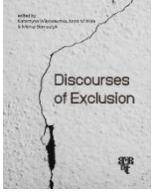

Discourses of Exclusion: Theories and Practices
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Medellín: Narratives of trauma and exclusion in the works of Colombian journalists

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Abstract

This article traces the discursive representation of cultural trauma and social exclusion of the inhabitants of low-income neighborhoods of Medellín in the reportage written by Colombian journalists. The three books written by Ricardo Aricapa, Alonso Salazar and Juan Camilo Castañeda Arboleda cover the period from the 1980s, years of extreme violence, to the first decades of the new millennium, representing marginalized people dragged into the narco business, youth gangs and armed conflict. The article's aim is to examine how violent urban life is represented in the aforementioned reportage and how these books function as secondary witnesses to cultural trauma. By including the voices of the marginalized groups and incorporating them to the national discourse, these books demand emotional, institutional and symbolic reparation and reconstruction.

Keywords: collective memory, reportage, *No nacimos pa' semilla, Nuestro otro infierno, Comuna 13*, cultural trauma, Jeffrey Alexander

1. Introduction

Medellín is a place where poverty and social exclusion are a massive urban phenomenon in low-income neighborhoods called *comunas populares* (or *barrios populares*) (Koonings & Krujit, 2005). The denizens of the second-largest city in Colombia have been drawn into the vicious circle of exclusion, insecurity and violence, especially since the 1980s with migration from rural areas, which caused the expansion of secondary metropolitan areas and the growth of the

informal sector[1] (Koonings & Krujit, 2009). The inhabitants of *comunas populares* became second-class citizens and were abandoned by the state. They were separated, spatially, socially and culturally, from the middle-class city of formal employment, public services and law enforcement. The advent of the Medellín cartel and drug trafficking activities generated unprecedented violence. Persistent social exclusion, linked to alternative extra-legal sources of income and power, combined with an absent state, provided means and motives for violent actions, which contributed, in turn, to the disintegration of the social and moral fabric. Over the years, an incredible variety of criminal actors have emerged: gangs, left-wing militias, drug traffickers, hired killers, criminal organizations called *oficinas*, death squads dedicated to social cleansing, guerrilla fighters of FARC, ELN and CAP, and various groups of right-wing paramilitaries. The actions of these organized groups have claimed many casualties among the civilian population. Certain neighborhoods or districts were labeled no-go areas while their inhabitants were in turn stigmatized as "undesirables." The poor were disproportionally affected by violence, and at the same time, they were also seen and feared as inherently dangerous (Rozema, 2007, pp. 57-69).

The excess of violence and injustices in Colombians' lives was reflected in literature and poetry, which became a reminder to jolt the public conscience and memory. They are used as vehicles for political and creative expression and as a means of including the stories of the marginalized inhabitants of the *barrio* who experienced trauma and violence. Literature is one of the practices that has served to tell truths and speak of recognition to heal the wounds of the past in order to live in the present. It also helps undo the exclusionary discourses and give voice to the harmed and silenced, serving as a platform for the subaltern, for all those who suffered violence which impacted their physical and mental health and who could never speak in their authentic voice.[2] However, not only novelists and poets speak on behalf of the dispossessed. There are also journalists who give voice to the marginalized and abandoned by the state and whose texts are agents and products of public memory, recorders of memory, to use Olick's words (2014, pp. 29-30). Although these are often individual stories, they are relevant to the group and constitute its cultural memory. Halbwachs (1992) argued that memory is carried largely by individuals, but he also showed that individual memories are socially framed and that they are the lifeblood of group existence. What is also important to note is that the memory of a community relies exclusively on mediated representations of the past (Assmann and Shortt, 2012, p. 3), and the reportage books analysed here constitute such a representation.

[1] Informal sector: unregulated economic sector with informal, often makeshift housing.

[2] For further discussion, see Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg's *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

This article traces the discursive representation of cultural trauma and social exclusion of the inhabitants of low-income neighborhoods of Medellín in reportage written by Colombian journalists Ricardo Aricapa, Alonso Salazar and Juan Camilo Castañeda Arboleda. The article's aim is to analyze the portrayal of violent urban life in these books and discuss their function as secondary witnesses to cultural trauma which, by including the voices of the marginalized groups and incorporating them into the national discourse, demand emotional, institutional and symbolic reparation and reconstruction.

2. Narratives of cultural trauma

The three books of reportage by Aricapa, Salazar and Castañeda Arboleda deal with different periods, providing insights into the prevailing problems of the time and focusing on specific groups in the society. The texts cover the years from the 1980s, times of extreme violence, to the first decades of the new millennium, representing marginalized people dragged into narco business, youth gangs and armed conflict.

