Performance Practices and the Conflict of Memory in Colombia: Working Towards a ‘Decolonial’ Digital Archive and Epistemological Justice

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‘El tiempo pasa, la historia se repite, los actores se levantan’ (Time goes by, history repeats itself, the actors rise up) excerpt from the play Honrar los Sagrados Espíritus, performed in Bojayá (November 2019)

A wise man with a hat and a cane enters the stage. He describes a past of abundance, happiness, and fraternity, and a present of oblivion, death and empty promises. In between physical pain and the loss of his memory, the old man says: ‘We always forget, right?’, while remembering elegant men visiting Bojayá after the 2 May 2002 massacre. Suddenly, a loud voice interrupts. It announces the arrival of a letter written by the living-dead to their beloved ones. Their words ratify their presence; they are accompanying and caring for their family and friends at every step. They remind us of the power of the spiritual and suprahuman worlds that provide strength to the survivors. The survivors gather, spread out across the ‘stage’ and sit to listen to these words from beyond the grave. Seventeen years later, the ‘lost town’ – as they call the dead – has sent letters to their respective family and friends who, having been spared by the massacre, are still alive. The letter states:

Dear survivors, we want to thank you for the courage you have shown during these 17 years of struggle; we know there is still a long way to go

1. We’d like to thank our assiduous and hard-working research assistant Jonelle Walker for her work on this article.
to achieve a dignified life; truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-repetition are missing. From heaven we support and accompany you with the firm conviction that together we will forge a better tomorrow for our children. From a distance, we embrace you with our souls. All that remains to tell you is this: do not lose heart in the struggle of taking care of our territory so that we can finally achieve the peace we long for.²

This scene of the play *Honrar Los Sagrados Espíritus* (Honoring the Holy Spirits), was performed in Bojayá in 2019 at the event called ‘La entrega final’ (The final return) when the human remains of the victims of the 2 May 2002 massacre were finally returned to their families. This same scene opens a short documentary specifically produced for Corpografías a digital archive that documents embodied practices in the Colombian Pacific. The audio-visual piece shows the story of Bojayá, a remote town in Chocó, Colombia, that gained national, and perhaps even international attention, in 2002. It was Thursday 11am, the second day of May, when a gas cylinder exploded on Bellavista’s church in the town centre of Bojayá. Over 100 people sheltered in the old church when the guerrilla FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) launched this cylinder in a crossfire with paramilitary groups. This atrocity, common in rural Colombia at a time of a growing presence of paramilitary armies, marked not only the turn of the century in the Pacific region but a new twist in the Colombian political conflict.

Formed in the late 1950s, the FARC was mainly formed by peasant groups combating landowners in the aftermath of a war between Liberal and Conservative parties disputing power. This war was officially declared in 1948 with the assassination of liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. It marked the beginning of a period called ‘La Violencia’ and the formation of Marxist guerrilla groups. After severe confrontations with the State and civil society, the Colombian government started several peace processes with these groups. In the late 1980s, paramilitary groups emerged to confront the still active FARC and ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional) guerrillas. In alliance with national and local governments and funded by multinationals, narco-traffickers and landowners protecting their property and business, the third army took control of a great part of Colombia’s territory disputing with the guerrilla groups the control of regional politics, the economy, natural resources and trafficking routes. Rural populations were the most affected while the Pacific became a central target for its natural resources and strategic location in the production and commercialisation of illegal drugs. The new century brought some hope with the demobilisation of paramilitary groups in 2006 and the signature of a peace agreement with the guerrilla FARC a decade later in 2016. Signed by Juan Manuel Santos’ government, the accord was rejected in a popular plebiscite where 50.1% of the population voted NO for the implementation of the agreement. The most affected regions by the conflict massively said YES. As we discuss below, the implementation of the peace accord alongside the emergence of a politics of memory functions hypocritically since the conflict persists. Within this political climate, one where conflict is both historical yet ongoing, our research project looks to this
affirmation of peace by rural Afro-Colombian communities and sets up to record alternative versions of the conflict by highlighting the marginalized communities most affected by it.

Our article reflects on the design, production, and creation of Corpografías, a digital archive that documents the artistic practices of Afro and Indigenous Colombian communities and the role they play in processes of memory, peace, and reconciliation in the Colombian Pacific. By artistic practices we specifically look at performance, rituals, theatre, music, and dance and we use the analytical framework that performance studies offers. While much work about the Colombian armed conflict exists within frameworks from politics, human rights, sociology, and anthropology, it is our focus on the theoretical intervention of performance studies that sets this project apart. We turn briefly to Marcela Fuentes’s succinct explanations of what performance studies does here to offer a summary of what helps inform the modes through which we conceptualize the digital archive. Fuentes writes that performance studies looks at performance as an ‘object of study, an analytic lens, and a method of inquiry and intervention’. Performance ‘not only reproduces what exists but it actualizes possibilities for worldmaking through consciousness-raising’. 3 It exists as a ‘symbolic mode of action that connects physical and digital environments and situated/physical and virtual spaces’ while it ‘mak[es] it possible for people to understand the constructed, contingent, and unstable status of embodied meanings and hierarchies’. 5 The analysis of body movements, corporeal interactions, and embodied practices can contribute to understanding and processing Colombia’s long history of violence and conflict, and the possibilities offered by digital tools to document those processes, guided our debates on how to imagine the archive. We worked closely with arts practitioners in four communities (Bojayá, Buenaventura, Guapi, and Ungúa): exploring their creative processes and sources of inspiration; listening to their voices and experiences of the conflict; recording their memories and understanding how artistic practices play a role in the construction of memory and identity.

