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The Graffitour of the 13: an aesthetic, political and historical trajectory through Medellín

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Abstract

To think the borders of the metropolis beyond the representations associated with precariousness and crime presupposes recognizing the abundance and vitality of aesthetic practices and productions that are reconfiguring the discourses on the peripheries. In both Brazil and other Latin American countries, the emergence and diffusion of languages produced in the “margins” of cities call into question the center/periphery dualism - relativizing the existence of fixed boundaries, while proposing other ways of narrating different collective experiences.

Commonly seen as a peripheral product, graffiti is an artistic language that express the multiplicity of agencies on the metropolitan edges. In the city of Medellín, Colombia, different groups formed mainly by young people from the edges have been taking on graffiti and hip hop as a resource to understand, narrate and distance themselves from the violence that crosses them. A significant sample of this type of collective experience is the Graffitour proposal, an “aesthetic, political and historical” route organized by the Centro Cultural Casa Kolacho in the Commune 13.

Based on the assumption that the Graffitour transcends the simple representation of the *medellinense* periphery and constitutes a form of cultural and political organization to speak about the violence that appears in the city, this work reports the experience of having carried out this journey through Commune 13. In this sense, it aims to reflect on how discourses are produced on metropolitan edges in contemporary times and on the role of urban artistic manifestations in the interpretation of violence and in the construction of social memory.

Key words: Urban Peripheries; Graffitour; Social Memory; Medellín.

○ *Graffitour* da 13:

um percurso estético, político e histórico por Medellín

Resumo

Pensar as bordas da metrópole para além das representações associadas à precariedade e à criminalidade supõe reconhecer a abundância e a vitalidade de práticas e produções estéticas que estão reconfigurando os discursos sobre as periferias. Tanto no Brasil quanto em outros países latino-americanos, a emergência e a difusão de linguagens produzidas nas “margens” das cidades colocam em questão o dualismo centro/periferia — relativizando a existência de fronteiras fixas, ao tempo que propõem outras formas de narrar diferentes experiências coletivas.

Tido comumente como um produto periférico, o graffiti se constitui numa linguagem artística que dá conta da multiplicidade de agências existentes nas bordas metropolitanas. Na cidade de Medellín, na Colômbia, diferentes grupos conformados principalmente por jovens das bordas vêm assumindo o graffiti e o hip hop como recurso para entender, narrar e se distanciar das violências que os atravessam. Uma amostra significativa desse tipo de experiências coletivas é a proposta do Graffitour, um percurso “estético, político e histórico” organizado pelo Centro Cultural Casa Kolacho na Comuna 13.

A partir do pressuposto de que o Graffitour transcende a simples representação da periferia medellinense e se constitui numa forma de organização cultural e política para falar das violências que se apresentam na cidade, este trabalho relata a experiência de ter realizado esse percurso pela Comuna 13. Nesse sentido, objetiva refletir sobre a forma como são produzidos discursos sobre as bordas metropolitanas na contemporaneidade e sobre o papel das manifestações artísticas urbanas na interpretação da violência e na construção da memória social.

Palavras-chave: Periferias Urbanas; Graffitour; Memória Social; Medellín.

The Graffitour of the 13:

an aesthetic, political and historical trajectory through Medellín

Natalia Pérez Torres

Introduction

At the end of March of 2016, I travelled to Medellín, the second largest city in Colombia, in the hope of acquiring an initial scope of the relation between graffiti and the peace process. This is the main theme of my ongoing doctoral research project, structuring it through the hypothesis that visual urban narratives, such as graffiti, furnish the new national peace process¹ with functional devices for the creation of discourse and practices of reconciliation.

My trip from Florianópolis to Bogotá and then on to “the city of eternal Spring”, in the middle of the Easter break, sought to obtain a preliminary engagement with my object of enquiry by seeking out concrete experiences that might aid me in defining the research and (re)defining its aims. Such a task is necessary and always complex, specially when confronted with fieldwork. Although my trip hardly qualified as such, since I had only just begun my PhD. course earlier that same semester, I went after images and practices of Medellín graffiti wherein I could discern signs of the transition from conflict to post-conflict² in my country.

