the people that inhabit them. I also provide an exploration of how the youth are remembering and representing the history of their neighborhoods. This work describes the state as experienced by people who live in political spaces in the "absence" of central governance, and discusses questions such as, What is the relationship between "center" and "periphery" in the way the state is formed and how it functions? I explore the state not as a bounded entity, but as a process; as a relationship between the representation and performance of the paternalistic state by communities under the presence of central governance and by communities that function at the "margins" of central governance.

Part I

In Search of the State

"…it would be difficult to say which is more important for Empire, the center or its margins."— Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt

Like a phantom, the state is difficult to grasp. With phantoms, however, we are able to recognize when they appear and disappear, which allows most of us to agree that this or that

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"presence" is phantasmal, as it were. When it comes to the state, it becomes difficult to recognize its presence, much less its absence. The state seems to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Sometimes it manifests as the government and its institutions in places like national borders and police and military checkpoints. At others, it manifests as the regulatory entities, like guerrillas, paramilitary groups, and gangs, that emerge at the "margins" of national territories. At first sight it seems that the state can be considered that "thing" which puts in motion the organizing mechanisms that regulate the lives of peoples in a given space.

If we consider the state to be the social apparatus that puts in motion and regulates the organizing mechanisms of a society, then there is little space, if any, for the individuals of that society to interact in a meaningful way within the maneuverings of the state. When the state is conceived as the governing entity, be it a national government, a paramilitary group, or a guerrilla group, that regulates the lives of individuals, it is assumed that power is only exercised in an unidirectional way, which places the governing entity as the powerful and the governed as the subject of that power. The activities and social practices of groups of individuals are then conceived as the result of the practices of that governing entity. Individual people are left to be mere receptors of the power that emanates from the state, without any ability to actively make sense and respond to such power. I argue the opposite; that the state is to be analyzed at the intersection between everyday practices of organized groups of people, especially the displaced in the Colombian case, and the practices of governing entities.

In discussions of the state, the idea that there is a *center* and a *margin* within national territories has been essential. The image that emerges from these discussions is that there is a locale, the center, where the state concentrates all of its influence, and a locale, the margin, which is empty of the presence of the state, in whole or in part. As much as this might be true in certain regions, I bring attention to the ways the Colombian state has been shaped not in terms of a binary

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'center-periphery' opposition, but by the interception of these two. It would be erroneous, in theory and in praxis, to treat the "margins" of the Colombian territory as isolated spaces untouched by the administrative, economic, and political influence of the "center". Doing this would give us a picture of the state that becomes diluted as it extends towards the national "margins". In fact, a state does not become "weakened or less fully articulated along its territorial margins" (Das & Poole 2004, p.3). Anthropologists interested in Colombia, and in exploring the margins, have shed new lights on an array of ways in which the Colombian state has been strengthened at its margins (Sanford 2004; Ramirez 2011; Civico 2016).

When anthropologists study the state, they usually start from the margin; from those locales that "lack", either totally or partially, "state" presence. The idea is that by studying the "margin", we can come closer to understanding the nature of the state and how it distributes its power (Das & Poole, 2004). In this section, my interest is to explore the ways in which the Colombian state has been constructed at the interception where its administrative and political *center* and the social practices of people at the *margins* collide. My intention is to contribute to the process of melting down the binary opposition between center and periphery by highlighting the effect that the social practices of the people at the "margins" have had on the administrative and political "centers" of national territories.

Perhaps the center-periphery opposition is simply a discursive conundrum. When we study the margins of the state we notice that there are no marginal groups of people— there are *marginalized* ones. The processes that are invested in the marginalization of groups of people are essential to processes of state formation. The Colombian state today, I argue, can be approached by looking at 1) the ways in which the Colombian government has *made marginal* the most economically and politically vulnerable groups of people by regulating their movement, mostly by mechanism of *destierro*, or displacement, and 2) how these people have made sense of and

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responded to such marginalization. The "margins" of the Colombian state are inhabited by groups of *desterrados*— people who have been forcibly pushed into the category of the "marginal". Thus, it isn't that certain territories and certain people are marginal by nature—they have been made marginal. The history of these people is the history of the Colombian state; and this is in turn a history of forced movement and of peaceful contestations.

In their introduction to the collection of essays, *Anthropology in the Margins of the State* (2004), Veena Das and Deborah Poole make the claim that "margins are a necessary entailments of the state" (p. 4). In other words, the state needs margins in order to justify its existence, and it creates and re-creates them in processes of rendering, *of making*, certain spaces and certain people *marginal*. The state *produces* margins as a way to make and remake itself. Without the margin, or periphery, there is no central state. However, the relationship between these two isn't simply that one, the central state, produces the other, the periphery, but that both are actants, dialectically, in the production of what we see as the State.

Expressions of community life at the "margins" are rarely taken into account in discussion about the state. If they are ever mentioned, it is only to highlight the effects of a governing entity (the national government, the military, or *guerrillas*) on them. I write about the ways in which the activities of community leaders in Medellin have shaped the governing entities to which their lives are allegedly subjected. The work of Maria Eugenia Ramirez with the *cocaleros,* or coca growers, in Putumayo and of Victoria Sanford among Peace Communities in Chocó, will be very elucidating to make sense of what I claim.

During the 1990s, the Colombian government was set to eradicate coca crops used for cocaine production in the Amazon region of the country, with the support (and indeed, the implicit demand) of the United States government. This was in part informed by an incident that caused the United State government to "de-certify" the president of Colombia, Ernesto Samper (1994-1998),

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due to his "having received campaign donations from drug traffickers" (Ramirez 2011, p.1).

Because the southern region of Colombia was to a great extent politically and economically controlled by the guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, the Colombian government constructed a discourse of "reconquering" the territory and framed it as a "civilizing" effort that would put things in place in such a "barbarous" area. Framing the intervention in such terms, and drawing from the idea the peasants of that region were contributing to strengthening both the guerrillas and the narcotraffickers, the Colombian government, in its need to clean up the name of the then-president and to reclaim the vast areas lost to the guerrillas, was justified to enter the area using violence as a tool (Ramirez 2011).

On one hand, Maria Clemencia Ramirez depicts the social, economic, and political dynamics in Colombia that systematically produced a dependence on coca crops for the subsistence of Putumayo peasants and their families, and on the other, she discusses the identity politics at play that equally rendered Putumayo peasants as active contributors to strengthening illicit drug trafficking, and as supporters of the insurgency movement, FARC (Ramirez 2011). Ramirez claims that the social, economic, and political dynamics that were at play in the identity politics of Putumayo peasants also allowed them to organize and make their local interests visible at the national and international level. The collective social construction of identity in relation to the construction of the *center-periphery* dichotomy is central to understand the struggle of *cocalero* peasants that live in the western Amazon region of Colombia, and their almost inescapable position between the guerrillas and the state. Ramirez's work can be understood as an ethnography of the collective construction of marginal spaces. It attempts to "explore the dialectic between periphery and center within the nation-state" (p.7) by analyzing how marginal spaces are imagined and constructed from the perspectives of both those who inhabit them and the central government.

The Colombian central government portrayed the southern region of the country as an

isolated territory— "barbarous", "uncivilized", and as a result, "marginal". An analysis of the discourse and practice that rendered Putumayo peasants marginal, and that as a result negated their citizenship status at the national level, is central to Ramirez's exploration of the *cocalero* movement that, following various strikes and civic mobilizations in the early '90s, sprung up in 1996 and obliged the Colombian government to enter into negotiation regarding aerial fumigation in the area. For the Putumayo peasants the government's project to "re-conquest" this area meant that they too were Colombian. In spite of the government's discursive apparatus that depicted them as barbarous—in fact, because of this—they were able to claim their citizenship right to participate in the decision making of the Putumayo region.