Methodologically then, Corpografías combines dance, theatre, and performance studies with the social sciences and the digital humanities. In balancing our roles as scholars funded by a global north institution working in the global south and as, what anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli calls, postcolonial archivists, we prioritize our decolonial commitment to put Colombian Afro and Indigenous communities at the centre as we developed the archive; bringing to the forefront their epistemologies and forms of existence; thinking, learning and documenting in ‘noncolonial’ terms, allowing ‘for the existence of histories other than the universal history of the West’ and global elites. As Sousa Santos sustains, ‘the adequate recognition of injustice and the possible overcoming of oppression can only be achieved by means of an epistemological break’ recognizing and including diverse systems of knowledge. Povinelli illustrates what this epistemological break might be in the development of the archive. She writes that a postcolonial archivist’s work is,
not merely to collect subaltern histories. It is also to investigate the compositional logics of the archive as such: the material conditions that allow something to be archived and archivable; the compulsions and desires that conjure the appearance and disappearance of objects, knowledges, and socialities within an archive; the cultures of circulation, manipulation, and management that allow an object to enter the archive and thus contribute to the endurance of specific social difference formations.⁸

As such, this project and the theoretical reflection about it here highlight our attempt to reconfigure ‘the archive’ as an archive particular to the needs of the communities: as sites of memory, re-existence, and epistemological justice. Corpografías, addresses these issues and concerns by disseminating Afro and Indigenous voices, their claims and worldmakings beyond the specificities of the armed conflict and the political consequences of the period known as ‘La Violencia’ and its aftermaths. Corpografías offers a portrayal of these communities as citizens and creative beings whose agency, subjectivity, and dignity are continually marginalized by the Colombian State and civil society. It shares their sensing of the world and creative processes; their experiences of conflict and their meanings of peace, body, artistic practices, and memory. It also explores how they come together, how they engage in convivencia, a way of coexisting amidst plurality, that has been threatened not only by the armed conflict, but more importantly by colonialism and capitalism. Our contention in this article and the digital archive is that conflict, justice, peace and reconciliation in Colombia transcend local disputes. Instead, they emerge out of global processes that have exploited Afro-Indigenous peoples and their lands in the name of multinationals, capitalism and Western epistemological models of being and knowing. This is especially relevant for ideas of justice. Without this recognition there can be no transitional or global justice that prevails. Thus, our aim is to contribute towards such recognition by showing how these communities create and maintain their own epistemologies that support their particular processes of resilience and artistic production.

Conceptualizing Corpografías

A Colombia-UK collaboration set up to examine the role of art in processes of memory, conflict, and reconciliation, our project was conceived in the aftermath of the signature of the peace agreement between the Colombian State and the FARC guerrilla in 2016.⁹ Its purpose was to contribute to the discourses about memory and healing processes in a ‘post-conflict’ context with the focus on the voices, presence, and artistic practices of vulnerable communities. We chose a digital archive as a main output of the project because it serves as a space for documentation and dissemination of the communities’ artistic practices to local, national, and international audiences, while contributing to current debates on digital archives and re-conceptualisations of performance, archives, and their interrelationships from an Afro-Indigenous perspective.¹⁰

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8. Elisabeth A. Povinelli, ‘The Woman on the Other Side of the Wall: Archiving the Otherwise in Postcolonial Digital Archives’, Differences 22, no. 1 (2011): 146–71 (153).

9. ‘Embodied Performance Practices in Processes of Memory and Reconciliation in four territories of Chocó and the Pacific Medio of Colombia: Guapi, Ungúa, Bojayá and Buenaventura’, UKRI/Newton Fund grant with Colciencias at Universidad de Antioquia (AH/R013748/1).

10. Lastly,
the Colombian Pacific was chosen for two reasons: it is one of the most affected regions by the armed conflict; and we wanted to highlight the presence of Afro and Indigenous communities who have been traditionally erased from memory processes and testimonies of violence.

While the digital archive is not imagined as a totalizing space that generalizes or universalizes Afro or Indigenous communities, it does rely on forms of ethnic and/or territorial collectivity and the vital role these conceptualizations play for their respective communities. Within these identity markers (e.g. Afro, Pacifico, indigenous, Guna-Dule, Guapireños) we are working with the concept of quiet developed by African American Studies scholar Kevin Quashie as a distinctive mode of existence for Black people. For Quashie, the aesthetic of quiet goes beyond preconceived ideas of Blackness as hyperbolically expressive and always engaged in resistance, a common ground also used to represent Indigenous communities. Quiet ‘is a metaphor for the full range of one’s inner life – one’s desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, fears […] it is not apolitical or without social value’. Thinking about this alongside Afro-Colombian concepts of ‘vivir sabroso’ (to live deliciously/with pleasure) or Indigenous concepts of ‘buen vivir’ (good living), Corpografías highlights these aspects of Afro and Indigenous life as these offer fresh perspectives alongside the narrativization of the effects of the armed conflict in their everyday life. By focusing on the embodied creative practices of these communities, Corpografías offers an alternative (and much needed) discourse about the armed conflict in these territories. As performance studies scholar Kaitlin Murphy explains, ‘[v]isual works have the potential to speak outside of and in a different register than government narratives-and to render visible the ongoing impact of past violence and unreconciled injustices by working at the intersections of visually, memory, human rights, and place’. Yet, the existence of a digital archive for Afro and Indigenous Colombian communities also poses several challenges: How to guarantee access to the digital archive? How to represent minoritarian affect within the greater digital humanities? How do they engage in the production and validation of content? How to prioritize their existence as creative citizens beyond their marginalized position as victims of the conflict?

The Digital Humanities (DH) claims to contribute not only to the ‘democratization’ of knowledge but to the incorporation and acceptance of different epistemologies into academic knowledge. It is not merely concerned with the incorporation of digital resources, but the transformation of hegemonic Western systems supported on the written text, ‘expert knowledge’, individual and universal truths. As Anne Burdick et al note, knowledge transmission can be now recorded, distributed, and mutated into new and hybrid forms, allowing wider dissemination and the acceptance of embodied ways of knowledge. DH envisages the present era as one of ‘exceptional promise for the renewal of humanistic scholarship and sets out to demonstrate the contributions of contemporary humanities scholarship to new modes of knowledge formation enabled by networked, digital environments […] to the resurgence of voice, of gesture, of extemporaneous speaking, of embodied
14. Kaitlin M. Murphy, *Mapping Memory: Visuality, Affect, and Embodied Politics in the Americas* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2019), 5.

