

## A Mural-Graffiti in Medellín: Fighting for the territory

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### Abstract

The article shares partial results of an ongoing research project on street art in the context of transitional justice in Colombia. It focuses on a case I describe as a mural-graffiti produced in Medellín at the beginning of this year, which invites us to understand the territory as an interconnected network of historical practices of territorialization linked to narco-territory, necro-territory, and anthropogenic territory. This mural-graffiti also fights for the transformation of territory into an ethical network of historical relationships.

### Keywords

Narco-territory, necro-territory, anthropogenic territory; territorialization; Street Art in Colombia

### 1. Introduction

In this article, I share partial results of an ongoing research project on street art in the context of transitional justice and the extended territorialization of neoliberal and narco-capitalism in Colombia. I focus on a case I describe as a mural-graffiti originally produced in Medellín at the beginning of this year, which fights for the transformation of territory into an ethical network of historical relationships. I describe it as mural-graffiti because, among other things, it strategically combines graffiti's subversive and unauthorized production, the historical use of graffiti, the protagonist role of text and denunciation, and the large scale of murals as significant cases of contemporary Street Art practices. Contrary to a superficial appreciation that restricts graffiti to "establishing notoriety rather than raising awareness of some socio-political issue[s]" (Bacharach, 2015, p. 483), the historical and contemporary graffiti practices, highlighted in this article, point out to the social and political importance of graffiti, its embodiment or thematization socio-political issues, as well as interconnection with street art in a large scale.

On January 12, 2025, members of Agroarte collective and the Women Walking for the Truth organization (*Mujeres caminando por la verdad*, onwards MCV), based in Medellín's Commune 13, accompanied by a large group of young artists, social media influencers, and human rights organizations, gathered near the Northern Bus Terminal in Medellín to paint a 50-meter-wide mural-graffiti on the concrete wall of the highway. The artwork featured the phrase '*Las cuchas tienen razón* [The mothers are right]' in bold letters (Figure 1). This piece, onwards labeled as *Las cuchas tienen razón* mural-graffiti, also included a dignified portrait of a member of the MCV and a vilifying portrait of former Colombian President Álvaro Uribe Vélez. The piece was created just three days after the Missing Persons Search Unit, supported by the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (onwards JEP)—a transitional justice court investigating some of the most significant crimes committed during more than half a century of armed conflict—announced the discovery of human remains in the site known as La Escombrera in the Commune 13. These remains were suspected—and



**Figure 1.** *Las cuchas tienen razón* mural-graffiti, as it was being restored for the first time after being covered up two days before. North Bus Terminal, Medellín. January 15, 2025. Photo: Valentina Arango Correa. Source: [www.elespectador.com](http://www.elespectador.com)

later confirmed—to belong to members of the Commune murdered during a dozen military operations between 2002 and 2004. The announcement, as the mural-graffiti stated, supported the testimonies and complaints of witnesses, women, wives, and mothers—who had spoken out for over twenty years without being heard or supported by the State’s judicial system—about the killing and burial of more than a hundred persons. Overnight, the city mayor’s office completely whitewashed the wall, sparking immediate criticism from social and human rights groups, the artists and organizations involved, and a significant portion of Colombian society. It was later repainted in the same spot and recreated in other cities, where it has faced ongoing censorship or vandalism by various actors.

There are many possible approaches to *Las cuchas tienen razón* mural-graffiti, as well as possible issues to consider. While extant discussions of the piece have mainly

focused on historical memory and the MCV, I propose instead to think of this mural-graffiti in less representational terms and more in terms of how it engages with the territory, by paying attention to the interconnected network of historical practices of territorialization it responded to. In this order of ideas, I discuss the mural-graffiti by interweaving three interrelated notions of narco-territory, necro-territory, and anthropogenic territory, which will be defined and explained. These notions also structure the paper.

## 2. Historical territory: Narco-capitalism and Narco-plantation in the Commune

Agroarte is a collective based in Commune 13, with a varying number of stable members spanning nearly all ages, from childhood to old age (Molina Posada et al., 2019, 93). It combines urban agriculture, street art, and rap music, and carries out educational and creative acts of resistance rooted in collective memory, social justice,



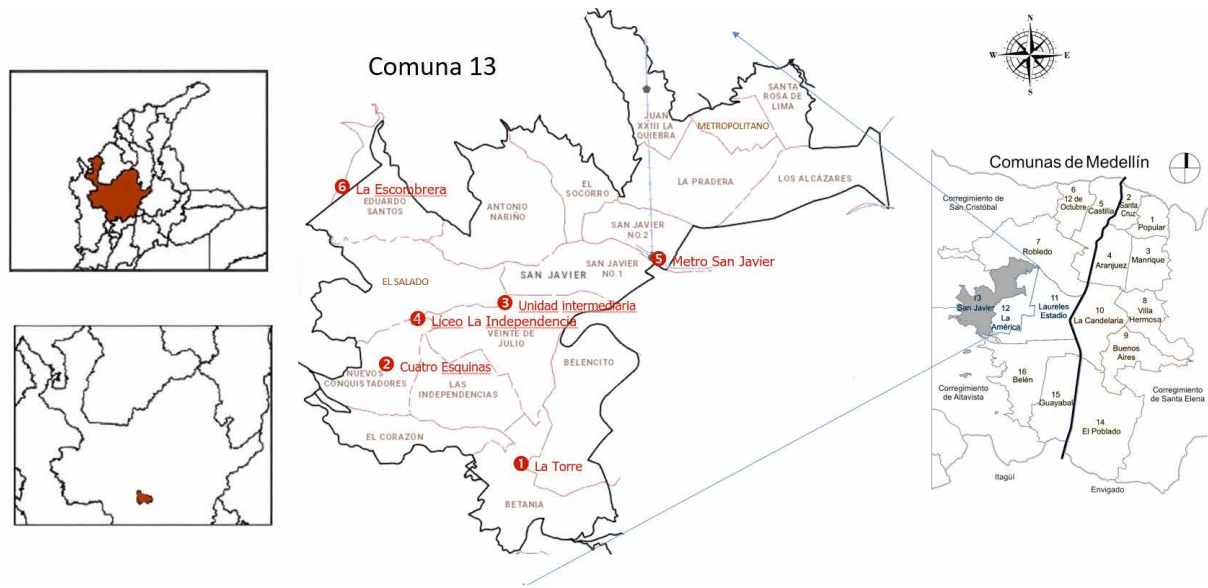
**Figure 2.** Warze, [Untitled mural], 2017. As one walks up along the tripartite mural and the underground river, there is a large map-mural of the city of Medellín (with skyscrapers rooted in the earth) and the Commune 13 (with brick houses also rooted in the earth) [Top Row]. Later, one sees La Escombrera (with skulls and human remains underground) and a campesino caring for a (dead?) woman, rooting on the earth [Bottom left]. Finally, one sees the portrait of a rapper who cries the river. This mural is part of the *Galería Viva*, the mural series produced under Agroarte's leadership at the Parish Cemetery of the America. Medellín. Credits to Warze and Agroarte, as well as [from left to right and top to bottom] Jorge Ivan Ochoa Siegert, Max Perez, Kao-ying, and Yurley Montoya. Source: <https://maps.app.goo.gl>

