

IN DEPTH

Art and culture as processes of healing and memory in Colombia

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In Colombia, reparation for the victims of the conflict has not been entirely effective and this process presents great challenges for the comprehensive recognition of their rights. In this context, whereas some academics and activists view the role of symbolic reparations as a way to compensate for harm suffered and to assimilate the traumatic effects of the conflict, many others see it as a way to avoid taking substantial responsibility with regards to comprehensive reparation. Symbolic reparation certainly plays a fundamental role in guaranteeing truth, justice and non-repetition, but, unfortunately, it is a dimension that has not been given the attention and importance it deserves.

As a result, providing conditions to guarantee the effectiveness of comprehensive reparation has become one of the greatest challenges of transitional justice in Colombia. Symbolic actions of various kinds carried out by groups and individuals, including for the specific case of disappearance, are a reparation strategy that goes beyond institutionalism and traditional views. This is because they focus on the feelings of victims and their ways of seeing and perceiving the world, becoming practices that constitute autonomous reparation mechanisms.

Consequently, various creative and artistic strategies and actions play a fundamental role in peacebuilding in two specific ways. On the one hand, art emerges as a form of communication, denunciation-protest and also as criticism-resistance and social and political demonstration, enabling spaces for social transformation. On the other hand,

art emerges as a scenario that asks questions, as a tool for self-discovery, to process, rework and give a different meaning to traumas; to heal both intimately and publicly, to narrate and build memory in another way.

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It is a fact that the reconstruction of memory depends primarily on its protagonists: women, communities, activists and ordinary citizens –and not only on professionals, experts and the media– in a process that weaves together memory, history, truth and justice in complex contexts.

Enforced disappearance and extrajudicial executions have once again been publicly exposed as an atrocious crime in the Colombian conflict with the recent discovery of a large mass grave by the Special Peace Jurisdiction (JEP) in Dabeiba, Antioquia, in December 2019. There are more than 100,000 disappeared persons and, according to the Institute of Legal Medicine, still roughly 200,000 unidentified bodies.

Those of us who, due to various circumstances, have experienced the drama of disappearance first-hand and have worked closely with different communities and victims over the years know that expressing in words the countless sensations and emotions experienced when dealing with this reality takes a long time. In my personal experience working with urban and rural communities since the late 1990s, I have seen, in Soacha and other areas of Bogotá, young rappers who evoked in their lyrics the memory of their missing peers, as well as peasants, women, communities, Afro-Colombians and indigenous people in various parts of the country who, through their traditional dances, stories and songs have narrated their pain, dreams and hopes.

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These different artistic expressions are a symbolic sample that reveals to society and its citizens the dimension of the tragedy and the need not to repeat it. There are alternative ways of addressing and narrating violence beyond a legal and academic perspective, with the aim of understanding and drawing attention to realities that are rarely addressed in the public sphere, such as enforced disappearance.

In recent years, awareness of enforced disappearance has increased in the public sphere through individual and collective creations. Countless symbolic, artistic and mobilization activities carried out by organizations, communities and family members, not only as an act of denunciation, awareness and education, but also as part of the elaboration of their mourning, both intimate and collective. Memory practices that are constructed through cultural and artistic practices such as songs, dances, rituals, the performing arts, murals, drawings, short films, photo exhibitions, memory galleries, etc. that show society the different faces of disappearance, generating new meanings. This involves artists and groups raising awareness about this reality that few people know about as a promise of hope for an intercultural dialogue.

A tour of some of the creations

Artwork speaks for itself and it is the public who has the last word. There are many actions that have been developed by artists, organizations, communities and individuals that give an account of the importance of the various voices on disappearance in Colombia. The main thing is that this artwork can be seen and recognized by many more people in the country and around the world as a work of awareness-raising and education about this reality that is seldom talked about.

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It would not be fair to focus on just one case and it is also impossible to make a list and name them all. However, we can highlight some of these proposals so that readers can explore them and generate their own reflections. The purpose here is to show both dimensions: that of the artist/narrator who personally, in collaboration with victims and communities, pays homage to them, evoking their pain and their hopes, as well as that of groups and/or organizations that jointly present their work to the public in collective creations, visions derived from the artistic processes of building memory.

We can begin in the nineties with *Atrabiliarios*, the work of renowned artist Doris Salcedo, who spent several years listening to the relatives of victims of enforced disappearance. And *Aliento*, by the artist Óscar Muñoz (1999), in which images of disappeared young people appear when the viewer breathes on them.

Subsequently, the famous Colombian artist Beatriz González, in a tribute to the anonymous victims of the armed conflict, joined together art, architecture and memory in *Auras anónimas* (2009). For this art installation, almost 9,000 silk-screened tombstones were installed in the Central Cemetery of Bogotá for the current Center for Memory, Peace and Reconciliation. The tombs were a mass grave for the thousands of victims of *El Bogotazo*, the massive riots that occurred on 9 April 1948. This public work of art provides food for thought.

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elaborate a message that is both intimate and public ”

Madres terra, by photographer Carlos Saavedra (2008), was also exhibited in the same Memory Center. This art exhibit is composed of portraits of mothers partially buried, in recognition for keeping alive the memory of their children, victims of enforced disappearance in Colombia.

The last example, from an intimate and personal perspective, includes several proposals resulting from the same experience: the documentary Cuerpo 36 (2015), by the forensic anthropologist Helka Quevedo, based on the research “Textos corporales de la crueldad”, of the Center for Historical Memory; the initiative “El bosque de paz y reconciliación”, where trees are planted and where, each time a body is identified, the family of the disappeared person is invited to receive the tree that a Colombian has adopted and cared for; and the book Un lugar para otras voces (2018), where Quevedo depicted her experiences through twelve letters to a group of people disappeared by paramilitary forces in Caquetá, in places where paramilitaries were taught torture techniques¹.

