

DISARMED WARRIORS

Narratives with Youth Ex-Combatants in Colombia

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For Miguel,
in the hope that, by reading these pages,
his appreciation and respect
for those who are different will grow

Tristes guerras
si no es amor la empresa,
tristes, tristes.

Tristes armas,
si no son las palabras,
tristes, tristes.

Tristes hombres,
si no mueren de amores,
tristes, tristes.

Miguel Hernández

Sad wars
If love is not the aim
sad, sad.

Sad weapons
it they are not words,
sad, sad.

Sad men
if they do not die for love
sad, sad.

Miguel Hernández
(Trans. Ted Genoways)

But I'm not from there;
I come from deep in the jungle.
Adriana

I was born of the earth and air,
not of any person.
Daniela

I had to sleep there.
I slept well.
That's how I grew up.
Mariana

Keep an eye on
the little thread of life
that was barely hanging on.
Laura

Why do we
who are human beings
kill other human beings?
Mariana

And I ran out of there and didn't care
about tigers or snakes
or worms, or bombs, or anything.
Daniela

I don't tell anyone
who I am.
Cielo

The little plant
has only just been born.
Daniela

I have only just begun
to make a life for myself.
Mariana

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Introduction

In Colombia, for over 50 years, we have experienced an armed conflict in which the armed forces, guerrilla groups (currently, the FARC-EP and ELN), and various paramilitary factions, grouped together in the AUC, have fought one another in the midst of civilian populations. The origins of this conflict are linked to enormous inequality and social injustice, political exclusion, and fierce ambition for control of the nation's diverse resources. These phenomena are constantly configuring the context of this armed conflict and its modification. A large part of the population has lived mired in poverty, with no access to these resources, while a small percentage of the elites has controlled politics, economics and land use for personal gain. The gap between these two groups is immense. Often in Colombian history, civilians have organized and taken up arms to clamor for what they do not have, defend what they have, as in the case of paramilitary groups that have defended the property of the elites or drug traffickers, or take by force what belongs to others, as in the dispossession of peasants' land.

According to Gómez, H., Roux, C. et al (2003), the difficulty in explaining the war in Colombia lies in its longevity, the way the actors involved have transformed, the multiplicity of interests involved, the diversity of reasons that gave rise to it, the involvement of multiple legal and illegal actors, its geographic expanse, its illegal means of financing, and its relationship with other violence such as drug trafficking. Of considerable importance is the irregularity of the conflict, in that it has never been an open civil war in which the entire nation has participated, but has instead taken place on the country's rural margins. Many Colombians could have never experienced the war or its effects. These rural areas are precisely the poorest and most neglected by the state (also the richest in natural resources), fertile ground for any armed organization seeking to take control by force. Besides, the conflict is irregular because it has exceeded the regulatory limits of all armed confrontation: it has impacted the civilian population more than the combatants.

Over the years, the guerrillas' ideals regarding social justice and equity have blurred and faded. The means became more important than the end; they benefited financially from the war, and have contributed to an increase in the breakdown of the

nation. Similarly, the Armed Forces have not been able to regain control of the State despite the billions invested in the war and exposing their men to death. Worse still are the paramilitary groups, who in standing up to the guerrillas to defend the assets and property of landowners, private business and multinationals, have employed the worst practices of war and used brutality to intimidate, with the connivance of State officials and the support of the political class. As for drug traffickers, their use of terrorism and corruption has had significant influence on all the players and helped blur political ideals.

Several studies have been done on the causes, dynamics, multiple forms and transformations of the violence in Colombia; these in-depth analyses exceed the scope of this dissertation.¹ Of the various findings, most relevant for the purposes of this inquiry is the anachronistic nature of the war in Colombia; all of the armed actors have failed in their purpose, one way or another, and their degrading and debasing practices have produced a humanitarian tragedy (Gómez, H., de Roux, C. & et al., 2003).

A recent research by the Historical Memory Group (2013) states that between 1958 and 2012, the armed conflict has been responsible for 220,000 deaths and close to 5,700,000 people have been displaced; we have seen massacres, targeted killings, forced disappearances, kidnappings, terrorist attacks, theft of property and land, arbitrary detention, torture, land mines and forced recruitment, for the most part, actions against civilian populations, in particular, poor, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, opponents and dissidents, women and children.