ecology, and community development. These activities include murals, farming, exchanges, communal pots, workshops, and meetings where community members share stories and legacies (Agroarte 2020). As the name of the collective and the brief description of its activities suggest, Agroarte's actions, including the mural-graffiti I discuss here, blend interests in care, sustainability, environmental and human protection, *buenvivir* and dignity

of life, as well as community processes. They are historically rooted in the Commune's peasant origins and in a territory at the crossroads of local and global dynamics of capitalism.

The Commune 13 is an administrative area of the City of Medellín, and a zone with a long history of violence depicted in several of Agroarte's murals, including those





**Figure 3.** Collage of maps localizing the Commune 13 (Comuna 13) in the City of Medellín [center and right], the Antioquia department, and Colombia [left]. Sources: Drawings on the public domain [left], and a map obtained from Ricardo Aricapa, *Comuna 13, crónica de una guerra urbana* (Medellín, 2005), CC BY-SA 4.0. Collage produced by the author.

part of the Live Galleria project, which made the Parish Cemetery of The America the first on the continent completely covered with murals (Figure 2). The Commune's origin dates back to the 1940s and 1950s, when hundreds of poor peasants fleeing ideological violence and economic pressure in their original territories in the Antioquia Department sought refuge in the department's capital city. Many of these fleeing peasants were forced to work as cheap domestic labor or in low-paying factory jobs under the shadow of Medellín's growth as one of the centers of textile production and coffee companies on the continent. Migrant peasants also ended up cultivating land for landowners or in unclaimed wastelands surrounding the city. Most of them ended up building precarious houses and establishing entire slums that soon began to overcrowd the city's outskirts.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, the Commune 13's poorest neighborhoods, like others in the main cities in Colombia, became strategic areas for criminal bands, and

militias affiliated with or belonging to guerrilla groups, such as the ELN, the M-19, and the FARC. In the 1980s, violence in Commune 13's slums made them stand out among others thanks to Pablo Escobar's influence. In those slums located on the slopes that social and political elites had decidedly neglected as socially and politically marginalized spaces, Escobar based his 'Medellín without slums' political party. It was there that he obtained the social support that enabled him to reach the Chamber of Representatives and consolidate his power as the most visible head of the Medellín Cartel. This was possible because, among other things, Escobar paid to build hundreds of houses in different poor neighborhoods, especially in Commune 13's slums, evidently filling the void left by local corrupt governments. He also supported local businesses, in addition to building soccer fields and other amenities for the inhabitants. His transformation of those forgotten slums into his territory of influence and sovereignty included creating communication networks through different strategies, from giving away

video recordings and TV sets at a time when satellite dishes and globalization were arriving, to buying a local TV channel in Medellín, and transforming the community into a network of informants. Finally, Escobar offered teenagers in the slums the opportunity to work as members of several groups of contract killers, who played a crucial national and international role in sustaining the Cartel's terror and consolidating the growing global neoliberal economy of narco-trafficking, which I shorten here as narco-capitalism. This is how the Commune's social and economic networks of interaction, communication, exchange, participation, and life were profoundly transformed, molded, and energized by what I describe as narco-capitalism and narco-plantation.

These two notions deserve attention and brief and practical descriptions. Inspired by Laura Pulido's work on 'Geographies of race and ethnicity', Eduardo Mendieta has stated that "without the slave ship [...] and the plantation" there would not be racial capitalism, that is, there would not be the generation of value by means of the (re)production of sedimentations of racial inequality (2019, p. 90). Mendieta arguably adds that "without expropriation [...] and distribution of brown and black bodies and Nature, [there would be] no accumulation of surplus value, and thus, no capitalist wealth" (2019, p. 90). Mendieta's words can be reformulated to address what, with Maziyar Ghiabi, I call narco-capitalism, a "capitalism founded on (illicit) drugs" (2022, p. 1). A type of capitalism where, I add to Ghiabi's analysis, the production of drugs and the generation of value is reached by means of the (re)production of social and racial inequality, as well as violence and terror. A capitalism where the surplus does not necessarily go to the actual peasant cropping the coca plant and the hitmen and hitwomen serving the regime of fear and control, but to those controlling and "managing, the value chain where drugs pass from being plants under cultivation to high-profit goods, especially once passed across international borders into Northern markets, or into national metropolises" (Ghiabi, 2022, p. 3). The reader should not neglect the fact that just the Colombian drug trafficking industry in the 1980s and early 1990s was among the twelve largest businesses in the world (Los Otros dueños del país, 1996), and this could not have been possible without an extensive inter-

national network and support from several international institutions, governments, and financial infrastructures.

I partially adopt Mendieta's and Ghiabi's reflections to affirm that, from the point of view of Commune 13, no narco-capitalism could have been possible—or reached the levels it has—without the cheap labor of peasants cultivating coca instead of food, the forced displacement driven by social inequality and the drug war, and the slums where impoverished youth become contract killers and soldiers for illegal groups. If one may agree that the development of merchant capitalism is linked to colonialism, plantations, and slavery, and that the trade and commerce of opium in East Asia shaped the British Empire and supported its colonial power, then one may also propose this: the transnational production and trafficking of cocaine since the 1980s fueled the growth of neoliberal capitalism and transnational commerce in Medellín and the globe, and fueled the violence and terror associated with the production, control, and market of cocaine and other drugs such as opium.

