"Quitar espacio a la guerra": Mapping everyday responses to violence in contexts of armed violence.

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In this presentation I start from the questions we, researchers at the Historical Memory Commission in Colombia, faced when we decided to document “civil resistance” as a critical component of our task to develop a report on the origins and causes of the armed conflict in Colombia. The group initially approached “civil resistance” as open political action and direct resistance against violence and war: mass demonstrations, anti war social movements, the declaration of entire communities as peace communities or the direct rejection of armed powers through strategies of negotiation, defiance or collective organizing. However, in the discussion on which cases to document, we considered whether privileging organized collective actions of open resistance risked to silence individual agency and the more mundane and not very visible strategies by which everyday persons and the great majority of Colombians have lived through violence. In sum, we were confronted with questions of focus, standpoint and scope and with understanding resistance in its more everyday forms. After heated debates on “what” could be called “resistance,” the Commission opted to document both direct open resistance and everyday resistance.

Integrating the documentation of forms and strategies of resistance in the tasks of historical clarification entails acknowledging the role of resistance as a matter of justice and to consider “not only the wrongful suffering that resulted from political resistance, but also the deeds and sacrifices of those engaged in resistance”

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1 The Colombian Historical Memory Commission is an interdisciplinary body of intellectuals and social leaders responsible for the development (with the “wide participation of society”) of a public report on the emergence and evolution of armed groups in Colombia. The group was part of the official National Commission of Reconciliation and Reparation (NCRR). The Colombian government created the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation (NCRR) after the demobilization of over 30000 paramilitary members between 2003 and 2005. This was done within the context of the controversial 2005 Justice and Peace Law that requires that ex-combatants participating in processes of demobilization confess their crimes and that their victims are ensured the right to truth and participation in public audiences. The Commission of Historical Memory currently operates under the newly created Center of Memory. The Commission has full intellectual and functional autonomy from the Colombian state to advance its work and its mandate extends to June 2013.
(Leebaw, 2011: 158). The exercise seeks to recognize the places, times and events from which diverse social actors resist terror through spontaneous or not, individual or collective acts. I focus here on everyday resistance --the subtle and often invisible ways in which Colombians subvert the regulations and codes of conduct and mobility and the climate of fear imposed by the paramilitary, guerrillas or armed forces during the war.

In the specific context of war analyzed here, acts of everyday resistance do not necessarily seek to oppose or subvert institutionalized systems of oppression or coercive legal institutions but engage with a regime of regulations, controls and repressive actions imposed on local populations by the armed actors, that is with the everyday operation of war. Reading everyday resistance --particularly in a scenario like Colombia with a long standing armed conflict in which direct opposition is almost unthinkable, calls then for a careful exploration of the covert and subtle forms whereby the population survive the day to day of war with dignity and autonomy (Osorio 2001; Uribe 2001). In this frame, I approach resistance as the set of motivations, actions and individual and collective behaviors by which individuals or social groups seek to oppose or modify the power of an external dominant actor or a specific institution (Hollander and Einwohner 2004; Osorio 2001; Scott 1990; Seymour, 2006; Thompson, 2011). This approach to the concept of resistance in a context of massive violence/war includes intentional actions and behaviours on the part of the civilian population that “make daily life more sustainable” (Thomson, 2011) under an armed regime of terror and that seek to “open space” for maintaining autonomous everyday social relations and places of encounter (García 2004, 2010; Uribe, 2004).