Medellin afforded me an opportunity to refocus my analysis away from Bogotá, the city in which I grew up and which had been the theme of my MPhil dissertation³. However, it also proved stimulating for two features that I consider essential to my recent academic concerns: its contemporary salience as an example of international urban practices and interventions; and its place in the global imaginary as an archetype of urban violence in Colombia. The way that these two dimensions meet and engage each other – disaggregating a variety of forms of understanding and accepting both the experience of the city and of Colombian violence well beyond official reports and statistics, and of fictional narratives such as the Netflix series *Narcos* – constitutes an initial level for approaching my object: who produces these contemporary narratives of violence and peace? When and where are they elaborated?

1 In referring to the “new national peace process” I want to register two things. First, the fact that Colombian history has witnessed various attempted peace processes. Since at least the first decades of the twentieth century, different government commissions and non-government groups were established to investigate the causes of, and to propose solutions to, national conflict. Although contemporary dialogue has reached a critical stage, it is but a “new” attempt at negotiation in an ongoing effort to establish peace (c.f. Molano 2015). Second, that the current effort does not seem to be “national”, or at least that its “national” status has been the object of debates in Colombia. Despite the fact that the country has been experiencing war for the past 50 years, the negotiated solution for the conflict does not find support in the general aspirations of the civilian population. Some political, religious, civil and military sectors linked to the political party of the ex-president Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010) have been boycotting the Peace Process, opposing the agreements reached in Cuba, as confirmed in the plebiscite of the 2nd of October of 2016. Conservative sectors which do not necessarily follow Uribe have also opposed the agreements, perhaps due to a critical lack of knowledge of politics and of the importance of a culture of peace for Colombia. This tension risks negotiations with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and reveals the underlying tensions to these types of processes (c.f. Gamboa 2016).

2 Peace talks between the Colombian government and the FARC began in 2012. This process has led to talk of a “post-conflict” period involving a series of political strategies to promote social restoration and reparation to the victims, as well as for other reasons.

3 The dissertation, entitled *O Lugar do Graffiti no Centro da Bogotá Contemporânea* (“The Place of Graffiti in the Centre of Contemporary Bogotá”), presented at the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Urbanismo, História e Arquitetura da Cidade (Graduate Programme in Urban Planning, History and the Architecture of the City) at the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (Federal University of Santa Catarina), aimed to make evident and to debate the trajectories of graffiti in the city from the perspective of conflicts in and over urban space.

Taking my lead from these questions, and having learned of the existence of a tour of graffiti sites in the periphery of the “capital of the mountains”, I planned a series of trajectories in the two days I had in the city. These circuits would provide me with an opportunity to take photographs of spray painted messages, murals, stencils and any other urban intervention through graffiti that dealt, in some way, with the internal armed conflict⁴ or with the ongoing peace negotiations. I also hoped to establish contact with local graffiti artists, and to speak with them on an informal basis. I thus visited the city centre, the Universidad de Antioquia, the neighbourhood of Envigado in the south, the Centro Cultural Moravia in Comuna 4 (planned by the noted Colombian architect Rogelio Salmona) and, finally, the neighbourhood of Las Independencias in the Comuna 13 of San Javier, where the Graffitiour takes place. The Graffitiour is organised by the “Casa Kolacho School of Graffiti and Hip Hop” (Escuela de Graffiti y Hip Hop Casa Kolacho)⁵, where the famous open-air escalators, an internationally renowned urban reference point, were built in 2012. Practically all my movements through town were on foot, in the midst of the pollution that then plagued the “most innovative city in the world”⁶.

What does the international recognition of Medellín’s urban landscape have to do with national conflict and peace, and with artistic idioms, such as graffiti and hip hop, that emerge in modern cities? Why might it be interesting to consider the relation between these types of urban phenomena and the Colombian Peace Process, taking in an aesthetic, political and historical perspective through the case study of a city that still carries with it the stigma of violence associated with drugs? And more: is it the whole city that is representative of this stereotype? Which Medellín are we referring to when we speak of violence, drug trafficking and crime, when we reflect on peace, reconciliation and memory? Who inhabits and this city and how do they inhabit it? Which types of violence are operative in the city and which are expressions of national violence?