Moreover, in connection to cocaine and narco-capitalism, we may also point out the emergence of a neoliberal transnational narco-plantation, which is neither a metaphor nor a concept limited to the agricultural enclaves of coca crops. The narco-plantation names here a complex and transnational system of production of cocaine and territorialization since the late 20th century that, in addition to the natural crops in the Andes and the peasants cultivating them and cooking and preparing the coca paste, involves, for instance, the chemical substances imported for producing cocaine, the increasing demand from consumers in Europe and the US, the rise of the Gross Domestic Product of several nations such as Colombia and the US, and the bands and contract killers in Commune 13 in charge of securing the transportation of cocaine or the control of territory and traffic routes, as well as the assassination of any competition, public servants, and witnesses. The narco-plantation of narco-capitalism, be related to cocaine or opium, also involves dynamics of (re)production and replacement of cheap labor that has profoundly impacted generations of youngsters, especially in Commune 13: The contract killers' high mortality rate means continuous

replacement as part of a narco-plantation system that still nurtures and takes advantage of social conditions of dispossession in the Global South, while undermining democratic and collective processes and practices.

Since the late 20th century, hundreds of young members from Commune 13 and other areas in Medellín and the country have become part of such dynamics of reproduction of cocaine-related labor. In fact, we must remember that in the 1980s and 1990s the youngsters recognized themselves as part of such a complex neo-liberal narco-plantation and its correlated necropolitics i.e., the capacity to control a group's life and death by excluding leaving it in a status of social death (Mbembe, 2019), and explicitly acknowledged their short life expectancy by claiming for themselves a 'motto' and piece of urban poetry eventually found as graffiti on the walls of the Commune's slums: '*no nacimos pa'semilla* [we ain't born to be seed]'. This motto, which served as the title of the first sociological study of young hitmen in Medellín, offered a striking image of the place those youngsters identified for themselves as part of the system of reproduction of death rather than life. As Aka, a hip-hop singer and poet, as well as graffiti writer and leader of Agroarte, explicitly stated, such dynamics of violence have "inflicted immense damage [for instance, through...] deaths, displacements, threats [... and have] left indelible marks on the population" of the Commune 13. (Aka and López, 2021)

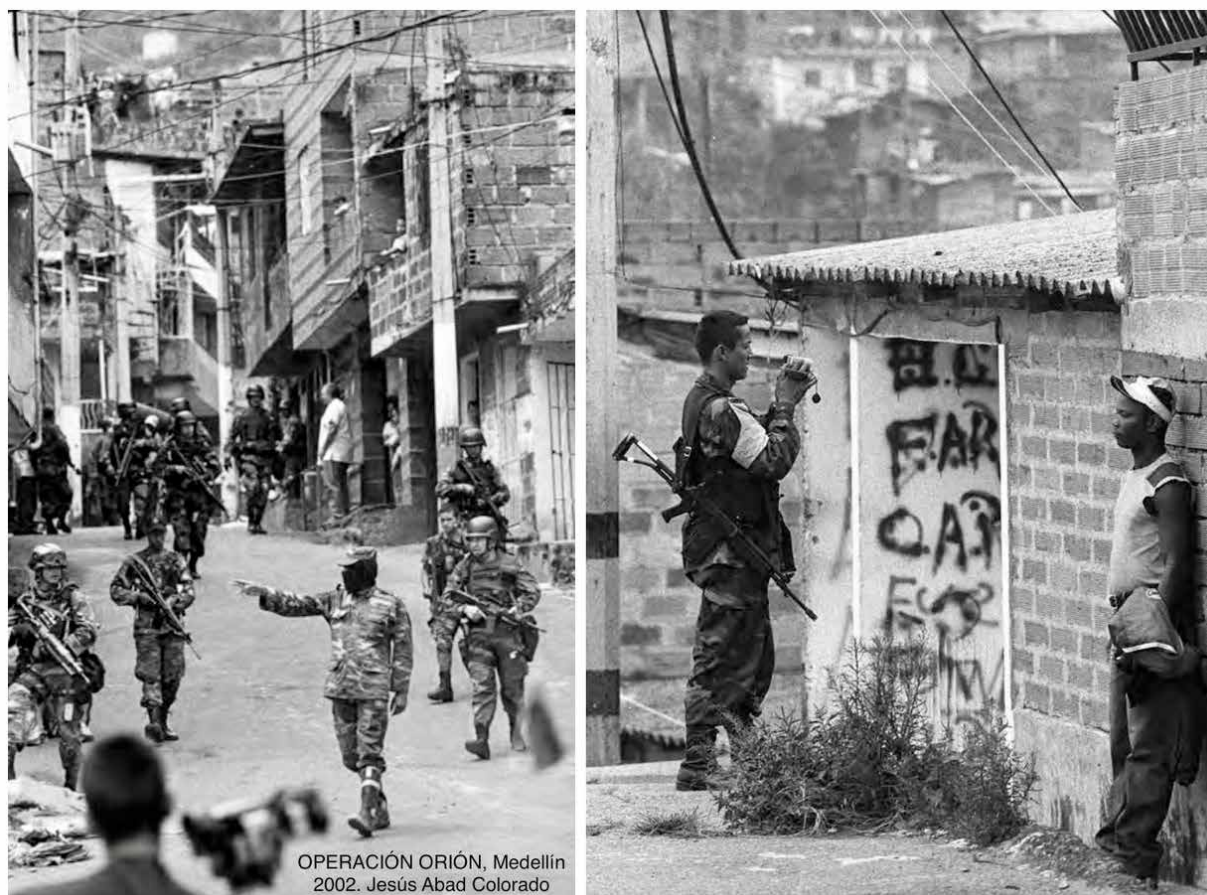
The *no nacimos pa'semilla* motto helps us better understand Agroarte's work of care and nurturing life and communality, aiming to reformulate the inhabitants' relationship with the Commune's history, life, and territory. Three of Agroarte's projects decidedly respond to narco-capitalism's necro-politics and narco-plantation: Seeds for the Future ("Pedagogical and learning processes [...] for producing neighborhood stories, workshops and local advocacy"), Memory Plants ("to remember the pain through the life that nature provides" by giving a plant "the name of a murdered or missing person, accompanied by a phrase written by a family member"), and Agrarian Hip-hop ("collectively constructed musical work in response to the historical and everyday

violence [... and to] propose resistance", "dignification of memory", and "transformation of our environment") (Agroarte, n.d.).