In *No nacimos pa'semilla* (1990), Salazar gives voice to the inhabitants of *barrios populares,* protagonists of the violence that Colombia suffered in the 1980s and 1990s. The crisis was caused by the deployment of violence and terrorism by the drug trafficking group headed by Pablo Escobar, who coordinated criminal gangs and a large number of hired assassins (*sicarios*). The book depicts the world of youth gangs and presents the historical and cultural roots of a dispossessed generation intertwined with the phenomenon of drug trafficking. Through various characters, Salazar describes the hard life of the young hired assassins and of the inhabitants of the most marginalized neighborhoods of the city. Salazar's book expands the perspective and focuses on *sicarios,* who are generally not considered by the society as worthy of concern.[3] However, they are also victims of violence, pushed to commit acts of oppression, and deserve to be heard. The reportage entitled *Comuna 13. Crónica de una guerra urbana* (2015) allows victims of violence to tell what happened in the Comuna 13 neighborhood in Medellín. Aricapa describes the neighborhood's origins, shows how its inhabitants lived, and explains their role in the urban war that placed them in the middle of bellicose forces. The book describes the informal sector of the Comuna 13 neighborhood, created through migratory processes and forced displacement. Lack of infrastructure and mobility, poverty and violence attracted multiple armed actors such as militias, guerrillas and paramilitaries who took advantage of the inhabitants. The reportage also concentrates on different episodes of internal armed conflict, in particular Operation Orion (2002), which was one of the seventeen military operations of urban warfare in Comuna 13.

[3] Concentrating on the trauma of *sicarios* as a result of their commission of violence is beyond the scope of this article. For further discussion on perpetrator trauma, see McGlothlin (2020, pp. 100-110).

Aricapa's book is an account of the painful daily life of the inhabitants of Comuna 13 which shows how the poor and the dispossessed became entrenched between illegal forces and how they bore the brunt of Colombia's armed conflict. The last reportage, *Nuestro otro infierno: violencia y guerra en Manrique* (2017), brings the reader closer to the phenomenon of everyday violence, not only in Manrique[4] (*barrio* Santa Inés) but throughout the city, and is representative of other low-income neighborhoods. The history of Manrique, as a constant scene of violent actions, began forty years ago. Since then, three waves of violence have disturbed the lives of its inhabitants. The first occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s; the second in the late 1990s; and the last, and most intense, is the subject of the stories in Castañeda's book. Many *sicarios* of the former Medellín cartel, who had lost their jobs, decided to join new criminal (youth) gangs (*combos*) that ravaged the city for years. The high crime rate in the neighborhoods was mainly due to the criminal activities of the *combos*—hundreds of teenagers lost their lives in armed confrontations between different gangs. Castañeda Arboleda describes the violent conflict that the Manrique Santa Inés neighborhood experienced between 2009 and 2011 to understand how its inhabitants had lived through the war. The journalist shows that *barrios populares* are the scene of violent actions which disrupt the lives of their inhabitants. He depicts the participation of young people in street gangs, the role of the State in the confrontation and the functioning of an illegal social order. Castañeda's reportage constitutes a history of a sector in which violence becomes part of everyday life and relates the events of *barrios populares* to the social situation of the city.

All three books are chronological compendiums of violence and exclusion in low-income neighborhoods in Medellín. They look at the daily life of the people who were affected by different types of violence. They are based on the testimonies of their inhabitants and they explore temporal and spatial location and the historical reasons for violence in *barrios populares*. Salazar's, Aricapa's and Castañeda Arboleda's books give voice to the urban excluded to describe their reality of insecurity and examine social dynamics of exclusion, at the same time offering them a platform to present their cultural trauma narratives. The stories by Salazar, Aricapa and Castañeda Arboleda invite the readers to reflect on the pain, anguish and human misery produced by violence and exclusion.

In Colombia, narrative has become both evidence and a form of remedy. It has been used instead of punishment or victim compensation, thereby echoing Walter Benjamin's positing of narration as an "act of justice" (1999, pp. 83-107) and his claim that narration offers the possibility to end traumatic events, hatreds and social resentments. By the same token, Elisabeth Jelin views narration as a tool of peace-building and providing stability through the

[4] Comuna 3 Manrique is one of the sixteen comunas in Medellín. Comuna 3 consists of 19 neighborhoods, and one of them is Santa Inés.

implementation "of politics of forgetting and reconciliation" (Jelin, 2003, p. 21). Reportage has given testimony of the life of Colombia, perhaps more vivid and more complex than the novel. Reportage expresses the intimate experience of atrocity and provides a subjective[5] dimension to cultural trauma (Strejilevich, 2006, pp. 701-702); its language springs from urgency and from necessity. The books of reportage analysed in this article are narratives that represent the personal experience of injustice, marginality, exclusion and precarity that is illustrative of a larger class. Victims bear witness to what they have suffered and share an aspiration to reparation through storytelling, and their narration of trauma, exploitation and injustice may serve at once as testimony, redress and public catharsis (Stone Peters, 2015, p. 19). Trauma victims must tell their stories as through narrative they create a memorial to suffering. Telling a traumatic story is not only a means of overcoming trauma but also a way "to speak for others and to others" (Felman, 1995, p. 14). Allowing victims to tell their own stories offers them relief and emotional release. The healing power of testimony seems to offer narrative closure both for victims and for society as a whole. It also has the power to create witnesses of suffering who engage empathically with terrible events. Such storytelling, by keeping the past alive, invites readers to act and generates compassion and benevolence. It is essential for the validation of cases of human rights abuses (Whitlock, 2015, p. 110).

