Fables of Memory: Reconstruction of Collective Memory through Literary Creation*

[English Version]

Fábulas de la memoria: reconstrucción de la memoria colectiva a través de la creación literaria

Fábulas da memória: reconstrução da memória coletiva através da criação literária

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Abstract

Objective: The main objective of this research is to reconstruct the collective memory through literary creation, involving students who are victims of displacement and the Colombian armed conflict within the Bachelor's Degree Program in Literature and the Spanish Language of the Universidad Popular del Cesar. **Methodology**: The methodology employed was action-participation research, utilizing the creative writing workshop as a tool and space for the production of fictional texts aimed at reconstructing the collective memory of the participants. **Results**: The outcome comprised a set of methodologies and tools to be utilized in creative workshops, targeting vulnerable populations within the context of the Colombian armed conflict. Identified gaps and voids in the official history of the armed conflict are an opportunity for rewriting a version through fiction and literary creation that vindicates the experiences of all affected individuals, thus reconstructing the collective memory of the country. **Conclusions**: Spaces for reading, dialogue, writing, and creation, such as the creative writing workshop, are indispensable for the reconstruction of a collective memory that promotes the search for truth, forgiveness, and peace.

Key words: armed conflict; collective memory; literature; creative writing; fiction (obtained from the UNESCO thesaurus).

Resumen

Objetivo: el objetivo principal de esta investigación es reconstruir la memoria colectiva a través de la creación literaria, con los estudiantes víctimas del desplazamiento y el conflicto armado del programa de Licenciatura en Literatura y Lengua Castellana de la Universidad Popular del Cesar. **Metodología**: como metodología se ocupó la investigación acción-participación, utilizando el taller de escritura creativa como herramienta y espacio para la producción de textos ficcionales que reconstruyeran la memoria colectiva de los participantes. **Resultados**: se obtuvo como resultado un grupo de metodologías y herramientas para utilizar en talleres creativos, que están dirigidos a poblaciones vulnerables en el marco del conflicto armado. Se identificó que las grietas y vacíos de la historia oficial sobre el conflicto armado son una posibilidad para que, desde la ficción y la creación literaria, se reescriba una versión que reivindique las experiencias reales de todos los sujetos afectados y así, reconstruir la memoria colectiva del país. **Conclusiones**: se concluyó que los espacios de lectura, diálogo, escritura y creación, como el taller de escritura creativa, son indispensables para la reconstrucción de una memoria colectiva que propenda la búsqueda de la verdad, el perdón y la paz.

Palabras clave: conflicto armado; memoria colectiva; literatura; escritura creativa; ficción (obtenidos del tesauro de la UNESCO).

Resumo

Objetivo: o principal objetivo desta pesquisa é reconstruir a memória coletiva por meio da criação literária, com alunos vítimas do deslocamento e do conflito armado, no âmbito do programa de bacharelado em Literatura e Língua Espanhola da Universidad Popular del Cesar. **Metodologia**: a metodologia empregada foi a pesquisa participativa-ação, utilizando a oficina de escrita criativa como ferramenta e espaço para a produção de textos ficcionais, os quais reconstruíram a memória coletiva dos participantes. **Resultados**: o resultado consistiu em um conjunto de metodologias e ferramentas destinadas a serem utilizadas em oficinas criativas voltadas para populações vulneráveis no contexto do conflito armado. Identificou-se que as lacunas e brechas na história oficial do conflito armado representam uma oportunidade para, por meio da ficção e da criação literária, reescrever uma narrativa que dê voz às experiências reais de todos os afetados, contribuindo assim para a reconstrução da memória coletiva do país **Conclusões**: concluiu-se que os espaços de leitura, diálogo, escrita e criação, como a oficina de escrita criativa, são indispensáveis para a reconstrução de uma memória coletiva que promova a busca pela verdade, pelo perdão e pela paz.

Palavras chaves: conflito armado; memória coletiva; literatura; escrita criativa; ficção (extraído do dicionário de sinônimos da UNESCO).