These actions are mostly individual or group responses operating within a complex field of social interactions marked by unequal power (in relationship to the dominant armed actors) and requiring constant adaptation to the changes in the dynamics of violence-repression-coercion-negotiation and their inherent power games (Osorio 2001). The balance is not necessarily positive, because the struggle could not be more uneven, but reveals what James Scott (1990) calls a "hidden text": subtle daily acts of protection, accommodation and countering the effects of war, an exercise of dissent or rejection in a low-profile and often disguised manner. As Susan Thomson has argued, these acts of everyday resistance have three qualities: a) They combine persistence, effort (individual or group based) and prudence to accomplish a specific goal (i.e. survive); b) dominant or armed actors do not recognize these acts as resistance or are not aware of them and, c) they provide tangible survival or temporary benefits to those who enact them.
This repertoire of strategies are critically centered in carving autonomous spaces from the oppressive control of the armed actors. Their impulse may be at times considered emancipatory, but in most cases they do not appeal to disruptive or violent methods, or manage a speech overtly political or of public opposition to the war or the presence of armed actors (Uribe 2001). The significance of these actions is rather to stage, often in a precarious manner, what Juan Carlos Velez called a form of politicization (politics) anchored in the decision to survive the war, to create transitory sites of safety and maintain a relationship with the territory (Vélez 2004). A crucial element in keeping active the hidden text lies in a collective memory of resistance that is transmitted through a variety of verbal narratives.

**Everyday Strategies**

Based on an analysis of the testimonies of men and women in the municipality of San Carlos in Northwest of Colombia, I introduce here three forms of everyday resistance. San Carlos illustrates an emblematic limit case of the horror experienced by Colombians in rural areas with the presence and attacks from all the factions: guerrillas, paramilitaries and armed forces of Colombia. As the report produced by the Commission of Historical Memory states, San Carlos was in the early 2000s, a ghost town,

Near three decades of siege, terror and death produced an almost complete exodus of the 25,000 inhabitants of the municipality. Victims of all [the armed actors], its people suffered successively or simultaneously destructive and murderous presence of guerrillas, paramilitaries and even members of the security forces, who acted sometimes with passive complicity, and others with an undisguised intervention alongside the paramilitaries. San Carlos is the continuing drama of hundreds of locations throughout the country converted by armed groups in areas of dispute or war zones. (Grupo de Memoria Historica, 2011: 15)

The forms of everyday resistance I refer to here do not include the entire repertoire of resistance acts we have analyzed for this town but allow a further exploration of the workings, forms and motives of everyday resistance in critical situations. These forms are:

*To survive in resistance:* It includes civilians actions and behaviors of invisible resistance that seek a partial and selective accommodation to the social order imposed, a passive rejection to the armed control of everyday life, and the reduction of the effects of war on individuals and their families (Garcia 2004; Uribe 2004).
Under this strategy are included the daily struggle for survival to feed and protect the family, forms of communication that transmit coded messages that ensure safety or protection, the practices of silence and ways of hiding that allow them to escape the armed vigilance or the risk of death, the various uses of social spaces and times of the day as protection and safety mechanisms, the anonymous and disguised acts of opposition, and the use of supernatural and spiritual forces as means of protection.

Quitar espacio a la Guerra [Snatching space away from war]: Includes strategies of selective accommodation, recreation and reconstruction of social spaces and social ties weakened or destroyed by the armed confrontation or the regime of terror imposed. Like the previous strategy, the actions registered do not involve direct responses or open resistance, but a way to alter the apparent submission to the war orders through actions that repair what the war destroys or what the armed regime prohibits. Under this strategy are included practices of social encounter and survival by those who refused to be displaced, the determination to maintain functioning public and community spaces such as schools, churches or roads by groups of individuals with specific social roles such as teachers, public transport drivers and priests.

To resist the dominion: it is a repertoire of anonymous and non-anonymous actions (individual or collective) of negotiation, confrontation, civil disobedience and open opposition to the territorial and political regime of control by the armed actors. This is about strategies of direct rejection to the actions or procedures that are considered unfair (e.g., taxing civilians, the prohibition of work) or excessive (forced recruitment of children and women, torture), attempts to place limits on the power of the armed groups and to carve and demand a degree of autonomy. These include actions such as defying the “death lists,” demanding face to face negotiations with armed actors; collective mobilizing to reclaim an abducted or torture community leader; anonymous collective actions of ideological challenge (e.g. erasing graffiti painted by the armed factions), collective actions such as marches and demands; neutrality statements, among others. In this paper, I do not develop an analysis of this form of resistance.

