
Cultural Ecologies of Symbolic Reparation in Transitional Colombia: State and Grassroots Initiatives of Memory and Reconciliation.

In countries passing through transitional justice processes, the construction of a post conflict society entails going beyond mechanisms for the demobilization of illegal armed groups and the economic reparation of victims, to the creation of a culture of inclusion, peace and reconciliation by state and civil society actors. Within this process, initiatives of symbolic reparation constitute a central element. Yet, scholarship and public debates on transitional justice mostly address symbolic reparation by focusing on official memory and truth commissions and the politics of truth telling. Little is known about how cultural initiatives contribute to peace building; about the effectiveness and impact of symbolic reparation policies, particularly among marginalized ethnic groups and displaced populations; or about the role of civil society in creating spaces for debate and civic participation among diverse social sectors within the reconciliation process.

This dissertation project articulates multi-sited ethnographic research and digital humanities documentation methodologies to illuminate the links between culture, reparation and reconciliation at a key moment in Colombia's history, when thousands of victims of the armed conflict still wait for their rights to truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence to be guaranteed. Despite the peace agreement signed on November 2016 with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), many regions continue to be epicenters of human rights violations affecting particularly social and environmental leaders, ethnic minorities and other marginalized groups. During 2017, a total of 138 social leaders were assassinated according to a recent report by CINEP (Center for Research and Popular Education). In the Pacific coast region, an area of particular interest in this project, black and indigenous communities counted for 76.3% (5,640 out of 7,400) of Colombia's total forcibly displaced population during 2017, according to Colombia's Office of the Ombudsman. A context of exclusion, institutional neglect and invisibility has intensified the risks these communities face.

Within this context, this project explores the potential of cultural practices of memory for mending the social fabric, promoting justice, revitalizing community ties and building lasting reconciliation in vulnerable regions. It focuses on practices that constitute nodes of conflict transformation, responding to violence by “transforming it into life enhancing opportunities to create constructive change” (Lederach 2003:14). I document and analyze the impact of what I call the “cultural ecologies” of symbolic reparation: the complex assemblage of memory initiatives that have proliferated in the current transitional justice conjuncture, from documentaries and photography exhibitions by which state institutions restore the dignity of victims, to grassroots memory processes promoting the recovery of ancestral agroecological practices to help displaced families face their concrete needs. A central element of the project is the development of an online media platform that serves as repository of documentation and interviews. Using curatorial techniques, the platform aims at making the research process accessible and giving visibility to initiatives that are making important contributions to memory construction and national reconciliation, as well as to the different actors, strategies, and processes involved. The platform leverages digital humanities tools to bring the result of the dissertation into the public sphere in an accessible format.

I use an interdisciplinary analytical framework that draws primarily on memory studies, cultural studies and transitional justice and peace studies literature, to comparatively examine initiatives led by the National Center for Historical Memory and other state institutions, and by grassroots cultural organizations. I assess which practices have the greatest potential for conflict transformation and for creating inclusive memory narratives and civic engagement processes in areas where the persistence of violence is linked to historical marginalization and state abandonment. Based on preliminary observations, the *central hypothesis* of this project is the following: symbolic reparation initiatives for memory and reconciliation are emerging as arenas for political struggle, and as spaces where particular claims of justice are being mobilized. In marginal areas inhabited by communities at risk, these initiatives are more likely to become sustainable when they foster: 1) forms of representation of the past that allow communities to articulate claims for inclusion and social justice, allowing its members to become active agents in building peace and reconciliation; 2) collaborative and alternative practices of memorialization that activate civic engagement to face concrete necessities within the communities, and revitalize social ties broken by violence.

REFERENCES.

Lederach, John Paul. 2003. *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books. Print.