15. Anne Burdick, *Digital Humanities* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012), 7–11.

16. Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 33.

17. Katie Shilton and Ramesh Srinivasan, ‘Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement for Multicultural Archival Collections’, *Archivaria 63*, no. 1 (2007): 87–102; Gabriella Giannachi, *Archive Everything: Mapping the Everyday* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 99.

18. Katie Shilton and Ramesh Srinivasan, ‘Participatory Appraisal’, 90; and Giannachi, *Archive Everything*, 99–100.

19. Michael Rothberg, ‘Multidirectional Memory’, *Témoiner, Between History and Memory [Online], 119, 2014, http://journals.openedition.org/temoiner/1494* (accessed July 23, 2020).

20. Giannachi, *Archive Everything*, 109.

21. Andrés Bermúdez Liévano, ‘Political Tussle Over Truth And Memory In Colombia’, Hiromondelle Foundation, May 19, 2020, https://www.justicetoolkit.net/en/truth-commissions/44027-political-tusse-over-truth-and-memory-in-colombia.

15 Such resurgences are crucial in this particular project as these are aesthetic specificities, like the notion of quiet mentioned above, tied to Black diasporic cultural production. By tying Black Studies to DH, we engage with the important issues Safiya Umoja Noble identifies in her writings about race, information technologies, and the digital humanities. She explains that ‘[b]y foregrounding a paradigm of critical engagement and activist scholarship that privileges the concerns of those living in the greatest conditions of precarity because of a combination of economic, racial, and environmental violence, we can think about the implications of DH work in a larger global context’. In our decision to foreground the communities’ affective relationships with one another, their creative processes, personal archives, quiet reflective moments and corporeal engagements with memory, ancestry, and territory, *Corpografías* hopes to contest how the armed conflict has been archived or will be archived given the current battle for memory going on in Colombia, focusing on these seemingly ‘unarchivable’ qualities. Knowledge about the point of view (often hidden in official conceptualizations of hegemonic archives) from which the archive is constructed is essential in diasporic archives. Who tells the story? From whose perspective are compelling points of entry designed? In further writings about subaltern archives, scholars suggest that to ensure the collection and preservation of communities’ points of views, archivists should preserve ‘the articulation of community identity’ and facilitate the production of ‘empowered narratives’. *Corpografías* commits to collecting, exhibiting, and preserving those points of views through contextual information conveyed by displaying records and histories spoken directly by traditionally marginalized communities, embedded within the local experience, practice and knowledge of that community.

Michael Rothberg offers the useful term ‘multidirectional memory’ as a way to think about the dynamics of remembrance. We are particularly drawn to the way that Rothberg’s framework of multidirectional memory complicates the relationship between memory and identity. For him, it is a performative relationship; it is not a given. Attention then shifts from the unproductive belief that memory and identity have a static relationship, to one where both memory and identity operate as dialogic processes of making, unmaking, and remaking memories on ‘shared, but uneven terrain’. So while ‘oral histories, rituals, and gestures are all strategic for the transmission of knowledge’, and are particular to Afro-Indigenous cosmologies and systems of knowledge, they are not inherently without exchange or tensions. Here is where a performance studies analysis contributes to the ways that we are thinking about memory studies and the overall narrativization of the Colombian armed conflict at the macro level of this project. Several factors we considered at the macro level include: the new politics of memory in Colombia under the Duque Presidency, the ongoing conflict despite the signature of peace accords in 2016; the consistent assassination of community leaders and the impunity surrounding these horrifying statistics; the reduced presence of the State in protecting communities
to guarantee their security and provide social services to the population; and COVID-19 which interrupted our fieldwork visits and plans for several face-to-face collaborative workshops (encuentros) where we would gather material produced by the communities for the archive and validate final outputs. These sets of factors created challenges and necessitated modifications in the methodology, while creating new ethical considerations. Ultimately, we want Corpografías to offer a possible form of ‘oralitura’ (oraliture)\(^23\) a bridge to connect different forms of expression/communication used by different cultures and systems of knowledge, by using the digital and postcolonial archives as a form of documenting and disseminating oral traditions to diverse social groups and cultural backgrounds in a dialogic exchange.\(^24\)

Our ethical concerns are not without the self-reflexivity required by researchers to pay attention to how we understand and represent these communities affected by violence. Rather than ‘victimizing’ the communities and rendering them powerless, we highlight their active role and the diverse ways they address the conflict. We look at how through kinship, spirituality, ancestry, social movements and artistic production they have resisted State exclusion, ongoing violence, and lack of basic necessities. Despite this reality, we found that these communities face life and describe versions of the conflict with hints of humour, especially in the Afro communities. Humor is rarely visible in testimonies of violence, perhaps in an attempt not to trivialize the violence, its impact on communities, or their histories. The erasure of laughter, comedy, and humor from memories of the conflict thus silences an important way of expression for these communities who, in an attempt to make their everyday more liveable, turn to it for emotional sustenance.

Security issues are a major concern especially when members of the community share intimate stories. Although interviews were mainly focused around artistic processes without involving information that could put communities at risk, the current situation of social leaders in Colombia demands special attention. In this case, regular ethical procedures and consent forms are not necessarily enough and a more ‘reflexive and flexible approach to ethical decision making’ is required.\(^25\) Participants were asked before and after testimonies were provided if they were amenable to those stories becoming public. Responses in many cases were that the situation of abandonment and violence in the regions are well known and highly documented. However, as Caroline Tagg et.al reminds us following Maggie Kubanyiova’s ‘ethics of caring’, researchers must carefully decide which content goes public. Researchers must care for participants, their intimacy, emotions, and openness, even more when involving social media, WhatsApp, instant messages, and informal conversation in communications with them.