Introduction

For many years, Latin America has been the scene of multiple representations of political, social, and symbolic violence. The various countries that comprise it, and their populations, have experienced the consequences of corrupt and oppressive states. Each country on the continent has its own extensive history of dictatorships, finger-pointing, disappearances, kidnappings, famines, and deaths, but none quite like Colombia. In this regard, Chevalier (2022) states:

> In the final report on the armed conflict, the Colombia Truth Commission documents, between 1985 and 2018, at least 450,664 homicides resulting from the internal armed conflict, as well as approximately 121,768 missing persons, and 55,770 kidnapped individuals, not including the 7.7 million victims of forced displacement (para. 2).

Within the context of the national conflict, the department of Cesar stands out as a territory commonly affected by violence perpetrated by various illegal national groups. Trejos (2020) comments that "According to the United Nations Development Program and the National Center of Historical Memory, Cesar is the Colombian department that evidenced the third most kidnappings between 1970 and 2010 with a total of 2,618 cases." The recent demobilization of illegal organizations, such as the Northern Block of the AUC and various self-defense groups, has given rise to the emergence of criminal organizations associated with drug trafficking and, with them, a series of violent events such as systematized extortion. In addition, of the six actions committed by the National Liberation Army (ELN) during its armed strike in the Caribbean region (February 10-13, 2018), five have been held in municipalities in southern Cesar.

Regardless of the legitimacy of these figures, even today, many Colombians believe that these data do not represent the truth about the victims of the war. Additionally, the imagery that points to the armed conflict in Colombia as a lesser evil that has only affected a few prevails. This phenomenon downplaying the number of victims and the real and holistic consequences of the war comes from the teaching and repetition of an official history that has been publicized and viralized through the country's ruling classes and the perpetrators of violence through the media. This with the objective of perpetuating this incomplete truth that benefits certain social groups in the country through the profits that systematic violence brings them. Considering this, university and research centers in the country have joined efforts to address the emerging need for research on historical studies of the armed conflict, as well as on perspectives aimed at

repairing and rebuilding by and for the victims regarding their civil and human condition.

From this perspective, studies on memory emerge, more precisely on collective memory; defined as that "which magically recomposes the past, and whose memories refer to the experience that a community or a group can pass on to an individual or groups of individuals" (Betancourt, 2004, p. 126). In this way, the facts of a nation's past, related to a specific phenomenon (such as war, conflict, violence, or displacement), can be reconstructed from the collective experience of a community when they gather, dialogue, and work with those memories. This, with the objective of creating a new past that considers the different perspectives of each participant, that complements the official history and its gaps, and that becomes an object of legacy for other groups or communities.

Thus, the determination to propose fiction and literary creation as new ways to address the gaps in official history germinates within the context of memory where employing the creative writing workshop is the ideal setting in which victims of the armed conflict in Colombia can dialogue, recreate, and reconstruct a collective memory of past events. Therefore, the objective of the present research is to reconstruct collective memory through literary creation with students who are victims of displacement and the armed conflict within the Bachelor's Degree Program in Literature and the Spanish Language at the Universidad Popular del Cesar.

For the present research, making a thorough review of selected research works that employ literary creation and creative writing was important as a means for the construction and reconstruction of the memory of the armed conflict in Colombia, especially in educational contexts such as the classrooms of schools, and universities.

Botero and Prieto (2016) created a didactic route that allowed spaces and processes for the reconstruction of collective memory in schools through the analysis of three selected works of Colombian literature, reflecting three historical moments of violence in Colombia and fostering processes for students to create their own vision of the conflict through literary analysis. Similarly, Bustamante (2017) proposed a project to understand the effects of writing exercises on individuals who are victims of the armed conflict and have participated in processes of writing emotions and memories in the city of Medellín. The goal is to analyze some of the experiences related to the writing process at both individual and group levels among the study participants, and to identify the effects of the writing processes on them.

For his part, Estrada (2017) sought to identify an appropriate narrative strategy for the reconstruction of historical memory in children who complete the primary education cycle, conducting workshops in educational institutions

in Bello, Antioquia. This demonstrated that fables work as a narrative strategy for the reconstruction of historical memory, offering the opportunity to foster lasting learning through their morals, and guiding the reader in reflections toward reconciliation and peaceful conflict resolution. From another perspective, Palacios (2018) outlined a project that focused on reconstructing a historical memory that would allow for the strengthening of writing practices in rural areas, based on autobiographical accounts and chronicles about the armed conflict in the Nueva Granada Educational Institution; thus, contemplating the school as a scenario for peacebuilding in times of post-conflict in rural areas.