Homi Bhabha argues that trauma narrative is not only an individual human right, whose exercise is necessary to prevent further atrocity, but essential to our general humanity. Bhabha claims that "the right to narrate means the right to be heard, to be recognized and represented" (Bhabha, 2014, n.p.). In such a view, narrative is seen as a kind of post-atrocity remedy. Under this optic, not only could victim narratives be considered as potentially subject to the interpretive tools of literary criticism, but the narration of atrocity could also be seen as a good in itself, offering its own special form of redress through catharsis and rectification through the truths of storytelling (Stone Peters, 2015, pp. 20-21). The reportage books analysed in this article constitute such a storytelling in which the most defenceless segments of Medellin's population tell the world about their traumatic injuries.

In the reportage books by Salazar, Aricapa and Castañeda Arboleda, the people from Medellín's most marginalized neighborhoods describe their social reality, producing a new collective and complex speech act. Their representation is

[5] "The DSM-V (2013) eliminates the only symptom cluster, introduced in the DSM-IV (1994), that addressed the subjective category of the victim's emotional response to the event: reactions such as fear, helplessness and horror. Some psychotraumatological handbooks, such as Charles Figley's (1985) and Fischer and Riedesser's (2009), have argued for a relational model that takes the subjective factor into account, defining trauma as "an emotional state of discomfort and stress resulting from memories of an extraordinary, catastrophic experience which shattered the survivor's sense of invulnerability to harm" (Figley 1985, p. xviii quoted in Sütterlin 2020, p. 16)

"a claim to some fundamental injury, an exclamation of the terrifying profanation of some sacred value, a narrative about a horribly destructive social process, and a demand for emotional, institutional, and symbolic reparation and reconstruction" (Alexander, 2004, p. 11). Their narratives are stories of cultural trauma which, according to Alexander, occurs when members of a group feel they have been subjected "to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (2004, p. 1). Alexander adds that "events are not, in and of themselves, traumatic" (8). To be seen as traumatic, they must be articulated as such by members of a collectivity. For Eyerman and Sciortino (2020, p. 209), narration seems to be the principal mechanism for this process: as they claim, "a central aspect of the cultural trauma process is the attempt to re-narrate and reestablish collective identity." According to Alexander (2004), cultural trauma refers to the impact of disturbing and damaging events on collective identity. Alexander explores how societies collectively remember, represent and interpret traumatic events. Alexander & Breese claim that traumas become collective when they are conceived as wounds to social identity. This is a matter of intense cultural and political work because

> suffering collectivities do not exist simply as material networks. They must be imagined into being. When social processes construe events as gravely dangerous to groups, social actors transform individual suffering into a matter of collective concern, of cultural worry, group danger, social panic, and creeping fear. (Alexander & Breese, 2011, pp. xii-xiii)

What is important for collectivities is a matter of symbolic construction and framing, of creating a narrative and moving along from there. The construction of collective trauma is often fueled by individual experiences of pain and suffering, but it is the threat to the collective rather than individual identity that defines the kind of suffering and the danger. That is why individual suffering must be transformed into a "we." It must be constructed via narrative and coding, which is cultural work that requires speeches and meetings, marches and rituals, plays, movies and storytelling. According to Alexander & Breese (2011, p. xi), the creation of a narrative of social suffering is a symbolic-cum-emotional representation, a collective, sociological process that is centered on giving voice and visibility to marginalized groups. An important aspect of this type of narrative is not simply the way in which it represents a historical event, but the collective identities that it produces. Representation of trauma depends on constructing a compelling framework of cultural classification. In one sense, this is simply telling a new story. For the wider audience to become persuaded that they, too, have become traumatized by an experience or an event, the carrier group needs to engage in successful meaning-making work. A successful process of collective representation must provide compelling answers about the nature of the pain, the nature of the victim, the relation of the trauma victim to

the wider audience, and the attribution of responsibility (Alexander et.al., 2004, pp. 13-15). This representational process creates a new master narrative of social suffering which is critical to the process by which a collectivity becomes visible and heard.

3. Living conditions of precarity

In their various books about exclusion and violence in Latin American cities, Koonings and Krujit (2005, 2007, 2009, 2015) note the following problems of the poor inhabitants of low-income neighborhoods in the so-called megacities[6]. The poor face a series of restrictions in how they use time, space and social relations. They have to learn a different set of rules and codes of conduct. Also, because they often live in informal sectors, they are prone to environmental and life hazards as their safety and security are impacted by inadequate urban planning. The inhabitants of low-income neighborhoods are abandoned by the state and they suffer from different forms of violence, among them structural violence. They live in conditions of precarity and vulnerability because they are exposed to social and political forces that they cannot fully control. All these problems generate trauma which the protagonists of the reportage books by Aricapa, Salazar and Castañeda Arboleda share with the wider audience in the cultural trauma narrative.

The books of reportage by Aricapa, Salazar and Castañeda Arboleda show the reality of the inhabitants of *comunas populares* and the intertwined dynamics of social exclusion and proliferation of violence in their lives. The relationships between poverty, exclusion, urban informality and violence are by no means direct or automatic; however, they form a backdrop to violence and fear in the sense that they lower barriers and inhibitions and tend to make non-violent practices less attractive and legitimate. Poor people look for alternative economic opportunities and often get involved in drug-based organized crime. Reading the reportage of cultural trauma, one sees that trauma is the outcome of a constellation of life experiences and that it may arise both from an acute event and a persisting social condition (Erikson, 1994, p. 228). The insidious trauma is often the suffering of people belonging to non-Western or minority cultures. They also must be given due recognition so that trauma studies can redeem its promise of ethical effectiveness (see Bond & Craps, 2020).