While I am unable to develop these question in depth in this short text, I believe that there is a category that converges and sheds light on elements of the questions. The urban periphery, when investigated beyond its spontaneous analytical bond with violence, poverty and criminality; when understood, in this way, without its overriding subjection to a geographical point of view; and when, thereby, it comes to be seen as an expression of new conflicts that relativize the idea of the fringes of the large metropolises (Birman 2013: 7); it then assumes a field of analysis for reflecting on the inter-relations between cities, territories, crime and violence. The aim of this text is to report on the experience of the Graffitiour of the Comuna 13 in Medellín through the aesthetic, historical and political elements that structure this trajectory in the *paisa* periphery.⁷

4 There are many notions of what constitutes an “internal armed conflict” in Colombia. For present purposes, it will be defined as in the report prepared by the Comisión Histórica del Conflicto y sus Víctimas (CHCV) in 2015, that is, as an internal confrontation characterized for being (1) prolonged (beginning in 1948, the period known as The Violence); (2) complex (involving numerous actors); (3) discontinuous (due to the re-emergence of guerrillas in the 1980s and of far-right groups at the same time); (4) displaying enormous regional differences (as a function of the heterogeneous population density and occupation of the land, as well as the relationship of the local population with national authorities); (5) barbaric (for the damage caused to the civilian population which has been most affected by the conflict); and (6) politically motivated (since it involves projects for society that actors perceive as being antagonistic). Cf COMISIÓN HISTÓRICA DEL CONFLICTO Y SUS VÍCTIMAS, 2015.

5 Unlike the tours *about* graffiti available in cities such as Buenos Aires and Bogotá – which I had the opportunity of taking in 2012 and 2013, respectively – the Graffitiour of Medellín is a peripheral event, organized by the young people of the comuna itself. In Buenos Aires the tour was guided by a journalist from London, while that in Bogotá was conducted by an urban artist from Australia. In both cases, the tour moves through areas that are considered neither distant nor dangerous. I perceive this to be a fundamental difference, not only in what pertains to the administration of the trajectory, but also in the sort of narrative that accompanies it and in the reasons for holding it. In Medellín, the Graffitiour benefits from the daily experiences of belonging of the young people of the Casa Kolacho and the fact that they are victims of the violence that they convey through urban interventions and the songs they produce. Cf Pérez 2013.

6 In 2013 Medellín received the title of the “Most innovative city in the world”, an internet prize organized by *The Wall Street Journal* and the *Citigroup*, which values different urban practices. At the time, Medellín and São Paulo were the only representatives from Latin America, and they stood out for “the construction of an integrated infrastructure of public transportation, which have reduced the emissions of CO₂, supporting the social development of marginalized zones, the reduction of indexes of criminality, the construction of cultural equipment and spaces, and the management of public services”. CAMARGO, María del Pilar. Medellín, la ciudad más innovadora del mundo. *Revista Semana*, 1, mar. 2013. Available at: <<http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/medellin-ciudad-mas-innovadora-del-mundo/334982-3>>. Accessed on 10 Oct. 2016.

7 Among its many meanings, “Paisa” is how people from Medellín are known in Colombia.

Image 1

Escalators in the Las Independencias neighbourhood



Source: <http://citiscopes.org/>

Image 2

Panoramic view of the Comuna 13



Source: Chavocensura

On Peripheries: the Comuna 13

Studying the edges of the metropolis over and above representations of its precarious nature and criminality, involves recognizing the abundance and vitality of aesthetic practices and political organizations that are reconfiguring discourse on the peripheries. In Colombia, as well as in Brazil, the emergence and diffusion of urban idioms and organizations produced in the “margins” disturb the dualism between centre and periphery – relativizing the existence of fixed boundaries in the cities by proposing other ways of narrating and appropriating different collective experiences.

Among various sectors of the population in Colombia, the notion of the “comuna”, much like the Brazilian “favela” or the Argentinian “villa”, tends to conjure the idea of a precarious and dangerous place. They carry what Hélio Silva calls “the stigma of locality”⁸, a conjunction of prejudice, absence of public policies, segregation, geographical distance, and lack of basic rights of citizenship, among other stereotypes. Unless one is an inhabitant of one of these places, or is otherwise linked to it, the very idea of visiting a comuna is frowned upon and viewed with suspicion. Those who intend to visit, even if only as tourists⁹, should do so with great care, preferably in the presence of someone who knows the place.