Marginal spaces are ambiguous spaces. They are equally inside and outside the state, ordered and disordered, ruled and un-ruled. The ambiguity embedded in marginaliz*ed* spaces conditions the relationship that the inhabitants of such spaces have with the central government (Ramirez, 2011 p.7). Being rendered "outside", "disordered", or "un-ruled" produces in the inhabitants of marginalized spaces a shared feeling of being abandoned by the central government. In the case of Putumayo coca peasants, it was precisely the shared feeling of being abandoned by the central government, that motivated and made possible their civic and political organizations to make their local interests visible and counted in the decision-making process of Putumayo. In Ramirez's words, "the discourse of state abandonment provides an impetus for people to make demands of the state" (p.182).

Two important points of analysis in Ramirez's ethnography are 1) the historical analysis of the cultural and political construction of marginality *by the central government;* and 2) an analysis of the perception and interpretation of the state by the people that inhabit marginalized spaces. Thus, to understand the origin and motivation of the *cocalero* movement in Putumayo, Ramirez explores the dialectic between the meaning and perception of the state, on one hand, by *cocalero*

peasants (the periphery), and on the other, by the central government (the center). The dialectical relationship between perceptions of the state of both centers and peripheries is in fact what constitutes the operations of the state.

Elected governments are perceived as legitimate states, and as such they are expected to perform as the State. Usually this performance takes the form of military interventions, welfare programs, and discourses of nation building that make explicit the center-margin opposition. The performance of the national government as the State during its "re-conquering" enterprise in the Putumayo region depicts well the ambiguity that in embedded in historical processes of marginalization and the contractions of the center-margin opposition. The inhabitants of the Putumayo region, the marginals, are inside the state of law and under the rule of the central government only when the "State's" involvement is in the interest of the government; only when the government needs to show its presence, performing as the State, to maintain its legitimacy. In fact, the Colombian government received international economic[1] support as well as national political support to reassert its legitimacy after the campaign's drug scandal of the newly elected president, Samper. However, Putumayo peasants were outside the dominion of the central government when they strove to assert their citizenship status by appealing to have access to the services that the central government is supposed to provide. But, the ambiguity that ensued enabled the *cocaleros* of Putumayo to organize and strive to bring their demands and interests to the national political discourse. They were included in the national discourse precisely by being subjected to systemic exclusion. The c*ocalero* movement of 1996 enabled the peasants of Putumayo to enact, by themselves, their status of citizenship by understanding and making use of both 1) the center-periphery ambiguity embedded in the meanings ascribed to state performance,

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[1] Plan Colombia was the name of a United States foreign aid, military, and diplomatic initiative aimed at combating Colombian drug cartels and left-wing insurgent groups in Colombia (1999-2015)

and 2) the collective construction of marginality. In Ramirez's words, "the *cocalero* movement sought to interact with and exert its influence on the hegemonic state discourse of democracy and citizen participation as a form of its own empowerment" (p.10).

Victoria Sanford (2004) paints a similar picture after exploring Peace Communities in the northwest of Colombia. She is interested in the ways state control is configured in relation to displaced communities. In her interactions with displaced people along the Magdalena and Atrato rivers, she was able to identify and shed light on how displaced communities "are not only objects of state control but are actively involved in shaping their futures in relation to the state" (p.253). In her account of the inner functioning of Peace Communities in relation to local or national government, and state-like entities, like guerrillas and paramilitaries, one is able to identify the complex dynamics that make up the Colombian state.

The presence of the Colombian state at its margins is anchored in a contradiction. The central government creates and puts in motion narratives of its own inability to have control over certain territories, such as those along the valleys that spread from the banks of the Atrato River and the Magdalena Medio region, while at the same time justifying programs, usually in form of military interventions, to, as it were, "reconquer" such areas that have been lost to the guerrillas. In this process, the Colombian state characterizes itself as incapable of maintaining control over the totality of the national territory, but it is this very "incapability" that serves as its justification to execute programs of state control and surveillance over "uncontrolled" regions, thereby strengthening its legitimacy as the central governing entity. For this reason the Colombian state should not be treated as a "failed" or "weak" state, as it is often conceived. Rather, claims Sanford, "it is a state in which the actions of the elected government, bureaucratic agencies, and legal apparatus are, in large part, determined by the reconstitution of the state and its infrastructure at its margins through the army's use of surveillance and state-sanctioned violence, including the use of

proxy paramilitary forces" (p. 256, emphasis added.). It is at its supposed margins that the Colombian state finds its strength.

Important to a discussion of the Colombian state is the mention of paramilitary forces. The presence of the AUC[2] (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* or United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia), an umbrella organization composed of various fronts of paramilitary groups, both in urban and rural areas of the national territory, is testimony not to the absence of state presence, but to its control over marginalized territories. Perhaps the strongest champion of the counter-guerrilla strategy, besides U.S support efforts like Plan Colombia, have been the paramilitaries. In areas historically controlled by guerrilla groups, like *Comuna* 13 in Medellín and most of the Chocó region, paramilitary forces were the ones who successfully challenged the guerrillas. Many narratives that intend to explain the presence of paramilitary groups in marginalized areas (those under the control of guerrillas) point to the state's absence as the reason for their existence. But it is well known today that some sectors of the military forces have kept close ties with paramilitary groups and have executed military interventions together with them, such as *Operación Orion,* the unprecedented urban military intervention in *Comuna* 13, Medellín, in 2002. In fact, "many who today occupy high-ranking positions in the Colombian army were material and intellectual authors of paramilitary violence in the 1980's" (Sanford 2004, p.258). Thus, the intertwinement of elected governments with paramilitary groups testifies to the strength and presence of the Colombian state in marginalized areas, not to its absence (Civico 2017).

To further a radical rethinking of the state, then, it is essential to look at the social, political, and economic peripheries of national territories as places that have *been made* marginal through processes of state formation. When one seeks to understand the nature of the state, it is important to look at its "margins" as *marginalized* territories and peoples and try to identify "how the practices

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[2] They demobilized in 2003 under the Alvaro Uribe administration.

and politics of life in these areas shaped the political, regulatory, and disciplinary practices that contribute, somehow, to that thing we call 'the state'" (Das & Poole 2004, p. 3). In other words, in what ways are certain territories and people rendered marginal, and how do their responses to their marginalization contribute to the shaping of the state as we see it?

The existence of the state also presupposes a nation. Sanford invites us to think of the nation as a contested space; as a domain both abstract and material that engulfs certain resources, which distinct groups (government, guerrilla, paramilitary, civil society) struggle to dominate. The Atrato River, for example, is a strategic region because it is a pathway for the illegal flow of drugs, military armaments, money, and people, hence the struggle between the army, the guerrillas, and the paramilitaries to control it. Another resource that is disputed in areas like this, but that is seldom mentioned, is the *livelihood* of people. People, mostly peasants, have historically inhabited these areas and have thus created strong and intimate social relations within them. The relationship between peasants and the territories they inhabit has significant social meanings and constitutes part of their ability to sustain their physical and cultural bodies. When the Colombian army, the guerrillas, or the paramilitaries intend to exert their control over these areas, it is their livelihood and their right to live in and move between and across these territories that the inhabitants defend and strive to maintain control over. Civil society participates in this dispute, then, by defending the right to continue having access to the distinct forms of livelihood that these territories provide, to preserve the relationship that they have with the land, and thus *to stay* in these regions and have some participation in the distribution of the territory of the nation. In short, their struggle is to have control over their distinct forms of livelihood in relation to the nation's land, and to have a say in the movement and regulation of their physical and social bodies within the national territory. Thus the warfare tactic that is exercised against civil society by the army, the guerrillas, and the paramilitaries is that of *destierro*, or displacement.

