

The “sung” history of the conflict in Colombia

Thanks to music, different participants have unveiled their vision of the country, told about their daily lives, and even shown the scars of painful chapters such as the cases of kidnapping. Researchers at Universidad del Rosario analyzed these songs to understand the challenges of peace and avoid the horrors of violence from repeating.

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Photos: 123RF, Leonardo Parra

The history of the armed conflict in Colombia has been written in blood and fire and, paradoxical as it may sound, also in music. By means of contrasts, each side has found, in the diverse music genres, an eloquent channel to tell or sing the pain, victory, and defeat from the subjective viewpoint of combat.

“Voy al campo de batalla a cumplir con la cita / Voy dispuesto al sacrificio que sea necesario / El sacrificio es el fuego que le purifica / El alma y el corazón al revolucionario (I’m going to the battle field to face the fight up / I’m willing to make any necessary sacrifice / Sacrifice is the fire that purifies / the soul and heart of the revolutionary).”

Songs like ***Nada personal*** (Nothing personal) by Julián Conrado, nicknamed “Guillermo Enrique Torres Cueter” and also called “The Farc singer,” reveal the other side of the conflict by unveiling the internal view of the artists who wielded guns and played some musical instruments in pursuit of winning other battles. Guerrillas, paramilitary groups, and even the army have turned to songs to cope with their tasks, send messages to civilians, celebrate their triumphs, and even live and love their way from inside their trenches.

The importance of musical expression in these groups has been significant such that Universidad del Rosario’s Faculty of Law in collaboration with other researchers from Universidad Nacional and Freie Universität Berlin (FU Berlin) has dedicated itself to the task of analyzing such songs as part of a project called ***Sound memory of war and peace: a musical library of the armed conflict in Colombia***, with the financial support of the Ministry of Science and Technology and Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica. In this way, series of work started with the study of the musical collection of the Farc. Now, the work has been extended to the M-19, ELN, AUC, Public Forces (Army, National Police, Navy, and Air Force), and the victimized civil population.



Besides Julián Conrado, some singers, such as **Kike Pacheco**, soldier of the National Army and **Las Cantadoras del Pacífico** (The pacific singers) who represent the victimized population of the conflict, stand out and have become a flagship voice in the country.

“We have noticed that this artistic production has remained in time and it is prolific. No thorough knowledge on how this material has been managed and the logic behind the composition, production, sharing, and reception is not available. This material is partially compiled because there is no database or library yet, enabling us to systematize and analyze their creations. This is where the project was born,” as professor and researcher from the Universidad del Rosario, Rafael Camilo Quishpe explains, who along with professors Enrique Prieto Rios, Maguemati Wabgou, and Laura Malagón lead this project.

“Therefore, he adds, this initiative seeks two objectives: knowing the contents and trends of songs produced by the victims, public forces, and organized armed artists and analyzing the message in these musical themes to understand the regional stories of violence in Colombia and, of course, build peace.”

The professor **Laura Malagón** from FU Berlin recalls, “**music has been a constituent element of the identities of such armed organizations; it has played a role in the internal cohesion and, thus, in making up their structures and social bonds.** It has worked as a means to enable a cognitive and an emotional connection between the participants.”

In this sense, Quishpe notes that inside groups, such as the Farc, music motivated the fighters, boosted their morale, and entertained them. Outside the groups, it was a determining channel for propaganda that was used on several occasions for recruiting, attracting people to ranks, or pleasing the supporters.

A previous study (finished in 2019) focusing only on the Farc resulted in three collections of songs about geography, everyday life, as well as peace and reconciling. Thanks to this work, it was found that the musical genres used were related to different regions in Colombia. The most predominant genres

were “vallenato,” “corridos,” and even “llanera.”

This analysis also let researchers identify a major group of terms repeated in their messages: equality, freedom, love, Farc, life, Colombia, power, wealth, and peace, well before the peace process talks started in La Habana, Cuba (2012). Once the conversations started, a change in the lyrical speech was perceived and the following words appear more forcefully: *life, reconciliation, welcome, Colombia, freedom*, and indeed, *peace*.

In pursuit of cultural memory

The phases of gathering are proposed in the *Sound memory of war and peace*, a project that started in December 2020 and will conclude by mid-2022, in three categories: armed groups, public force, and victims. For this purpose, different strategies are being used: they have turned to institutions such as the **Agencia de Reincorporación (Reincorporation Agency)**, the **Unidad de Víctimas (Victims' Unit)**, the **Unidad de Restitución de Tierras (Land Restitution Unit)**, Army, Police, and former soldiers' associations, among others, to find if they have any musical material or if they know people keeping files.



