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CCCC International Workshop

Writing for Peace in Post-Conflict Colombia: Emerging Results of an Ethnographic Study

Overview:

As a 2018-2019 Fulbright / ICETEX scholar in Colombia, a country devasted by a decades long civil war, I have recently completed ethnographic fieldwork with four community groups in Manizales, Colombia to examine the practices through which Colombians are using writing to build peace. As I have just begun data analysis, I will be grateful for feedback in this context.

Institutional Context:

The contexts I'm working in are four: an adult literary community; sixth and tenth graders in a school in a high-conflict region; an organization that has been teaching poetry for peace for a decade; an intergenerational music/poetry group with the goals of creating well being through the use of traditional instruments and poetry.

Key Theorists:

Lederach (2003): Peace involves conflict transformation, not just conflict resolution
Street (1986): Literacy does not act autonomously to create change; it does so in relationship to people, practices, ideologies, power, and history.
Pennebaker and Evans (2014): Writing has the potential to heal psychologically
Freire: Writing has the potential to transform society.
Latina feminist collective (2001) / Delgado Bernal et al. (2018): testimonio serves both personal and social ends by documenting and circulating memories that can challenge and rewrite dominant narratives.
Ospina-Ramirez and Ospina-Alvarado, 2017: Young people's agency, particularly as expressed through the arts, are crucial to building peace

Glossary of Terms:

Peace: Not only the resolution of conflict but the transformation of conflict, such that peace-builders address the past, imagine a shared collective future, and create harmonious social relationships characterized by equality and trust.

Healing: An intentional process of transformation of self and/or society

Writing: A complex set of personal, social, material, and artistic practices infused with the ideologies of writers and the social groups within which and to which they write; in this context writing involves literate production with an artistic intention.

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What follows is not so much an article draft as a way of organizing my thoughts around some recent fieldwork. I am grateful for any and all conceptual and methodological insights at this very early stage.

Social Context

In the wake of the historic 2016 agreement to end 52 years of deadly conflict, Colombians are working to ensure peace is lasting. According to a summary by the Washington Post, the war resulted in over 220,000 deaths over the past five decades; 7 million Colombians driven from their homes — the highest number of what the United Nations considers "internally displaced people" (IDPs) in the world; and 11,000 dead or maimed since 1990 by land mines (Miroff 2017). While peace accords were signed just two years ago, their promise is not yet fulfilled. As of this writing, the new government is threatening not to fulfill the terms of the accords and social leaders continue to be murdered at a rate of four per week. Everyday citizens of Colombia, then, are facing an unstable current political situation even as they are working to collectively heal the wounds of a violent past—a past that as one of my teaching collaborators has put it, infuses everything. It's not that everything in Colombia *is* war, he explained, but that nothing, in this fragile post-accord moment is quite separate from it.

Many are calling for a more robust large-scale political response. But of equal importance, as peace scholars have shown, are grassroots initiatives that seek to build peace from the ground up (Mac Ginty, 2014; Theidon, 2007). While not always called upon in conflict *resolution*, such grassroots efforts are crucial to what peace studies scholar Lederach (2003) calls conflict *transformation*—a holistic, long-term project that aims to create "positive peace," characterized by equality and trust (Galtung, 1969). In Colombia, to both address the past and develop dialogue about the future, many of these initiatives have made use of the arts, including storytelling, rap, and theater (Berents, 2013; Philips-Amos, 2016; Lemaitre, 2016). As the director of the Center for the Advanced Study of Children and Youth in Colombia (CEANJ), my host institution, has said, art contributes to peace because it allows community members to express political agency (Alvarado, 2012). The artistic expression of political agency may be especially important in a context where, as one 16 year-old research participant told me, Colombians often stay quiet out of fear. Building on such initiatives, my project ethnographically homes in on how four community groups in Colombia are building peace via a widespread artistic intervention: writing.