Displacement is often treated as the result of war and it's rarely sanctioned as an implicit crime of war. In Colombia, displacement is deemed as one of the unintended consequences of the internal conflict, not as an implicit part in the making and sustainment of the conflict. However, displacement is a "key military strategy of war, rather than a byproduct" (Sanford 2004, pg. 257). Between 2002 and 2010, Colombians witnessed the strongest governmental campaign of nationalism and patriotism, perhaps since the years following its war of independence, under Alvaro Uribe's "Democratic Security" policy. After the failed peace negotiations of *El Caguan* between the government and the FARC during the Pastrana administration (1998-2002), Uribe won the election by promising to bring security to Colombians. Uribe constructed a discourse of nationalism that built great enthusiasm among Colombians (especially in major cities) who were fed up with the internal armed conflict. One would see people wearing wristbands with the colors of the Colombian flag like never before, and signs in airports and on major roads with the slogan of the Ministry of Tourism and Commerce: "*Vive en Colombia, viaja por ella*" (literally, "live in Colombia, travel around her*"*). And people traveled. The national economy showed signs of improvement, the image of Colombia abroad began to change for "good", and the president, as noted in an August 2010 BBC article titled, "How President Alvaro Uribe Changed Colombia", had a popularity rate of 75% (See. BBC, 2010). This was all at the expense, however, of the almost two and a half million people who were being displaced for the sake of the "security" of the nation. With these figures, one can conclude that displacement, like Sanford suggests, has been a significant tool of the Colombian government in its processes of state formation, a warfare strategy, and not a by-product of the internal conflict between the military with its proxy paramilitary forces, the civil society in the middle, and the guerrillas.

I have made explicit how the Colombian state can be understood by analyzing it not from its margins, much less from its center, but from the relationship that these two have at different

moments in history. In the case of the *cocalero* movement in Putumayo, Ramirez shows how the central government, in its attempt to legitimize itself and make its state-like performance, had to function in relation to the "margin". The response of the *cocaleros,* guided by the meanings they ascribed to the state and to their own condition of marginalization, ended up reshaping state practices in Colombia. The government was strengthened to the degree that the *cocaleros* were able to question their status of marginalization and claim their citizenship rights. In Sanford's exploration of Peace Communities in the Choco region, it is evident that the Colombian state is constituted and re-constituted in relation to the elected government's ability to show its presence at the "margins" through the army's (and proxy paramilitary forces) surveillance and state-sanctioned violence, including the warfare tactic of forced displacement. Ramirez's and Sanford's ethnographies of the state are important for this work, in that, they support my claim that the Colombian state must be understood beyond the center-periphery dichotomy, and that it is to be found in the contradictions and ambiguities embedded in these two categories. Also, Sanford's claim that displacement is not a by-product of war but is strategically implicit in the making of war (including civil wars), serves to justify my claim that displacement has been key in processes of state formation.

The Youth, Public Policy, and the State

Another phase of displacement is the phase of *resettlement.* It is here where I see concretely the ways in which the actions of *desterrados* contribute to the state form that we see today in Colombia. In their agile actions to *resettle* themselves in new areas of the country, displaced people have contributed to the (re)formation of the major cities of Colombia, and as a result, have fundamentally contributed to the formation of the Colombian state. An example of this is the city of Medellín. The "margins" of this city were formed by a process of rural-urban movement of displaced people, who today constitute a significant portion of the city's population.

Especially important in the dynamics of resettlement have been the youth. Youth leaders of the *comunas* of Medellín have been able to construct thick webs of relationships among them, as well as a shared identity as Youth Leaders, in order to call attention to the problems they face as the sons and daughters of displaced families, and to mobilize the interests of their communities to the political arena of the city.

The youth that live in the *comunas* today are the daughters and sons of displaced families. Most have been born in Medellín, but they carry the social burden of being marginal given the sectors of the city they were forced to inhabit. The older generation, those who were forced to leave their homes behind in other parts of Colombia, paved the way for these new communities to be formed physically, per se. Through collective action, like *el convite*[3], newcomers built the infrastructure of the *comunas*— the houses, the roads, improvised sewer systems, and everything needed to meet the physical necessities of their families. Around *sancochos comunitarios*, or community soups, a new family would erect the walls of their house, and like this, family after family constructed new homes in what are now officially called *unplanned neighborhoods*. With time, community leaders have been able to pave the way for these neighborhoods to be politically recognized as legitimate spaces of the city.

In my years of interaction with youth leaders in Medellín, there are some aesthetic and linguistic configurations that I recognize as being instrumental to the strengthening of their political and social participation. One of them is the idea of *articulación* (literally, "articulation"). In formal community meetings or informal conversations, they often say, "*nos estamos articulando*" ("we are articulating ourselves"), "*somos un proceso de articulacion*" (Literally, "we are a process of

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[3] A *convite* is a practice by which members of the community get together around a personal or group initiative, like building a house for a newcomer or raising money for someone in need, and work together to make it successful. Most neighborhoods in the *comunas* were first constructed in this fashion.

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articulation"), *la clave está en la articulación*" ("the key is in our articulation"). I understand this

process of articulation as a social process that renders visible and actionable the perspectives of

youth community leaders on city matters, from the political, to the emotional, to the philosophical.

The youth have a distinct outlook on the city's history and conflict and have set in motion a praxis

that contests and strives to interrupt old patterns that have led a large sector of the city to be

socially and politically excluded.

In a 2009 study about youth experiences in the political and social arena of Medellín, which

was financed in large part by the office of Alonso Salazar, the mayor at that time, it was established

that "the youth of the city have been effective in creating their own symbols of resistance,

countercultural critiques, in many cases in highly proactive and suggestive ways, that challenge an

anachronistic political system" (Uribe 2009. p. 33). Many youth leaders organize their actions

around social praxis, the idea that social knowledge must take a practical character and not only a

contemplative one. In addition, its application must be directed toward restructuring the structural

components of the social reality that informs the organization of the city. As such, youth activism

and leadership in the *barrios* range from community service activities, initiatives for a *mejor*

convivir (better coexistence), the protection of human rights, the environment, communication and

pedagogy, and peacebuilding; to artistic expressions like music, literature, painting, theater, and

dance. In the same study, it is claimed that "since the nineties, youth organizations have been able

to make their actions concrete and consolidate their processes through the creation of symbols,

discourses, and practices that allow them to be identified as distinguished social and political actors

in the city, and highlights the perspectives that the youth bring to the city" (Idem. p.34). Moreover,

the perspectives of this new generation of community leaders, with their emphasis on praxis, have

had an influence on the way the city is governed. Apart from constructing alternative languages to

speak truth to power, such as the language of "resistance" and "articulation", their collective

actions have made visible some of their communities' needs, to the point that a Secretariat of Youth (the only one in Colombia), which reports directly to the city mayor, was established in 2012 to negotiate their demands at a political level. Also, many of their initiatives and projects are financed by the city's participatory budget, in which the youth sectors have a say. The overall sentiment is that the youth of the "marginal" sectors of the city "identify themselves as subjects of the law, pivotal in their community's social and political dynamics, with ample capacity to serve their communities, and with the right to make demands and let their voices be heard" (Idem. p.214).

Marginal *barrios* in Medellin have historically been places where crime is rampant and conflict between gangs is part of the everyday. Apart from some political victories, such as their participation in the city's participatory budgeting process, and their mobilization to demand from the city a space for greater participation, which ended with the establishment of the Secretariat of Youth, *la articulacion juvenil*, youth articulation, has had significant implications in the daily life of community members, including themselves. Youth collectives have been pivotal in breaking with some of the conflict dynamics of their neighborhoods, by means of reclaiming public spaces from armed actors, and thereby generating safe spaces for the free mobility of community members within and across the *barrios*.

Here I re-create an account that is present in the collective memory of many youth leaders, and that marked, as they say, *un hito*, a milestone, in their political and social participation in the city. The first Sunday of February 2013 was not going to be a normal day. Over ninety cultural and social agents, from musicians, painters, poets, clowns, to social organizers and community leaders, gathered at Altavista, a remote sector, immersed in conflict, on the periphery of Medellin. Through a creative, poetic and melodic political action, a violent conflict between two armed groups that were inflicting pain and terror to the community, was suspended. This event was named

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ConVidArte[4], and was organized as a way to confront the violence that was permeating the social life of Altavista, and also to show support to those who had no part in the conflict, but that were in the middle of the confrontation between gangs. The armed conflict between the two major gangs of Altavista was claiming many lives, especially of children and youth. The murder of a young street mime on January 9th 2013 sparked this massive movement of youth leaders from all over Medellin towards the situation at Altavista. According to the narratives of the youth leaders that were present on the day of ConVidArte, what ignited this massive mobilization was a sense of collective consciousness, which, they say, is formed when many people are affected by something in common; in their words, "violence" and "exclusion". Two representatives of the *youth articulation*, with the support of community members, took up the challenge to negotiate a ceasefire between the two rival gangs, including the one responsible for the death of the little mime, for at least a couple of days. The "excuse" they used to begin the negotiation was to ask the armed actors to join them for a gigantic artistic festival (ConVidArte). These two *quixotes* served as mediators between the two gang leaders, who were as young as themselves, and finally were able to negotiate a ceasefire, not only for the two days of the festival, but for four.

