Negotiating Ambiguity, Nuance, and Uncertainty: A View from Colombia

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"After every war someone has to clean up. Things won't straighten themselves up, after all."

- Wislawa Szymborska (The End and the Beginning)

Over the course of more than seven years leading the conceptual and field work for the *Peace Speaks Up*[1] project, questions regarding how and why aesthetic dimensions contribute to transformation have taught me that artistic languages are particularly conducive to dealing with uncertain situations, precisely because their nuances and complexities leave room for the ambiguity that characterizes the legacy of conflict. Art, like many ancient practices, leverages symbols and their possible interpretations to challenge the human tensions and uncertainties that follow any confrontation.

The Uncertainty of Conflict Situations

The complex nature of confrontations leaves in their wake an uncertain path of generally overlapping causes. Conflicts are experienced from different social, ethnic, economic, cultural, and gender conditions and the economic, territorial, and political interests that feed them mutate and adapt. From the outside, the conflicts of others often seem inexplicable or easily solvable. But when we approach or experience them ourselves, the tension caused by the multiple visions, needs, and interests that cause and maintain the conflict becomes evident. Reality is a complex fabric and conflict tangles the threads. Regional, national or global conflicts explode in the bodies of victims, in their privacy, in their daily lives, and destroy the cultural ties that sustain those lives. There is no place for subtleties in the language of instruction, order, or authority. The multiplicity of the reasons for and contradictions caused by the conflict in the daily lives of victims calls for a multiple language with room for contradictory reality and its textures.

According to Samar El-Masri et al., (2020), one necessary precondition for transitional justice processes is the acknowledgement of the complex tangle that sustains conflict. But how to identify that complexity? How to name it? How to leave room for at least one plausible interpretation? Paul Lederach[2] in his inspiring *A Moral Imagination,* proposes: "To suspend judgment and explore face and heart value in settings of conflict require a capacity to develop and live with a high degree of ambiguity (…) Paradoxical curiosity relies on complexity as a friend, not an enemy (…) From complexity emerge untold new angles, opportunities, and unexpected potentialities that surpass, replace and break the shackles of historic and current relational patterns of repeated violence (Lederach, 2005, p. 37)".

The Ambiguity of Artistic Languages

Whether we read ambiguity based on its dictionary definition –"capable of being understood in two or more possible senses"[3]– or as a term used in literary analysis –"the peculiar semantic expansion of poetic language"–, we understand it as the space in which a multiple or extended meaning is viable, a

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[1] https://proyectos.banrepcultural.org/proyecto-paz/

[3] Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary

space with room for interpretation. In his text, "Reality and its Shadow", Emmanuel Levinas reflects on how artistic manifestations are related to reality, producing symbols that create a distance from, not a reflection of that reality. In this sense, Levinas asks: "Does not the function of art lie in *not* understanding? (…) Does not the commerce with the obscure, as a totally independent ontological event, describe categories irreducible to those of cognition? It is the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow." (Levinas, 1989, p.129)".

Artistic languages inhabit precisely this ambiguous territory between representation and shadowing, where human interactions can arise and create the space for interpretation needed to transform a specific reality. I speak deliberately of "artistic languages" and not of art itself because the cultural processes that we have put into practice are leveraged on the symbolic dimension of images and words, but they do not seek to produce works of art. The processes are activated by cultural mediators, some of them artists, who share a trust in aesthetic forms as a way of opening spaces for the transformation of communities. I do not claim that art itself triggers social processes. Artistic languages and practices, however, have demonstrated their potential to generate relationships and promote change –at least in the way we see things– in the individuals and communities touched by them. Doris Sommer in *Cultural Agency in the Americas* (Sommer, 2006) speaks of "wiggle room" as the space offered by cultural practices: "Despite material constraints and customs that can cramp creativity, a kind of cautious confidence in cultural agency comes from the very openness of culture to variation and multiple interpretations (Sommer 2006, p. 5)" and in her fascinating book, *The Work of Art in the World,* she reminds us that Schiller, at the French Revolution's darkest hour, wrote to that "art, not arms, achieves political freedom" (Sommer, 2014, p.135).