In the reality of the inhabitants of the poor neighborhoods of Medellín, living conditions are often a source of trauma. Medellín is one of the main destinations for internally displaced Colombians. The peasants, the poor, the displaced

[6] Megacities are usually defined on the basis of their population size, with a minimum of 5 million inhabitants; however, Koonings and Krujit (2009, pp. 2-3) do not base their understanding of the conurbation on its demographic size and "consider urban spaces to constitute a megacity if their size reflects a certain pattern of social and economic problems."

who arrived in Medellín built their shacks wherever and however they could, without adhering to any urban planning norms. Some built their houses out of boards and cardboard, others had the luxury of brick, cement and eternit roofs. Makeshift networks of paths and stairs, smuggled electricity, no water supply or sewage—these are very often the living conditions of the poor and marginalized denizens of Medellín. In his reportage, Aricapa describes their reality, and based on the example of Esperanza shows their precarious quality of life:

> Esperanza had been living for a year in the sector that had been Medellín's garbage dump [...]. They called it the Moravia dump, because at that time the garbage was not subjected to any sanitary treatment. It was simply deposited in the open air in overlapping layers that over the years became a mountain, where legions of vultures fought over the leftovers and waste with the multitude of people who came to recycle. The expansion of the city to the north made this dump unsustainable, so it was closed. But it was only after it was closed that dozens, hundreds of homeless families moved in [...], they built their huts in which they lived at the mercy of everything that sprouted from the ground: flammable gases that in an ill-fated spark turned into fire, cockroaches of heroic sizes, nauseating vapors that gave no respite [...]. And, of course, at the mercy of the punctual visit of the rats.[7] (Aricapa, 2015, p. 21)

The economics of mass urbanization and the high concentration of impoverished people on sites unsuitable for human habitation increased human vulnerability to natural hazards and created the conditions for what Anderson (2011, p. 6) calls "mega-disasters". In Anderson's terms, disaster is the opposition to defined normality. Furthermore, disaster is related to loss, psychological or material, the absence of hope, self-esteem or love, as much as that of food, employment, housing or education. To live constantly in an "underdeveloped" place is also to be in a permanent state of disaster. One could say that in the marginalized neighborhoods of Medellín, there is a kind of permanent state of catastrophe that calls into question the existence of any notion of "normality." In such situations, people are vulnerable not only to health hazards and the trauma of living conditions but also to different forms of deviant and violent behavior.

4. Criminal gangs and *sicarios* as the results of precariousness

Poverty is not the only cause of violence in Medellín, but it is not a coincidence that the poorest neighborhoods are where violence and crime occur. Structural violence, which operates routinely, overloads people's daily lives and limits their life chances (Jaramillo Morales, 2015, pp. 57-58). Criminal gangs (*combos*)

[7] Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

emerge in unplanned neighborhoods without public services, where the critical material situation of their inhabitants influences the decision of young people to join a gang. Many young people are voluntarily or involuntarily involved in illegal businesses, which is confirmed by this excerpt from *Nuestro otro infierno*:

> Arley, for example, was forced into the *combo*. They offered him a grave, a gun or banishment. He chose the gun. The same one with which he earned money and became known for his bravery during the confrontations. The gang gave him those options, but what did society and the state give him instead? I suppose little. Probably, if he had had other options such as a job or a place at a university, he would be alive. In Medellín they teach that you have to have money, a motorbike, a car and women any way you can, as easily and quickly as possible. The *combos* provide that in a very short time. (Castañeda Arboleda, 2017, n.p.)

The description above confirms what Duncan and Eslava (2015) argue about poverty. Poverty influences the decision to join a criminal gang, but it is also the economic ambition of young people as living according to the law does not provide them with opportunities and they have limited opportunities to advance in social hierarchies. That is why they follow a criminal career to gain an important position within gangs that provide them with wealth, power and prestige. Membership in criminal organizations can generate enormous profits. For this reason, generations of young people form violent criminal subcultures in many locations in Medellín:

> These gangs were made up of two or three older men and a pack of little boys who had grown up to be thugs; 13, 14, 15-year-olds doing the Devil's work. They collected taxes of two thousand pesos a week from the shops and five thousand from the public buses, they searched the streets as if they were the law, they robbed delivery trucks. (Salazar, 1992, p. 56)

The gangs aspire to regulate the life of many communities, control flows of resources from criminal economies, impose rules of coexistence in the community and provide a series of public services such as “justice” and security that would not otherwise be available. There are places where alternative normative systems and different socialization parameters are established with the use of violence as a private resource to impose order and claim a superior position in the social hierarchy. An example of this is the description from Salazar’s book:

> When I returned to the neighborhood in 1988, what I found was the problem of gangs. Kids that I had known when I was a kid had turned into terrible muggers and murderers. […] One day I was in the shop when one of those little gangs arrived, with revolvers, and they broke in. They stole some money, the television, the sound system. They came out very cool, threatening me so I wouldn’t tell the police. (Salazar, 1992, p. 46)