Before turning to some geographical and political contextualization, we conclude this section with some thoughts about the collaborative nature of Corpografías. The power dynamic between the communities and our institutional affiliations brings up issues of ownership and how the communities are not only credited but will have future access and administration of the archive. Community members gave the material

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22. Maria Alejandra Navarrete and Laura Alonso, ‘Overview of Violence Against Social Leaders in Colombia’, InSight Crime, February 18, 2020, https://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/overview-violence-social-leaders-colombia/ (accessed August 4, 2020).

23. This term comes from filmmaker Olowali Green who explains the Guna Dule system of knowledge, the mola, as a type of oralitura: a mix of orality and literature.

24. Wiñay Mallki, ‘Indigenous And Oraliture As Resistance To Forgetfulness’, Errata #, https://revistaer.rata.gov.co/autor/wiñay-mallki-fredy-chikangana (accessed September 23, 2020).

25. Caroline Tagg, Lyons, Agnieszka, Hu, Rachel, & Rock, Frances, ‘The Ethics of Digital Ethnography in a Team Project’, Applied Linguistics Review 8, no. 2 (2017): 271–92 (272).
they wanted to store and upload to the archive. We recorded interviews (offering the choice to decide what to tell and how to tell it) and selected the main points participants wanted to highlight about their relationship to their territories, communities, and memories. For example, many spoke about the need to represent these territories beyond the entrenched narratives of conflict and violence; many wanted to highlight their knowledge and traditions, their abilities as creative and capable beings of imagining and world-making despite the scarcity of resources and opportunities; others wanted to show how peace exists/existed in their communities and what their life was like before the infiltration of violence. More importantly, videos, photo albums, and personal and institutional archives were collected over fieldwork and after, in a continuous process of communication. At the time of writing, we are waiting to receive material produced by the communities as part of digital fieldwork and digital encuentro (encounter-meeting) methodologies that are in the process of finalization as a response to COVID-19. Digital encuentros will work as a meeting point between the four communities (with no presence of researchers), involving broad areas of inquiry and inviting creative response through imagery, gesture, recordings, photographs, song, dance or anything else they would like. They are facilitated by Corp-Oraloteca,²⁶ our research partners in the Pacific. Finally, our interactions with designers and developers in the presentation of media content that works both digitally and according to communities and researchers’ needs is a complex task that Corpografías is embracing. While crucial debates in digital humanities continue to foreground the importance of collective knowledge production over individual authorship, we anticipate contributing to these debates with the rich material of Corpografías and its goal to provide a path towards a decolonial way of historicizing the armed conflict in the Colombian Pacific.

Debating the Decolonial in Colombia

Many of the terms we engage with emerge from Latin American decolonial philosophies. As the global north begins to finally catch up to Black, brown, Indigenous, and queer world-making practices, the term ‘decolonial’ is increasingly gaining attention inside and outside academia. While decolonial philosophies are crucial and necessary, the term is not without its limitations. There is a need to carefully reflect on the overuse of the term as a generalization or simplification of the inclusion of marginalized voices (as postmodernism did). The recognition of the fundamental principle of decolonial thought is the need to ‘unlearn’, to rethink what we think we know, to reconceptualize notions and ways to produce knowledge and to accept other systems of knowledge as valid and diverse populations as citizens with full rights. The decolonial also asks for a reconceptualization of how we understand civil rights and sovereignty in their liberal Eurocentric conception as part of the dualities inherent in Western modernity. When working within Latin America, there is an additional urgency to address the coexistence of a conflictive
mestizo identity which privileges European modernity with the Afro and Indigenous groups that also make up the region generally, but Colombia specifically.

In Latin America, there is a long tradition of decolonial philosophies with the work of Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals-Borda, Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire, and Colombian anthropologist Manuel Zapata Olivella who, with their contemporaries, included alternative forms to produce and disseminate knowledge. Eschewing Eurocentric methodologies such as the idea of ‘expert’ knowledge and the written text, they worked closely with peripheral communities and participatory methods using photo-albums, poems, or comics. The ‘decolonial’ term was developed and conceptualized in the 1980s in the works of Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, Argentine philosopher María Lugones, Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar, and Argentinian linguist Walter Mignolo. Approaches that resonate and differ with other approaches across academic disciplines and regions using different ideas and notions like ‘post-colonialism’, ‘the west and the rest discourse of power’, ‘interconnected histories’, ‘epistemologies of the south’, and ‘southern theories’. The twenty-first century welcomes an increased visibility of Afro-Indigenous intellectuals and scholars (e.g., Afro Colombian sociologist Aurora Vergara, Mexican linguist Yásnaya Elena Aguilar, Guna-Dule linguist Abadio Green, Wayuu anthropologist Weildler Guerra) and a renewed presence of grassroots and civic movements in the region. This convergence of approaches not only enriches the debate but imposes new challenges. We remain attentive to care for an emerging trend that could be easily co-opted by categories inherited from traditional academic disciplines and the north.

In working on Corpografías we identified the significance of these epistemologies in the worldviews of the communities: a daily negotiation between notions of ancestors and contemporaneity; African and/or Indigenous spiritualities; a profound understanding of a system of unity between practices, traditions, community, mind/body, human/spirit, material/immaterial; a refusal of simple binary oppositions, and most importantly the centrality of death as part of the living. This helps to reconsider how violence and trauma are experienced, memorialized, and shared among these communities and how best to represent them in our archive. Next, we move into some important political and geographical details to help frame the difficult contexts that shape the communities’ everyday existence and their insistence on hope.