As can be seen, forced recruitment is associated with the armed conflict and has been defined as the use of anyone under the age of 18 by an armed group (in our case, Colombian guerrillas or paramilitaries) to fight and/or perform any work (cook, doorman, messenger, spy, etc.) and/or for sexual purposes (UNICEF, 2007, p. 7). This

¹ For more on this analysis see: Guzman, G., Fals Borda, O. & Umana, E. (1963/2005). *La violencia en Colombia* [The Violence in Colombia]; Gómez, H., Roux, CV & Et al. (2003). *El conflicto, callejón con salida* [The Conflict: A Dead-End Street]; Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica [National Center for Historical Memory]. (2013) *¡Basta ya!* [Enough!] *Colombia: memorias de guerra y dignidad* [Colombia: War Memoirs and Dignity]; Pecaut, D. (2013). *La experiencia de la violencia: los desafíos del relato y la memoria* [The Experience of Violence: Narrative Challenges and Memory].

phenomenon is not unique to Colombia: it is estimated that around 300,000 persons under eighteen are part of armed groups involved in conflicts, in forty one countries, in the world (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008). There are no reliable official statistics in Colombia about the number of children and young fighters belonging to armed groups outside the law (FARC-EP, ELN, and AUC).² However, it is considered to range between 7,000 and 14,000. In 2002, UNICEF reported an estimated 6,000 to 7,000. In 2004, Watch List valued the number between 11,000 and 14,000; Human Rights Watch (2004), as well as the United Nations Program for Development (PNUD, 2006), calculated the number of underage combatants in 14,000.

The following figures show the configuration of the phenomenon in Colombia. An estimated one in four irregular combatants is eighteen years old or younger: the equivalent of 25%. The average age of linkage is between twelve and fourteen years.³ The medium age of disengaging is between fifteen and seventeen years (Watch List, 2012). The permanence in armed groups varies over a range of six months to three years, and there is one girl for every male child (Human Rights Watch, 2004). During the 1990s, armed groups carried out the most massive recruitment campaigns.

As concerns legality, in 1998, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court criminalized the recruitment of children under fifteen as a war crime; Colombia ratified this statute in 2002.⁴ In 2000, the United Nations promulgated the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states: "The armed groups distinct from the armed forces of a State should not, under any circumstances, recruit or use in hostilities persons under eighteen".⁵ In 2003, Colombia ratified this protocol, extending the same principles to armed groups of any kind.⁶ The New Code for

² Although Colombian and international laws consider everyone under the age of eighteen to be a child, in this research I will refer to both children and youth under the age of eighteen as I believe that socially, culturally and psychologically, the range covered by the legal definition is too wide.

³ The average age of recruitment has decreased from 13.8 years in 2002 to 11.8 years in 2009, according to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia (International Crisis Group, 2010).

⁴ Law 742, D.O. in 2002.

⁵ Geneva Optional Protocol on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict. Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly Resolution A/RES/54/263 of 25 May 2000, entry into force 12 February 2002.

⁶ Law 833, D.O. in 2003.

Children and Adolescents in Colombia (Law No. 1098 of 2006) acknowledges the fact that no child under the age of eighteen can have enlisted voluntarily in an armed group, but rather joined because of his or her *ignorance or coercion*. In 2011, Law 1448, commonly known as the Victims' Law, dictates protective measures, intervention and redress for victims of internal armed conflict, including children *disengaged* from illegal armed groups. Therefore, in Colombia, forced recruitment is a war crime, and covers any person under 18 and any (legal or illegal) armed group, and children and youth under eighteen *disengaged* from the war are considered victims.

International research on enlistment in armed groups began with the work of Graça Machel, commissioned by the United Nations in 1994, and Colombian research with the Defensoría del Pueblo's investigations (Ombudsman Office) in 1996. For nearly two decades, research has mainly focused on the description of socio-demographic and legal variables, and psychosocial intervention; recent studies have focused on gender, DDR (disarmed, demobilization & reintegration) processes, and more comprehensive approaches. International research has primarily focused on African countries (Cifuentes, Aguirre & Lugo, 2011).