The Collective's projects and responses also involve mural projects, including portable murals, in an effort to deterritorialize the narco-plantation and narco-capitalism and forge a new communal territorialization of life. Murals that portray, for instance, the Commune's peasant roots and the impact of violence, the care for plants, the celebration and commemoration of the commune's social leaders, and rappers. And *Las cuchas tienen razón* mural-graffiti is not an exception in Agroarte's reterritorialization and thematization of history, narco-capitalism, and narco-plantation, even if it, unlike the small and medium-sized murals produced within the Commune, was by far the largest single intervention and took place outside the Commune.

### 3. Necro-territory: Necropolitics and the Military Operations in the Commune (2002-2003)

With Escobar's death in 1993 and the neoliberal policies nationally adopted by the State in 1992, the infighting between diverse armed groups involved in the drug business increased and reached levels never seen in the Commune 13. Groups that included leftist militias that arrived before Escobar and far-right paramilitary groups created before and at the time by a combination of wealthy landowners and new and old drug cartels who fought Escobar and had received foreign military support through the State's US-backed war on leftist groups and the 'War on Drugs'. Of significance was the infamous Persecuted by Pablo Escobar group, a Paramilitary Bloc founded by enemies of Escobar, including the Castaño brothers—who would create the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, commonly known as AUC—and the Cali Cartel. That group assisted the Colombian government (which was supported by the US's 'War on Drugs') and secured further influence and presence within the State. In their war against Escobar, it was usual to find contract killers—and many other youngsters—dead in the streets, eventually with graffiti on nearby walls or on text written on papers placed on their bodies, as had happened earlier in the 1980s and would happen later in different regions of the country, under



**Figure 4.** [Left] A member of the Cacique Nutibara Group, guiding the Army and pointing to people who should be taken, and [Right] During the Orion Operations, the youngest members of the Commune were interrogated and filmed, October 2002. Note the graffiti on poles and walls. Photos and Credits: © Jesús Abad Colorado. Sources: @AbadColorado on Jun 17, 2021, and @AlvaroArtD on Oct 5, 2023. X (former Twitter).

paramilitary control. In this context of the drug war and the 'War on Drugs,' violent actors used graffiti to threaten people—locals and visitors alike—and highlight necropolitical logics of territorial control.

In 1996, a new far-right paramilitary group founded by entrepreneurs and politicians—apparently including Uribe Vélez, then Governor of Antioquia—was called Metro Bloc (Gallo, 2025). Its goal was to oversee the entire metropolitan area of Medellín, co-opt hitmen and hitwomen, and establish territorial hegemony by dominating this traditional Escobar enclave, controlling entry points to the city, and securing surveillance vantage points. The Bloc contracted leaders of small armed

gangs, providing them with a monthly salary and training on farms and military bases, while instructing them to patrol neighborhoods and extort money. It also developed a subcontracting system with highly operational criminal organizations and hitman bands. In 2001, the Metro Bloc subcontracted the far-right Cacique Nutibara paramilitary Bloc led by a former Escobar lieutenant. By 2002, the first controlled a significant portion of crime in Medellín and Antioquia. As members of the Commune have long publicly denounced, it was in this context that various armed forces adopted the practices of kidnapping and killing people as mechanisms of 'cleaning,' control, and terror.

And yet, the levels of violence in the Commune will only increase as the Metro Bloc's military leader rejected the demands from entrepreneurs, politicians, and the main paramilitary groups in the country that had joined together under the AUC to regulate drug trafficking and routes; tasks and businesses in which the AUC was deeply involved in a plan for securing their status as armed and economic group (Bloque Metro, *el fantasma que ronda* a Álvaro Uribe Vélez, 2019). The Metro Bloc also refused the demands to join the AUC in ongoing negotiations for an official demobilization with the Uribe Vélez Administration, as he had recently been elected president of Colombia. Pressure was applied, and a coalition of interests and armed groups emerged to usurp the Metro Bloc's power and control. This is how, under Uribe Vélez's orders and under the guise of pacifying Medellín and Antioquia and restoring the State control over the territory, a dozen official operations were carried out in Commune 13 between 2002 and 2003; a period during which kidnapping and killing reached their peak.

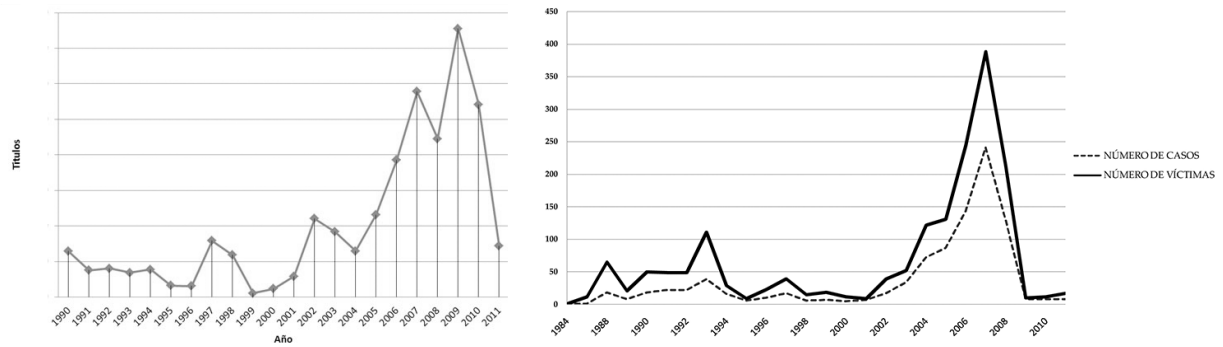
During those operations of conquest and colonization, the National Army was guided and accompanied by members of the Cacique Nutibara Bloc to identify anyone believed to be a member or collaborator of the Metro Bloc, as well as of the remnant leftist militias (Figure 4). Among the most advertised operations are those called Orion, which included tanks and helicopter gunships, and arbitrary detentions justified by the façade of legal procedures from the Attorney General's Office. The operations resulted in bloody massacres and disappeared individuals, and involved throwing bodies into La Escombrera, a site of disposal of rubble from city demolitions and renovations, established a few years earlier by Agregados San Javier, and soon absorbed by Construcciones Cóndor. Remarkably, both companies maintain close relationships with high-ranking officials and executives who previously held key roles in government agencies (Ajaib, 2025). Located in the upper part of the Commune, at the border between rural and urban areas, La Escombrera had, and still has, restricted access. However, as many testimonies have indicated, the army and paramilitary groups had easy access to the site at the time. Apparently, a paramilitary group had even set

up a camp in the area (Figure 7).