### The Colombian Pacific and the Armed Conflict: Context, Territory, and Hope

Colombia racially defines itself as a mestizo nation (mixed Spanish/European and Indigenous), yet it contains the fourth largest population of African descended people in the Americas and 3.4% of the population is Indigenous. These populations have not only been heavily affected by Colombia’s armed conflict, they have been systematically erased from
economic and cultural policies, national identity, and testimonies of violence. The ongoing conflict in the four territories of our project and the absence of the Colombian State in providing social services and security worsens the reality of Afro-Indigenous populations highly vulnerable to armed groups, drug trafficking, and the extraction of natural resources, a situation further exacerbated by COVID-19. Children and youth are recruited by illegal armed groups, while sexual abuses are committed by combatants, including the national army.33 Men are used to transport drugs across the seas. Aerial herbicide fumigation of illegal crops destroys subsistence crops and herbs that sustain traditional cuisine and medicines. This poses not only food insecurity for local populations but threatens their cultural heritage, the environment, and their healing methods, which are vital in the absence of adequate health services. Few opportunities for young people to continue higher education or to find employment exist. Poverty, forced displacement, armed groups, and migration are their only options in these territories. Resources towards culture and education are very low, and there is no economic infrastructure available to help develop business or artistic enterprises. Women, many of them social leaders, oversee many of the mutual aid societies at the local level. They have small entrepreneurial endeavours which struggle economically yet nevertheless endure due to the communities’ essential need for them.34

The signature of the peace agreement (2016) provided some hope and optimism towards the improvement of their living conditions, yet our research has found quite the opposite. Dissidents of the FARC guerrilla, other guerrillas (e.g., ELN), and paramilitary groups are still in the regions fighting for the control of the territories and the drug trafficking.35 More than 170 ex-guerrilla members and over 300 community leaders, mainly Afro-Indigenous working on the implementation of the agreement or protecting their territories and the environment, have been assassinated since 2016. The response of the government has been slow or nonexistent and it has a shamefully reduced presence in these territories. Massacres are back while illegal armed groups reinstate their control of the territories, even imposing their own COVID-19 curfews.36

Despite such grim realities, the sentiment we found in the four territories was hope and trust in the agreement measured against a reflective dismay of an unfulfilled promise. For them, the agreement meant the possibility of living without the threat of armed groups and illegal crops and a path or ‘way back’ to their peaceful living; peace that, according to them, transcends the idea of legal and political justice. It means opportunities and living in harmony with other living beings and the environment: el buen vivir or vivir sabroso. In one participant’s words: ‘When talking about peace, we talk about opportunities for all; we are talking about economic revival and respect for our cultural traditions and territory. We are talking about development, ethno-education, ethnodevelopment […] Peace is not signing a document […] peace is built day by day’.37

Peace and reconciliation, then, transcend the specific and localized armed conflict of the last 70 years in Colombia. It goes back to colonial
times and the consolidation of the Western empire, its geopolitics, economic models, and systems of knowledge deeply rooted in the marginalization of peoples and cultures, land displacement, and the commodification and exploitation of natural resources and human beings. It was imperative for the project to address ‘conflict’ within this wider historical context rather than limiting the discussion to Colombia’s armed conflict understood as ‘La Violencia’ and its aftermath. This current political conflict that symbolically concluded in 2016, transcends beyond the Colombian State and armed groups. It involves international capitalism and globalization, mining companies, and civil society. It is an entire system nurtured and allowed by ‘implicated subjects’. According to Michael Rothberg, an implicated subject ‘is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator, and yet in which most people do not occupy such clear-cut roles […] implicated subjects help propagate the legacies of historical violence and prop up the structures of inequality that mar the present’. Rothberg’s concept helps us to think of the relevance of documenting and archiving the memories on the side of the victims while addressing the implicated subjects within the memory ‘wars’ currently underway in Colombia. Such subjects include corporations, multinationals, civil society, or memory curators, who privilege certain memories and perspectives.

A vital contribution of the 2016 peace accord was the special treatment given to the victims, minority and ethnic groups, recognising the impact of the conflict on the majority Afro and Indigenous communities and offering them a space to voice their concerns. Previous peace attempts were mainly focused on the State and the armed groups, without considering the voices and memories of minority and ethnic groups as victims of the conflict. The 2016 accord installed special mechanisms and institutions to guarantee their rights to reparation and access to the truth. Recording and recognising their memories and testimonies of the conflict became a priority. Unfortunately, the government of Ivan Duque elected in 2018 took an hypocritical turn against the implementation of the agreement, its principles and institutional arrangements since his administration is one of the main opponents of the peace agreement. In particular, the responsibility of the National Centre for Historical Memory (CNMH, its Spanish abbreviation) is ‘to contribute to integral reparation and the right to truth’, by collecting and disseminating ‘the plural memories of the victims, as well as the duty of memory of the State and all the victimizers’. The Centre was closely working with communities, supporting artistic and local initiatives, collecting their personal archives and testimonies to create the Museum of Memory as a repository of the victims’ documentation and memories. Its role and ideological position has completely shifted under the new administration. Its current director dismisses the existence of a political conflict and the involvement of the State and the Army as perpetrators of war crimes. The museum is now led by the former curator of the army museum and their strategic partners are no longer the communities but FEDEGAN, the association of cattle ranchers linked to illegal
appropriation of land and paramilitary groups.\textsuperscript{41} The credibility of the CNMH was highly questioned and in February 2020 it was excluded from international association of memory centres. This contestation and violent reinterpretation of the memory of the armed conflict shows, on the part of the current Colombian government, their limited understanding of how memory works. There is never one grand narrative of memory. As Rothberg insists ‘memory works productively through negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; the result of memory conflict is not less memory, but more – even of subordinated memory traditions’.\textsuperscript{42} And, it is these subordinated memory traditions that we turn to for \\textit{Corpografías}.