Colombians from diverse sectors of society are deeply engaged in writing for peace. In my five months here I have observed: Children from high-conflict regions writing and performing poetry for peace; rural women writing and publishing their experiences of sexual violation during the armed conflict; young people writing to mourn their dead; members of an indigenous community that was placed in the middle of violent conflict developing peace-centered mural and poetry projects; Afro-Colombian poets raising their voices to call for racial inclusion as part of the new chapter of peace in Colombian history; and adults in cities meeting

in writing workshops and circulating experimental academic and poetic books for peace in community festivals and meetings. These months have also witnessed college students take to the streets—indeed block off the streets--in a historic series of nationally organized protests against the killing of social leaders and in favor of financial support for public education. They are calling for "more books, fewer guns"—a protest symbolized by a defiant fist holding a pencil, leading to the protests' popular name, "the march of the pencils." Writing, in sum, is both widely practiced in Colombia as a technology of peace and is tightly discursively associated with peace and social progress.

Academic Context

And for good reason. Interdisciplinary studies of writing reveal its unique potential to develop peace-building capacities—which I follow peace educator Reardon to define as personal engagement with the past and a commitment to a harmonious social future (1988). It can do so in four ways: First, writing has been shown to help people address the past to overcome emotional and even physical trauma (Pennebaker and Evans, 2014; Van der Kolk, 2014). Second, at the same time as writing is *personal,* decades of literacy research have demonstrated that it is also profoundly *social* (Street, 1984), linking personal experiences to the inequities and conflicts of the wider world (Brandt, 1998), and giving it the potential to participate in processes of liberation (Lorde, 1980) and restorative justice (Winn, 2018). Third, because writing produces a material document that has social caché (Vieira, 2016), writing can lend people authority to participate in, and indeed propose changes to, that world (Freire, 1968). Finally, as an artistic practice, writing engages the imagination, serving as a platform for envisioning—and circulating to others—an empowering future (Vieira, forthcoming). Taken together, these elements make writing a powerful vehicle for both the personal and social transformation that peace requires.

Writing appears to be magic.

But of course, it isn't. As Colombian peace scholars Guzmán, Cuatin-Cuesta, Guapacha Bañol, Jaramillo, Aristizábal, Salazar Castillay Loaiza de la Pava (2018) have pointed out, art by itself does not construct peace. It is not a priori "a tool of social transformation." Likewise, decades of literacy research have shown that writing in itself does not have autonomous power to transform society (Street, 1984). Writing's potential can only be activated—and is best studied—in its social context. Which is to say that it is people—*la gente*—who put magic in writing, who make it transformative.

But how?

This project attempts to articulate, in an ethnographically rigorous, collaborative, and community-engaged manner, how people are using writing to facilitate the construction of peace, with the larger goals of: a) acknowledging, naming, supporting, learning from, and eventually adapting their practices; and b) contributing to writing studies scholarship about the conditions under which and practices through which writing can promote both personal and social change.

The Research Questions:

Specifically, my project asks the following questions:

In the Colombian post-peace-accord context, how do members of a community—young people, teachers, adult writers—use writing to construct personal and social peace? What do their texts reveal about writing for peace? What are their experience and practices of writing for

peace? How are they creating the social conditions in which writing can participate in processes of peace? And what can the answers to these questions teach us about the evolving role of writing in communities working for personal and social change?

The Data Collection:

As a Fulbright scholar with CEANJ at the University of Manizales in Manizales, Colombia, and in collaboration with political scientists at the University of Antioquia in Medellín, I have been working to understand the writing-for-peace activities of four community groups in Manizales, Colombia: Sixth- and tenth-grade writers in a school in a high-conflict neighborhood; writing teachers working in high-conflict regions; adult writers living in the shadow of war; and an experimental intergenerational music and poetry group designed to produce experiences peace and well-being.