ConVidArte was only possible due to the existing city-wide network of youth leaders, artists and social activists. The little mime belonged to Corporación Casa Arte of Altavista, a community organized space where members of the community have access to artistic formation and mentoring. The little mime was known in the city both for his membership at Corporacion Casa Arte and for his skills as a mime. His death, under crossfire between the two gangs, moved social activists from across the city to join forces and act upon this unfortunate and, all-too common, death. The first time I heard this story was in mid 2014, and until then there was no armed conflict in Altavista. In the collective memory of many youth leaders of the city, this event

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[4] From the Spanish, Conciencia, Vida y Arte (Consciousness, Life and Art)

made the armed actors of Altavista resolve their matters in a non-armed fashion. However, since

the latter part of 2014 the armed conflict re-emerged in Altavista, and seems to be increasing, in

part, as the result of a security policy based on military surveillance[5] that since 2016 the mayor of

Medellin, Federico Gutierrez, implemented (See. El Colombiano, 2018).

The youth leaders of Medellin have participated in the development of the city, from its

public policies to its conflict resolution measures. The shared feeling of being marginal, and being

pushed to inhabit violent areas, has serve as impetus for the sons and daughters of the displaced to

actively participate in the social and political dynamics of the city in relation to general processes

of state formation.

I have argued, then, that the current Colombian state, with all the institutions that are

ascribed to it, has been constructed through a dialectical process between governmental practices of

hegemony and the responses of concrete groups of individuals (*cocaleros*, human rights activists in

Peace Communities, and youth leaders in Medellin) that have been targeted as marginal. In sum,

my claim is that the Colombian state is found in the abstract intersection between the social

practices of marginalized people, especially the forcibly displaced, and the political practices of

national and local governments accompanied by proxy paramilitary groups.

Part II:

A History of Movement

As social activists, armed actors, and or victims of violence and displacement, the youth in

the "peripheral" neighborhoods of Medellín, Colombia have been key in the development of the

social, economic, and political life of the city. These neighborhoods, or *comunas,* as they are

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[5] One of the measures of this policing strategy is to have a surveillance helicopter fly over the most marginalized sectors of Medellin, especially at night. The youth leaders call it, *el Ficoptero*, after the mayor's nickname, *Fico*.

colloquially known in Colombia, began to be formed during the 1950s and 1960s, as Medellín became the center of commerce and manufacturing in Colombia. During this time, people from every corner of the country migrated to Medellín in search of a better life. During the 50's Colombia was experiencing one of the most violent chapters of its history, an epoch referred to as *La Violencia*. This epoch, portrayed in Garcia Marquez's novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* was marked by a civil war between the Colombian Liberal Party and the Colombian Conservative Party that erupted after the assassination in Bogotá of Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, a liberal presidential candidate in April 9, 1948. Gaitan was the most popular politician at the time; his political discourse and public demonstrations had galvanized a desire for deep political renovations among many Colombians. His killing occurred during the Inter American Conference, which would give rise to the Organization of American States (OEA), in Bogotá, and sparked days of popular turmoil. Buildings, churches, the trams, were destroyed by the furious, and now hopeless, masses. The public disorder continued for days, and spread towards the periphery of the country, igniting even more the sectarian attitude of the political elites around the country. This turmoil that almost brought the capital to ashes is knows as *El Bogotazo*. In the aftermath of *El Bogotazo,* the factions of both the liberal party and the conservative party, deepened their violent confrontations for political power, land tenure, and national hegemony (Palacios 2006; Roldán 2002; Pécaut 2001). *La Violencia* was a time of bloodshed in Colombia. In 1959 the factions of both parties entered in negotiation, singed a peace agreement, and gave rise to the *Frente Nacional* (National Front), which established that both parties would take turns in governing the country. This marked the official end of *La Violencia*. However, some political sectors were left outside of this agreement, such as the Communist Party and many rural social and political organizations. As the result of this insufficient peace agreement, during the 1960s the country experienced the emergence of left-wing guerrilla groups, most notably the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the Revolutionary Armed

Forces of Colombia (FARC). During the decade of the 70s these guerrillas began to spread all around the national territory, and the army began a massive plan of contention. Though Medellin remained almost untouched by *La Violencia*, in the 70's the violence that was spreading through Colombia began to permeate the city. Wave after wave of violence unfolded, especially in the most vulnerable communities, on the steep slopes that embrace the city.

The history of the *comunas* is a history of people moving from one place to another. This movement has been regulated for the most part by larger social, political, and economic forces, not by personal or group will, and has left lasting impacts on the social lives of people. After studying the social and political dynamics that take place in the *comunas* of Medellín, I understand displacement, the practice that renders specifically defined groups of people[6] to forcibly move from one place to another, as a political and warfare strategy in processes of state formation on one hand, and on the other, as a generator of new political spaces where those who have been displaced find ways to reassert their human dignity and claim their civil rights.

The intentional forced movement of people in Colombia has given rise to a country in which state practices, citizenship rights, and the sense of nationhood of Colombians are constantly being contested and redefined. At the same time that people's lives were, and continue to be, transformed by the social, economic, and political practices that regulate their movement, the political spaces that are generated by the displaced, like the *comunas* of Medellín, fundamentally transform ongoing state practices intended to regulate the movement of certain people around the national territory. However, the political spaces that are generated by the victims of forced displacement are usually rendered marginal in processes of state formation and in the name of development. I argue that the territories generated by the displaced, what I call *territories of contestation*, like the *comunas*, are made marginal in processes of state formation, and that it is in

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[6] Afro-Colombians, peasants, and indigenous communities.

the relationship that these territories come to have vis-á-vis "the state" where we can see the multiple ways in which the Colombian state functions.

A definition of the Colombian state can be drawn from the life histories of *desterrados*. I felt the need to use the Spanish term *desterrado* interchangeably with the English term "displaced" in my discussion of forcibly displaced people. In Spanish the word *des-terrado* alludes to someone whose *tierra*, land, has been taken away, whereas the English term "displaced" only alludes to someone whose *place*, not necessarily their land, has been taken away. This is an important difference considering the history of violence in Latin America, given that as Mariategui (1990) taught us, the problem of the Latin American peasant and of the indigenous person is the struggle over control of the land. Thus, the memories and representations of experiences of *destierro* are important for the reckoning of the history of the social, political and economic dynamics in which Medellín (and Colombia) is currently situated. Many people have been *desterrada* on a daily basis in Colombia, and this work argues that this has been an integral function of a process of state formation: a sign of the reach of the state's tentacles, and not of its absence or weakness, as it is sometimes claimed.

In this section I discuss and respond to the narratives that, since the 1970s, have depicted the marginal youth of the *comunas* of Medellín as perilous; as *juventud perdida* (lost youth) that have not had and will not have any say on the further development of Colombian society. I bring attention to the ways I see the current youth community leaders of Medellin responding to the narratives that were generated around "marginal" youth as described by journalist and former mayor of Medellín (2008-2011), Alonso Salazar, in his book *No nacimos pa' semilla* (1990) (in English, *Born to Die in Medellín*). In this seminal book, Salazar takes us into the lives of the "marginal" youth of the 1980s, the sons and daughters of *desterrado*s who found a new home in Medellín during the 1960s and 1970s, and that, given their harsh economic and social

circumstances, were simply destined to *"born to die in Medellín"*.