In fact, these spaces for interpretation and creation, the shadow, the "wiggle room", can occur in sister practices of artistic language that, in our rush to compartmentalize cultural practices, we tend to place in a different category. I refer here to the ritual that takes place in a mythical dimension where times and reasons overlap. In his article, "Indigenous Perspectives for Peace: Their Aesthetics and Rituality", Weildler Guerra, a Wayuú *pütchipü'ü*, explains the role of ritual in conflict resolution and claims that Colombia's peace process did not incorporate in any defined way the cultural practices that have allowed indigenous societies to negotiate conflicts in the past. Says Weildler: [4]

> *"The millenary experience of these peoples in conflict resolution could make invaluable contributions to the search for peace. Indigenous peoples, like the Wayuú artisans, are convinced that aesthetics is a guiding principle of human transactions. Said aesthetics supposes the integration of the sensual and the rational, the supremacy of non-utilitarian over material benefit, and a pleasant reciprocity between the organization of the elements in a formal structure and the sensibilities of the perceivers." (Guerra Curvelo, 2017, p.421).*

From the Perspective of Fieldwork

The following examples are taken from our six years of fieldwork throughout the country with cultural managers who were successful in providing spaces in uncertain situations in which to transform

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[4] The *pütchipü'ü* is a negotiator who uses words and rituals to resolve conflicts in the Wayuú ethnic group indigenous to the northern peninsula of South America, a territory shared by Colombia and Venezuela.

communities that have lived through a conflict that is more than 50 years old. In 2013, while the government was committed to the signing of a peace agreement, we presented *Children Think About Peace*[5], a reading and writing exercise carried out with more than 800 children in 16 different rural and urban locations. Guided by poet Javier Naranjo in readings and word games, children wrote their versions of peace and war. The result was an archive available for consultation, a book, and a reading and writing chain that continues today. As a whole, they reflect the web of reality that Colombian children have experienced, the complex situation of repeated violence. A 7-year-old boy writes: "Peace is my family" while a 10-year-old girl writes: "My family is war." How can we not accept that this ambiguity names a reality? The children's stories reflect situations of overlapping sexual violence, armed attacks on their territories, social and economic violence exerted on their families, and the forced recruitment feared by so many and the symbolic and extended language of poetry leaves space for the simultaneous representation of multiple levels of conflict and the complexity of the situation.

In *"Facing the Other: Drawing in a Post-Conflict Society"* we organized an unlikely encounter between 106 FARC guerrillas and paramilitaries recently returned to civilian life and 16 graphic artists. Each artist traveled to a designated part of the country to meet with volunteers engaged in reintegration processes who had agreed to dialogue through testimonials and drawing. The result was an extremely moving exhibition created by many different hands in which all of their frustrations, motives, violence, convictions, and memories are superimposed, and below which lie the individual self-reflections that include recognition of the fact that they could very well be the other, in other circumstances and drawn by a different pencil. The museography for this itinerant exhibition invites the viewer to relate to the proposed interactions and functions as a mirror that, when looking at ourselves, most likely reflects the other's experience, in an ambiguous experience that inspires a new interpretation.

In 2019, we launched "A Place in the World"[6] in all of Banco de la República's art museums, which invited a group of transgender women from Bogotá's red light district to visit the museums and learn about the collection in the company of experts. For several weeks they forged their own place among the works and each was invited to stage a performance in front of an artwork with which they especially identified. The result, exhibited to the general public, was aesthetically superb in the sophistication of the interpretations and the quality of the performances. The interpretations were nourished by the transgressive women's performance skills; the same skills, in fact, that lead society to marginalize and abuse them. The reversal of positions of authority proved transformative for them, for the museum staff, and for the general public. Especially impressive was Daniela Maldonado's performance in front of a baroque painting of a dead nun crowned with flowers (characteristic of Spanish-American colonial art). Dressed beautifully and crowned also with fresh flowers, she explained that the thing she felt closest to was a nun: "… we are both defined by our dress, can trust only our sisters, and we will die alone –hopefully with some flowers." Maldonado achieved her ambiguous representation thanks to the space provided by a baroque work from a distant time and different conditions, but capable of accommodating the complex and baroque life of a person in her circumstances, which allowed her to provide an unexpected explanation and name herself from a new place in the world.

[5]https://www.banrepcultural.org/proyectos/la-paz-se-toma-la-palabra/baul-de-herramientas/los-ninos-piensan-la-paz

[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVA0n0enoi4

The examples are many and the results change as community processes of exchange and symbolic interactions are activated in different places and adapt to different contexts through the plasticity and rhythm typical of artistic languages. But which changes confirm this effect on people's lives, on their daily lives and in their communities?