In situations of pervasive and severe inequality, the urban poor are undervalued and marginalized, and their everyday living conditions increase the potential for conflict, crime or violence (Winton, 2004, pp. 157-182). Medellín is a city with a network of violent actors who seriously affect the communities in which they operate. The city has experienced a multiplicity of conflicts that are articulated in specific ways, including wars between youth gangs (Duncan & Eslava, 2015, p. 15):

> In the neighborhood there have been many gangs [...] And as the song says: This bed ain't big enough for everyone [...]. The wars have been tough, whole families have been killed for revenge. They put me in a tub of water up to the back of my neck. They left me there all night freezing my balls off, and ran electric current through me too. They kept asking me about the others in the gang, who the leaders were, but I didn't say a word. "Think you're a real tough guy, don't you, you fairy," they shouted, kicking me as hard as they could in the stomach. (Salazar, 1992, pp. 29-30)

The aforementioned quote clearly illustrates that hatred, revenge, desire for recognition and retribution triggered endless small wars between the gangs. Such conflicts mean loss of life and pervasive fear:

> For some years now war has visited every corner of the neighborhood. A war of young people, almost children. A gang war that has left so many dead over the years that everyone has lost count. A war that generated another one [...]. In each street three, four, five have died... because of the shooting of the gangs, because of the shooting of the law, because of the shooting of self-defense, because of the shooting of... (Salazar, 1992, pp. 29-30)

The allure of conspicuous consumerism also draws poor, jobless youth into drug-trafficking activities and youth gangs. In the 1990s, after the fall of the Medellín cartel, youth gangs diversified their activities and services to include a variety of smaller drug trafficking, organized crime and urban crime networks. These new social actors come from the very margins of society, from *barrios populares*. Both *Nuestro otro infierno* and *No nacimos pa' semilla* reveal the world of young people who, associated with gangs, have terrorized Medellín, and especially the poor inhabitants who had no means or resources to escape the terror. Young people joined the ranks of armed groups due to the lack of social policies and opportunities; the absence of the state reinforced the illegal mentality. Thanks to their participation in contract killings and drug trafficking, the youth of low-income neighborhoods can "be protagonists in a society that has closed its doors on them" (Salazar, 2001, p. 187). They get involved in crime because it is an attractive world for them, with easy money, possibilities for promotion, pretty women and parties organized by their bosses. They turned life, both their own and that of their victims, into an object of economic transaction. This is the legacy of Pablo Escobar, who is the role

model for many poor and marginalized youths. Young people from *barrios populares* had to choose between an economy of dispossession and unemployment, and the so-called narcotics economy (Herlinghaus, 2009, pp. 106). Drug trafficking became the reference model, unlike the traditional one of studies and work. Many young people from the marginalized neighborhoods incorporated death as an everyday element and consider life as a disposable object. In neighborhoods where conditions of precarity are prevalent, death is normalized and life is devalued.

All this occurs when certain people are consistently subjected to conditions of poverty, violence and disenfranchisement, and this, in turn, leads to a desensitization to their suffering and struggles. Judith Butler argues that the differential distribution of precariousness creates frameworks that shape people's perceptions and recognition of certain individuals as full subjects deserving of rights and dignity. Individuals from marginalized communities often fall outside of these frameworks and are not seen as fully human or worthy of consideration. This dehumanization allows for their suffering to be disregarded, as their lives are not deemed valuable or intelligible within dominant societal conceptions of what constitutes a valuable life. Their experiences are rendered invisible or insignificant within the broader social discourse, which perpetuates their marginalization and systemic inequalities. Those unrecognizable people, whose lives we do not consider valuable, are forced to bear the brunt of hunger, underemployment, legal disenfranchisement and differential exposure to violence and death (Butler, 2009, p. 25). And this is exactly what happens with the youth of the *comunas populares* of Medellín. When the deaths of civilians are treated as collateral damage, when there is no law, no justice but insecurity, violence and impotence instead, and very little is done against reality in poor neighborhoods, then some lives are really treated as if they were not worth living, not worth protecting. Salazar cites the words of a priest from one of the parishes in *comuna popular* of Medellín that confirm the value of life for the hit men:

> They know they are *desechables*, disposable. When they join a group they know they won't last long, but nothing stops them. They start to think of death as something natural. You see them from funeral to funeral. Today they say goodbye to one, tomorrow another, and the day after tomorrow… There are days in this parish of three and four funerals, all of them youngsters. […] It doesn't matter if you die, after all, you were born to die. But to die at once, so as not to have to feel so much misery and so much loneliness. (Salazar, 1992, p. 107, 31)

Instead of suffering from structural violence and dying slowly in misery, they choose to kill and most probably be killed in the foreseeable future.