The *"Formadores d-mentes"* educational group (2018) formulated a project involving students from the Bachelor's Program in Spanish Language and Literature at the Technological University of Antioquia, as well as protagonists of the armed conflict in Colombia (victims and reintegrated individuals), in spaces of interaction and literary creation. The aim is to foster reconciliation and reconstruction of social fabric from academia. Finally, Rebellón (2018) proposed an idea demonstrating how stories of the armed conflict from the school can be transformed into tales. Meanwhile, Patiño (2020) developed a writing methodology regarding the possibility and necessity of writing about the Colombian conflict through new and different aesthetics and narratives that envision a particular aspect of the conflict. They explore microfiction as a device that opens the possibility of once again discussing what happened.

Within the framework of violence in the department of Cesar, the Universidad Popular del Cesar emerges as a prominent space. It has not only been home to thousands of students who are direct victims of the armed conflict and displacement (both from the city of Valledupar and students from various municipalities of the department), but the university itself has been recognized as a subject of rights due to the multiple attacks its community suffered between 1987 and 2006. Regarding this, Rodríguez (2018) comments that:

> [...] the Universidad Popular del Cesar endured a scheme resembling an assault and paramilitary infiltration, resulting in the eradication of critical thinking and the imposition of a single ideology. This led to the dismantling of alternative and oppositional organizational expressions within the university community, the establishment of a university catering to the interests of education merchants, and the diversion of a significant portion of its budget toward specific clients and corrupt networks" (p. 9, own translation).

For these reasons, implementing investigative projects at the Universidad Popular del Cesar has been necessary — considering the university's nature as a subject of reparation and as a place where hundreds of people who have suffered the horrors of violence coexist — to delve into the past events of the conflict for the creation of a collective memory that dignifies the victims and seeks truth, forgiveness, and peace. In this context, the present research project emerged. For its development, establishing reading and film clubs where students could, through fiction, study the reconstruction of collective memory regarding displacement and the armed conflict was first necessary. Subsequently, creative writing workshops were implemented with the students to reconstruct the collective memory of displacement and the armed conflict through their own perspective. The final step was publishing a digital magazine featuring the literary product that emerged from the creative writing workshops regarding the reconstruction of collective memory regarding displacement and the armed conflict in Colombia.

Memory: Notions and Approximations

Currently, there are many authors who have dedicated intellectual and creative efforts to memory studies, making valuable contributions that highlight the importance of understanding memory as an element for sociocultural studies in the present democratic era. For example, for Sarlo (2012), understanding memory as a means of comprehending a national past and building a present is only possible by observing the object of study (the events) through a subjective lens. In the author's own words:

> [...] A storyline for the market is no longer limited only to the narration of an event that historians would have hidden or overlooked, but also adopts a focus close to the actors and seeks to discover a truth in the reconstruction of their lives (p. 12, own translation).

Thus, Sarlo conceives that changing the perspective with which the facts of the past were analyzed and alleged works on memory were built is necessary. This due to the historical discipline that gave relevance to the general facts of the past fractures the possibility of conceiving it from the most intimate and real perspective: that of the victims.

In the same way, Sarlo proposes this subjective turn, since research trends point to the fact that historical science — possibly, and from a contemporary perspective — has defects that have been perceived by scholars and intellectuals, as

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well as by the masses. With the pervasive use of the internet and the continuous flow of news, certain ruptures become more noticeable when relating the past and the present. Within those teleological gaps of the historical discipline, people begin to distrust history as a social institution and feel the need to make a turn toward the subjectivity of the testimony, the story, and its properties. In this regard, Sarlo (2012) asserts that "academic history loses due to methodological reasons, but also due to its own formal and institutional restrictions, which make it more concerned with internal rules than with the search for external legitimizations" (p. 17).

Currently, Klein (2007) studies a fundamental relationship for achieving the objective of this research, which involves bringing fiction closer to memory and fictionalizing the past (or some fragments of it), with the ultimate goal of dignifying memory through the gifts of storytelling.

> Through life narratives we gain access to a fascinating field of study, since, by staging the very process of narration, they allow us to approach not only the reflection about specific questions of the genre [...] but also general issues about what is worthy of narrating or what the process of fictionalization consists of (p. 16).

