

# Chapter 13

## Artistic Spaces for Rebuilding Social Fabric: The Colombian Case

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter analyzes the theoretical concept of social fabric, as well as the damage which armed conflict has caused it and how art can contribute to rebuilding it. Affective and symbolic characteristics of art, engaging the body, and the act of collective interpretation-creation may provide the conditions required for the necessary intangible and tangible factors to rebuild a social fabric damaged by war. Artistic spaces, as shown by a case in Colombia, can be an important place to generate, especially, intangible factors which keep the flow of social fabric active, such as values and beliefs, sense of community, confidence, and emotional stability of the individual and the group.*

### THE COLOMBIAN CONTEXT

In 2013 the first report on historical memory of the armed conflict was published in Colombia. The report covers the period 1958 to 2012. This document explains that, throughout that time, civil society has found itself in the midst of cross-fire from diverse armed actors, including guerrilla groups, paramilitaries and even the State itself (81 percent of victims). Indigenous, Afro-Colombian and small-scale

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farming populations have been heavily attacked, and become victims of selective assassinations, disappearances, massacres, forced displacement, torture and sexual violence. The report illustrates not only the methods but also the impacts of the conflict. It shows that the damage done by the war has affected individuals and has succeeded in undermining ties within communities – in conclusion, destroying their social fabric (CNMH, 2013).

Due to the violence and threats, and in order to resist the physical and psychological violence to which they are subjected, people abandoned their lands, against their own will, resulting in forced displacement and alienation (Zuluaga, 2009). According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in 2016, Colombia was the country with the highest displaced population in the world. The number of displaced people stands at 6.9 million, more than 10 percent of the total population.

Along with forced displacement, the Colombian people have been victims of massacres (14,660 victims between 2002 and 2007), forced disappearances (62,745 victims by 2011) and continuous killings (averaging 20,342 victims per year). This data comes from the Colombian Human Rights Observatory and Vice-Presidency.

Hence life in the midst of violence has become customary in Colombia. People grow used to psychosocial trauma. Children are the most deeply affected since they “have to build their own identity and live their life in a network of those dehumanizing relationships” (Baró, 2003, p.295), (Authors’ translation from the Spanish).

In such a context, the logic of violence prevails; little by little the rule of fear is established through terror, a paralyzing lasting terror which guarantees the submission of Colombian populations (Lair, 2000; Villa, 2006). Silence becomes one of the prominent elements of the social landscape, becoming both “defense and preservation, and at the same time becoming the main mechanism for propagating a culture of fear” (Taussing, 2002: p. 30).

Thus, that which Pecaut (2001) calls “the non-place” is created, where all relationships are marked by suspicion and fear, where the individual and the collective succumb to the inability to build a self or an ‘us’ due to the absence of trust and an excess of suspicion. These are the devastating consequences of the isolation of the victims and the undoing of the social fabric (Rodríguez, 2013; Villa, 2006).

Therefore it is necessary, for peace studies and the task of peacebuilding, to recognize what social fabric is, how it can break up in the face of violence, and to what extent it is possible to repair it, both in the middle of, and after, conflict. This chapter focuses on the possibility of rebuilding social fabric on the basis of artistic experiences, with special emphasis on music. After explaining the main theories of social fabric and those undergirding practices of using art for peace building, this chapter concludes with a case study.

## **Social Fabric and Peacebuilding**

The term *social fabric* is frequently cited within social sciences in Latin America; however, it has been invoked more from a practical than a theoretical perspective. This concept is of great interest for peace studies as civilians are highly affected by ‘new wars’ (Kaldor, 2001). In the case of Colombia, 81percentof victims of the armed conflict between 1980 and 2017 have been civilians (CMH, 2013). What is concerning is that the psychosocial impacts of this violence live on even after a conflict ends. In fact, as Harris (2009) explains, traumatic memories derived from the experience of war can continue throughout one’s life, through indistinct impressions and strong sensations.

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