5. Lack of security and socio-cultural damage

The inhabitants of *comunas populares* suffer from a lack of human security in enclaves that obey a totally different set of rules and codes of conduct, where the inhabitants have to face a series of restrictions in how they use time, space and social relations. Their neighborhoods or districts become stigmatized as no-go areas, while their inhabitants are, in turn, stigmatized as "undesirables." Portraying daily life in the urban areas of the city of Medellín, the authors of the reportage show a feeling of generalized helplessness and risk of paralysis. Violence rewrites the conditions of citizenship in poor communities of Medellín and destroys the social fabric, creating institutional disorder. Violence is one of the daily phenomena that most contribute to the traumatization and deterioration of the quality of life of the inhabitants of *barrios populares*. The books of reportage written by Aricapa, Salazar and Castañeda demonstrate that fear, risk and anxiety are deeply embedded in the fabric of contemporary Medellín, shaping all kinds of social practices. An interviewee from Castañeda's book observes the change in habits when the wars between youth gangs began in Manrique:

> Years ago the weekend habit was different. We preferred to go to see my uncles Jaime and Giovanny's football games or, in my case and that of my cousins, go to a bar. We used to go out with our partners or we looked for a house to throw a party. But in Santa Inés, fear became a jailer who kept us at home. (Castañeda, 2017, n.p.)

Similar cases are described by María Clara in Aricapa's reportage about Comuna 13:

> And the atmosphere in the street at night [...] was one of fear. No one with their instincts in order ventured out after nine o'clock. Only the ownerless dogs and the militiamen who, with or without hoods, patrolled the corners. It was a curfew that no one had decreed and to which the whole neighborhood submitted. And not only El Salado and Nuevos Conquistadores, but also Veinte de Julio and Independencias, La Divisa, La Loma, not to mention Belencito Corazón, where the conflict was burning. [...] It was dangerous to be there at night, within easy reach of a stray bullet. (Aricapa, 2015, pp. 156-157)

It is visible here that violence changes the habits of citizens. As Nancy Cárdia (quoted in Rotker, 2002, p. 19) observes, people move to other places, stop using public transportation, withdraw from community life, and become more fearful of the stereotypical adolescent.[8] The inhabitants of the marginalized neighborhoods suffered socio-cultural damage that altered their ties, social relation-

[8] In the period between the 1980s and 2000s, local youth became key social actors both as perpetrators of crimes and as victims of violence. The event that marked this generational change

ships and ways of living. From the experiences narrated and the reflections of the victims, one can understand that because of violence, people change their customs and use different measures to protect their lives. Such ways of surviving are illustrated by the habits of one of the denizens of Santa Inés neighborhood:

> Gilberto worked as chief archivist at Social Security's San Ignacio headquarters. When his son arrived by taxi, he took the same vehicle but slept in his office. He preferred that to going out in the middle of a shooting the next day. (Castañeda, 2017, n.p.)

Some protection measures were easier to apply, others less so. In *barrios* populares, during the armed conflict or the wars between youth gangs, different armed actors also usurped and used the houses for purposes that represented a kind of "profanation" for their owners:

> The war could not have been bloodier; there was such control of the territory that it was impossible to cross borders. The response of the *combos* was to take over the terraces of the houses as trenches and fight for nights on end, to such an extent, says Alicia, that: -We became experts. In the end we could distinguish the sound of shots fired from revolvers, pistols or rifles. (Castañeda, 2017, n.p.**)**

People could not feel safe in their homes which ceased to be shelters, places of tranquility and comfort. The paramilitaries, guerrillas or members of other gangs could enter with force, rob, kill the inhabitants or rape the women and girls. Also, many civilians died from stray bullets. This is how Luz Estela remembers her life in Comuna 13:

> There were days when I couldn't go out, and I had to pay some boy to go to the shop to buy me a pound of rice or a bag of milk. And since our new house was made of wood, there were nights when we had to go to my parents' house at dawn because bullets could easily penetrate wood. (Aricapa, 2015, p. 212)

All this limited the realization of their productive activities, the movement and the social use of the spaces.

Numerous examples from the reportage by Salazar, Aricapa and Castañeda illustrate how violence has become part of daily life, thus showing that with the growth of the levels of violence, the naturalization and normalization of vio-

took place in April 1984, when two assassins, acting on the orders of the Medellín cartel, assassinated the Minister of Justice, Rodrigo Lara Bonilla. The image of the juvenile murderer on a motorcycle, an inhabitant of one of the poorest neighborhoods in Medellín, traveled throughout the country (Riaño-Alcalá, 2006, p. 1). Since that day, adolescents have been perceived as agents of violence.

lence also grow. Naturalization of violence is a process of getting used to different actions that are characterized by aggression and becomes a strategy to survive in a traumatized society, allowing violence to spread silently in the culture (López Bravo, 2017, pp. 111-126). This can be seen in the testimony of an inhabitant of Manrique in Castañeda's reportage:

> At first, she says, it was very hard to hear those gunshots and know that Luis, my daughter's husband, could be the one shooting. Or to think that one of those bullets could be killing him. Then I relaxed because you get used to it and it becomes a routine. (Castañeda, 2017, n.p.)

What Inés María narrates is another striking example of the daily nature of violence that has become a habit for many citizens of Medellín:

> Mum had to stay at my house for a while, while we were getting a ranch for her. And she hadn't even been there for three days when the first shooting in the neighborhood hit her. And it took her a while to get used to it. She heard gunshots and ran to hide in the back room, and she didn't understand why Manuel, the children and I didn't do the same. We were already used to the shootings and the dead, but she would hear that someone had been killed and she would start asking who it was, what he was doing, if he was known to the family. As if you knew. […] Eventually, she got used to it just like we did. She no longer ran to hide when she heard gunshots, unless they were very close. As she got used to it, she also got used to the dead, and the militiamen didn't seem so horrible to her anymore. (Aricapa, 2015, pp. 93-94)

Victims often do not realize that what is being done to them is violence, perhaps because they have come to accept that what they are being subjected to is generalized, expected, culturally sanctioned, and therefore "normal." As Simpson puts it, in a hostile environment one can get used to almost anything, including injuries, so someone raised in the midst of turmoil or social decline may not recognize that they are being subjected to violence (Simpson, 1970, pp. 22-35). That is why the stories described by the journalists need to be read, heard and reflected upon.