Currently in Colombia, there are more and stronger initiatives from academia and victims' movements to restore the memory of the conflict, documenting the damage and impact in humans, environments, relationships, property and customs. We have also, in nascent form, begun to actively remember the dignity and resistance: the heroic acts, defense, courage and bravery, solidarity, demands, vindications, mobilization and, finally, the endless responses and actions of the survivors. I hope this dissertation will contribute to these efforts.

Coexisting in Colombia are those who believe that the solution to the conflict lies in weapons, and those who believe in a negotiated solution where, in addition to the relinquishment of arms, the State is capable of strengthening democracy and improving the way politics are practiced, overcoming poverty, building equality and social justice, in order to ensure a sustainable peace. In 2013, the government of President Juan Manuel Santos began negotiations with the FARC-EP guerrilla group in

Havana, Cuba. The dialogue has made progress on four of the five items on the agenda: agricultural development and political participation. Aspects related to the end of conflict, illegal drugs, and victims are still on the table. The signing of a peace agreement is still uncertain, but the more possible this seems, the greater polarization grows between those in favor and those against such an agreement. Forced recruitment is part of the last item on the agenda related to the victims. If a peace treaty is signed, child and youth ex-combatants would be among the first to demobilize and the country would face the enrollment of thousands of them in ICBF protection programs. From 1999-2011, 4,811 children and youth who escaped or were captured by the army have received care (Watch List, 2011). From the moment the demobilizations take effect, the structure and dynamics of the programs will require complete modification. I hope this inquiry can provide ideas concerning what can be done with children and young people separated from armed groups.

When children and youth have quit or been captured, they have been referred to as *disengaged* from the war. Even though *disengaged* from the war is the legal, official and common term, in this inquiry I will refer to them as *ex-combatants separated from the armed groups*, including those separated from the guerrilla or paramilitary groups. This denomination recognizes their status as fighters, which they consider a significant part of their identities. It avoids the use of disqualifying names such as terrorists, rebels or criminals. A combatant is someone who takes up arms as part of a group involved in an armed conflict and with social and political status in Colombia.

In this dissertation, I consider this separation to be only physical, since escape and, to a much lesser degree, capture for a youth ex-combatant do not imply a break with the emotional, social and existential ties that bound him or her to the armed group. I retake the concept of “transition to civilian life” posed by Castro (2001), because it better represents the transition from armed to civilian life than terms such as reintegration, reinstatement or reincorporation. Youth ex-combatants were not *integrated* into society before or during their passage through an armed group. They cannot, therefore, be re-integrated. At this point in their lives, they remain

marginalized and discriminated against so re-integration is a euphemism. Finally, we must all integrate, not just them, and the concept is therefore better applied to society as a whole than to them exclusively: a re-integrated society. It is however very clear that while they are in the process of building a civilian, unarmed life they remain at the same time warriors, continuing to fight for physical and social survival. Hence the title of this inquiry: Disarmed Warriors.

This inquiry was conducted in Manizales, Colombia and its main purpose was to understand the importance of social relations in the *transition to civilian life* currently faced by youth ex-combatants. To accomplish this purpose, we developed a dialogic, collaborative and narrative design, examined through the lens of Social Construction, which allowed us to recognize the resources and relational practices of these youth; render intelligible the micro-social scenarios where they construct their multiple forms of existence; narratively reconstruct their experiences before, during and after the war; explore relational alternatives; and experience new forms of collective action. The social relationships with and of this specific group of young people, at a particular moment of their lives (transitioning from military to civilian life), became the focus of interest, reflection and connection. The research question guiding this process was: How can we build a socio-relational process to facilitate the transition to civilian life of child and youth ex-combatants enrolled in the Tutor Home Program (PHT) in Manizales, Colombia?

Starring in this research were 20 youth from different parts of the country enrolled in the Tutor Home Program (hereinafter, PHT, for its acronym in Spanish). The program was created in 2006 by Caldas University's Center for Conflict, Violence and Cohabitation Studies (CEDAT, for its acronym in Spanish). Both the ICBF and Caldas University, through CEDAT, co-sponsored the program, which places ex-combatants in foster families to be cared for on a full-time basis by volunteers. The PHT spearheads activities in areas such as health, education, development, participation and protection.