To illustrate the strategies of resistance, I present examples of the various individual and collective actions and responses to the war or to particular situations created by it. This thread is adopted as the actions taken are not generally planned decisions or spontaneous acts of rebellion against the ruling powers. They are nevertheless intentional in that there is a motivation and goal. The analysis focuses
in a description of the form of resistance, its purpose and meaning and through this analysis the intent is to reveal common underlying strategies.

If well I refer here to the people of San Carlos, in general, it is important to note that they do not constitute a homogenous group in matters of war. The people of San Carlos take various stands in relationship to the armed groups and have different interests, including: participation and complicity of some with the logic of war, civil disobedience or open challenge to the armed powers by others, disputes and confrontations among local actors, and ambiguous positions, mixed and contradictory loyalties. Similarly, there are differences in the meaning given to the past, and this makes that their responses and actions are dissimilar and even sometimes contradictory.

**Surviving in resistance: everyday invisible strategies of survival**

Survival strategies include actions and behaviors intended to prevent death, hunger, illegal recruitment, disappearances or forced displacement. The effect of these actions is primarily oriented to protect life, defend livelihood means and protect resources and family. In this sense, these strategies represent an adaptive response to changes in the physical and social environment that the armed conflict brings. The forms of action documented here allowed the population of the town and villages neutralize or reduce the effects of war and cope with their daily lives. But as will be shown through a few illustrative cases, several of these strategies of adaptation and survival maintain a hidden discourse that challenged and sometimes subverted the dominance of one or more armed groups. In general, these actions took place in those areas of social interaction beyond the tight control of society by armed actors.

The proximity of the armed groups and the fact of living in a battlefield kept the residents of San Carlos away from public spaces such as the main square, markets, and cemeteries, and forced them to adapt the use of their homes. Residents remember how the ongoing gun firing and town siege forced them to lock themselves up from the late afternoon onwards to the next day. The night was a source of great fear because it was the time when disappearances, searches and torture most often occurred. During the period of paramilitary domination between 2000 and 2005, when anyone they considered a guerrilla collaborator or who was in their death lists run the risk of being taken away at night to be killed, Sancarlitanos opted to take shelter in their houses. In the rural areas, the houses were not safe as a refugee so they went to improvised shelters (cambuches) or the bushes (in rural areas). They adopted cautious and
surreptitious strategies of prudence to protect themselves, communicate and escape. Among the resources deployed for the night and for falling asleep, for example, they went to bed with their clothes on and kept a bag with some clothes packed, to be ready to escape at any time (Testimony adult woman, San Carlos, 2010). As well, the use of only dark clothes and dim lights when at home allowed them to move unnoticed.

Besides having the "suitcase ready" or "keep the ladder to the courtyard ready to escape" (Testimony of adult male, memory workshop, San Carlos, 2010), they also stayed in those spaces of the house that could protect them better during the fighting, that is in rooms "where there were enough [solid] walls" (Testimony of young woman, memory workshop, San Carlos, 2010), so that the bullets will loose impulse. In the downtown area, and as a way to challenge the permanent surveillance on people by the paramilitary, people would sleep in different houses every night and spend the night in the company of friends. These resources enabled them to confront fear, and to develop an early warning mechanism to hide or escape:

People started to respond because the anguish was too great and they felt “apretados” [tight/cornered] at the time and as the nights were very complex affair because we had to seek places to sleep everyday in a different house. We always looked for a house that had a patio because we were thinking that they may all of the sudden enter our houses. There were many groups of friends, because even I think almost everyone gathered together to sleep in a house, sleep in another … This was with the purpose to protect us and we always looked for the same characteristics in a house, that it have to had a patio. [During the night] everyone told her story of what would happen, say, if that night they entered your home, we kept it all prepared, many people slept in their clothes, and with their clothes packed, including children … as this was also a process to plan our escape. So those were very hard and anguish times. (Interview with adult male, Medellín, 2010)

Protective measures for the night, for sleeping and finding food were reinforced with a cautious management of communication based on encrypted codes that used a language hidden to the armed actors. Such coded communication warned about risks, and so people could take actions to protect themselves, escape death sentences or displacement. When the paramilitary established their base of operations, torture and death in the Hotel Punchiná known as the "house of terror" and located in the downtown core of San Carlos, they applied a strict
monitoring of the movements and whereabouts of the residents. Faced with the overwhelming presence of armed actors, people developed a repertoire of communicative resources:

Not even the door one would dared to open to our neighbours, for example, in the neighbourhood amidst all this violence, I went and knocked on your door but if I did not call you by your name, you did not open it, so even if I knew it was your voice I did not open. If I came and knocked once and then call your name, then you opened the door, but if I was ... and only knocked I could stay two, three hours knocking and you did not open. That was a way to warn us. (Testimony of adult female, San Carlos, 2010)

Inside the houses or in hiding places, those seeking refuge learned to move in the dark, to communicate in whispers under the bed and lighting matches just to move from one place to another in the house. These arts of murmur and darkness were used particularly by those few who remained in the urban areas and in a few villages. These times are remembered as very stressful and harsh, hearing continuously the sound of bullets or explosions while living with the anguish on who was going to be taken next. Moreover, the possibility of using and circulating through public spaces such as the square and streets, and to exchange with others outside the houses depended on these years on a smart use of warning signs.

An effective warning mechanism was through the sound produced by the closing of blinds in the daytime, which alerted those in the street on the risk of another siege, killings or the arrival of an armed group. When there were threats and rumours of armed raids and massacres in the countryside, women and children undertook daily afternoon walks to the town to spend the night there, while some of the men remained in the villages, hidden in the "stubble" or in "hovels" (Interview with adult woman, San Carlos, 2010).

So, the people adapted to the dynamics imposed by the war, and when possible, they warned each other about what they could do or not at certain times. In the countryside, when the peasants realized that their names, particularly those of men, were on the death lists of paramilitary, they adopted protective measures, having women in charge of going out of the village, traveling the roads and going to the town:
For this reason [detention and disappearance of men in the roads] they stopped going to town, that is, they stopped coming to town; then they spent two, three, even four years without coming, only the women came.  
(Testimony of adult male, Medellín, 2010)

For those who remained in the villages in the period of greater displacement and death (when the public transportation buses quit working and food blockades and checkpoints rose), survival brought many challenges. An example of the ways in which farmers avoided blockades and protected against the threat of the arrival of the paramilitaries is a group of farmers from the village of Buenos Aires, who appealed to their deep knowledge of the bush and the surrounding geography to hide, feed themselves and their families and to refuse displacement from their territory:

Then we were struggling to resist. Already in 2003, ending 2003, we were no longer able to resist, there was a period of sixteen days, which was the last, we kept panela [blocks of raw sugar], others kept the rice, we all kept little something: panela and chicks, those that were able to get out ... we were like rabbits, we planted enough cassava, 2,000, 3,000 sticks. Then we would go and pulled the cassava and take it to the stubble to eat it there, we prepared food at three in the morning, from two to five o’clock in the morning, thereafter turn off the stove because that was “voleo de candela” [heavy infighting] there. As we were in the canyon, no one came down or any armed group came to be there. ...On the day we did not eat and tried that the children did not cry, anyway it seems my God helped us.  
(Testimony of adult male historical memory workshop, San Carlos, 2010).

The responses and behaviors of civilians in wartime necessarily have an adaptive sense, since their environment is constantly changing. We have called them strategies to survive in resistance because the examples suggest that the purpose and meaning of these acts are not exhausted in the mere struggle for economic and physical survival --which already constitutes an act of great courage in the circumstances of violence and devastation described-- nor in physical or behavioural adjustments to stay alive. Flor E. Osorio (2001, 70), in her analysis of the collective actions of the rural population in the armed conflict in Colombia, notes that in these actions, survival and endurance are simultaneously present and that they have various meanings. In the actions described, meanings are associated to a sense of collective protection against the risk, reducing the impact of war, maintaining a protective and restorative sociability, and anonymous and indirect challenges to curfew measures or the prohibitions of circulation and
communication. So, these senses transcend the idea of adaptation as a simple accommodation or acceptance of ruling relations and power, and record the action and response capacity even in conditions of deep adversity and subjugation. The repertoire of languages and actions described shows a protective capacity and mitigating the effects of the war, as well as a sense of invisible resistance, manifested in the myriad ways by which the residents of the town and villages circumvented controls and arbitrary behavior of the armed actors.