Reading these books of reportage, one clearly sees that the living conditions, armed conflict, criminal gangs and wars between them produced injuries and alterations in social practices. People close the doors carefully every night, think about how they will interact with others on a night out, how they will get home. They also have evasive strategies planned in case of danger (see Rozema, 2007). Spaces and forms of meeting, associated with parties, celebrations and commemorations were lost or destroyed. The logic of war imposed mistrust, silence and isolation. Living amidst armed conflict or war brought direct consequences such as physical injuries and disruptions to daily life and routine mobility. Poor living conditions also lead people to greater insecurity and unpredictability in daily life. Fear of violence affects the quality of life in multiple

ways. As a form of chronic stress, fear of violence may also be a key mechanism affecting other physical and mental health outcomes during and after conflict, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety (Williams, Ghimire & Snedke, 2018, pp. 145-159).

6. Psychological and emotional damage

Traumatized people often scan the surrounding anxiously for signs of danger, erupting into explosive rages and reacting to ordinary sights and sounds, but at the same time all that nervous activity takes place against a numb gray background of depression, feelings of helplessness and a general shutting down of the spirit, as the mind tries to insulate itself from further harm. The quote below from Esperanza's testimony shows what traumatic experiences the inhabitants of Medellín lived through and what responses the body provoked:

> I was about ten years old at the time, but I remember everything. I remember the dead, because at that time they killed a lot of people in this village, so many that the men from my house couldn't go out to the village or walk much on the roads.[…]. And because I was so clever, my father used to send me alone with three mules loaded with loads of coffee to sell them in the warehouses of the Federation of Coffee Growers. Because I was a child, they were not supposed to do anything to me. And nothing ever really happened to me. Seeing dead people was the only thing. Once I came across a herd of mules loaded with dead bodies on their way to the Cauca River, and twice I found corpses lying on the water basin. But what shocked me most was finding a head, all alone, strung on a fence post. That's worse than seeing a whole dead body. […] I got sick. I almost didn't sleep, my blood pressure was high and my nerves were on edge. (Aricapa, 2015, pp. 240-241)

What Esperanza's testimony clearly illustrates is that the inhabitants of Comuna 13 lived through a barbaric time. People found the mangled corpses of pregnant women, the elderly, children who had left school or other people along the roads when they were coming back from work in the middle of fire exchange. The children witnessed horrific events, such as the murder and torture of their parents and neighbors and the destruction of their homes and personal belongings. Young people describe Dantesque scenes, the tortures, the smell of blood— that have been inscribed in their memory, tormenting them in their dreams and altering their ability to pay attention, concentrate, remember and learn (¡BASTA YA! 2013, pp. 314–321). It is recognized that post-traumatic stress disorder can be acquired indirectly through witnessing traumatic events. It can affect people physically, emotionally and mentally. The events described in the quotes below, which show situations experienced by the children and youths in Medellín, can lead to cognitive and behavioral deficits, such as anxiety and long-term memory impairment:

> […] on two occasions we had to pass by dead bodies lying in the street. On one of those occasions, my little sister, Carolina, was so frightened by the sight of the dead body that she dropped the notebooks she was carrying in her hand, and they fell into the pool of blood. She had to pick them up and clean them. And it became very common to see people sleeping in class because of the late night shootings. (Aricapa, 2015, p. 152)

> A boy had come up and sat in front of me. He had not yet finished slumping into the chair when I saw a black hole surrounded by blood. He was pale, the wound seemed to breathe with a life of its own. […] A woman, the boy's mother, had come up with him, and she was on the verge of tears saying to him: "Calm down, son." But it was she who needed to calm down. Next to her was a man who seemed to be the father and he didn't say anything, he just looked with despair in his eyes. I don't know if the boy had a shirt, I only remember the blood that we all saw and smelled, and we were all as terrified as he was. (Aricapa, 2015, p. 222)

The violence in Medellín caused psychological and emotional damage resulting from the victimizations suffered. Victims are silenced, the social world of audiences shrinks and fear restricts the threshold of moral vision. Horror and barbarity reduce victims to dehumanized objects (Humprey, 2002, p. 86). Many children and young people lived through days of terror, endured loneliness, darkness and hunger, and not only witnessed violent events but were also subjected to them. Some methods of exercising violence can extremely destabilize people's lives, destroy their sources of support and make it impossible for them to work through mourning and regain stability and control over life projects, be they individual or collective (Aricapa, 2015, p. 288).