As someone used to exploring cities through public transport, the idea of going to the Comuna 13 to take part in the *Graffiti tour* derived less from a tourist’s curiosity about its new urban equipment than from the opportunity to see *up close and from within* (Magnani 2002: 17) the epicentre of the “Operación Orion”. This was a military operation under the authority of the Presidency, ordered during the first term of Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2006)¹⁰, which was in place, through different mechanisms and in different degrees of intensity, from the 16th of October until early December 2002 (CINEP 2003: 21). As one of the most emblematic expressions of the internal armed conflict in Colombia in this century, the Comuna 13 also

8 Through the ongoing research project called “O lugar da residência, o local de moradia, estigma de localização, critério de residência no Grande Rio - o caso da Baixada Fluminense” (The place of Residence, the place for living, stigma and localization, criteria of residence in the Greater Rio area – the Baixada Fluminense case), Hélio Silva has been discussing how prejudice in terms of place of residence manifests itself, which, according to the project’s description in the Plataforma Sucupira “cannot be reduced to notions of ethnicity, “race”, gender, sexual orientation, or age class, but is prolonged and stressed in the consequences, damage and suffering imposed on people through false and generalizing presuppositions”. This category was used by the researcher in teaching the course on “Urban Peripheries in Brazil” in the Programa de Pós-Graduação Interdisciplinar em Ciências Humanas (Interdisciplinary Graduate Programme in the Human Sciences, PPGICH/UFSC) during the first semester of 2016.

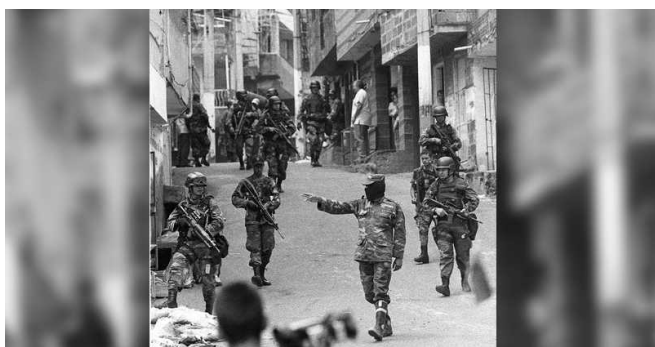
9 “Favela tourism”, which for Medellín would be a “comuna tourism”, is a relatively recent phenomenon in the city which, since 2004, has benefitted from the Metrocable system of mass transport. In the Comuna 13, the escalators of the Las Independencias neighbourhood is a further attraction, linked to what is known as social urbanism. It is estimated that around 1,500 people, both locals and visitors, use the escalators every day. Other tours are available in the area, including nightly tours around Christmas time, and those offered during low season, such as the “Pablo Escobar and the Transformation of Medellín Tour”.

10 Initially touted as a military operation to control armed groups present in some of the neighbourhoods of the Comuna 13, the Operación Orion left behind various victims, detained or missing members of the civilian population that were attacked by agents of the army and the police, as well as by paramilitary groups who also held sway in the region. Although the details of the mission have yet to be elucidated, it left evident marks in the population, which anchors a temporality of *before, during and after* in the history and collective memory of the community. Cf. Posada and Vergara 2015.

bears what we may call the “stigma of violence”, representing some of the dynamic aspects of confrontation in city peripheries. As in Antonio Arantes’ classic study of the transformations of places in São Paulo, the *comuna* is conceived as “an aggregate of tensions and conflicts that become specialized in an amalgam of multiple territories (or places) and non-places [...] a flutter of interpenetrated spaces and places, confrontation of singularities, in an explicitly political and ample scenery” (1994: 200). Going there was hence an exercise in approaching the history of the recent conflict, and the ways of narrating these events that may be revealed by the graffiti produced there.