In this manner, analyzing how the act of narrating what happened becomes an exercise in recreating memory is crucial. To narrate, to recount the events of a past action — which for a long time was minimized to a memory — one by one and bring it into the present transformed into words, signifies dignifying it through fictionalization, and countering the statistics and history that nullify it. For Klein (2007), individual and collective memory only differ from each other through the subjects who construct them, but fortunately, they also share the same purpose. Regarding that, he states:

> Memory is the mediating concept between lived time and narration [...] and if memory presupposes the conservation of practical experience, collective memory is nothing more than a set of stories produced by a non-individual subject that fulfills the same function as the individual subject, that is, that of inheriting and conserving experiences (Klein, 2007, p. 28).

The relevance of this contribution lies in the immediate nature of collective memory, as the exercise of recreating it requires the involvement of multiple actors. As an individual memory of the past is constructed within a group context, a collective memory is simultaneously reconstructed. It is immediately nourished when two individuals narrate their past, thus building a clearer notion

of mutual recollection. That is to say, multiple individuals reconstructing an individual memory within a group context ensure the automatic reconstruction of a collective memory. According to Richard (2010):

> [...] art and literature know how to explore the gaps in meaning, the opacities of representation, that is, everything that official memory, institutional memory or mythical past tends to suppress from their monumental constructions so as not to spoil their illusions of control and dominance (p. 128).

For Richard, the role of art, of fiction, is to embrace the subjectivities of the narratives of the victims and dignify their fragile and recent enunciation. Since the memory being brought to the present is a recent event, it returns to the subject in a painful manner when recalled. If the past event were to return to the present in a harmless manner, then it would lose its presential attribute that contradicts the official discourse of institutional memory.

This is where fiction takes center stage in memory reconstruction processes, assuming the role as one of the few options that can contribute to the narrative of events. Not only does it present another version of the past, counteract the official version, or acknowledge the experiences of the victims, but it also helps construct a new present where the events of the past, presumably violent, are valued, with the premise of forgiveness and peace. Without these last two elements, reconstruction would lose its ultimate purpose and would be reduced to being just a methodology for counting.

Methodology

This research was conducted using the participatory action research method, as it is a broad family that includes different ways of conducting research for social change with the participation of people. However, to clarify which of its different lines of work is applicable to the present project, Selener's (1997) definition will be used, which states that participatory action research (PAR) has been conceptualized as "[...] a process by which members of an oppressed group or community collect and analyze information, and act on their problems with the purpose of finding solutions and promoting political and social transformations" (p. 17).

Participatory action research is ideal for the implementation of this project because, as a method, it seeks to transform the realities of its participants through analysis, dialogue, debate, and reflection.

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Among the procedures employed to carry out this research, the development of reading and film clubs was included, where participants had the opportunity to study how, through literature and audiovisual content, alternative discourses about violence in the Colombian territory are constructed. Similarly, creative writing workshops were implemented with the aim of allowing students to enhance their skills in narrating their experiences through texts. This was done with the intention of recounting, through fiction, the memory of personal experiences regarding the conflict and displacement, thereby contributing to the reconstruction of a collective memory.

The creative writing workshop "Horrible Night" (also the title of the digital magazine that features the product of the workshop) was developed throughout the 2022 semesters, during 16 meetings (eight meetings per semester) at the Sabana branch of the Universidad Popular del Cesar, every Friday from 10 a. m. to noon. Biographical, bibliographical, and audiovisual material from the Consuelo Araujo Noguera Cultural Center (pertaining to the network of public libraries of the Banco de la República) was used as tools for the development of many of the sessions. The J14 and 69 traveling suitcases, the RELATA traveling suitcases, the collection of games, «*La paz se toma la palabra*» [Peace takes the floor] and the tool "A Kit Against Forgetfulness/A Kit to Heal the Soul" by the Truth Commision, and the audiovisual contents of the cinescuela.org portal of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia were employed.

At the beginning of this research proposal, the workshop was conceived as a meeting place where participants could learn to write and put their personal and family stories regarding the conflict into words, as well as a place where students of the Literature and Spanish Language program of the Universidad Popular del Cesar could dialogue and share personal perspectives on the official history of violence in Colombia, the violent events that still plague the Department of Cesar, and their views and opinions on the reading of a literature of violence.