Prelude to a Story

On a taxi ride in the summer of 2016, I was going from the office of the Medellín Secretariat of Youth to my apartment in Villa Niza, a neighborhood located in *Comuna* 2, in the northwest of Medellín. My cab—right at the intersection that separates the financial and commercial center from the north side of the city, the only place where the rich and poor meet— was rear-ended by a luxurious SUV. As the taxi driver returned to his seat after a confrontation with the other driver, he said out loud, mostly directing the statement to himself, *"¡Ah! me dan ganas de enfrentarme a estos hijueputas que siempre abusan de uno…de todos modos, no nacimos pa' semilla"* (Literally, "I sometimes feel like I should confront these sons of bitches…They are always abusive to me… Anyway, we weren't born to be seeds").

Apparently he had been threatened by the other driver, who had asked him to leave if he didn't want any problems, in spite of his responsibility for having hit our car. The taxi driver was in his 40s, and he was part of the generation that inspired Salazar's book. He was also part, and this is rarely mentioned, of the first generation of youth that began processes of social mobilization and political activism that initially began to make visible the problems that their "marginal" communities were facing.

The narratives of the youth of the 1980s coalesce today with those of the younger generation, the sisters and brothers of people who grew up in the Medellín of the 1980s. Youth leaders of this new generation are building upon the community- building progress of the past and continue to find ways to make visible and mobilize the interests of their "marginal" communities in larger political conversations. I will tell the story of the people who inhabit the *comunas* of Medellín from the lenses of young people whose personal histories are filled with experiences of displacement and almost endless but delimited movement— a movement that, as I said before, has

been systemically regulated by larger forces, but that at the same time has allowed people to generate *territories of contestation*.

Medellín: *La Eterna Primavera* (The Eternal Spring)

Medellín is a city of magnificent contrasts and peculiarities. In the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium, when most countries along the Andean corridor were undergoing the revival of an emerging political left, Colombia, and particularly Medellín, was advancing along a distinct path of state formation. At the same time that many radical populists from the left were being elected along the Andes and redirecting the economies of their countries, Medellín was undergoing a dramatic economic boom. Before the crash of the housing market in the United States, "levels of high-rise construction in Medellín surpassed those of Los Angeles and New York combined [...] the country's largest conglomerates and over seventy foreign enterprises [had] their Colombian headquarters in Medellín," and since 2005, "over a dozen international business conferences [had] been held there annually, generating more than $100 million in investment and business deals annually" (Hylton, 2010. p. 338). Because these years follow the extradition of large narco-traffickers and paramilitary leaders, this economic boom was also part of a massive project of money laundering.

This same prosperous and thriving city, years earlier, was a very different place. In fact, it served as the setting of the book by Alonzo Salazar (1990), *No nacimos pa' semilla.* During the late 1970s and 1980s, the city was recognized for being the home of the Medellín Cartel and its infamous *capo*, Pablo Escobar. The city also became the homicide capital of the world, reporting 55,000 people murdered between 1990 and 2002 (Fisher-Yoshida, 2017). The objects of murder were mainly young men. This same city also saw the birth of Fernando Botero, whose depictions of the torture at Abu Ghraib gained recognition around the world, and whose voluptuous sculptures of

fruits, animals, and people reside in the city center, suggesting perhaps, in a piercing metaphor, the voluptuous complexity that embraces Medellín.

Medellín, the capital of the department of Antioquia, lies on the Andes, in the Aburra Valley. It is the second largest city in Colombia, and since its founding in 1675, it has been recognized for the elevated spirit of entrepreneurship among its people and for its vast commercial activity. The city was founded by aristocratic families who were fed up with paying tribute to maintain the bureaucracy in Santa Fe (now Bogotá), and decided to create political and economic distance. Because Medellín was to a large extent isolated from the perils of *La Violencia* during the 1950s, and due to the growth of the textile industry in the city, many people from every corner of Colombia, fleeing the civil war or looking for economic betterment, started populating the city. As time passed and the city prospered economically, the upper class of Medellín pushed the working-class people out of town toward the suburbs growing along the northeastern and northwestern slopes of the city. To this day, most internally displaced persons and people of the lower socioeconomic classes live in these areas (Fisher-Yoshida, 2017).

In the beginning of the 1970s, as guerillas groups were spreading around Colombia, the textile manufacturing industry in Medellin experienced a major decline due in part to the rise of the textile industry in Asia. First marijuana and then cocaine trafficking became the economic and commercial base of the city for years to come, and became an important factor of the armed conflict that was being re-developed. In fact, "the trading of these commodities gave the criminals from the lower and middle classes chances to mimic the life of the privileged class [...] Drug trafficking allowed the unleashing of a deep desire for material wellbeing and the access to power, which historically had been denied to everyone but the aristocratic families" (Fisher-Yoshida, 2017, p. 7). As a result of a new economically emergent class and the establishment of powerful

drug cartels, as well as the emergence of left-wing guerrillas in the country, violence erupted. In fact, as Salazar (1990) depicts in his book, marginal *barrios*, became settings for gang formation. In consecutive waves of conflict and violence, the *comunas* were first governed by urban guerrilla militias, gangs associated with narcos, and then by right-wing paramilitary groups.

The History of the *Comunas* of Medellín is the History of Forcibly Displaced People

Desterrados is a word that is used less in its noun form than in its verb form *(desterrar)*. It is used as a verb perhaps too often, unfortunately. Colombia is the country with the second-highest rate of forcibly displaced people (7.7 million), after Syria (12 million) (See. El Espectador, 2017). The forced movement of people around the country (and outside of it) accounts for Colombia's history of socioeconomic disparities, and the struggle over the natural resources of the land. When engaging in conversations with taxi drivers, constructions workers, small business owners, gang members—in short, when speaking to many Colombians—one can start to recognize that the current state of Colombia is the result of people moving from one place to another; some at will, but most by force. The life stories of some people, especially those who inhabit the most vulnerable territories of the country, like the growing *comunas* of Medellín and other major cities, reveal the intricacies of the history of the country.

Land has been at the center of displacement. The issue has been over the control of the use and tenure of land, to be precise. Alfredo Molano, a trained sociologist who has devoted his life to journalism, has shared some testimonials that will help us see a larger picture of the role of forced displacement in the history of Colombia. For example:

> We were just coming into Pinillos when we heard the bombs exploding. The helicopters were coming down out of the sky like hawks, dropping their eggs all at once as if they were at war with everybody […] They had done it before. Then we heard the shooting pick up in the town's plaza, and the real battle began (p.80).

This is the story of a man who had experienced *el destierro* from a very young age, and whose life story has been one of forced movement, just like that of many Colombians. He continues, "then we heard the worst of it—single shots and silences […] long silences, which scared us more than the bombs" (Molano 2005, p.80).

This incident caused fourteen deaths in the town of Pinillos, in the department of Bolivar. The *paracos*[7] had returned to Pinillos to take over the town from the guerrillas. Apparently, the army and the police were complicit in this military intervention against the guerrillas, given that army helicopters were waiting outside, shooting from above, as guerrilla fighters were being pushed out of town by paramilitaries on foot. When the army, the paramilitary, or the combination of these two, arrive in rural towns with the excuse of eliminating the guerrillas, they distribute violence and terror among the civil society. The distribution, and successful establishment, of terror among a community has a social function beyond that of fear: spreading confusion. People feel obligated to transform the way they practice their most intimate social practices, such as mourning. After the massacre of fourteen members of the Pinillos community, nine *campesionos* from a town nearby were cup up with chainsaws, and their body parts were hung up along the roadside for people to see them. In Molano's account, it is mentioned that at the funeral of the victim of this massacre, *no one cried*. The distribution of terror, through spectacular portrayals of violence, creates the feeling among community members of being permanently observed. Thus, any act can become a threat to your own life, even crying the dead. The man continues, "people gathered their belongings, their children, and their dogs together and, with what little life they had left in them, fled into the swamps to become invisible […] I caught up with them on the other side of the river in the Morrocoyal swamp" (Molano, 2005, p.82). When transforming intimate cultural practices as a way to resist newly forms of social cohesion exercised by armed actors is not enough, people opt

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[7] Paramilitaries.

to leave.