Image 3

Operación Orión



Source: Revista Semana (Jesús Abad Colorado)

Image 4

Operación Orión



Source: Revista Semana (Jesús Abad Colorado)

Administratively, a *comuna* is a cluster of neighbourhoods that are organised as a function of the need to delimit urban zones. The city of Medellín, is made up of 16 *comunas* and 5 *corregedorías*, according to which, strictly speaking, all neighbourhoods of the city belong to a *comuna*. However, no one calls neighbourhoods like El Poblado or Laureles by the term ‘*comuna*’ (Jaramillo 2015: 58). The stigmatizing label of the ‘*comuna*’, which has been current since the 1990s, also indexes local topography: in Medellín, the so-called peripheral neighbourhoods extend across the mountain tops, while neighbourhoods for which the pejorative label does not apply, and which lie close to the city centre, are situated in the valley bottoms, close to the river after which the city takes its name. The double stigma of the Comuna 13 as both violent and distant is, as Juan Diego Jaramillo has observed, further emphasised by what it means to be “someone from the *comunas*”:

[...] when one speaks of a *comuna* or of “people of the *comunas*”, a specific representation is evoked: *peripheral* neighbourhoods, poverty, youth (young men), violence, *delinquency*; all of those characteristics that, in general, are used to represent what is marginal or marginalized in many cities. This hegemonic representation, part of a common sense, like so many sets of ideas, practices and discourses that are understood to be “natural” or proper to a given context (Gramsci 2007), works in two ways. One the one hand, [...] where there are specific subjects who imagine others in particular situations, and, on the other, where the these very people represent themselves as people of the *comuna*, with the same negative characteristics that this word assumes (Jaramillo 2015: 57)

The “people of the *comunas*”, that is, the residents of neighbourhoods that appropriate or put into practice dissimilar forms of urban space in the dialectic between inside and outside (de Certeau 2003: 42), find in their youth a crucial group for understanding how violence has been represented in the last decades in the periphery of Medellín. Through the initiative of the young people of Comuna 13, the Graffitour emerged from the work carried out in the Casa Kolacho, created in 2009 “as a mechanism of social,

cultural, political and historical transformation of the territories”¹¹. In other words, as an alternative to pre-established stigmas and as a means for youth to take on a role which eschews the discourse that frames them as victims (Jaramillo 2015: 30), lacking experience of the world and potentially more vulnerable to the call of the world of crime.

Graffiti is usually seen to be a practice inscribed in the peripheries of cities. Although neither the practice nor the aesthetic of graffiti are at present restricted to the margins of the city, being also present in the many peripheries not located in the fringes of urban spaces, it is difficult to dissociate these practices from these locations, and consequently from the violence associated with them. This violence, we will see shortly, is not unitary, which certainly makes it more expedient to think in terms of “violences”, which find a narrative support in the graffiti produced by these young people.

Making use of the new information technologies available to the young inhabitants of the peripheries, which connects them and gives them access to “renewed spaces of identity-formation” (Feltran 2010: 206), the tours had to be arranged through *Facebook* or *Whatsapp* with Jeison Castaño “Jeihhco”, a hip hop artist and cultural broker for the comuna. Once the time, the price and the tour guide (Ciro) were agreed, I went to a baker’s next to the San Javier metro station, which connects to the Metrocable, which also provides access to the escalators of Las Independencias. The tour cost around R\$40,00 (USD\$12), and included bus fare from the meeting point to the edge of the neighbourhood.

The aesthetic, political, historical

When we were kids, they told us to be careful because the walls could hear you.

Now we want to say that here in Comuna 13 the walls can speak.

Ciro.

The way stigma permeates the media, and manages to enact the social body as an official account of the territories that make up the Comuna 13, makes itself evident in a certain anticipation of violence, or its explicit scars and agents, when intruding places marked by the internal conflict, or otherwise associated with it. Crossing the boundary, the tense coexistence of division and fracture, of transgression and flux (Feltran 2011: 336), implies crossing the associated notion of the “invisible boundary”, a category that is part of the socio-spatial framework through which violence is being considered in some Latin American peripheries. In this sense, it contains an implicit reference to the “dynamic of fear, restriction and neighbourhood control, which establishes mobility barriers among youth in *combos*¹², but which affects the population in general, and young people in particular” (Jaramillo 2015: 75).