Snatching space away from war: strategies of accommodation, recreation and reconstruction of spaces and social relationships

Resistance actions are not restricted to "social actions" against "the other, as if they were opposing poles, there is also resistance formed in an open sense, in a transversal not exclusionist way" (García 2010). These actions of open and transversal resistance include selective accommodation strategies and actions towards the reconstruction of spaces and relations that armed confrontation and the militarization of the everyday destroy or weaken. This strategy of recreating spaces is of particular importance in the analysis of San Carlos as an emblematic case of forced displacement because it describes the repertoire of actions by which people have responded to the eviction orders, displacement or confinement. This strategy was deployed against a geopolitical operation of power where armed groups exercised extensive and direct control of the daily activities of people: patrolling the villages, controlling the entry and exit of people, monitoring their movements activities and who they met, demanding they account for the amounts of groceries they acquired or transported. In addition they applied a logic of extermination on those groups and social actions they saw as directly threatening their power [dominio], as in the case of the local civic social movement.

The imposed regime of violence erupted in most areas of social life to facilitate the operation of the armed groups and the exercise of power: in the urban downtown core the paramilitary established their centre of operations in the Hotel Punchiná, and in villages such as the Jordan they had their training site. The guerrillas had their operations and monitoring centers in the village of Santa Ana and in the higher point of the town. Given this thick presence of the armed groups in the town and villages, actions such as keeping elementary schools open or street gatherings of people who remained in the towns performed a maintenance and repairing effect.

The resisters and displacement
The regime of terror imposed in San Carlos through armed incursions, forced recruitment, circulation of pamphlets with eviction orders, massacres and disappearances among others, caused the displacement of most of the population. However, some stayed because they had no where to go or because of their age, others argued that they did not want to give up their land and livelihoods, and assumed that to stay was a way to prevent the razing of the town and its disappearance. Others, in the opinion of some people, stayed because of their vicinity to one or another armed group, which offered some security. These, however, like the rest of those who stayed, "endured the downpour" and had to face and solve the woes of loneliness and the shortages of food, supplies and electricity, and as they tried to carry on with live in the midst of the destruction around them.

For this small group of people who did not move, "the resisters" as they are called in San Carlos, the politics of space and time use were critical to conjure fear, face loneliness, manage uncertainty facing the shortage of all goods and destruction, neutralize the effects of war and stand firm in the task of not letting the town disappear.

In the midst of the hostile environment, precariousness and fear, some tried to keep everyday social meeting spaces to thereby prevent the desolation and inactivity. Knowledge of how to read the environment to identify the danger and an uncanny ability to respond to the opportunity facilitated encounters and time to play, share and confront fear in spaces such as the street (in front of their homes), the court, the square and the school. The testimonies that follow illustrate some of these tactics of re-inhabiting destroyed public spaces and of creative adaptation to the daily life of the war:

After the transport minister stopped the bus route to San Rafael, the town was very lonely, it was like a ghost town, alone, alone, you did not see anyone in the street or the park and I witnessed that people after six p.m. ... people came together nevertheless, the little or a lot of people that was there, they will go to the park until dawn ... (Testimony of adult male, San Carlos, 2010)

[...] Then I never left because of that, I did not leave because I felt like I could contribute and somehow I think that those who stayed did. Yes ... I think the mere fact of going out at that time (evening) and seeing that there were a few other neighbors, if in a block remained five families (among 40 houses), among those who remained they kept company to each other and created these meeting spaces, so to bear with life. (Testimony of adult male, San Carlos 2010)
The Open School is an eloquent example of the strategy of carving space away from the war. Schools were one of the places that armed groups appropriated for their operations. The FARC guerrilla took as its base the schools of Hondita and El Choco because of their strategic location at the top of the town. The paramilitary took the school of Jordan. Most schools also were used as a meeting place, where each group’s commanders ordered the people to gather to "inform of their purposes in the area," or to demand from politicians and others to be accountable to them. That is, the school was the place in which the ideological and political power of each of these armed organizations was staged. Teachers were also victims of accusations by the paramilitaries of guerrilla collaborators and were subjected to constant surveillance, particularly in schools located in the upper part of the town, where the guerrillas had greater influence and control.