- With high school students, I have observed and co-taught 19 writing-for-peace workshops, conducted 52 interviews with student writers, and collected over 200 of their poems;
- With writing-for-peace educators, I have participant-observed 14 hours of planning meetings and conducted 6 interviews;
- With writers, I have conducted 25 literacy history interviews, collected samples of each writer's work; and participant-observed 18 hours of writers' meetings and workshops;
- With the music/poetry group, I have participant-observed 16 hours of rehearsals, and interviewed all participants and their family members.

My overall methodological goal with this diversity of data collection methods and groups was to understand the broadest range of writing-for-peace activities possible during the tenure of my Fulbright fellowship. My involvement in these groups varied: With the high school students, I was a teacher (albeit a foreign teacher who did not give grades); with the teachers, I was a collaborator and a co-thinker and co-creator of pedagogies. With writers, I was an interviewer and also a co-writer. And with the music/poetry group, I was a participant and an observer.

Very Early Emerging Analysis

I have just begin analyzing my data. Right now, I'm memoing about fieldnotes, interviews, and writing of just a few participants and just a few key events, to develop interpretations, from which I can build to analyze the data set in a more systematic way. In these humanistic interpretations, I am drawing from community-generated definitions of peace, Chicana feminist theories of *testimonio,* and interdisciplinary studies of writing's potential to heal to understand how people are using writing to promote peace in the following ways:

1) As an expressive art that helps people simultaneously address the past through *testimonio* and imagine a harmonious future;

2) As a linguistic intervention to embody new social relations, including relations of reconciliation and respect for diversity;

3) As a community material practice, characterized by the gifting of written materials, that circulates visions of peace and thereby reinforces social commitments to it.

In what follows, I share some nascent interpretations that center around the first category above, using the writing and text-based interviews of three students, two sixth graders and two tenth graders, all of whom attend a school in a neighborhood known as a "*barrio de guerra* / *neighborhood of war*" and who participated in weekly writing-for-peace workshops (19 in total) I co-led with the directors of *Encanta Palabras*, an organization dedicated to teaching writing for peace. Our process of co-creating writing-for-peace workshops is another source of data—but I want to be clear that the goal of our workshops was not to study the effects of our specific curriculum on students' peace-building capacities, but instead to create the widest space—the most welcoming invitation possible--for students to practice writing for peace. As a researcher, I wanted to learn and more deeply understand these practices. I did so through text-based interviews with focal participants (five per participant over the course of five months) and analysis of their writing.

From Testimonio to Fantasy

In these workshops, some young people wrote for peace by trading on two affordances of writing: the ability to establish testimonio via personal experiences and the ability to imagine a peaceful future. *Testimonio* traverses the realms of both psychological and social healing, making it productive for understanding writing for peace. In the U.S.particularly among Latina feminist scholars, *testimonio* has been used to acknowledge experiences outside of White patriarchal norms and to create community (Latina Feminist Collective, 2001; Delgado Bernal et al, 2017), and in South America, *testimonio* is understood as both therapeutic and political instruments (Cienfuegos and Monelli, 1983). At the same time as the concept is conceptually useful, it's also present in Manizales as a public cultural practice. For example: Graffiti in blood read on a wall along the city's main street reads in Spanish, *Where are the children of the war?* And a paper taped to a post reads: "They are killing us. Sincerely, a social leader," referencing the worryingly pervasive murder of social leaders. Likewise, the sidewalks of town are spotted with white outlines of bodies accompanied by poetry demanding recognition for blood spilled.

What is interesting about testimonio for writing the peace, is that while it addresses the past, it's also future oriented. Embedded in testimonio is an idea of a hoped for imagined future: one in which a social leader would intervene in killing, one in which the children of the war would be found, one in which the dead would be acknowledged and honored. And as I've learned from Colombian scholars imagining a peaceful future is crucial to developing peace. (Ospina-Ramirez and Ospina-Alvarado, 2017). And writing one's role into an agentive, embodied, active way of making change in one's world may be important for overcoming trauma (Van der Kolk, 2014), and even experiences of physical empowerment (Vieira forthcoming). It's also fun and involves elements of play, which is especially salient for children's literacy practices (but which is also evident in my work with some adults) (Dyson, 1997).