The concept of the “periphery” articulates aesthetical, historical and political elements that singularize the territory, as is evident in the slogan that promotes the Graffitour. Upon entering the comuna in the sector of the Las Independencias neighbourhood, the aesthetics of the trajectory becomes evident, as I have noted previously, in the convergence of recent urban interventions, the colouring of the facades of brick houses, the patchwork of narrow passages and stairways, and the graffiti on the walls and roofs of the houses. Like a montage, in the sense of a series of elements that take meaning from their interaction as layers of signs that account for history, the landscape of the comuna is a “convergent social space” (Arantes 2000: sp).

11 HIERRO, Lola. Casa Kolacho: La violencia se cura con hip hop. *El País*, 30, jun. 2016. Available at: < http://elpais.com/elpais/2016/06/23/planeta_futuro/1466698760_170228.html > Accessed on: 10 Oct. 2016.

12 According to the glossary created by Juan Diego Jaramillo (2015), a *combo* is “one name for groups of young people that gather to commit crimes [...] Additionally, it is also used for groups of young people who gather for a particular activity, which need not be violent” (p. 150).

For the organizers of the tour, graffiti art, but also hip hop and rap lyrics, define aesthetics as a tool for transformation. Much as urban planners agree that changes to public spaces trigger large scale changes that have social impact¹³, for the young people who interpret the comuna through the Graffitour, artistic expressions have the potential to transform: “We carry the culture, the processes and the transformation that we want, which comes from the art, from within people. A change that transforms me and helps me transform reality”¹⁴. Although it is not its sole distinctive element, it is evident that this account of change is built on the axis of violence: the young people of the comuna do not want to be identified by it any longer, and so the deconstruct and resignify it through their art. According to Rose Hikiji and Carolina Caffé, “debates concerning representations of the periphery are not separate from the production of a counter-discourse” (2013: 90). They know that art is always politics and that it likewise constitutes a means to resist and challenge the violence that crosses them, and which automatically defines them.

One of the first stopping points in the trajectory, the escalators are an allegory of the disputes that also lurk behind ways of conceiving and representing the comuna. According to Ciro, they are, at once, “the angel and the demon” of the neighbourhood of Las Independencias I. As we stopped there to shelter ourselves from the rain that threatened to ruin our tour, Ciro offered a paradoxical panorama of the place: the stairs, which evidently beautify the place and facilitate access to the neighbourhood, and further national and international tourism in the peripheries, are also part of an urban marketing that conceals or plays down conflicts involving space and, in the Comuna 13, the lingering manifestations of the violence suffered 14 years ago, and even before the Operación Orión. Comuna 13 aggregates international recognition – awards for innovation, architectural landmarks and successful models of mass transport for the poorer sectors of the population – as well as the living traces of systematic forms of violence that still demand clarification and resolution¹⁵.

Image 5

Members of the Casa Kolacho



Source: Facebook

Image 6

Access to the Comuna 13



Source: N. Pérez

Thinking of violence in this way, we are faced with a concept that is by no means homogenous, but rather exceptional and capable of equally affecting all actors involved with it. The very specificity of the Colombian conflict, its complexity and the content of the mechanisms which have been used to erect a national narrative, are incompatible with the idea of violence as stable and predictable.

¹³ Equipo Editorial. Gustavo Restrepo: O urbanismo pode combater o narcotráfico. ArchDaily, 13, jun. 2015. Available in: <http://www.archdaily.com.br/br/768286/gustavo-restrepo-o-urbanismo-pode-combater-o-narcotrafico#disqus_thread> Accessed on: 10 Oct. 2016.

¹⁴ Hierro 2016.

¹⁵ ALDANA, Andrea. A 14 años de la Operación Orión, víctimas piden que se implemente ya acuerdo de paz. El Espectador, 16, Oct. 2016. Available at: <<http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/paz/14-anos-de-operacion-orion-victimas-piden-se-implemente-articulo-660707>> Accessed on: 16 Oct. 2016.

It is thus understandable that, in the Comuna 13, different types of violence, inserted in the logic of the extended duration of the Colombian conflict, have pressed upon the territories, traversing the sphere of crime and delinquency. The historical aspect of the Graffitour can thus be understood as an exercise of constructing collective memory tied to a place of memory which, as such, is the centre of multiple disputes over meaning (Pollack 1992).