"On the other side of the river" is where the young narrator of the story grew up. This area was populated by *ceiba* trees at the time his father arrived. His father told him, "we made shelters out of plastic bags and *ceiba* branches and put them up on [their] farm" (Molano, p.82). The Ceiba constituted an important element for the livelihood of peasants around this area. His dad would also tell him, "the *ceiba* tree would prove to be the nail in all our coffins […] ceiba wood is straight and strong and lumber companies prize it for that" (p.82). The testimonial continues, "the lumber business financed all the cattle spread […] they complement each other perfectly, and the loser is always the *colono*, the peasant farmer […] today, the lumber companies around Pinillos have exploited the *ceiba* to extinction […] It's sad" (p.83). Once a piece of land is identified by large businesses as profitable, those who have historically inhabit it, and that have used it for their physical and social survival, become targets of *destierro*. He continues, "when things started going badly and the ranchers began pushing peasants off the land, he [the father] figured there was too much virgin land elsewhere for him to end up hanging on some barbed wire (p.83). Apparently this was a common practice in the region to coerce people to leave. In fact, "the police would hang them up on barbed wire as a warning, so they'd back off and go […] so my father packed his things and headed down the Sinú River (p.83).

Some years later the man who gave Molano his testimony returned to Pinillos. He was around eighteen at the time. His father had fallen ill after many failed attempts to settle somewhere and construct a livable farm for his family— which at last he was able to do. Upon his return to Pinillos he fell in love with a local woman, and before they were able to establish a family in that town, they had to leave for Medellín in search of a more tranquil place to live. The dynamics of the conflict in that town had changed a bit. So had the armed actors. As it is depicted in this

testimonial, the presence of paramilitaries and their opaque, though pretty direct, relationship with the military and the police, had morphed. A new category of armed actors had been born: *los muchachos*. These were young men, not wearing any armband that identified them as part of a guerrilla or a paramilitary group, but that took control of the town by means of violence and terror. These *muchachos* are usually former paramilitaries that form *combos,* or gangs, in places where guerrillas and paramilitaries controlled before. Molano's informant claims, "around the beginning of 1995, they sent word to all the farmers that they wanted to see them in Achí […] we went to the meeting, and they were direct in what they said:

> *"We are going to stay around here. We won't tolerate drugs. We won't tolerate informants. We won't tolerate criminals. If you are one, you'd better leave. If you aren't, do your work, keep to yourselves, and don't bother anyone else. Anyone who breaks our law will get two chances before we kill him or her. The first, to correct their mistake. The second, to go. The third is the end."*
> *(p.93)*

After this event, a guerrilla group took over the town and as a result of the dispute between the guerrillas, *los muchamos*, and the police, Molano's informant, along with others, decided to go to Medellin with their families.

Stories like this have filled many conversations I've had, over *aguardiente*, during long nights and eternal conversations with friends who are always eager to recreate the reasons that brought them, and their entire families, to the *barrios populares*[8] of Medellín. Most of the people I know in Medellín have been victims of forced displacement, either from their hometowns in rural areas or from one neighborhood to another after their arrival in the big city. When one looks from a distance at the slopes that surround Medellín, the disorganized street lights at night that give them the appearance of mazes rather than of neighborhoods, one can't help but be amazed by the creativity and resilience of the people that built those spaces after experiencing so much.

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[8] Poor neighborhoods. This is another colloquial way of referring to neighborhoods that are inhabited mostly by the poor, working class, and the displaced.

In his journalistic work during the 1980' and 1990' in the northeast and northwest *comunas* of Medellín, Alonso Salazar realizes that, *"thirty years ago nobody could think that these slopes would be able to be built upon [...] now every corner is inhabited [...] the old wood and cardboard shacks have been replaced by cement and adobe houses that cling to the mountain with force"* (Salazar, 1991, p.37). Alonzo Salazar tells the tale of many families whose younger members, after having re-settled in Medellín, fell prey to the urban conflict that the city began to experience during the latter part of the 1970's through today. He is right in highlighting the fact that the youth, mostly men, that lived in the peripheries of Medellín during the late 70s and 80s had limited opportunities of personal and professional growth, and that such circumstances led them to fill the ranks of the military, the left-wing urban militias, the gangs connected to narco-traffickers, or paramilitary groups; sometimes to different ones at different times. Some have wore the left-wing militia armband first and then the paramilitary one. Many have been trained in the military, given that military service in Colombia is obligatory for all men over 18 years of age.[9] This fact makes young men in the peripheries of the city very profitable to illegal armed groups, given that they need not spend resources and time in military training. Indeed, this was a generation of child soldiers for different powerful armed actors, from the Colombian military to the *narcos*, the *guerrillas*, and the paramilitaries. In the testimonials he collected during his work in the northeast and northwest *comunas* in the 1980s, one is able to see how cities became loci of reception for the displaced.

In the beginning of his description, Salazar recounts,

Old faces look out the windows. The peasants who founded the neighborhood, against all odds, now spend their time discreetly and collected. According to them, the tranquility of their initial days in this neighborhood no longer exists. Everything has changed. For a years now the war has visited every corner of this neighborhood. A war of young people, almost children. A war of gangs that has left so many dead that everyone lost count (p.39).

To tell the story of these *comunas*, Salazar recounts the life story of Don Rafael, one of the

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[9] See. Ejercito Nacional: https://www.ejercito.mil.co/?idcategoria=334204&c)

founders of a *barrio popular*, in one of the northeast *comunas*. In Don Rafael's words, "we have always lived from one phase of violence to another, with very little peaceful time. Each one of us is a complete novel [...] mine has been a life of *rebusque* (finding ways to make a living), of *aguante* (resilience), of *berraquera* (being strong)" (p.40). Don Rafael was 58 at the time Salazar interviewed him, and his has been a life of almost uninterrupted movement across different regions of Colombia. Don Rafael recounts,

> first it was the political violence, which I had to live in Narcasia, in the department of Caldas. There were liberals killing conservative families, and conservatives killing liberal families, and then the army killing one and the other. At that time, we could not walk on the roads, there was always someone passing by and willing to kill you, it was a time we walked through the hills, *haciendole el quite a todo mundo* (evading everyone) (p.40).

Don Rafael, like everyone that began to inhabit the hills that surround Medellin during the 50's and 60's, was pushed out of his land and forced to look for another place to resettle.

The *comunas* were formed by these peasants first, and then by afro-Colombians and later indigenous people, as they arrived to Medellin looking for a place to construct new livelihoods. The slopes of the city seemed at first like places where life could not be sustained, but with collective work, displaced populations constructed communities where new social relations emerged. Don Rafael tells us,

> I came to stop in Medellin. A countryman helped me and I started working as a contractor for the Territorial Credits Institute. That was the first time I lived here in this neighborhood, when it was just begging to be constructed. We turned these rifts into *vivideros* (places to live) thorugh *convites*. We organized the people with through the parish and build the first communal action. Those were good times, there was no space for evil, and everyone was very collaborative (p.42).

Collective actions like *convites* served to create strong community ties between displaced groups of people and helped generate the material conditions to establish the livelihood of generations to come.

In the struggle over the land, the most vulnerable people, like peasants, Afro-Colombians, and the indigenous population, have been pushed around the country. They have been pushed to the

most remote and harshest terrain of the country, leaving them with very limited possibilities to make a decent living, and to have to experience an ongoing process between *destierro*—resettlement—*destierro*, that continues in major cities when gangs and self-defense groups push them out and around.

Because what is at stake in processes of *destierro* is access to and control of the most fertile and "richest" land of the country, people who do not have the means to engage in an armed or legal conflict to defend their land from powerful landowners (using paramilitary forces), or national and international corporations (in complicity with local, national, and international governments), end up living in remote areas like city slums. It can be said that violence, per se, isn't what forces people to move from one area of the country to another. Violence isn't the root cause of the conflict in Colombia. The root cause is, rather, hidden behind the violence that makes people leave their land. In fact, Mabel Gonzalez Bustelo writes in the appendix of Alfredo Molano's "The Dispossessed: Chronicles of the *Desterrados* in Colombia" (2005), that about 84% of the displaced come from areas that produce 78% of the country's oil revenues (Molano 2005, p. 210). People are pushed out of their land so that powerful national and international corporations get hold of the resources beneath the homes of many peasants, Afro-Colombians, and the indigenous population. There is a class of people in Colombia that are pushed out of their homes, where they have historically made a decent living and constructed meaningful relationships with the land and their communities, and are funneled into precarious areas, where the likelihood of their very survival is almost nonexistent. In spite of this, there is another social process that happens in relation to displacement. Entire communities, including their youth, begin to build strong communal relationships on newly erected communities; new livelihoods begin to be developed, and the use of the land and the very structure of cities begin to be redefined.