The Four Territories: Knowledge Exchange and the Production of the Archive

The Pacific in Colombia is broadly associated with Blackness and its predominantly Afro-descendant rural communities. This association emerged as a consequence of the 1991 constitution and the Law 70 of Black Communities of 1993.\textsuperscript{43} The Constitution declares a ‘pluricultural and multietnic’ nation discursively recognizing for the first time Afro-descendant and Indigenous groups as citizens. The Law 70 recognized Black Colombians, and particularly rural communities in the Pacific, as an official ethnic minority with particular rights.\textsuperscript{44} According to Tianna S. Paschel, this presumed multiculturalism ended up equalizing ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ while regionalizing Black identity. In the promulgation of multiculturalism, officials ‘defined Black communities as rural communities living on the Pacific Coast’, triggering a series of claims by Black urban organizations and those living outside of the Pacific Coast, to expand existing legislation to include urban Blacks.\textsuperscript{45} This broad identitarian construction of the Pacific becomes more problematic when considering the Indigenous communities who inhabit these same territories of Black people. The Colombian Pacific is a vast area that extends along the entire western coast of Colombia and cuts across different departments or local states with diverse political and cultural arrangements. This is the case of the four territories included in our project; they defy the idea that ‘the Pacific’ is a homogeneous entity.

In Ungúa, one of the first fieldwork visits coincided with the opening of ‘Santa María del Darien Memory Park’ that featured performances of traditional local dances. Indigenous and Afro dances were performed in their diverse range of body movements and styles; slow and quiet steps marked by the sound of Indigenous flutes contrasting with circular and rapid hip movements to the rhythms of African drums. The event evidenced the co-existence of dispersed and distinct Indigenous and Afro-descendant groups, that demanded a much needed perspective on cross-coastal and inter-ethnic analysis. Strategically located in between the Pacific and the Atlantic coast and between Colombia and Panamá, Ungúa served as a crossroads for the slave trade and current migrant movements.\textsuperscript{46} It is also home of Santa María del Darien, the first Spanish...
settlement in Colombia’s territory (1510) and of a number of Indigenous groups like Guna-Dule, inhabiting both countries and coasts. Informed by the experience of local dances and the memory park, Corpografías engages with both Afro and Indigenous communities. It further explores the complex cultural productions of the Indigenous reservation of Arquía, and the Bocachico festival, an Afro-Colombian celebration of music, dance, and culture. As part of the Indigenous experiences analyzed, there is the cinematographic work of Olowaili Green, of Guna-Dule descent who grew up in Medellín as a consequence of displacement. This young film director highlights the importance of women and weaving and their intertwined work with the ‘salas’ (singers healers) as living memory of their territories. Corpografías includes her work and more widely, the creative and artistic expression of the Guna-Dule: their cosmologies, cosmogonies, and ‘saberes’ (knowledges). The Bocachico festival acquires relevance for this project as an initiative led by Afro-descendant communities to gather and recreate their festivities with a joy that has been threatened by violence and conflict.

Afro-Indigenous connections were less evident in shaping the analysis in Guapi, Bojayá, and Buenaventura. Indigenous groups were less accessible or directly involved in the artistic practices analysed. In Guapi, for example, the fieldwork was mainly conducted in the urban district as rural areas – where Indigenous groups mainly live – are difficult to access due to the presence of armed groups. The analysis focuses on marimba music, traditional chants and dances due to their cultural representation and value in Guapi and the Southern Pacific among Afro-descendant populations. In 2015, these expressions were declared as intangible heritage by UNESCO. The government’s investment in music and culture is minimal despite this recognition and the existence of a significant number of entrepreneurial efforts in the area. Our analysis finds a constellation of traditions and ‘saberes ancestrales’ (ancestral knowledges) that transcend marimba, and includes healers and traditional medicine, weaving, beverages and cuisine, wooden houses, hunting, fishing, and countless of practices that constitute their identity as Guapiéños, ‘from the Pacific’, as they reiterate. This territorial identity claim specifically addresses their particular location in the Cauca Department, which is ruled by a mestizo class in conflict with the strong presence of Indigenous/Andean groups like Guambianos and Paeces that have heavily resisted colonialism and violence. Our project works with Tejiendo Saberes, Semblanzas del Rio Guapi and Legado Pacifico, three music organizations that combine the teaching of traditional music and chanting with a holistic educational process centred around the cluster of traditions. We also include Los Torres family, a dynasty of musicians and instrument makers, ‘cantadoras’ (traditional singers), female healers and other embodied practices that reflect the interweaving of ‘saberes’.

In Bojayá the research focuses on the work of youth groups formed initially by the Dioceses of Quibdó in the early 1990s. After the May 2002 massacre, German theatre director Inge Kleutgens worked with
the youth group to stage *Los Muertos Hablan* (*The Dead Speak*, 2003) in commemoration of the first anniversary of the massacre. The group continued co-creating theatre (both with and without Kleutgens) and in November 2019 they devised, staged, and performed Honrar a los Sagrados Espíritus (*Honor the Holy Spirits*). This devised theatre piece was led by Boris, Elvia, and José Luis, who as teenagers participated in *Los Muertos Hablan* and were now introducing a new generation to their particular practices of devising theatre based on memory and ancestral-ity. The relationship between the theatre process in the construction of memory and the valuable scenographic and choreographic elements of the play make this experience a significant case study for our project. The symbolic representation of the ‘actors’ of the conflict, the homage paid to los muertos (the dead), the resignification of their daily activities filled with hope, offer in their own voices, a humanized and contextualized version of conflict. As José Luis explained to us, it aims to transform the journalistic and bureaucratic view of Bojayá as a massacre; and of ‘dead bodies’ as ‘numbers’. It aims to highlight their existence and their right to an Afro-Colombian funeral with its rituals of passage. The dead provide support and strength to the survivors, animating them to re-exist and to keep going. The theatre process signifies to them a place to safely raise the collective voice of the community, to claim their rights, to denounce ongoing conflict, to process the wounds of violence and ultimately, to give dignity to life and death.

