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Migration, Political Art and Digitalization

Sara Wiederkehr González

Sometimes we walk around on different edges of this world, trying to find a place we can call home. Sometimes, we find a corner, or a cliff, and build a house there. We meet our neighbors and become friends with them. We find a job, a lover, and plant a garden. We feel free and creative. We learn, we are scared. Sometimes we just cross country borders, trying to find some peace, anywhere calm, a space to remain and be. We travel with our history, our own stories, our way of being. We may find others in these walks, we may walk alone sometimes. Sometimes, we wonder if we will ever find that place, or if we will be like nomads around the world, running away from the difficulties, the bullets, the hunger, the lack of money and of opportunities. Being refugees, migrants, strangers. Remaining foreigners.

We might find out that home can be wherever we are. We may build our own place somewhere else, we may find the place we belong to. But if we miss our other home, we just call. All we have to do is open the laptop, scroll through Facebook, call by Skype, write an e-mail, chat, read the news, listen to the radio. And for a few seconds, minutes or even hours, we are home, we sit next to our mother, we see the blue sea and almost, almost, feel the breeze. We actualize ourselves through these interactions.

The war we thought we left behind is on the screen, as are the horrors and the nightmares. Is it on the screen or is it on the other side?

-Personal reflections of the author.

Throughout this paper, the main interest is in describing the use and practice of social networking by Colombian migrants and its influence on the relation with, and the construction of a discourse about, Colombian conflict and social reality. In addressing the problematization of cyberspace and its virtuality as a space, an account is given of the singularities, political concerns, and personal expectations of two Colombian migrants living in Berlin. This leads to an analysis of the influence of virtuality in the construction of political and social discourses and of practices abroad.

In the following, there is a short introduction to the Colombian armed conflict, followed by the theoretical and conceptual approach that leads this research. The second section outlines the method used, while in the third and fourth sections the relations between territory and virtuality through (short) life histories are described.

INTRODUCTION

Colombia is a country with a very particular history. The Colombian armed conflict dates back to 1962, and is an ongoing, low-intensity war between the Colombian government, paramilitary groups and left-wing guerrillas (for example: FARC,¹ ELN,² EPL,³ M-19⁴), with participation of the drug cartels and different criminal gangs. Its historical roots can be found in the period known as *La Violencia* (“The Violence”), which started in 1948 with the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a populist political leader; the bipartisan war followed.⁵ The roots are multiple: social inequality, concentrated ownership and control of land,⁶ political persecution of those who are “left” in their thinking, and drug trafficking, among others (cf. Lozano Guillén 2006).

1 | Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - FARC (“Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia”), founded 1964.

2 | Ejército de Liberación Nacional - ELN (“National Liberation Army”), founded in 1964.

3 | Ejército Popular de Liberación - EPL (“Popular Liberation Army”), founded in 1967.

4 | Movimiento 19 de Abril - M-19 (“19th April Movement”), founded 1970.

5 | Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was assassinated in Bogotá, April 9, 1948. The bipartisan war (1948-1958), between the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party, ended with a political agreement named: “National Front” (Frente Nacional) (1958-1974).

6 | The majority of the land in Colombia is under the control of a few families. They have enormous political control and power. This issue plays a key role in the conflict and exacerbates the social inequality.

Since its independence from the Spanish conquerors,⁷ Colombia has not actually had a single period of peace. During recent decades, there have been several peace negotiations between the government and different armed groups. For example, in 1985 the guerrilla group M-19 and the government jointly signed a ceasefire, however the agreement was not respected by either side. At the same time, the government started fruitless negotiations with FARC. Together with some of ELN combatants, they created the new party of Unión Patriótica (UP) as a political alternative to the armed struggle. In the elections of 1986, UP won twenty-three municipalities and gained fourteen seats. However, in the period between 1986 and 2002, between 5,000 and 20,000 of its members were assassinated.⁸ This offensive was carried out by elite groups—still unidentified—in an attempt to suppress political opposition (Cepeda 2006). The UP party turned back to political life in 2014. The current peace negotiations with FARC started in 2012, and there have been several subsequent agreements between both parties. This year (2016) is set to see the signing of the document that should open a new period in Colombian history. Simultaneously, peace negotiations along the same lines have begun between ELN and the Government.⁹ Despite these efforts, since the foundation of Marcha Patriótica, 113 of its members have been killed.¹⁰ In March 2016 alone, 28 young social activists were killed.¹¹ In the last three decades, 5.8 million people have been subject to forced internal displacement (Acnur/Codhes 2013). At the time last census was carried out, 3,331,107 Colombians were recorded as living abroad (Cepal 2010).