Part III

Representations of Memory and the Construction of Territories of Contestation

Solomon sayeth: There is no new thing upon the earth.
So that as Plato had an imagination, that all
knowledge was but remembrance; so Solomon giveth
his sentence, that all novelty is but oblivion.
— The Immortal, Jorge Luis Borges.

...the past strives to turn towards the sun which is raising in the sky of history.
—Walter Benjamin

My concern in this section is with the memory of violence that is imprinted on those who have survived lived experiences of violence and displacement, and the way this memory contests the meanings, ascribed from the outside, of the territories, the *comunas*, that some people have historically been *pushed* to inhabit.

In October of 2017 I received painful news. A member of the youth collective, *Movimiento Tierra en Resistencia* (Land in Resistance Movement), had been murdered. He was part of a little neighborhood *combo*[10] in his teen years and was involved in everything having to do with the everyday activity of street gangs. This young man was mostly in charge of collecting *vacunas* (vaccines, a term used to refer to extortion), and one day, as he approached a house to collect the "security dues"—*la vacuna*— he was invited by the owner of the house to join a community-organized event. He agreed to go, and after hearing from others about the great community-building initiatives that were taking place in Castilla, he became interested in this. With time, he became engaged with the sector of the community that was concerned with the violence that members of *combos*, people like himself, were inflicting on the neighborhood. As a result of this, he distanced himself from the *combo*. He later became a member of *Movimiento Tierra en Resistencia*, a youth collective in *Comuna* 5, in the northwest of Medellín, that is described by its members as, a space where they can articulate various initiatives from around the *comuna* in order

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[10] Gang

to demand and defend the human rights of people and redefine and transform their territory. Not too long after I met some of the members of MTR, this young man was murdered, apparently as the result of a drive-by shooting in Castilla.

Feeling quite disgusted, frankly, after learning that yet another youth was taken by Medellín's urban conflict, I also became intrigued by how the community in Castilla, especially the members of MTR and their partner organizations from around Medellín, responded to this death. On October seventh, a week after this lamenting event, MTR organized an event to commemorate his life, not his death, and to, as they announced, "continue with our peaceful resistance and contribute to the redefinition and transformation of our territory through the construction of memory"[11]. The event was titled *Plantón del fuego* (the Fire Occupation). They lit a fire very close to where the young man had fallen, invited musicians from around the city to play Latin jazz and salsa, and celebrated the life of this "poor warrior" in an act of collective resistance and *remembrance*. This, however, isn't an isolated case in the *comunas* of Medellín. In fact, not too far from this place, several blocks away from where this event was taking place, there is a graffiti mural titled, *El mural de los caidos* (The Mural of the Fallen), that community members argue both commemorates the lives of the dead and helps the living "*a no olvidar*", to *not forget*.

At the base of conversations about the urban conflict in Medellín, most people, especially those who have devoted their lives to facing this problem, like community leaders, speak of the importance of memory. In the many times that I've asked about the predominance of the word "memory" in the local discourses of resistance and youth activism, the responses have been multiple and significantly distinct. The majority of the responses, however, are concerned with issues of the present or the future, rather than with those of the past, as one would initially imagine. Moreover, when youth community leaders speak of the relationship between violence and memory

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[11] This was taken from an invitation pamphlet they distributed on their social media.

in these conflict zones, they refer to the collective or individual experiences of violence, past or present, in terms of the actions taken to confront and respond to such violence, and leave aside the actual experiences of violence and the pains that it caused and still causes.

As I began to receive more news from Medellín after the unfortunate event, I noticed that the focus was more on the responses to such an act of violence than on the act itself. The narratives that emanate from collective experiences of violence, and the ways in which these narratives become an integral part of the memories of violence and of the redefinition of the meaning of social spaces, is my concern in this section.

In order to provide a discussion about the narratives that are produced after violent events, I draw on narratives that are mobilized through local discourses of political resistance among youth community leaders and *engaged artists*, and the role that these narratives have in processes of remembering. I conceive these narratives as key entry point to elucidate how community members of some of the *comunas* of Medellín remember and represent the (hi)stories of violence of their territories. I pay special attention to the notion of "territory" as imagined in these communities, given that memories of violence are usually spoken about in terms of *memorias del territorio*, (memories of the territory*)*. And in fact, it is in the very "territory"—on the walls, the streets—that one sees the representations of these memories. In the following pages, I provide an understanding of the ways violence is remembered by those who have lived experiences of violence and displacement, the relationship that this remembering has with the (re)configuration of social territories, and ultimately, the spatial and material dimension that is at play in the interpretations and representations of these memories. I suggest that within the narratives of violence expressed by community leaders in the *comunas* of Medellín, in their appropriation of the past through discourses of resistance in the present, and in their insistence of remembering the ways the communities respond to violence rather than the acts of violence themselves, one can identify some

of the ways communities are organized to construct territories of peaceful contestation in times of war, and after.

Youth Representations and the Constructions of Historical Memory

After many years of social and political turmoil and devastation due to violence, the Colombian society is beginning to make sense of the internal war that has marked the last 60 years of Colombia's cultural life. Representations of the conflict of different sorts are being explored by the *Centro Nacional de Memoria Historica* (National Center of Historic Memory)*,* a government-sponsored entity. Here, I strive to bring attention to the representations of the conflict that some of the youth that live in the poorest neighborhoods of Medellín are creating. How are some of the young men and women of this city—the ones who have experienced violence in one way or another— expressing what they have witnessed? How is the memory of the conflict being remembered and represented, and how do these representations play a role in the production of a collective historical memory? Because the history of the conflict is also a history of displacement and the constant movement of people from one place to another, what is the relationship between the *territories of contestation* that are produced by the displaced and memory? While I try to answer these questions, I also suggest that the memories and representations of the conflict allow us to speak of memory in materialistic terms, and of the territories of contestation as the product of memory being remembered and represented; and ultimately to speak of contested territories as both products *of*, and settings *for,* the storytelling of the history of Colombia.

As I stroll through *barrio Santa Fe* in Bogotá, shining due to its colorful graffiti, I recall an article I read in *El Espectador,* a major Colombian newspaper, titled "*Los murales son lugares donde se disputa la memoria*"("Murals are Places Where Memory is Disputed") (See. El Espectador, 2015). In this article, Bill Rolston, an expert in transitional justice from Northern Ireland, claims that after his visit to Bogotá, his perspective on theories about urban artistic

expressions had changed dramatically. He believes that the graffiti murals in Bogotá are spaces where the memory of the country is being disputed.

There is something inherently tangible, that is, material, in the human practice of remembering. To think of memory in materialistic terms is to think of memory not only as abstract and conceptual, but also as an imperishable *material* that piles up, and ultimately finds the way to manifest itself at some point during the ongoing march of history. "Nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history", Walter Benjamin warned us (1969, p. 254). Considering this, the past is there for the taking and can be retrieved from the pile of history as it "flirts by as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized" (p.255). Walter Benjamin, in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, depicts history as a material depository of memories. Following Benjamin, I claim that historical memory is constructed by "a secret agreement between past generations and the present one" (p. 254). In other words, historical memory is found in the array of ways the present generations inform their current social practices through the representations they make of the past. In the various ways people relate and act upon folk tales, paintings, myths, songs, and other representations of the past, one is able to have a glimpse of how the past is remembered in the present, and how memories of the past take a material and social dimension, as these influence people's social interactions in the present. I bring the attention to graffiti murals in some of the neighborhoods of Medellín to examine the materiality of memory, how memory is remembered, and how historical memory is produced.