As part of the inquiry, we created what I have called the *Green Zone*, a physical, emotional and relational space constructed collaboratively with the youth in which 40 narrative, audiovisual and corporal expression workshops took place. This collaborative and dialogic space demanded a permanent and prolonged commitment, which in turn produced changes in all participants. The transformations experienced by the youth, and by me, are widely documented in this dissertation.

The emerging, uncertain and continuous dialogue in the *Green Zone* allowed multiple voices to be heard and for those dialogues to resonate in the outside audiences closest to the youth, such as foster families, their families of origin, and the PHT group of professionals. I hope those who read this dissertation will recognize a good example of collective action, joint activity reaching beyond the individualist discourse and emerging from the characteristic deficits of State protection policies for these young people. Those with alternative proposals could benefit from an analysis of the process presented, in the same way that the PHT group of professionals benefited. The collaborative architecture is an example of inquiry that resists colonialism, although not necessarily seeking emancipation, and strives to carry out a process in which power circulates and transitions from subordination to creative and generative power are possible (De Sousa Santos, B., 2010). There is something innovative about this: most research published and reviewed has been performed by experts *about* youth ex-combatants and not *with* them.

As Social Construction has been the meta-narrative guiding this inquiry, it is likely that those in tune with this orientation will discover contributions in it to the current literature on relational processes. Specifically, that our relationships with others precede, maintain and sustain us. It is not specific people, but one's relationship with an Other that makes survival possible. The realization that our survival depends on others is more plainly assimilated in extreme situations where life is in constant danger. Various ethical reflections arising while participating in the war and afterwards might prove useful. Those familiar with dialogic orientations may be interested in how we coordinated the conversation and kept it going. I hope to have made it clear to

readers that the keys to our dialogic process were emergence, uncertainty, permanence and collaboration.

Readers interested in the narrative inquiry will have an opportunity to learn how the stories told facilitated the creation of new meanings for everyone involved, storytellers and audience alike. The youth were able to collect scattered pieces of their stories and gain some sense of continuity, while recognizing the movement that these stories bring with them. There is no single story, not even the most painful, and all stories are reconstructed in the telling. The stories show us the continuous movement between a present that speaks of the past, re-drawing it, and a future which is simultaneously anticipated. The resulting narratives were discursive productions among people in a specific cultural context. The others, those –like me– in the audience, understood that our lives are not so different from the lives of others, that we can see ourselves on the edges of their world and ours, and more importantly, that there is coherence and rationality in the stories and lives of others and, therefore, we need to find a way to coordinate our differences. The use of artistic methods to motivate the narrative and find other ways to communicate experience and capture what is difficult to put into words could be considered innovative.

This dissertation consists of eight chapters, plus the introduction, which can be read in any order; each chapter has its own internal structure and can be understood without reading previous chapters. Chapter One, *Social Construction, the Narrative and the Dialogical as Companions in the Mountains* is the theoretical argument guiding the research and is founded in Social Construction. I present the contributions made by this orientation to the work and to my academic training. I present a brief analysis of the history of Social Construction, such as postmodernism, and its linguistic, discursive, narrative and dialogic developments. I delve deeper into three key aspects for the research: social relations, the relational self, theoretical generativity. I say *companions in the mountains* because there is where we, ex-combatants and me, live now. Mountains, because there is where they survived the war, the jungle in the highest and most remote mountains, which they miss every day. Mountains, because we went up and down in life, this is not a straight line, where the uncertainty and the unexpected

are present, as in this inquiry. Mountains, because these kids' lives are like an emotional roller coaster, you must pull up in order to understand something about what is happening to them.

In Chapter Two, I narrate the inquiry process, its origin, the emergence of the question, the principles that connect the theory, methodology and epistemology to more concrete moments of action such as the structuring of the dialogic space, the manner in which the workshops were carried out, the narratives construction, dialogues with other audiences, and how the meaning and connection progressed. My interest lies in making sure readers understand the how, when and why of the methodological decisions that shaped this work.