Given the high rates of displacement recorded in the area, many schools ended up without children. However, the determination of the teachers to continue in their role and the fact that the school bus kept running allowed some schools to keep open. The school bus left daily from San Carlos and went to the various villages and then returned "in the middle of the war but its only objective was to pick up students" (Testimony of adult male, San Carlos, 2010). In order to keep schools open, teachers confronted the armed actors demanding them to recognize the neutrality of these places. They travelled long distances, many of them of prohibited transit, to fulfill their role as teachers. A teacher recalls the challenges of making the daily journey to school:

We never stopped going to work, never ... but one felt so many things while on the road; we carried little radios, then we turned them on to listen to the Mass; we turned them on to listen to anything and we were listening. Sometimes we did not even put attention to what was in the radio, because we were talking and talking. [...] One day on one of the roads we went, there had been a shooting at dawn and when we got there..., up here, we saw the Army [vuelta nada] turned out to nothing, pure swamp and right there they said, "where are you going?". We saw then that they had killed two guerrillas who were blowing up a power pole ... (Testimony of adult male, San Carlos, 2010).

Teachers made this journey daily to keep the school of Vallejuelos open during those years. They saw the number of students dropped to just 42, but continued to teach and keep the school running as a refuge for students and teachers from other
schools who came there after their schools closed when their entire village was displaced,

Then with these children in the school, one did not know what to do [...] The teacher in the village felt very vulnerable as well and did not know what to do with the kids [...] Nothing, there was nothing to do, but then when things slowed down a bit, they returned to school because we told them: "do not stop coming to school because we do we are not going to stop doing it," because we could not abandoned all these people. (Testimony of adult male in memory workshop, San Carlos 2010).

The acts of resistance documented here respond to a strategy of adaptation and non direct resistance through which residents restored social spaces to survive, to recreate a sense of normalcy in everyday life and to deal with uncertainty (Riaño 2006). The sense of social repair is the product of a multitude of non visible and often anonymous actions by which residents were able to open or maintain spaces of relationality that alleviate in minor but significant ways the destructive powers and omnipresence of war.

A youth during a workshop with youth leaders told a story that illustrates this sense of repair. To be direct witnesses and survivors of the massacre El Vergel impacted profoundly the village youth's memory and everyday life. His story recalls how he and other young men defied the fear:

In El Vergel happened the first massacre I've seen in my life ... Then people were afraid to get out, to get out of the houses, out of town ... [We would go to] the soccer field ... we climbed there to play, that is to shake off fear .. we climbed and climbed all the "gang" together because the fear was too big. Then we went up there on the field and played and then we went back all together again ... yes, because it was the soccer field that brought us together ... That was in 2000-2001, I was eleven years old. We were going to school together and, yes, as I say, we did not go out at night because of fear, we played for a while then we went again to the houses, we came, we did exercise and this allowed us to overcome fear and all that and to gain some trust. (Testimony of man, memory managers workshop, San Carlos, 2010)

As it can be concluded from this description, the court and the school became what Kimberly Theidon called "recuperative spaces" (Theidon, 2004), sites in which people struggle to maintain ways to live and survive with humanity amidst the violence. It is in this apparently depoliticized acts that the weight of everyday
resistance reveals itself: if the logic of war and perpetrators of violence is to destroy the very basis of daily social life and impose an oppressive regime of prohibitions, the simply act of walking together and playing a soccer game in an open space constitute a practice of remaking the world but furthermore an act that subverts and undermines the intent to maintain fear and confine people to their homes. The importance of such actions for facilitating adaptation in resistance is enormous when you do not have the support of a collective or an organization and when they are constantly facing up dilemmas and risks that must be resolved. Finally, these social spaces and informal gatherings provided a structure and a stage for the staging of expressions of concealed rejection (out of sight of the armed groups) and those of direct rejection (Scott 2004).
References