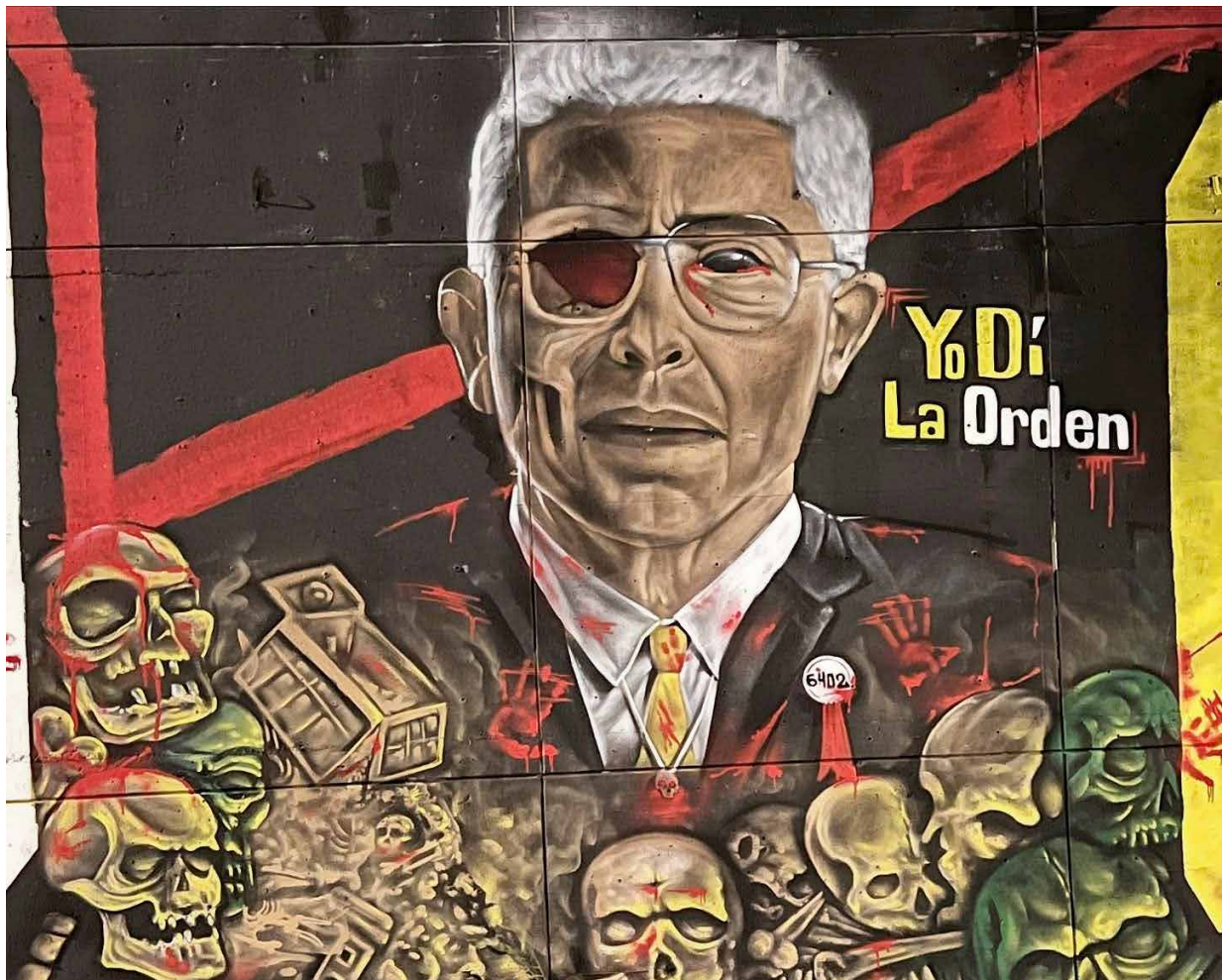
These military operations increased violence, and La Escombrera became a significant symbol of what I have described as the narco-plantation as well as narco-capitalism's necropolitics and, I may add now, a symbol of the necro-territory, a territory of necropolitics. The operations granted the Cacique Nutibara Bloc territorial control of the city and the drug trade, making the Bloc the largest and most influential outsourcing office for criminal gangs in Antioquia and across the country. Notably, the 'War on Drugs', which it is worth reminding was renamed in 2001 as 'War on Terror', has become, in actuality, part of the dynamics of narco-capitalism that have long captured a significant part of the State, and have shaped violence and terror, creating landscapes and territories of necropolitics related to the production and neoliberal control of the cocaine supply chain, value, and market around the globe.

Significantly, as Colombian society would realize more than a decade later, the operations in Commune 13 tested what soon became a secret national policy of controlling military and economic zones, illegally regulating illicit drug trafficking, and producing figures that favored the militaristic victory of 'War on Drugs' and 'War on Terror' at any cost. This secret policy was part of the Uribe Vélez Administration's 'Democratic Security' public policy aimed at creating "confidence and stability" and attracting foreign private investment. In fact, the operations in Commune 13, which the Administration widely advertised on the national media, marked the beginning of Colombia's most critical period of extrajudicial killings. I am referring to the killing of innocent peasants, homeless and disabled individuals, and outcasts whom the Army, through paramilitary and narco-related gangs—via outsourcing—kidnapped or lured to rural and isolated areas with false job offers. They were later murdered, dressed in military uniforms, placed next to old guns, and presented as guerrilla fighters eliminated in staged combat. These State crimes, euphemistically called 'False Positives', which the Army and Uribe Vélez Administration assumed would soon be forgotten and buried by time, as the bodies of La Escombrera would be by rubble, served to test the success of Uribe Vélez's





**Figure 5.** [Left] Number of mining titles authorized between 1990 and 2011, Source: Insuasty Rodríguez et al, 2013; [Right] Number of extrajudicial executions (Number of cases reported and number of victims) between 1984 and 2011, Source: CINEP, 2011.