It is in this developing of narrative coherence between the past and the future that psychological studies of writing have suggested writing can personally heal. Here I am interested in how young people's development of narrative coherence via testimonio and future imagination might point towards not only personal healing, but also social healing, a process that I follow peace educators to see as necessary to peace.

Reckoning with the Past

First consider Lucia, from a displaced family in a region of Colombia deeply implicated by violence, who experienced the war-related disappearance of three of her uncles. The farm that is her home is too dangerous for her to return to, so her family forms one of the millions of Colombian families that has been forced to relocate.

In this exercise, students wrote a "where I am from" poem, an effort that built on the previous week's writing from their bodies, the stated goal here was to honor our origins and daily practices as a way to construct peace.

> "Soy de donde una guerra nos hizo mucho mas fuerte y unidos asi que tengo muchos historias bonitas que contar si se las cuento nunca termino"
> "I'm from a war it made us much stronger and more united so that I have many beautiful stories to tell if I tell them I won't stop"
> --Lucia, 16

Now this was a where I am from poem with fill in the blanks. And this blank asked for a story. So embedded in her poetic rendering of *la vida cotidiana*, like eating pork in December, in the narrative portion of the poem, the story, she wrote she was from a war. Her story is one of war, and her impulse is to tell it, to make it visible, in a way that I am coding as testimonio.

But there is also something else going on here. Notice her follow up:

> "I have many more beautiful stories to tell."

She doesn't specify what those stories are, but just that if she starts telling them, she won't stop. This construction, grammatically, is a kind of projection into the future. It describes a past overcome and a future yet to be written—giving the kind of narrative coherence that psychologists say is important to healing and imagining a social future that theorists say is important to peace.

What were the processes by which Lucia came to this narrative coherence? To get at this question, I conducted text-based interviews with focal participants. For Lucia, I was interested in what appeared to be erasures and rewriting of the writing she did about the war—the only section of her poem that had visible signs of revision. Here is an excerpt of our conversation about her process.

> Lucia: I think I had something similar. I wrote that we were in a war, and about militarism.
> KV: Why did you erase it?
> Lucia: I think they weren't the exact words to express myself. I was looking for something prettier.
> KV: to make it artistic?
> Lucia: So that it didn't end up being so much about my danger. That despite the fact that we were in a war, my family was united . . . you can't stay thinking about the dark things.

Lucia emphasized her writing as an act of authorial and artistic agency—one that took effort and thought. She was revising it to make it pretty, and in doing so to imagine a a positive future. "You can't stay thinking about dark things," she told me. You can't forget them, but you also have to go forward. In Lucia's other writing that sememster she often gave advice in the

second person—you can't stay thinking about dark things. You have to move forward. These kind of encouragments coupled with the erasure and rewriting suggests she was incorporating her experiences and contextualizing them in a narrative. Such incorporation was an ongoing process, a practice of peace via writing.

In her narrative reflection about writing for peace, she noted that the practice of writing had changed her "soul, heart, and thoughts" and that she continues to construct peace in her life by "having my soul clean, without hate or rancor."

Distorting Reality

Within the first three weeks of my fieldwork a 15 year- old student at the school was shot and killed on the way to the local store to pick up some groceries for his mother. The day after the death was a workshop. We were teaching when we heard a commotion outside and some students got up to leave, so we followed. In the halls was a makeshift altar with candles and digital pictures printed in color. Students milled around in quiet groups. I'll say a bit more about this tragedy in a moment. In light of this event, my collaborators and I asked students to write about their neighborhood: to describe its people and sounds as a way to honor where they were from and also to imagine if they were a superhero, what they would do in their neighborhoods.

I'm going to offer here a few examples. Consider first this response from Luis, an Afro-Colombian 12 year old.