Arts initiatives involving social activism and memory are more prevalent in Buenaventura, the main urban port in Colombia’s Pacific. As Paschel (2016) notes, the aftermath of the 1991 constitution was marked by the rise of Black urban groups claiming their Black identity and the escalation of violence in their territories. Part of these movements are *Minga por la Memoria* (Minga for Memory), a platform constituted by social, artistic, ecclesiastical, and memory organizations asserting the dignity of life and the recognition of memory as a victim’s right. We worked with two artistic initiatives from *Minga por la Memoria* in our project: *Arambei*, a music, dance, and theatre group that features Afro-Colombian social and identitarian issues in their performances which are inspired by the vast cultural tradition of the Pacific; and *Semillero Teatro por la Vida* (Theatre for Life) which underline local, territorial and cultural specificities in plays that facilitate spaces for both self-reflection and artistic enjoyment. Both groups, together with other artists, produced the CNMH’s final report ‘Buenaventura a port without community’ that emphasizes the abandonment of the state and the breakdown of social networks as a consequence of the violence. The meaning and relevance of ‘minga’ and ‘uramba’ as spaces of coming together, of teamwork, social relations, familiarity, and collective responsibility feature prominently in the artistic productions of Buenaventura. One participant, John Erick, noted:

*minga*, the pot community, is that ancestral practice of subsistence; if one has bananas but does not have fish, and one has fish but does not have
bananas, when we share it, we can both have everything and that is Buenaventura’s richness; if I do not have one thing I have another; and when we share it, then we all have everything. We are not a poor territory; we are a territory that has been impoverished. We are a territory that has been deprived of its natural wealth but we will recover little by little. 50

Despite clear differences and distinctive identities as peoples from the Pacific, commonalities exist across the territories. In both Guapi and Ungüa, a direct relationship between artistic practices and the construction of institutional memory are not necessarily observed as they are in Buenaventura and Bojayá. Cultural production happens regardless of conflict and public denunciation, working rather as ‘quiet’ and symbolic existential protest.51 Rituals and creative processes are embedded in a network of ancestral knowledge that represent them. Oral tradition plays a significant role here in that it characterizes and reflects their beliefs, ways of doing and living. In Ungüa, for example, Indigenous filmmaking becomes a form of ‘oralitura’, a way to record ancestral knowledge and to guarantee its preservation and dissemination for younger generations (Ólowalá Green).52 A similar motivation is observed in Guapi with music schools preserving the knowledge of los maestros (elder musicians) even as they die in conditions of poverty and abandonment. This is also evident in Buenaventura and Bojayá where contemporary theatre, dance, and music serve as a vehicle to maintain and reinforce their culture and traditions in their actual contexts. Contrary to Western dualities, tradition and contemporaneity coexist in the past, present, and future. Time and space are not linear nor uniform. They constitute a system of unity as their cultural practices and traditions do.

This system of unity is embedded in the creative processes and reflected in the artistic production as they share various elements in common across the territories. Firstly, the central role of ancestors as their point of reference and inspiration. Their music, dances, songs, films, or plays are devoted to them; their ancestors motivate them and move them to create; their presence is embodied in their performances while their legacies help them reinforce their identity as multifaceted peoples. Secondly, the relevance of spirituality and the suprahuman that blends in a mix of Catholic, Indigenous, and Afro traditions, incorporating also other traditions like the Hindu ‘mandala’ in the productions of Buenaventura (Marcela)53 and Bojayá (Elvia).54 They all sing, dance, and compose lyrics and scripts to their saints and patrons like San Antonio or Indigenous deities like Baba and Nana the creators of the universe in the Guna-Dule tradition. The centrality of both death and life and the significance of funeral rites are symbolically represented in their productions. Finally, ideas of unity and peace that centre a harmonious coexistence between human and spirit, the material and immaterial, the rainforest and the environment, spirits and saints, life and death. This system of unity allows them to process conflict and histories of violence while still enduring persistent forms of colonialism. They continually claim their cosmologies and world meanings as valid living
forms, still denouncing contemporary forms of colonization just as their ancestors experienced over 500 years ago.

These initial findings informed and guided the production of Corpografías. They are incorporated in the design, production, navigation, and content of the platform. As Claire Warwick et al. note, ‘thinking about use before a [digital] resource is built means studying the users, not the resource’. Corpografías aims to reflect their system of unity, their worldviews, and forms of expression, while meeting their own interest in producing a digital archive. A careful examination of the use of the digital and archiving forms was thus conducted. We found that despite low levels of digital infrastructure, connectivity, and reduced electricity in the four territories, social media, especially Facebook and WhatsApp, are the main way of sharing and storing information amongst adults and younger groups. This is not the case for the elderly who still rely on face-to-face communications, printed material or highly limited (sometimes non-existent) phone access. Personal laptops are rare, and public computers with low bandwidth are available at schools, churches, other community organisations, and internet hubs. In Guapi, for example, electricity was only installed two years ago, while in Bojayá it is rationed per neighbourhood at designated times. The situation worsens with the presence of armed groups controlling the zone and restricting the access to electricity towers and internet poles as it happened in Guapi during our second fieldwork visit. Despite the high costs of internet packages, almost everyone, including some children and excluding the elderly, have smartphones. A prerequisite for Corpografías then is the easy and manageable navigation of the platform on smartphones with low levels of connection. Further dissemination strategies have to be designed for the elderly.

Communities were actively involved in the production and provision of audio-visual material, guiding researchers through sources of information, its contents, and the type of material to collect. They helped to programme fieldwork visits and were in permanent contact, via WhatsApp, with the team of researchers in Colombia. Through interviews and personal archives they provided content. When deciding which material to share and which not; which stories to tell and which not, they become ‘the curators of their lives’, the archivists. Long silences, omissions, expressions like ‘things that cannot be said’ or simply a humble smile, helped to maintain ‘an exquisite balance of what is public and what is intimate’; an ‘aesthetic of quiet’ that announce that certain information and knowledge are only for themselves; or in the words of Elver from Guapi, ‘el que lo dice todo se queda con nada’ (he who says it all, keeps nothing). These gaps and silences that come up in the production process are also meaningful and a constitutive part of Corpografías; it understands documentation as ‘a process – or a performance – in and of itself, whose methods of preservation, organization, and access might become as important as the documents themselves’.