**Figure 6.** Portrait of Álvaro Uribe Vélez in *Las cuchas tienen razón* mural-graffiti, as it was restored for the first time after being covered up two days before. Note that La Escombrera is represented on the bottom left, and the figure wears a 'bloody medal' with the number 6042, which corresponds to the 'False Positives' recognized by the JEP. North Bus Terminal, Medellín. January 15, 2025. Source: @AquinoTicias1 on Facebook.

policies and helped him secure reelection in 2006. The crimes also facilitated the smooth continuation of outsourcing neoliberalism, which, in the early 21st century, introduced a more official—even if secret—necropolitics through the 'False Positives'. Note how the dramatic increment of these extrajudicial executions defines a period inaugurated with the Orion operations and very much characterized by the boom of the Administration's authorization of large-scale foreign mining projects with multinationals.

In this regard, we must underline the following significant decision: Agroarte, MCV, and the national social organizations (including MOVICE, which is a coalition of HHRR organizations against State crimes) supporting the mural-graffiti resolved to respond to the JEP's announcement by painting *Las cuchas tienen razón* mural-graffiti on the vast concrete wall in the main intersection in front of the North Bus Terminal. This Bus Terminal was a critical node of the complex network of 'False Positives' in the Antioquia Department, where many victims, including people from the Commune, were deceived and transported on commercial buses to rural places where they would be killed. With this decision about where to paint the phrase 'the mothers were right' in bold letters, accompanied by an image of the leader, Margarita Restrepo, holding a picture of her missing daughter (Figure 9), and portrait condemning former Colombian President Álvaro Uribe Vélez (Figure 6), the joined actors evidently connected the struggle of the mothers and relatives of those killed and missing in La Escombrera, and the mothers and relatives of the so-called 'False Positives'.

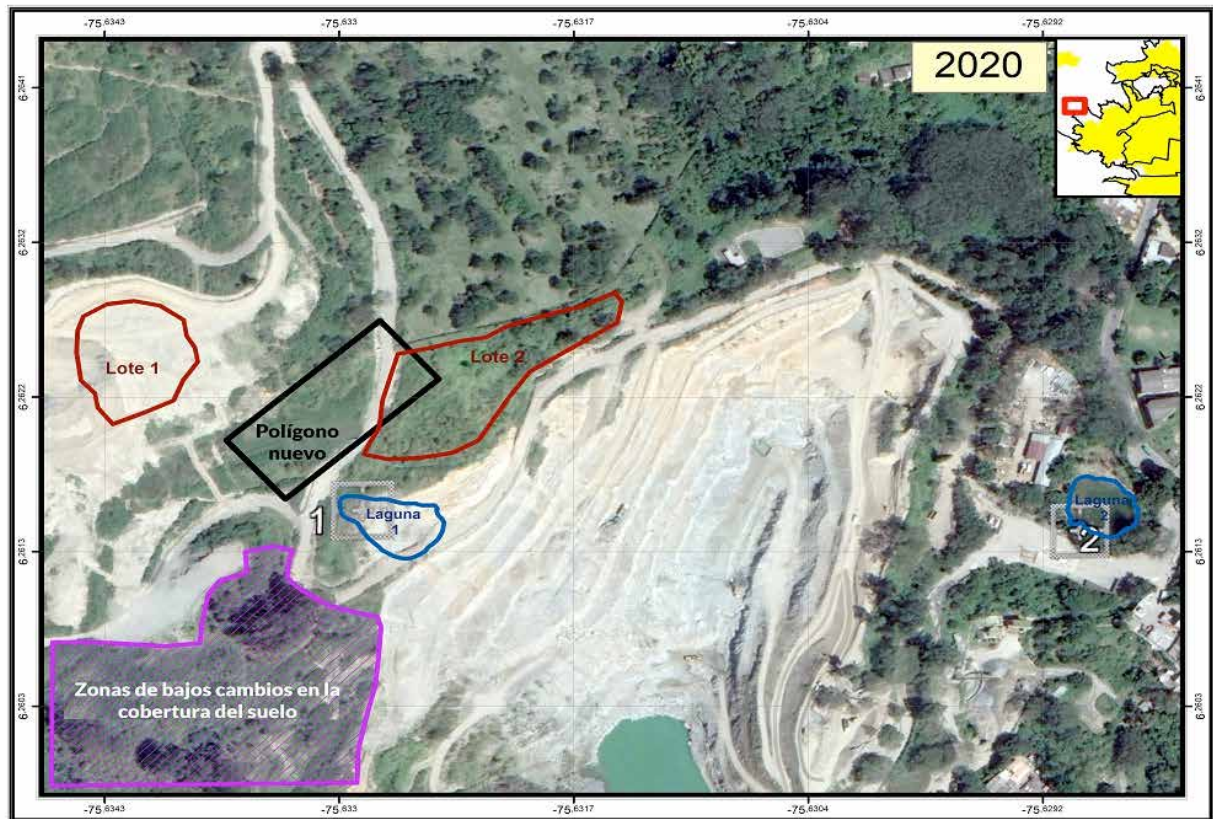
Nonetheless, I must also underline an aspect of the decision that has been somewhat marginalized: by painting the mural-graffiti on a concrete wall next to the Bus Terminal from which innocents were taken to find their death in rural areas and be exhibited as guerrillas, the mural-graffiti 'inverts' La Escombrera, that is, brings the narco-capitalism's necropolitics from the Commune and the outskirts to the large central area of Medellín, and suggests a bid for an ethical reterritorialization of the city, while making visible the necro-territorialization of narco-capitalism. *Las cuchas tienen razón* mural-graffiti of-

fers a distinct statement and, in a sense, partially evokes what Val Plumwood (2008) describes as "shadow places [...] forfeited for the sake of sustaining developed-world lifestyles", and Naomi Klein calls "sacrifice zones" where the inhabitants' lives are expendable (2014). However, while Plumwood's sites and Klein's places are located in faraway rural regions, La Escombrera is a site endemic to the neoliberal development and organization of the urban world. The mural-graffiti's marking of the (des)territorialization of narco-capitalism and necropolitics acquires an interesting global pertinence when considered in the context of the Anthropocene.