Every fall community members of San Javier, in *Comuna* 13, remember the anniversary of *Operación Orion.* For the inhabitants of *Comuna* 13, and its visitors, it's difficult to remember *Orion* without remembering the graffiti on the walls. The graffiti murals there embody some of the remembered (hi)stories of violence and resistance in that sector of the city. On October 16, 2002,

hundreds of soldiers and police, accompanied by "hooded informants"[12], arrived in SUVs to some parts of *Comuna* 13 following an order of the then-president of Colombia, Alvaro Uribe Velez. This event, known as *Operación Orion*, marked the beginning of a massive urban military intervention in which, "launching urban warfare against the FARC and the ELN […] law enforcement used machine guns, rifles, and Blackhawk helicopters" (Civico 2016, p.171). This brutal urban military intervention lasted two months, and according to the Center for Investigation and Popular Education (CINEP), one civilian was killed and thirty-eight were wounded; eight civilians were disappeared by members of the military and the paramilitary; three-hundred fifty-nine residents were detained, of which 185 were taken arbitrarily, and "there was massive forced displacement from the inner city" (Civico 2016, p.171). After the massive devastation that this operation left behind, the people of *Comuna* 13 are finding ways to recuperate, heal, and remember.

There was a predecessor to *Orion*. Residents of San Javier in *Comuna* 13 remember the nuances of *Operación Mariscal*, a military intervention by the Colombian central government similar to the one described above, as they tell it. The story goes that during *Operacion Mariscal*, when the airstrikes began, civilians came out of their houses "armed" with white sheets, waving them and calling for a ceasefire. It is said that thanks to the massive presence of civilians waving white shirts, sheets, and whatever they could find, some of the wounded were successfully taken to local clinics and hospitals and many lives were saved. Right at the entrance of *Comuna* 13, a group of *grafiteros* painted a mural after becoming acquainted with this memory through the testimony of the older people who experienced it firsthand. The *grafiteros* represented it with elephants, both babies and adults, holding white handkerchiefs, almost as if they were waving them. Although the majority of the *grafiteros* were young at the time and have very vague recollections of *Operacion*

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[12] Paramilitaries that were present in the area.

Mariscal, they have been active participants in what came after this operation: the recuperation processes, the resistance movements that were born, and above all, the interpretation and communication of the memories that were produced during and after *Mariscal*. They represented these with an owl also holding a handkerchief, but not waiving it like the elephants. Rather, she holds it to her heart, symbolizing the longing for peacefulness with which *Comuna* 13 has been reborn after *Mariscal*.

(Figure 1.1) *Mural Mariscal, Comuna 13*. *Taken by the author 2016

The social implications that the production of this graffiti has in the making of *memory* and *place* in *Comuna* 13 can be interpreted from a materialistic point of view. This graffiti can be visualized as a pendulum swinging back and forth and dragging with it the memories-of-the-past toward what Benjamin calls the *time-of-the-now*, just like in the case of fashion that "has a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago […] it is a tiger's leap into the past" (Benjamin, 1969, p.261). The *grafiteros* represent on this mural the memories of the collective

responses to violence, and not of the acts of violence, thereby reclaiming and giving new meanings to this history. In experiencing the "present", in recuperating, in making history move, the residents of *Comuna* 13 appropriated the memories of their responses to violence as a way to redefine this historical event for the sake of redefining the very territory they inhabit. The social practices of the youth leaders in *comuna* 13 are guided in large part by the memories of the past that live in their conception of the present; their work of political resistance and youth articulation is the embodiment of the memories of the peaceful contestations their communities have exercised along the way, through their shared experiences of displacement and marginalization. It is here where I see the material dimension of the act of remembering, and of memory itself.

Building on the idea that memory is material it can be said that the construction of the *territories of contestation*, i.e. the *comunas*, is the result of a process of remembrance. These *comunas* have been constructed in ways that simulate the homes left behind in rural areas of the country, and continue to be constructed, by the younger generations, through the representations of experiences of violence and displacement of community members. Historical memory isn't an end in and of itself. The production of historical memory brings with it the redefinition and/or production of a social space. Gaston Gordillo claims that there is a "spatiality of memory" (2004, p.3). In his analysis on the Toba, Gordillo makes a move from mere phenomenological studies of space that overlook history to examine the "materiality of memory, its embodiment in practice, and its constitution as a force in the production of places" (2004, p.4). When Gordillo claims that "every memory is, in a fundamental way, a memory of a place" (p.4), given that what "makes memories meaningful is the locale" (idem) I do not think he is suggesting that memories are memories *of* places, rather, he suggests that places *are* the memories themselves. In addition, not only "what makes memories meaningful is the locale", but also, what makes the locale meaningful is the *historical memory* of its content—the same that made possible the production of such a

locale. What makes the graffiti of comuna 13 meaningful isn't only its constitution as a place, but also its historical content (the historical memory) that's embedded in it, and that made its production possible.

It is important to acknowledge that for *space production* and *remembering* to be possible in this way, history must be understood as "the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now" (Benjamin, p.261), and that, "to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it the way it really was" (Ranke, quoted in Benjamin p.255). What this means is that history doesn't expand in a unidirectional way, toward a necessary homogeneous time. It means that history is populated by the *piled-up* memories represented in a multitude of forms, by memories that *revive* how we make sense of the world. Sense-making in this way invites us to interpret *being*, "what *was* and what *is*, as forms of *becoming*", in that, as the piled-up "*was*" becomes historically significant to what "*is*", *being* is constituted by a process of an infinite *becoming* between what *was* and what *is* (Coronil, 2011). It is in this way that territories, as settings for peaceful *contestation* and *resettlement*, are produced by communities in the "peripheries" of Medellín. Memories are not only remembered and represented, but they are also embodied in concrete political actions. In processes of remembering, it isn't the violence that is appropriated as much as it is the resistance to such violence. And that, I think, is what has allowed these communities to thrive in spite of the harsh, conflict-ridden conditions where they are situated. These are territories that are imagined and intended to be remembered as territories of peaceful resistance, not of violence. And this is the key.

Conclusion

I conclude by suggesting that what allows communities to reconstruct their social spaces and their lives after experiences of violence is, by all means, memory; not the memory of women and men, but the memory of the struggling, oppressed class responding to experiences of

oppressive violence and actively contesting the meaning of the territories that they have historically been pushed to inhabit. Memory, as Benjamin envisions it, "itself is the depository of historical knowledge"—and by extension, of historical memory (1969, p.260). Therefore, the march of history, that is, the march of people, is a march of *remembrance*.

In this thesis, I have argued that a definition of the State must be drawn from the social practices that are shaped at the interception between imaginaries of "centers" and "peripheries". The Colombian state as we see it today is the result of the interactions that take place between the responses of people that have been forcibly displaced and pushed to the margins, and the maneuverings of the central government in its attempts to characterize itself as the State. I showed how Colombian elected governments, at different times, have been strengthened in relation to their presence on the margins. This thesis argues that displacement is not the result of war, but an essential function of elected governments, the army, with their proxy paramilitary forces, in processes of state formation. It is also claimed that forced displacement generates, through the concrete actions of the victims, territories of contestation as people reclaim their civil rights and human dignity. I showed how the peripheries of Medellin, the *comunas*, have been formed by the actions of the displaced as they make sense of their status as both displaced and marginalized. Their actions become tangible in processes of community building and concrete political actions. I provided evidence to conclude that the social and political spaces that are constructed by the displaced are in fact territories of contestation, i.e. places where the civil rights and the human dignity of people is reclaimed. Lastly, I argued that memory, as experienced by victims of displacement and political, social, and economical marginalization has a material dimension. I showed how the memory of the Colombian conflict is remembered in the *comunas* of Medellin, and how this becomes embodied by youth leaders in their social work and in place making by entire communities.

The history of Colombia is the history of people moving from one place to another. It is only in the lived stories of people making sense of their condition of *destierro* and marginalization that the face of the Colombian State becomes visible. In spite of the almost perpetual armed conflict in Colombia people have found ways to claim their dignity. It is in the uninterrupted search for dignity of the oppressed and forgotten that new expressions of the unaccomplished promise of Modernity, the same that enunciated that all humans are born equal, will begin to flourish.

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