Let's begin by naming some of the most common remainders left behind by continued violence on the symbolic universes of the communities identified in the testimonies collected, research done on the work we accomplish[7] and related experiments (Suárez & Lizama-Mué, 2021) point to the following repeating patterns:

- The invisibility of victims whose individual experience is lost in news reporting and political and historical statistics.
- The absence of diverse narratives reflecting the complexity and subtleties of people's experiences, which are often collapsed into categories of winners and losers.
- The polarization of language, evident in media and social networks, that makes it impossible to empathize or interpret from a new or creative position.
- The language and images used by the dominant discourse to name and represent the lives of women and people from minority groups (disproportionately victimized in the Colombian conflict) tend to revictimize and make them invisible and deny the subjectivity of their visions.

We are, in short, referring to languages from which the subtleties and ambiguities of the complex reality of conflict have disappeared, to the symbolic wounds that prevent a community from finding a story with which to identify or narrate their experience. The loss of territory and daily routines are accompanied by the loss of a place of enunciation from which to criticize, make demands, or interpret. Lost are the words that name one's own experience, along with the possibility of representing from our individual imaginary that reflects the complexity of reality lived as a society.

And it is here precisely where interactions made possible by words and images in creative spaces become useful tools for triggering transformation. To recover the place of enunciation with a story of one's own; sketch an image from one's memories; draw in the company of others the memory of a shared experience; or interpret and question a version of the events are all exercises in civility that allow us to name the multiplicity of reasons for and contradictions caused by the conflict in the daily lives of victims. A multi-tiered story filled with different textures and contradictions ensures the possibility of re-telling or re-imagining ourselves and makes listening possible. In the Massey Lecture series, *The Truth About Stories* (King, 1993), Cherokee descendant Thomas King explains the role of oral storytelling in community agency and demonstrates how it enables the recreation of cultural ties that provide a sense of belonging. Because an oral story is never the same, no matter how many times it is repeated. Relating and representing the multiple and diverse allows a community to agree on a common discourse that gives new meanings to the lived experience and its story. Interactions through artistic languages make it possible to recover places of enunciation seized by destruction and to initiate new, complex stories that clear the confused memory and give rise to disinterested relationships with room to listen to the other, and that, above all, help communities, with all their differences and contradictions, agree upon a path toward reparation. Because transformations are individual processes that must be woven into the collective if their effects are to become real. True transformation becomes manifest over time, through recognition of the complexity of what happened

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[7] The research project associated with *Peace Speaks Up*, Barona, Fernando and Concha, Sandra (2016-2020) *Cultural Impact Indexes Research Project: Peace Speaks Up*. Banco de la República.) provides annual impact indicators.

to all of us as a community, not just as individuals. Communal stories and listening processes enable interaction through objects and cultural relationships and allow us to name unspeakable memories as well as the differences and the ambiguity in what happens to all of us as a society in conflict. It may be that, instead of the often unattainable virtues of acceptance and forgiveness, our recognition of the ambiguity of our experiences and the hope of building in the midst of uncertainty are what make it possible for us to embark on the paths of transformation that lead beyond the condition of victims and perpetrators to being part of a forward-moving community.

Author Biography

Ángela María Pérez Mejía is Chief Cultural Manager of Banco de la República, Colombia's central bank, which has a network of 28 cultural facilities around the country. She leads the cultural national initiative "Let peace speak up," a series of physical and digital cultural products intended for use by peacebuilding agents working to transform Colombian communities. The project includes a team researching how cultural networks impact social change, and has been included in the projects led by Culture Plex Lab. Pérez Mejía has represented Colombia in several international academic events, speaking about culture as a tool for social transformation. She has been a member of the Cultural Agents Initiative at Harvard University and a member of the ICAA Ideas Council at the International Center for the Arts of the Americas, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Pérez Mejía was an associate professor of Latin American literature at Brandeis University, where she taught for 10 years. She has a degree in journalism from the Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, and a Master's from the University of Maryland and a Ph.D. from the State University of New York. Her book, La Geografía de los Tiempos Difíciles, received the Casa de las Américas Prize in 2000. She has published on travel writing, buccaneers in the Caribbean, gender in Latin American literature, and cultural management. She co-authored the screenplay for the film Rodrigo D, winner of the Latin American Film Festival in New York in 1998 and selection for the Cannes Film Festival the same year. She has recently written critical editions for the Manuel Uribe Angel travel narrative De Medellin a Bogota, published by la Universidad de Antioquia (2012) and Una Geografía Hecha a Mano, published by Santiago Cortés (2013). Angela is partnering with IMPACT on different levels, including exploring possibilities for regional hubs.

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