#### 4. Anthropogenic necro-territory: La Escombrera and the Neoliberal City

When the Orion Operations took place, and after having peacefully demonstrated in the Commune's streets against the security forces for firing at their homes, relatives, mostly women, of the victims began to denounce the killings and dumping of bodies. Since 2003, about a hundred and eighty relatives, mostly women, seeking their missing relatives in the Commune and pointing to the dumping of bodies in La Escombrera, have organized under the flag of the MCV. For two decades, their claims were consistently dismissed by national and municipal administrations, as well as the Attorney General's Office, when the complainants were not publicly censored and vilified as liars and accomplices of criminal bands by the local and national administrations, and threatened by 'dark forces'—not always that 'unidentifiable'. Finally, in 2020, the JEP addressed the denunciations, studied the findings and registers of the Attorney General's Office, and granted precautionary measures. A protected area of 6,912 square meters was defined in 2024, with 2,417 square meters prioritized for the search (JEP, 2024) (Figure 7).

The JEP organized a large interdisciplinary team of engineers, geotechnicians, and forensic archaeologists to search in the rubble dump. The team calculated that more than 40,000 cubic meters of rubble had been disposed of at this site since 2002. After removing 37,022 cubic meters, equivalent to 2,278 dump trucks of material, the JEP reached the area of forensic interest and found the first remains (JEP, 2025). Layers and layers of



**Figure 7.** Visual documentation included in the JEP's announcement on social media of the areas of exploration in La Escombrera. Marked with black and purple on the left of this aerial photo are those areas where the bodies of victims were likely buried. Between those two areas is a third area in blue ink, where the paramilitary group set up a camp. August 12, 2020. Credits: JEP. Source: @JEP\_Colombia on X (former Twitter). @JEP\_Colombia on X (former Twitter).

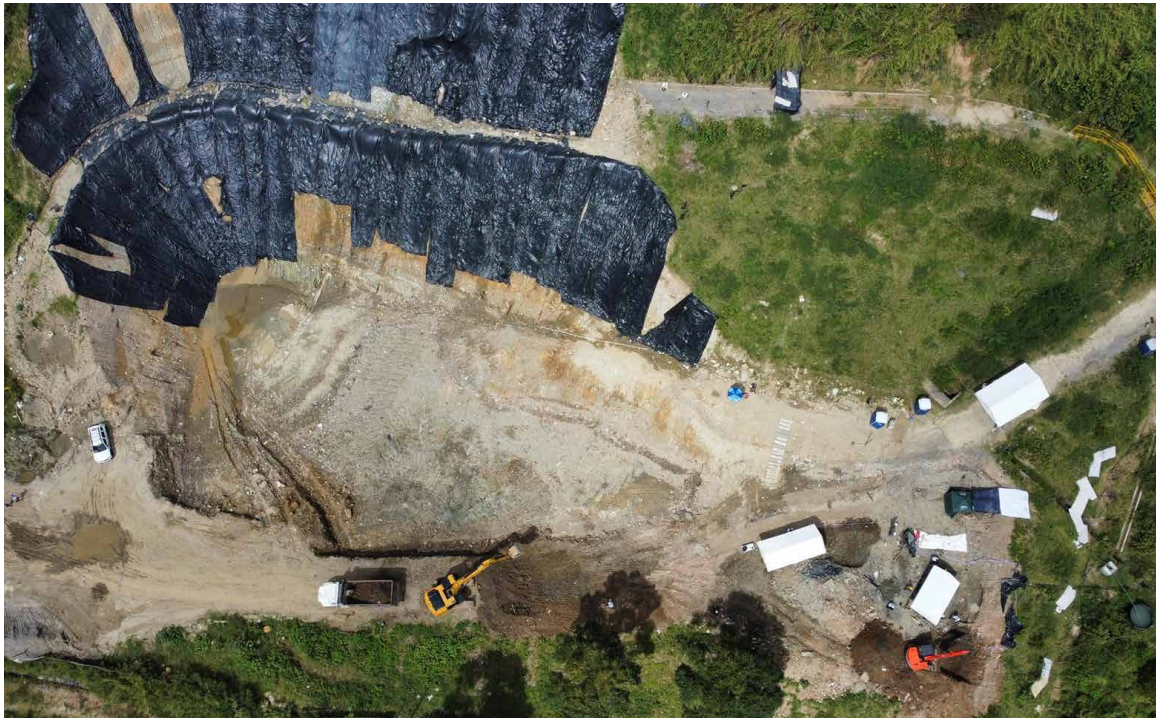
debris have made La Escombrera less a traditional mass grave and more an anthropogenic territory or necropolitics that surpasses traditional forensic interventions. As already stated, the mural-graffiti responded to the discovery of the first corpses (Figure 8).

To link *Las cuchas tienen razón* mural-graffiti and the anthropogenic necroterritory, we need to reformulate Peter Sloterdijk's suggestion that the concept of "Anthropocene"—as an era of anthropogenic changes in the geological strata—involves "a gesture that in a juridical context would be characterized as the designation of a responsible agency" (2018, p.1). We may say that La Escombrera invites us to consider an anthropogenic territory of State crimes in the context of the critical con-

nection between narco-capitalism and the neoliberal city. In this regard, it is worth noting that La Escombrera also includes a stone, gravel, and sand quarry used for new construction projects in the city and for concrete production (Figure 9). Notably, the dump and the quarry site emerged during a construction boom in Medellín, when real estate and concrete production became practical venues for laundering money from narco-capitalism—coincidentally at the time of the AUC's demobilization—and when the local administration, supported by the wealthiest companies' alliances (including construction firms) in Medellín, decided to develop what they called 'Social urbanism'.

A brief recount of the historical context of the emer-





**Figure 8.** Aerial photo of part of the area known as the new polygon. JEP's announcement of the first remains found in the forensic excavation. January 30, 2025. Credits: JEP. Source: @JEP\_Colombia on X (former Twitter).