The discussion of the authenticity and “realness” of the virtual world and virtual relationships invokes the supposed opposition between virtual space as abstract, and the real world as the tangible and real one. However, the notions of virtuality and reality are not necessarily opposed; there is a reality in the virtuality itself or as Josefine Bormann states it: Some spaces become places to some people, while to other people they will remain spaces (Bormann 2013: 63).

The distinction relates to the more fundamental one of time: the actual image of the present that is happening, and the virtual image of the past

7 | The first independence uprising began on July 20, 1810 and ended in 1816. Finally on August 7, 1819, at the Batalla de Boyacá (“Boyaca Battle”), the Spanish troops capitulated.

8 | The genocide of the UP was perpetrated by people still unknown. There have been single convictions, but the investigation is ongoing.

9 | www.Semana.com March 30, 2016.

10 | “Marcha Patriótica” is a social and political movement founded in 2012 by different social organizations and political parties. They claim to seek peace in Colombia through social justice.

11 | [El Tiempo](http://ElTiempo.com), March 21, 2016.

that is conserved, are marked in the *actualization*. Deleuze (1995) argues that actualization allows for the distinction of that limit that is impossible to assimilate: the *virtual* reacts above the *actual*. The virtual is actualized, and the actual reverts to the virtual as its own. The actual is then the complement; the object of this actualization that has, as subject, the virtual.

According to Augé (1995), a place is defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity. Borrmann (2013) concludes in her study that cyberspace cannot be understood as an abstract place, meant to exist only “while we are sitting in front of the computer.” (ibid: 64). From this reasoning, several questions arise: If the cyberspace is a tangible one, how do migrants—those people who supposedly live in between territories—relate to virtuality? How are these virtual spaces and places constructed from the singularities of Colombian migrants in Berlin? How do they relate to the actuality overseas, in their home countries?

I consider that it is important to begin from the understanding cyberspace not as virtuality, but as the methodological place where different *virtualities* are being articulated. This became apparent during the study I conducted over the past months, following participation in several online chats, discussions and events with Colombian migrants located in Berlin, Germany, and also Argentina and Brazil. It is here, from where the subjects are absent, that the actualization of the space happens. Cyberspace emerged as the medium to connect to a reality happening miles away; political concerns related to from a distance—geographically—remain a close reality in the virtual world.

According to Guattari and Rolnik (2006), the notion of territory is wide. People organize themselves within territories defined by themselves and articulated through other existing ones. It can be related as both a vivid place and a perceived system. Territory is then appropriation; it is the set of representations that will lead to a range of behaviors, inversions, both in time and social, cultural, and aesthetic spaces (ibid: 323). Consequently, territoriality could then be understood as a characterization of agency, when the first step of agency is to discover the territoriality it contains. Territory surpasses the organism and the medium, and the relationship between the two (Deleuze/Guattari 1997: 513). Territory, both the physical and the virtual, can then be understood as a social construction that results from the exercise of power relationships. These power relationships are always implicated in social and temporal practices, and are both material and symbolic, resulting from the production of a space that is constructed differently according to the particular experiences, perceptions, and conceptions of every person (Harvey 1998: 250).

In this context, the discourses about the conflict, and social and political reality in Colombia, are virtual. Its construction happens also in cyberspace, mostly by people living abroad. The virtual depends on and actualizes in the reality. Over the course of this study, and in the same light of Rolnik (2006),

another interesting issue came up: that of examining and assessing—via their constructed virtual world—emotions of the people who migrate, in order to analyze the relationship(s) between migrants and territory. A salient factor in this study was the consideration that even if they do not participate in the actuality of their country, Colombia in this specific case, they still participate in the process of actualization. While abroad, they do attend political and social processes being held on the other side. As noted in wide studies, cyberspace has a direct influence on migration and the formations of communities in diaspora, as well as in the direct relation of building and strengthening of the imagined community in a transnational context. The aim in this study is to understand the notion and construction of territory and the subsequent identification with it through cyberspace. In this respect, I wish to participate in the current debate relating to the use of social networks within communities of migrants, focusing largely on the capacity to strengthen the notion of belonging to their home nation and countrymen. I am aware that this is a fact, but I am more interested in inquiring about the emotions, expectations and personal stories of migrants, considering that migration is not a phenomenon that can be universalized, as it is tied to specific subjectivities.

TERRITORY, MIGRATION AND IDENTITY: A CASE STUDY

For four months, I conducted semi-structured and unstructured interviews, both on- and offline, with Colombian migrants based in Berlin, Germany. These conversations and interviews were held in Spanish, our mutual mother tongue, but I'll present them here translated. During these interviews and conversations, I was interested in inquiring as to their reasons for migration, their expectations and possibilities that were available to them in their host countries, as well as understanding their connection to Colombia and family. In doing so, I wanted to track their emotions as migrants, to trace singularities, as migration does not affect every person in the same way. Further, I work to understand the way in which virtuality affected these singularities in their relationships to their respective networks in Colombia, and their *awareness* of the Colombian conflict.