Mi Barrio

Es cuando me dicen hey amigo juguemos y hagamos armonia y contamos "hagamos la paz en nuestro barrio y disfrutemos la tranquilidad" y cuando los pajaros cantan se siente

el folclor de su canto y cuando llega el president a felicitar al barrio y cuando la carretero esta sola los animales pasan y disfrutan campo solo y si fuera un superhero haria mucho mas feliz a mi barrio

My neighborhood

Is when people say to me hey friend, let's play and we make harmony and we sing "Let's make peace in our neighborhood and enjoy tranquility" and when the birds sing one feels the folklore of their song and when the president might come to congratulate the neighborhood and when the street is only the animals passing and enjoying the field only and if I were a superhero I'd make the neighborhood much happier

--Luis, 12

His vision sparkles and is such a finely imagined vision of peace that it makes one want to cry. If we go back to all of the definitions of peace I laid out at the beginning, Luis has hit them all: harmonious social relations, physical peace with nature and the environment, and even a social political vision: that the neighborhood would be recognized by the president himself who would congratulate them. He seemed to bypass reality altogether, perhaps speaking what Dutro describes as the incommensurability of children's trauma stories, how they can't be rendered in language. When I first read it, it appeared to be an imagined social future that was almost entirely imagined, not grounded in reality

Except for one little line. This line was the line that in our text-based interview Luis told me he liked the best. It was this: "The birds who sing their folklore." The term folklore was

beautiful and inventive--it resonates with the notion of history and shared stories. The birds were the ones with testimonios in their beaks. In his imagination, it's only after they sing their folklore, that the president comes in, congratulating the barrio, integrating it. To be clear, Luis didn't *mean* all this necessarily. When I asked him how he decided to create a fantasy, he said he simply didn't know what to write so he wanted to invent something. But what he invented matters: and I see in this process of invention a productive play between reality and fantasy, testimonio and social vision. When I asked him how writing poems had changed him, if at all, he said he felt "happy and very calm," because "he said things that happened to him."

The writing of Carlos, another sixth grader, is more explicit about creating a fantasy of peace in a context of violence. In conversations with me he told me of the fights in his neighborhood, how at six years old he had been cut by a machete on his eyebrow (he showed me the scar) and how once at the age of 9 he had engaged in a fight and almost pushed another boy off one of the neighborhood's many cliffs to his death. When there are fights now, he said, he locks himself in the house, under "fear of death." But this is what he wrote.

> En mi barrio siempre al salir siempre dialogo con mis amigos y ponemos la cancion de fumaratto el ruido de las aves en los cielos y mi amigo de siempre el paisaje un arcoiris con unas hermosas montanas
> Volar libre por los aires
> In my neighborhood, always when I go out I dialogue with my friends and we put fumaratto music the sound of the birds and my forever friend the scenery a rainbow with some beautiful mountains.
> --Carlos, 12

He told me that this was not a fantasy. It was instead a "dream" and a "distorted reality." "Everyone thinks it's a neighborhood of war. . . This is like a dream. . . I wanted to create a distorted reality, to fly in the air." Carlos' writing is not outside of reality, but plays with it, to imagine a peaceful scene including natural beauty (the mountains and birds), bodily freedom (flying versus being locked in the house under fear of death), and dialogue (as opposed to fights). Carlos in his writing for peace was imagining his way out of violence and restriction, proposing alternative realities, writing about which makes him feel "very happy, moved by my words, . . . inspired."

Imagining agency

Ultimately, students were addressing their reality, were testifying, whether they wrote it or not, but were also envisioning an alternate future. I want to offer one more example here of the neighborhood poems, because it's haunted me.

> Mucha gente chismosa muchas montañas en las cuales esconden los cadavers o van a volar un ratico si pudiera ser un superheroe seria alguien que acabaria con las armas los muertos gritos y llantos para llenar mi barrio de felicidad y una gran paz.
> There are many gossipy people and many mountains in which they hide cadavers or go to fly a while if I could be a superhero I would be someone who would end arms the deaths screams and cries to fill my neighborhood with happiness and a great peace.
> --Maria, 16

The way Maria writes of cadavers in the mountains I find profoundly disturbing but also profoundly metaphorical for how students used testimonio and imagined future to write for peace. They are honoring their dead and also imagining a future of happiness and peace in which they are actors and heroes—a process that helps them, in the words of Maria, "liberate my thoughts, feel peace, write with less pain."