**Figure 9.** La Escombrera in Commune 13, with Downtown Medellín in the background. Jan 10, 2025. Credits: JEP. Source: @JEP\_Colombia on X (former Twitter).



gence of the 'Social urbanism' and La Escombrera is needed. During the construction boom of 1992-1994 in Colombia, "it was impossible to buy good lots for construction because they were all controlled by drug traffickers" (Los Otros dueños del país, 1996). Notably, some of the more conservative calculations estimated that narco-traffic investment in real estate between 1979 and 1994 would amount to \$6.56 billion; an amount tremendously significant in the Colombian market, driving real estate prices by 1996 to levels comparable to New York (Los Otros dueños del país 1996); a situation from which large building companies and real estate corporations benefited. And this trend of investment did not disappear overnight with Escobar's death. It continued and grew across Colombia (Los Otros dueños del país, 1996), and coincided, in the context of Medellín, with the local crisis of capital accumulation caused by the fall of the flow of capital from the cartel, as well as the stagnation of the industrial production (Santana Rivas, 2021, p. 42-43) due to the neoliberal policies adopted in 1992.

Since 1999, and effectively since 2003, when the alliance of the wealthiest companies led by the Business Group of Antioquia (a conglomerate composed by around 125 companies working an economic group with significant investments abroad, with profound influence in local and regional policies and supporters of the paramilitary), put the new Majors in the city and developed the 'Social urbanism' plan. Presented as "an idealized social pact between business owners, local communities, and the municipal government", the plan involved strategic urbanistic intervention, impacting specific points in poor communes (for instance, with kilometers of public electric escalators) (Santana Rivas, 2012, p. 36). The building permits for large and expensive interventions, approved by the new local administration and initiated in the Medellín Metropolitan Area, experienced dramatic growth until 2011, even amid the 2008 global crisis (Santana Rivas, 2021, p. 49-50). Needless to say, the wealthiest companies' plans also included transforming Medellín into neoliberal territory and a destination for international tourism and capital investment.

*Las cuchas tienen razón* mural-graffiti painted on the concrete wall next to the Bus Terminal, brought La Escombrera to the center of a city that has been renewed from Las Escombrera itself, and reminded people that the missing's corpses are embedded in layers of criminal agency and anthropic material, on which flows of capital of the narco-capitalism and the neoliberal city and companies feed. The very same neoliberal city that, in less than 24 hours, rapidly erased the mural-graffiti, while for decades has been permissive of the tourist-attracting murals celebrating Pablo Escobar on several walls and as part of a new branding and territorialization of Medellín that has also financially supported street art in the Communes (Figure 10). *Las cuchas tienen razón*: mural-graffiti interrupted and disturbed this neoliberal territorialization that allows that kind of murals and, at the same time, determines what, where, and how should be (in)visible, (in)audible, and meaningful in Medellín's dynamics of capital, life, and death. In fact, and it is not a mere coincidence that the Medellín Major (a well-known supporter of Uribe Velez's policies and a politician protecting the Business Group of Antioquia's interests), who asked for the whitewashing of the mural-graffiti, justified the censorship stating that "One thing is graffiti as an artistic expression, example what has been achieved in Commune 13 and other areas of Medellín, and another very different thing is disorder and those who simply want to generate chaos" ('Las cuchas tenían razón', su dolor merece respeto, 2025).

## 5. Final words, instead of Conclusions

A territory, the Commune 13 included, is not just—as usually assumed in geography—an administrative division, a geographical region under the jurisdiction of a State, or a land with human and nonhuman resources claimed, controlled, or disputed by political, military, or economic forces such as drug cartels, paramilitary, and business groups. *Las cuchas tienen razón* mural-graffiti reminds us that territorialization does not just concern the territory as reification of power or as controlled land. The territory is also an interweaving of spatial, symbolic, and cultural networks of actual and historical social and intersubjective relationships and dynamics of power over



**Figure 10.** The most famous mural among a dozen depicting Pablo Escobar was painted in 2021. This one includes the statement 'Welcome, here one breathes peace' and has been repainted for decades in Commune 9, where Pablo Escobar lived. This neighborhood, now known as the Pablo Escobar Neighborhood, and the mural are part of persistent celebrations of Escobar's deeds and a site for narco-tourism. A month after the outrage over the censorship of *Las cuchas tienen razón* mural-graffiti, the famous mural was finally erased by the city mayor's office. Photo and Credits: Anonymous TripAdvisor reviewer. Source: [www.viator.com](http://www.viator.com)

life (necro-territory), capital (narco-territory), and human action and time (anthropogenic territory). Moreover, the mural-graffiti reminds us that (de)territorialization may not consist solely in gaining control, as the usual take on the territory suggests, but instead in mutual care and a vital space of ethical interdependencies for constructing sovereignty and self-determination against narco-capitalism, necro-politics, and military and economic regimes. At stake in *Las cuchas tienen razón* mural-graffiti is not just historical memory. The mural-graffiti also articulates and performs a commitment and an invitation to

address and expand the understanding of the territory as a network of care, support, renewed ethics, and dignity of life and death. It should not be surprising that when news of the first erasure broke on social media, people immediately rejected the censorship. During the following months, graffiti and street art crews and art collectives, along with the general public, HHRR organizations, and social groups, raised their voices and began producing versions of the graffiti-mural in other areas of the city of Medellín and in other cities. Photos documenting the new murals populated the virtual 'walls', in



**Figure 11.** Margarita Restrepo, leader and most public face of the MCV organization, stands next to the mural-graffiti and her portrait as they are being reproduced again. The painting shows her wearing a photo of her missing daughter, with the name “MOVICE” written on it. North Bus Terminal, Medellín. January 12th, 2025. Source: @AquinoTicias1 on Facebook.

a clear example of solidarity and expansion of the territory as the said network of care, ethics, and dignity. The reflection on how that expansion particularly took place in the virtual realm and what the tensions between different social actors and further cases of censorship developed deserves its own space.

#### **Conflict of Interests and ethics**

The author declares no conflict of interest. The author also declares full adherence to all journal research ethics

policies, namely involving the participation of human subjects' anonymity and/or consent to publish.

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