Image 1

Andrea Territory. Montage: Felipe Ramírez. 2015.

Throughout these conversations I found that most of the people I interviewed took interest in political, social and cultural matters in Colombia, but only after having left. They remained informed through social media; for example, keeping in touch with relatives and co-workers via *Skype*, while through *Facebook* and e-mail they discussed daily news with friends and relatives. The main online diaries they read were those found on www.semana.com and *El Espectador*,¹² as well as other smaller, alternative ones such as *LaSillaVacía*.¹³ Many also developed academic and cultural projects concerning the Colombian armed conflict. This is the case of Andrés, who began to study and research the Colombian conflict whilst in Berlin:

I'm presenting my master thesis in Sound Studies at the UdK...It's about victims [of the Colombian conflict]...I became interested in this topic because previously we did another project about the victims, also with you—he laughs—...and this year I also did a project with my sister in Bogotá, a theater play...about female victims of the armed conflict, based on the report *La Verdad sobre las Mujeres* [the truth about women], written by *La Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres* [the peaceful journey of women]...Those motivations I had had the previous year, and this year, made me think that my thesis... [he hesitates]. After 10 years of being here, you tend to become more interested in Colombia, because the distance allows you to see things better, so, because of the [alienation], you grasp more details about the complexity of the conflict...Because

¹² | www.elespectador.com

¹³ | www.lasillavacia.com

when you're over there, inside, it's more difficult to gain a general perspective. (Andrés, in an interview with the author. March 3, 2015. My translation).

Image 2



Andrés Territory. Montage: Felipe Ramírez, 2015.

I also accompanied them in their academic and work projects and went with them to film and art events, from and about Colombia, in Berlin. After spending so much time together, I became friends with some of them. Being a Colombian migrant myself was helpful in this study, not just as a researcher, but also with regard to being able to share feelings, thoughts and reflections on a similar level, despite differences in our various socio-economic and ideological backgrounds. As someone who left her hometown many years ago, I have still not found another place to really settle down. Interestingly enough, both Andrea and Andrés wholeheartedly accepted me as Colombian—a fact that is rare both in Colombia and in Europe, due to my unusual name and the color of my skin and eyes. I am generally perceived as a foreigner even in my home country.

In the pages that follow, I will present some abstracts of interviews, conversations and observations held with both Andrés and Andrea. I met Andrés in Berlin through a common friend (also Colombian) who had asked me to help in an art project about the Colombian conflict, *Proyecto Mangle*. After the installation was presented we did not keep in touch, but in February 2015 I made contact with him for this study.

I invited Andrea over for dinner. She arrived with a friend of a friend, who was attending *El Espejo*,¹⁴ in Berlin. After this first meeting we stayed in touch, having become friends on *Facebook*. I called her for this study in February 2015, and we began to spend time together and visit some of the cultural events organized by Colombian migrants in Berlin.

I chose to focus on these two people because of their life experiences and the time we shared offered me an interesting insight. Through an account of their personal stories, I will analyze the issue of belonging to a territory, the influence of mass media in the construction of reality discourses and virtual relationships to the home country.

THE PLACE WE BELONG TO

While talking and sharing life experiences with Andrés and Andrea, I realized that even when we understand cyberspace as a space or place, it is actually a methodological space where these virtualities are constantly being actualized. Sometimes, it is just a tool for elaborate nostalgias, sometimes it is converted into a place to create and recreate places of daily resistance and creativity. Additionally, it also helps to narrow the distance gap between here and there, to create an illusion of proximity, to strengthen ties with loved ones left behind.

Both Andrea and Andrés share similar experiences in this regard. But while Andrea is sometimes annoyed because of the blurring of her physical location, she also needs this tool for her job:

I see [*Facebook* and other social media] as a platform and opportunity for promotion... Through the internet, there are these new tools for promotion, dissemination of, lets say, other kinds of content, because before these [contents] were monopolized or concentrated by the mass media and what they wanted to tell us...Recently, I have had more frequent contact with my organization, Cine Libertad,¹⁵ because of common projects...Let's say [what is most affected is] time difference; that's what really affects your reality, even if you don't want it to. Until Sunday, it was a six-hour [time difference], now it's seven. And I had to tell them to be more punctual...It affects reality. I don't hang out with friends in the evenings anymore, because I'm on *Skype*, or waiting to meet someone on *Skype*...and this makes me sad, makes me feel blue. It's like feeling in touch and almost being there, and yet you aren't there. Reality is different. And I wonder, if I'm living here, why I still need so much contact to there? (Andrea, in personal conversation with author. March 31, 2015. My translation)

14 | <https://elespejofilmfestival.com> Accessed: May 26, 2016.