All the three books by Aricapa, Salazar and Castañeda Arboleda show how different armed actors introduced their own rules, violated human rights and murdered residents with opposing political ideas. The books of reportage present the range of fears, violence and traumas produced and experienced in Medellín by the inhabitants of *barrios populares*. The reader learns that violence and traumas were as diverse as the people and spaces that make up the urban fabric. Different armed actors gained a strong presence in more than sixty neighborhoods in Medellín, and their death squads carried out cleansing campaigns (Riaño Alcalá, 2006, p. 54). The people of Comuna 13 often experienced selective assassinations by the militiamen: "several boys were accosted in the street or taken from their homes and shot to death, and signs of this kind were left beside them: for being a thief, for being vicious, for being a traitor …" (Aricapa, 2015, p. 42). Violence against the civilian population has been a tool used in a premeditated manner by different armed actors who want to achieve support and subordination. The testimonies presented by Salazar, Aricapa and Castañeda show that ordinary people were the ones who suffered the most. As the stories of the inhabitants of barrios populares of Medellín show, all the armed actors used the attack on the civilian population as a war or survival

strategy, using different forms of violence. The repertoire of violence included selective assassinations, massacres, forced disappearances, torture, threats, massive forced displacement, economic blockades, sexual violence, kidnappings, attacks against civilian property, looting and arbitrary arrests (¡BASTA YA! 2013, 35). This all created a situation in which violence became "banal" (see Pécaut, 1999). Although in everyday life, in the representations and perceptions of the city, the situation is simply called violence, it is in fact the result of a sum and superimposition of various forms of violence, from those perpetrated by armed conflict actors and organized crime actors to neighborhood violence (*Medellín, memorias de una guerra urbana*, 2017, p. 19). This article deals with all of them to show the more global spectrum of violence in Colombia, its continuity and its cyclical form.

7. Conclusion

The books of reportage written by Salazar, Aricapa and Castañeda Arboleda show the trauma of exclusion and violence the inhabitants of poor neighborhoods of Medellín experienced. They have been traumatized by violence in all its manifestations, inflicted on them by different armed actors, as well as the Colombian government. Aricapa's, Castañeda Arboleda's and Salazar's books answer the question of who is the responsible party for the trauma and list violations and different economic strains that constitute the pain that accompanies cultural trauma. The reportage contributes to a cultural narrative by painting a more vivid picture of the victims of the trauma and indicating vulnerable groups in society. It helps to revise the collective identity of the community affected by violence and exclusion and remember its past. This article looks at reportage as a practice used to deal with memory as a way to heal trauma, demand justice and build peace. The reportage can be treated as what Alexander calls a foundation story, which is recognized by the whole community and makes it possible to mark an important and distinctive caesura in its history. It constitutes a new narrative that concentrates on the daily life of the marginalized inhabitants of *barrios populares* who form the so-called "carrier group" which plays a key role in the process of recognition, trauma healing and demanding justice as they possess certain discursive abilities to articulate claims about the shape of their social reality (Parish and Rugo, 2021, p. 2). Thanks to the work undertaken by the "carrier groups," a new "model story" is created about a particular event/events. If the new narrative proves to be sufficiently carrying—through "symbolic extensions" and "emotional identifications"—there is a routinization and institutionalization of memory, whose framework extends beyond the scope of the community constituting the starting point of the trauma process. The "carriers" of the meanings and representations of violence in Medellín also have another task before them: to make the story competitive with the already existing narratives about the past. It seems

that the authors of the reportage are concerned with everyday life, not a particular traumatic event: surviving, suffering from different forms of exclusion, protecting children from falling into street gangs, etc. The transition from family, private memory, often handed down orally, to community myth takes place through a history that codifies, legitimizes and validates the story. Then, personal experiences become a common history that can bring into play other emotions, such as solidarity. They create a mixture of common feelings for moral repudiation, which could be translated into actions of reparation and recognition.

According to Assmann & Shortt (2012, p. 4), to achieve reconciliation and social integration it is important to study how citizens of various social groups remember or refer to their experiences of violence, exclusion and marginalization. Reportage plays a significant role in the representation and the critical reception of the past, in social and political change. Reportage might guarantee integral reparation, solidarity towards victims and peace building, in a bid to rebuild the social fabric broken by the armed conflict, narcotrafficking and injustices perpetrated by the state. Aricapa, Salazar and Castañeda accumulate many stories of violation and embed the individual stories in a larger cultural trauma narrative. The traumatized community needs the narrative of their suffering, in which they will find a space to discuss the reasons, the pain and the loss they have experienced in recent history; this is also a space for reflection, for naming and claiming the experience and bearing witness. Recognizing their suffering and cultural trauma, the society might be able to answer Gonzalo Arango's question: "Is there no way that Colombia, instead of killing its children, makes them worthy of living?" (Arango, 1974, p. 125).

Aricapa's, Salazar's and Castañeda's reportage is a producer and a product of public memory and attempts to provide a social understanding of history among members of a community united by experience. It is an active agent in historical documentation and it goes beyond its reporting function, becoming a new form of "remembrance" of the past that helps create a mnemonic community which shares the experience communicated through narrative, in the case of the reportage analysed in this article, in an attempt to come to terms with the intensely disturbing experience of violence and exclusion. Speaking out for them is both a political and a therapeutic act, and as such it is a claim to power. Trauma narratives point to the unjustified violence done to people. They are stories in search of a voice to stop the torment of the solitude in not talking. They liberate individual memory, which is essential in establishing justice (see Roberts and Holmes, 1999).

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