Between an institutional sort of violence and the violence of armed conflict itself, the “political meanings of violence”, a category coined by Gabriel De Santis Feltrán (2011), is actualized in the Comuna 13 through the tension between the absence of a state power that might guarantee basic rights and the excess of a state power that makes indiscriminate use of repression, a logic that characterises peripheries throughout Latin America at the turn of the century (Feltran 2010: 209). In the first case, united in systematic discourse that has been produced, since the 1970’s, on the need to remove young and peripheral *Medellinenses* from crime and violence enacted by the “moral and institutional economy against drug trafficking” (Jaramillo 2015: 34), what we find in these places is a public presence geared toward the effective control of the practices of young people rather than to the promotion and consolidation of political tools for constructing citizenship.

After so much time in which the conception of young people was understood to be the shared result of the regulating activity of the family, the Church and the school, it is interesting to see these very subjects at the forefront of processes of self-management and the exercise of citizenship in the face of violence. In the Graffitour of the 13, and also in the parallel work of the Casa Kolacho, we find not only an aesthetic and historical concern with the periphery, but also the reproduction of a political vocation buttressed by its own principles and its own interpretation of the social world that hosts and interpellates them as political subjects: “We went from this small house to the schools, the neighbourhoods, the courts... We go with a sound system to hold a small concert any time in the afternoon, to draw new graffiti, to hold a workshop or a festival in a school where many dudes can participate and sing”¹⁶.

During the trajectory this becomes evident in the relations that the members of the Casa Kolacho maintain with the other residents of the neighbourhoods. An initial prejudice against the music they produced and listened to and the clothes they wore gradually gave way to the recognition that these young people are hinges in the ongoing urban and social transformations of the comuna. According to Ciro, “Before we were synonymous with hit men, drug addicts, vagabonds... and people crossed the street when they saw us. Today people cross the streets to greet us, they see us as a positive reference in the transformation of this place”¹⁷. This shift also has something to do with the denaturalization of the category of “youth” or “young person” and the possibilities available to them for engaging the public world in ways other than as the object of control. Hence they have become references, both within and beyond the comuna, and have converted the experience of the tour into a form of resistance – not only against the many types of violence, but also in alignment with the social and institutional expectations of those who see them as protagonists of change.

¹⁶ Hierro 2016.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

Image 7

Graffiti alluding to the Operación Orión



Source: N. Pérez

Final Considerations

Fifteen years after the Operación Orión in the Comuna 13 of Medellín, and under the shadow of the non-ratification of the Peace Accords between the Colombian government and the FARC in the plebiscite of the 2nd of October of 2016, it is worth reflecting on the complexity of the internal conflict and the many ways that the peace process are assumed and resignified by the civilian population. In the cities, and particularly in Medellín, the periphery, which had been the protagonist of the urban scenery of conflict, witnesses the emergence of experiences at the fringes of the violence. Such experiences aim both to escape it, and to develop collective projects for the construction of memory – a trajectory that is always difficult to follow, and which they confront through artistic manifestations articulated around graffiti.

It is noteworthy that the experience of the Graffitour takes place in the Comuna 13 and that it assumes itself as an aesthetic, historical and political trajectory that makes visible other views of the periphery. This not only questions the rigidity of urban boundaries, but provides elements through which we can conceive of the periphery beyond the stigma of place and the stigma of violence. From the point of view of the construction of a stable and long-lasting peace for the country, it is fitting that it is the initiatives of young people that seek to account for the present and to raise the banner of citizenship.

A conception of the periphery that is not exclusively topographical is thus furthered in the analytical passage from places with well-defined borders to places that are not restricted to spatial coordinates nor to the cataloguing of attributes of social difference. This is a perspective that considers the many forms of accessing complex and heterogeneous spaces and the recognizes the political, religious, social, administrative and cultural margins that constitute the periphery: a recognition that enables the convergence of distinct thematic fields that result from an understanding of distinct social domains and the interpretation of the practices that exist in these places (Birman 2013: 8).

Translated by: Luiz Costa

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