The production and development of Corpografías could be described as a collaborative and experimental process between communities, researchers, designers, and developers. The last three groups work as
co-curators and instrumental mediators of the communities’ memories. Researchers create specific content based on direct quotation given by participants and research results. Members of the communities create specific pieces, like audiovisual footage, or texts to use in the description of representative elements of their practices. A team of creative designers and digital developers, experts in documenting memory and community and artistic practices, worked closely with researchers in a parallel process, integrating these memories and cosmologies. The design for example, reflects the relevance of their territories and traditions in their construction of identity; navigation tools follow common words and elements found across artistic practices.

Finally, according to the communities involved, Corpografías could contribute to publicizing their creative processes, territories and knowledge; but also ‘to tell them how beautiful Guapi is; to visit our region […] the delights of our coast’,60 ‘to tell them that we exist’.61 Curated material can also help promote their work and be used for lobbying with funders, public institutions, NGOs, or festivals. It can function as a memory site to record ancestral knowledge and practices that are at risk of disappearing with the death of the community elders; a memory place that can help other members of the community to conduct research about themselves, to be inspired and represented by their own people: ‘where young people can admire their community members as they admire those who appear on TV’,62 and finally, a place where researchers, journalists, and civil society can find information to conduct further research on the Pacific and their artistic practices.63

Conclusion

Creating and collaborating through embodied practices opens up safe spaces to gather and to come together. It generates a place for the establishment/enforcement of unity and community ties. As John Erick, director of Semillero Teatro por la Vida, explains, one of the main characteristics of the conflict and violence in Colombia is that it generates fear and distrust among people.64 Art, according to him, allows the community to feel united and in solidarity with one another. Actors in Bojayá shared similar testimony when they referred to their theatre group as a family,65 and theatre as the space where they can come together and collectively express themselves as a collective, as a community. This in turn informs their creative processes since they gather testimonies and stories told by different members of the community and use them in their plays and performances.66

As we draw this essay to a close, we want to point out that in the context of conflict in Colombia, art and culture are usually addressed from either their anthropological or aesthetic value. Anthropology privileges the value of cultural differences and the need to guarantee these multiplicities for a peaceful coexistence, while aesthetics allows the art object to facilitate or express processes of trauma or reconciliation.67 Less is said about the processes that contribute to the making of culture
and art, what these may mean or even the roles they have. Our rationale, then, for this project has been to analyze and document these processes to better understand the role of art in context of conflict, memory, and reconciliation from a wider outlook; from a specific arts-based performance-studies perspective in conjunction with memory studies and transitional justice, or what we prefer to call symbolic justice, epistemological justice or ‘cognitive justice’. The turn to memory is crucial for communities to disseminate their voices, knowledge, existence, and reclamations. There was the need to address structural claims raised by these communities that claim for their territory and identity, their resources and environment; their bodies and spirits, their traditions, their knowledge and beliefs. Symbolic and epistemological justice seem as, or perhaps even more, relevant than legal and institutional justice. We make this claim (without diminishing the relevance and centrality of legal and institutional justice) because throughout our project we witnessed and listened to the experiences of the communities. They long for safe spaces where they will not feel threatened or can enter without fear. The significance of affect to endure and continue despite trauma, memory of violence, or displacement came across in how they come together as communities to express their dissatisfaction with, and denouncement of, the government. They also gather together to embrace, to connect through movement, song, or dance, and to centre their customs, traditions, and beliefs. We met individuals who imagined new worlds and alternatives for economic sustainability and survival beyond formal education (or its absence), the guerrilla, the paramilitary, and/or illicit trade. They were also very imaginative in how they brought together elements from other cultures and traditions, merging the urban and the rural, the so-called contemporary and the traditional, and the blending of religious systems and beliefs.

If Corpografías is to contribute to discussions about the role of artistic processes in transitional justice, we consider the suggestion of Sotelo Castro who advocates for more accountability of listening. He writes that ‘the performativity of listening […] is left unaddressed by the assumption that circulating victims’ testimonials is enough. There is not a mechanism to control the public’s listening process, to check that they have heard correctly, to know if they refuse to listen, or to raise awareness about the effect that their mode of listening is having on those who speak’. Likewise, we propose a careful engagement with our archive, similar to Quashie’s idea of working within an ‘aesthetic of quiet’ which requires ‘a shift in how we read, what we look for, and what we expect, even what we remain open to. It requires paying attention in a different way’ so that the underlying structural problems and situations beyond ‘memories of an armed conflict’ can be seriously considered.

Given that Colombian governmental and juridical systems of reparations, restitution, and justice do not appear to work on behalf of those whom we consider the actual victims of the conflict, the role of civil society, academics, and projects such as ours becomes more relevant as the collaborative work with communities and/or victims draws attention to the significance of symbolic versus institutional justice. Corpografías
contributes to this debate, specifically archiving the need to counteract the erasure of victim’s memories by working closely with communities, disseminating their messages and interpretations of conflict, and most importantly their daily practices and ways of living that were peaceful to begin with. Many of them adamantly proclaim that the armed conflict has nothing to do with them and they were just in the ‘wrong’ place (contested and resource-rich territory desired by multiple capitalist and government interests) at the wrong time. As Gabriella Giannachi highlights, the archive ‘constitutes just the beginning not only of the re-evaluation of the identity and the rewriting of history of individuals […] but also the creation of a community and with this, the possibility that this community may use the transformational power of the archive to seek social and political change’.  

71. Giannachi, Archive Anything, 106.

72. Corpografías, aims to create an extended community within the Pacific, to connect the four territories virtually with one another and other victims of conflict elsewhere. It makes an effort to prioritize symbolic and epistemological reparation at levels beyond institutions and the state, by addressing diverse audiences, and perhaps even the ‘implicated subjects’ inside and outside Colombia.  

73. Michael Rothberg, The Implicated Subject, 1.