Based on the stories narrated by the youth, their families and PHT professionals, as well as local, national and international research I became familiar with, I present, in Chapter Three, an analysis of the conditions that lead children and youth to enroll in and separate from armed groups. This reflection explores the logic of recruitment and the predictability of the phenomenon given the legacy of social bonding that exists in the areas where these children were born. I argue that joining an armed group is a form of earning a living, active resistance to structures of violence, and a way of finding life (recognition, belonging and identity). For women, in addition, it represents the desire to become warriors like men. At the end of this chapter, I reflect on their current condition after separating from the group.

Chapter Four is a reflection on the victim discourse. Here, I stress the legal, ethical and political importance of being considered a victim in Colombia as well as the implications of this discourse, given the way it can be manipulated to infantilize youth ex-combatants and its associations with paternalistic and deficit discourses and their consequent pathologization. Based on the real situations of youth ex-combatants and on Gergen's proposal (1994/2007), I analyze the possible consequences of the deficit discourse in our culture. To close, I offer an alternative view of these youth as survivors, not only of war, but of poverty and neglect as well.

The single life story “*The Commander's Daughter*” occupies the entire Fifth Chapter. The narrative begins by explaining the four-handed approach to writing the story, how Mariana's life began in the midst of war and the jungle, how her relationship with the Commander, the man who raised her, developed, the Commander's various attempts to free her, the ethics of war, Mariana's capture, and her new start in life. It is an amazing, human and moving story and besides constitutes an ethical and political argument against war.

Chapter Six deals with the process and is titled *The Green Zone: Dialogic Practice on the Margins*. In the first section, I analyze dialogue as an emerging, uncertain, and continuous process based on three contradictions: stability/change, integration/separation and expression/non-expression. In the second section, I delve deeper into the collaborative architecture of dialogic practice, including my position as a researcher in relation to the way I see youth ex-combatants, listening and response, dialogic time, the future, and the proximity of this practice to their everyday lives. I spend the final pages presenting the *Green Zone* as a restorative process: the youth gained appreciation for what they are and what they can become, they enriched their perspective of the time they have lived and that remains to be lived, and they rebuilt a sense of “we” that acts jointly, remains present in the conversation, and is based on respect and solidarity.

I could not have ended this thesis without giving the youth a direct voice. Chapter Seven, *Memories of Resistance*, is a compilation of the youth's skills, strategies, knowledge, learning, and reactions and of their actions to defend and protect themselves and to resist, illustrated in the stories, pictures and drawings constructed during the inquiry. At the end, I include the poem *Daniela's Voice*, based on the story she told, *Looking for a Dad*. In the chapter dedicated to final reflections, I set forth more general implications of this work and point out some alternative action.

I made the decision to use a dialogical/narrative style, meaning that both dialogues and stories would have a prominent place and that, while telling the stories, I wanted to establish dialogue between them, between the protagonists, with the

authors and the readers. This decision is consistent with the way the research was developed and with its theoretical Social Construction orientation. It grew out of my interest in encouraging readers to look closer at the multiple and complex realities of youth ex-combatants and at the process we all share in when attempting to reconstruct relationships, which is the primary purpose of this research. A narrative style encourages reflexivity and makes the text more accessible to readers taking part in different *language games*. Both first-order and second-order narratives have been included. First-order narratives consist of the stories, transcribed verbatim and told by the protagonists, the youth ex-combatants, their families, and professionals. Second-order narratives consist of the stories I wrote about other people, stories by and about other people, or collective stories written by several different people which cannot easily be said to have a single authorship. I hope that readers will be able to construct third-order narratives from the participants' narratives and those of the researcher.

I decided to write in the first person to honestly and thoroughly identify myself as an author, with all my questions, frustrations and decisions. This increased my sense of responsibility for what I wrote and seemed more consistent with the aforementioned ethical, theoretical and methodological ideas. Writing in the first person allows readers to place themselves inside the research, in a more evocative and relational manner. Writing, in any case, means entering into a relationship with the reader: writing with an audience in mind and not in the abstract. I hoped, therefore, to produce a more informal text, more accessible to different audiences, not only to academics, but to professionals and people interested in understanding the experience of these youth ex-combatants. This style of writing aims at achieving openness that allows readers to creatively complete their own process of understanding.