Further, material already uploaded on the internet was accessed, which has contributed to a collection of around 2,000 songs from all artists. There is also a possibility that physical material, such as vinyl records, can be retrieved from the Army, Farc, and victims.

For example, the “alabaos” (the dead’s wake) of the “Cantadoras del Pacífico” embodies a story of pain, exorcise the sadness for the dramatic departure of a beloved one amidst the violence, and tries to heal the wounds of the soul with chants, lullabies, and music:

“Lo mataron sin piedad / Sin tener ningún consuelo / Ay, Saturio fue fusilado...”

(He was mercilessly murdered / with no comfort / Oh, Saturio was shot...) ”

This verse along with several others composed by **Elena Hinestroza** give a testimony of the cruelty of the conflict and, in this case, of the shooting of a well-known Afro-Colombian leader, a symbol of racial fighting.

To have first-hand knowledge of similar stories, the next step of the research is to move to different regions of the country to broaden the exploration. “We are going to

the Eastern Plains, Pacific Coast, and Caribbean Coast, regions meeting three features: they have a strong cultural production, were severely affected by the armed conflict, and hosted more than two types of participants. We have realized in the process that majority of the culturally produced material is available there,” as professor Quishpe explains.

Notably, the fieldwork does not involve active members of illegal groups but only former fighters being reincorporated, the victimized civilians, and the public forces. In the case of the National Liberation Army (ELN), the objective is to gain access to musical material in different formats.

This research aims to have a solid digital memory and a physical memory with the rescued vinyl records. In this enterprise, the support from the German cooperation has been fundamental, particularly from the **Instituto Colombo-Alemán para la Paz, Capaz (German-Colombian Peace Institute)**. “We will have an audiovisual collection of knowledge; we will create an online library with free and public access for every Colombian citizen. We are going to make a musical collection of our journey and the ideas we have managed to gather from those songs. For example, in the first project we received first-hand contributions from former fighters through the meetings organized to work upon such material, whereas for the latter we combined the stories told by the participants through video clips where they narrated their experiences as a background to the music,” the researcher points out.

With this work, we want to advance from the academic archives to interact with citizens through radio, social networks, and other technological resources. There is also a project for creating an interdisciplinary incubator with the Faculties of Law, Creative Studies, and Human Sciences of the Universidad del Rosario together with the Universidad Nacional to train people in this subject. Likewise, two courses are being prepared on music, armed conflict, and peace in Colombia, which will be delivered at pre- and post-graduate levels at both universities.

“We want these music recordings to provide pedagogical opportunities,” Quishpe adds. “It is in our best interest that this library also enables us, within the university, to generate dialogs among the faculties for creating different products, thereby make this tradition of music-in-the-conflict visible. For example, journalists can contribute fundamentally to our case by telling the stories hidden in these songs. Artists from musical drama have a critical role when interpreting or giving life to such stories. It is not only a message for outsiders, but also for the University: how we can relate knowledge and disciplines around the same topic.”



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A step towards reconciliation

For Professor Quishpe, besides rebuilding a memory, this research work is a key for peace building. “We want to reveal the musical creations of the people who dropped the guns and are getting integrated in society as well as the victims who suffered different types of abuses from the public force present in several regions, contributing to the reconciliation of the country. **The music created by these participants has to be publicized to understand what happened during the armed conflict from a different perspective and see listen to ideas directly from the groups, whether from victims, the public force, or former fighters,**” the professor specifies.

In this way, the research aims for the country to reflect upon the armed conflict, not only from the military viewpoint but also from an integral view, as professor Laura Malagón explains. “Music lets us look at those participants from a more ‘human’ angle. It is a bridge that connects us with other stories and experiences; it invites us to stand in other people’s shoes and, consequently, to move toward peace. The building of memory by getting involved with the understanding of such cultural production to understand others and achieve reconciliation is pending,” she adds.

Music has undoubtedly been an important component of the society, personal experiences, collective processes, love, and lack of love; it has been a weapon of war around the world in the hardest and most decisive times for humankind, and for peace. Colombia is doing this lyrical introspection through the efforts by the university to go beyond the use of fighting songs towards a peaceful language and a new cultural stage, enabling the country to “sing” a new history. ■

The purpose of this research process is to have a solid digital and physical memory with the vinyl records rescued. An online library as a musical collection of the voices of victims and former fighters will be created with free access to all Colombians.