Likewise, noting that in this project the processes of reading, dialogue, writing, and the creative writing workshop constitute a methodological approach was necessary. Additionally, explaining how those elements function as a methodology was crucial. In this order of ideas, thinking of the processes of reading, dialogue, and writing not as cognitive procedures, but as social practices was essential. What many authors have called "literacy," which is nothing more than:

> The process [which] always involves a way of using reading and writing within the framework of a specific social purpose. If we examine the uses of reading and writing, beyond the school context, we can understand that reading and writing are not ends in themselves: one does not read or write simply for the sake

of reading and writing. On the contrary, they are ways to achieve broader social objectives and cultural practices. (Zavala, 2008, pp. 23-24, own translation).

In this specific context, the reading and writing practices that take place in the framework of the creative writing workshop "Horrible Night" confer to that space the suitability to learn to read and write in a literary key, and the capacity to be a place of specific social practices. In a particular sense, it represents an opportunity to build and reconstruct the memory of the armed conflict through creative processes.

The creative writing workshop also functions as a work methodology, considering the premise that its main objectives are related to language in its broadest meaning.

> The literary creation workshop is of a general nature, it admits all types of apprentices and its object of study is verbal expression from all points of views, both the creation itself and the reception of the texts. (Klein, 2015, p. 20, own translation).

Thus, the creative writing workshop can become a specific place for a certain type and number of people to get together to write and can also revolve around specific themes and have multiple purposes. In view of this, it is important to state that:

> The reading workshop, which is the least pretentious in appearance, can become a real factor of cultural growth for the community [...] The only goal pursued is the pleasure of reading and sharing the conversation about what has been read. (Macías, 2015, p. 22, own translation).

Therefore, asking how the reading and writing workshop — which in principle is a time to learn to read and write — can become an ideal place to create memory based on historical and specific moments of an affected community is valid. For this reason, understanding the workshop as an artisanal method, a place for learning by doing, by working is necessary. Characteristics shared with memory construction which, in the words of Gallardo and Salazar (2012) — referring to the postulates of Elizabeth Jelin's *Los Trabajos de la Memoria* (The Work of Memory) — assert that:

> The author resorts to the concept of work to address the concept of memory, as she understands its exercise as a distinctive trait of the human condition that places the individual and society in an active and productive position. One is an

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agent of transformation, and in the process transforms oneself and the world (p. 146).

In this way, the creative writing workshop can be the ideal place to narrate the facts about the armed conflict, and to fictionalize them to recreate them in the imaginative field and find the truth there. Thus, this space transforms the personal experience of the student attending the creative writing workshop —through the encounter with their own recreated memory— as well as that of all other attendees through the recreation of their own and collective memories.

The work done in "Horrible Night" was very diverse and was tailored to the planned objective for each session. In some sessions, reading select stories or tales narrating horror stories in the context of the armed conflict was decided unanimously, followed by discussions on how the authors work, narrate, and create based on the theme. Examples of these texts were *Sofoco* by Laura Ortiz Gómez, *Mambrú perdió la guerra* by Irene Vasco, and *Delirio* de Laura Restrepo. In other sessions, using the tools provided by the Consuelo Araujo Noguera Cultural Center, the participants told the group how they and their families had been affected by the phenomenon of violence and displacement. In most of the sessions, writing exercises were developed to nurture the final stories that would be anthologized and published in the digital magazine.

Again, instrumentalizing the pain of the workshop participants to turn their own experiences into fictional stories or chronicles of real memories was never among the purposes of the project or that of the researchers. On the contrary, the attendees themselves created, based on their experiences, fictional stories, mostly with imaginary characters and places, to narrate their discontent toward forgetting and the official history.

Results

The results obtained from the development of the «*Fábulas de la memoria: reconstrucción de la memoria colectiva a través de la creación literaria*» project, with students who are victims of displacement and the armed conflict within the Bachelor's Degree Program in Literature and Spanish Language at the Universidad Popular del Cesar, are of different natures and serve different purposes. First, the reconstruction of collective memory regarding the armed

conflict in Colombia necessitates carrying out projects that promote the group, collective, and cooperative work of victims and perpetrators who wish to make a critical and analytical reading of official events and their own experiences. This was identified through the application of the workshop tools and methodologies. Likewise, the official history of the armed conflict in Colombia was determined to have gaps wherein rewriting the narrative to homogenize the experience of all the individuals involved was shown to be possible. And, finally, the workshops demonstrated that the use of artistic tools, in this case literary creation and creative writing, are vital to rewriting this official history through the possibility as an aesthetic device, but also as a means of memory and creation of memory that fiction offers.