In their efforts to write for peace, young writers set themselves to the task of documenting what had "happened to them," in the words of Luis, describing war, brushes with death, the presence of cadavers. They also engaged in the work of the imagination, proposing realities in which they could tell beautiful stories, shake hands with the president, dialogue with friends, end the suffering of loved ones. This play between memory of the past and hopes for the future appeared fluid and unproblematic in the privileged space of creative and artistic writing, in which one could "distort reality" and "invent." For all of these focal participants, the experiences brought them what they described as happiness and peace. In this way (and in many other exercises involving writing from the body, and writing for reconciliation), writing became a discursive space in which young writers could practice peaceful relations, with themselves, with the past, and with each other.

These affordances of writing were intensified in the aftermath of the death of the 15 year old. I visited a a session led by psychologists to help students process the death of their classmate. Without going into details, the process involved what the pscyhologists described to me as gestalt therapy, in which the absent student was represented by an empty chair. Students imagined he was there, took turns speaking to him, and then sat in groups, (one young man just sat with his head in his hands) to write letters to him and about him. They wrote of his smile, his jokes, his love of music, and how much they would miss him. In the end of the two-hour long session, some read their writings aloud, and everyone put their writings in the empty chair. It was an act both of narrating the past—they loved him, he was now gone—and also as the psychologist put it, reimagining his role in the group. The chair was filled with his absence, but it was not empty. The students used the writing to represent the absence, to build from it, to imagine peaceful group relationships in the aftermath of violent death.

As educator Dutro teaches, language is inadequate for what these children, and many Colombians have experienced. In fact, the world itself is inadequate. Writing, however, was a tool that the community is taking up, investing it with the power to heal personally and socially.

These are early thoughts and there is clearly much more systematic work to do with all the data that I have. Moving forward, other angles for analysis include the relationship between personal catharsis and social catharsis, particularly in the lives of writers I interviewed; how the circulation of literary artifacts materially as gifts reinforces community commitment to peace; and the use of ritual/magic/speaking with the dead as part of poetic encounters that infuses them with the power to create peace for participants.

The Implications

1) For peace studies, this study can explain with more precision the practices through which the arts, specifically writing, can be used to construct peace.
2) **2)**

3) For writing studies, it can expand our understandings of the "consequences" of writing. Scholars of literacy know that literacy is ideological and frequently reinforces hegemonic ideologies. This study offers an example of the conditions, and the practices, in which members of a community can create their own ideologies of literacy—in this case, an ideology in which writing is associated with practices of peace.

4) For studies in the teaching of writing, it builds on critical expressivist pedagogy in order to revalue expressive writing as a method to connect people with the social world via their connections with themselves and their stories. In this sense, it builds on studies of writing's potential to heal—revealing the practices through which writing can heal not only individually, but also socially.

Community connections:

In order to make this study as useful as possible for the community in which it took place, collaborators and I are in the process of drafting what we are calling, *Writing for Peace: A Toolkit.* This toolkit is an accessible, Spanish-language, co-written book, accompanied by an interactive game, that describes the study's findings and concretizes ways for community groups to use them. It includes chapters by community members who have played different roles in writing for peace: a local writer, high school students, a social leader who has led writing for peace workshops in high-conflict regions, a teacher in a high-conflict neighborhood, a literary cultural organizer, a psychologist who uses writing and music in therapy, an adult educator, and a publisher. Partners and I will distribute the toolkit and demonstrate ways it can be used in a series of collaboratively led writing-for-peace workshops for educators and community leaders in the Caldas region of Colombia. The book is under contract with a local independent press in Colombia, and I am awaiting word on the grant I have submitted that requests supplemental resources to support the toolkit's publication.