Additionally, an important initiative launched recently is the Colombia Enforced Disappearance website, through which a tour of the various artistic proposals dealing with disappearances can be taken.

There are also numerous examples of collective creations conceived by people who have directly experienced the drama of disappearance, with a capacity for resistance, resilience, and social and political action. One of the most representative actions is the Memory Gallery, an initiative of the Association of Relatives of Disappeared Detainees, together with other organizations. This initiative is a traveling exhibit with photographs of disappeared persons, with the aim of working on the reconstruction of historical memory in public spaces. Another example is Antígonas Tribunal de Mujeres, of the Mothers of Soacha organization, which demands justice and dignity for the victims and the disappeared through dances and songs. Since 2008, Mothers of the False Positives of Soacha have worked tirelessly to be heard, participating in various artistic initiatives.

They are currently working on the project *“Grabar en la memoria”*, where they carve their children’s faces in pieces of wood.

“ The works are a poetic means that allows us to recognize the ability of family members to transform and build other collective imaginations about disappearance ”

La Escombrera, in the Comuna 13 district of Medellín, is possibly one of the largest mass graves in Latin America. In 2002, the Orión Military Operation, in collusion with paramilitary forces, left hundreds of disappeared persons and a burial site for victims. Agroarte was formed that same year as a platform coordinating five grassroots organizational processes that promote the “reappropriation of territory, intergenerational exchange and the strengthening of the social fabric” through different methodologies based on the arts. One of them is Cuerpos Gramaticales, a “political-artistic performance action (planting of bodies) that tells the stories of violence against bodies and territory” through preparatory activities involving theatre, dance, weaving and writing.

Other noteworthy works are the book Memorias poéticas de la Diáspora Colombiana (2019), by women in exile; the series of short documentaries BuscArte, by the Disappeared Persons Search Unit (UBPD); the short film Mi regreso a las orillas del río; the animated film La nube que oscureció nuestras vidas; or the dramatized Nuestra búsqueda. Another beautiful initiative is Costurero de la Memoria, which was started by a diverse group of women in 2007 as an exercise to share dialogue and listening through weaving. It is a metaphor of sewing, knitting, joining together and mending life fragments and stories, led by the Afro-Colombian woman Virgelina Chará.

It is also important to consider the harm caused by enforced disappearance to indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, which creates spiritual and cultural discord in their lands. An emblematic case is that of Kimy Pernía of the Emberá Katío

people in northern Colombia and the songs and stories of the Mujeres Buscadoras de Tumaco, women who are searching for their disappeared children.

“ Collective creations are a cathartic process that contributes to the exploration and understanding of their own feelings as victims of enforced disappearance ”

We have seen how many of these initiatives are promoted by women, since they have suffered the effects of the armed conflict disproportionately. An example of this phenomenon is the event organized by the Truth Commission and the UBPD in the city of Pasto in 2019, where more than 400 women from all over the country –indigenous women, peasants, exiles, victims of enforced disappearance– raised their voice: “Our absence is the same, but we have found ourselves in pain”.

Where there is art, there is dialogue and there is hope

All these initiatives work as a canvas, a way to communicate with disappeared loved ones. They draw the feelings and rituals of the victims and elaborate a message that is both intimate and public: a window of communication with the world, transmitting messages of hope, freedom and dignity, like a political aesthetic act from everyday life.

The psychosocial impacts and harm caused by enforced disappearance on the victims (both direct and indirect), on the communities to which they belong and on their environment reflect the magnitude of this crime. The act of disappearing denies the human condition, absence as loss, but at the same time as expectation of life.

It is important to see how the effects, impacts and harm on families, communities, places and territories have transformed the meaning of many of these human groups and landscapes, and through art a new symbolism has been developed. The creation of these symbolic places is linked to the reconfiguration of their personal and collective identities.

“ All these artistic initiatives are not simply symbolic acts; they are a way of fighting against impunity and of shaping the historical truth ”

In many of these creations, pain is the protagonist. These are works that reflect the pain of absence transformed into strength and its tireless search for truth as a key element for justice. They are works that reflect the will, strength, endurance and efforts to achieve a more dignified life. A poetic means that allows us to recognize the ability of family members to transform and build other collective imaginations about disappearance and that seeks to generate bridges of recognition between different actors.

Collective creations are a cathartic process that contributes to the exploration and understanding of their own feelings as victims of enforced disappearance. It is not easy to document emotional impacts and distress, but what has been achieved through different performances or artistic scenarios is that disappearance can be manifested and imagined in another way. It is important to be able to document and transform that wealth of emotions as an act of recognition of their pain; to invoke them and bring them to the forefront as an act of healing, a learning exercise of public awareness, and also, as an individual and collective practice. It is a way to resignify territories, bodies, stories and lives through artistic dialogue.

When a group of people are convened, an important piece of unknown history is recovered, since the importance of telling their stories, of telling their truth in a different way, is invoked. Being able to reveal the violence infringed on them specifically because they were women, men, peasants, indigenous people, trade unionists or Afro-Colombians plays an essential role in the country's reconciliation. All these artistic initiatives are not simply symbolic acts; they are a way of fighting against impunity and of shaping the historical truth about crimes against humanity in Colombia through different voices.

1. You can listen to [this story](#) and others in the voice of various victims on the podcast [Voces desde el territorio](#) from the newspaper *El Espectador*, in a section called “*Hablan los Desaparecidos, una serie para recordar a quienes no regresaron del conflicto*”.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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[Photography Project](#) “Costurero de la memoria”, Colombia.

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