As a direct result of the implementation and application of the project, a methodology and specific work tools were created for use in reading and creative writing workshops with vulnerable populations related to the armed conflict in Colombia. The creation of this methodology and tools were necessary to achieve the first two specific objectives of this project: developing reading and film clubs where students could, through fiction, study the reconstruction of collective memory of displacement and armed conflict in Colombia; and implementing creative writing workshops with students to reconstruct, through their own perspective, the collective memory of displacement and armed conflict in Colombia.

This result consists of a group of reports containing each of the activities conducted with the tools provided by the Consuelo Araujo Noguera Cultural Center. This includes the texts, short films, and bibliographic material used in each session, as well as brief pedagogical reflections that provided a guide for those who used these materials in the framework of the workshops. Likewise, a group of texts (short stories) produced by the workshop attendees was obtained as a result. These are located within the theme of the armed conflict in Colombia and could also be called literature of violence. These texts were gathered in the digital magazine "Horrible Night," which was presented to the academic community and the general public on November 25, 2022 as part of the VIII Literature Symposium, «*Memorias, Arte y Construcción de Paz 2022*», of the Universidad Popular del Cesar. The launching of the journal consisted of a meeting between the authors (workshop attendees, students of the Literature and Spanish Language program), professors, researchers, peers, and colleagues.

Conclusions

Before initiating the development of the research project, several investigations were explored that had as a central axis the construction and reconstruction of collective memories regarding the armed conflict in Colombia, through processes of creation, reading, and writing. Very significant proposals were found, appropriate to the contexts in which they were developed; some of them were mentioned above. The exploration did not find any proposal that developed a work methodology based on the creative writing workshop as a tool for the reconstruction of collective memory with university students from the Department of Cesar who were victims of the armed conflict.

At the beginning of the process, a call was made for students belonging to the Bachelor's Degree Program in Literature and Spanish Language of the Universidad Popular del Cesar who were victims of the armed conflict or displaced by violence, to join the creative writing workshop "Horrible Night." Thus, the workshop began with the aim of bringing together these students at a specific time and place to carry out reading, dialogue, and writing activities framed within the theme of the armed conflict and violence in Colombia. From the beginning, the workshop was an enjoyable space where students could engage in extracurricular activities, but also turned it into a safe space for students to recount their anecdotes and family experiences regarding the horrors, murders, kidnappings, and disappearances.

In this order of ideas, indicating that collective memory is only reconstructed through the encounter of a group of individuals who are related by a social, political, or anecdotal facts is necessary to point out the main conclusion of this project. These facts are gathered to tell the different versions of the events, and thus read, analyze, and recount them from the different perspectives and life experiences of the affected subjects. In that encounter, a tool was needed to enable such readings and analysis, but also to function as a device for reconstruction, for the creation of proposals from a vision that considers victims, perpetrators, and their generational repercussions (in the case of the Colombian armed conflict).

Thus, in this project, literary creation, that is, the narratives constructed by the workshop participants, makes the reconstruction of collective memory possible since, first, the narratives provide the opportunity to tell the genuine truth of each of the experiences of the subjects involved, to discuss, analyze, and read it in a community. Second, literary creation allows working on this experience through writing, seeking to transform experience into memory by using the cracks in the official truth as niches for fiction to inhabit as a more real and meaningful version for victims and perpetrators alike. Finally, this story,

coming from real experiences, is reconstructed as a fictional story so that it can be read and listened to by other actors in the community and the country.

Therefore, the project affirms that reconstructing the collective memory through literary creation with victims of displacement and the armed conflict is possible. This fits within the general project objective of developing workshops and activities that feed a methodology of reading, dialogue, and writing that is aimed at the creation of new discourses that trend toward truth, forgiveness, and peace. Considering this, a memory was reconstructed regarding violent events of the armed conflict that occurred in the Department of Cesar, through multiple working methodologies that emphasize dialogical and creative processes as tools that contradict forgetfulness, as well as the official history that silences victims and the repetition of violent discourses and actions that prolong war and horror in Colombia.

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