15 | Cine Libertad ("Cinema Freedom"): [[www.http://cinelibertad.co](http://www.cinelibertad.co)]

From my field-diary I read a quote dated April 1, 2015:

Emotional experience: They [migrants] don't belong despite having entered it [the territory]. They don't stop belonging despite having left it. One becomes migrant: territorial and identity reconfigurations. (Rolnik 2006. My translation).

One becomes "migrant." In this becoming, there is a certain agency. In this "not belonging," there is a certain absence of territorialization, even a de-territorialization that becomes a re-territorialization:

Home? Difficult. That's a tough question, because well, here, here, *this* is my home now. As much as I would like to go back to Colombia, let's say at this moment, if I were to go back there, I'd feel I was visiting, as much as I'd like to go back ... As much as I feel that it is my land, or that I feel identified and all, here is where I have my place, where I have my stuff... the association of home, maybe it is that feeling of being comfortable in a place, regardless of geographical location (Andrea. Interview with author, March 31, 2015. My translation).

As Bernal (2006) argues in her study about the Eritrean diaspora online:

The fact that cyberspace has no physical location mirrors the displacement of (those) in diaspora, and the networked sociality of cyberspace resonates with their dispersed social networks. In this way, the internet may be the quintessential diaspora medium because it builds upon, reinforces and extends social networks (Bernal 2006:168).

And at the same time, cyberspace is also a "mending of ruptures in the social body and in individual subjectivity, through the ability of internet to bridge distance or at least render it invisible, making physical location irrelevant" (ibid.).

On the other hand, Andrés became aware of the multiple implications of the distance and influence of mass media in his personal approach to the Colombian reality. His recently presented project pursued two goals: to generate a contrast between victims of different armed actors, and to achieve a symbolical identification by the spectator with the victims. To do this, he shows a loop of pictures of the victims, using a mirror that rotates, where the spectator can see himself. During this loop, the spectator can listen to readings of the letters written by friends and family of the kidnapped and sent to the radio station *Las Voces del Secuestro*.¹⁶

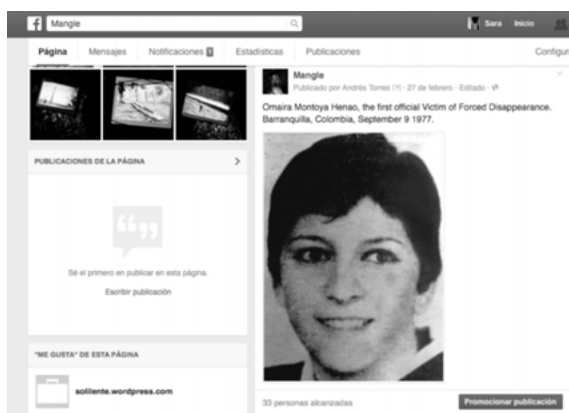
He did his research online and took material from the internet:

16 | *Las Voces del Secuestro* ("Kidnapped Voices"), a radio station that every day reads several letters written to the kidnapped ones with the hope that, in their captivity,

I tried to communicate with the people of *Las Voces del Secuestro*, but they never answered an e-mail, and I wasn't going to sit and wait for their response to do something with material that, for me, it is for public use, and free. The photographs I use are not professional (...) I take normal pictures [from the internet], trying to conserve the format the people use, to show their disappearance. That's online, and for me, that's open and anybody can take them. (Andrés, Interview with author. March 10, 2015. My translation).

In his research process, he made his discovery of the first official victim: Omaira Montoya Henao. He posted her picture as a homage, on *Proyecto Mangle's Facebook* profile:

Image 3



Omaira Montoya Henao, the first official Victim of Forced Disappearance. Barranquilla, Colombia, September 9, 1977. Posted to Proyecto Mangle's Facebook account.

During our conversations, this issue became very important. Andrés stayed in contact with Colombian reality in cyberspace. Reading news, reports, and listening to radio stations, he gained knowledge about the many problems of the conflict and its victims:

With the victims, a feeling overtakes me; in my case, a national feeling. I feel that it reaches my integrity, and as it's like my reference point—Colombia—it affects me. I need to put this somewhere ...It might look like a kind of art therapy, but the important thing is to tell, to manifest, because if one remains silent, then it's worse. (Andrés. Interview with author. March 16, 2015, My translation).

they will hear the messages and won't lose their strength. You can hear the audio on this website: <http://www.lasvocesdelsecuestro.com>

Image 4

An instant from the art installation “Perpetrators and Perpetrated: Audio-Visual-Kinetic Installation for the Encounter with Victims of Forced Disappearance and Kidnapping in the Colombian Armed Conflict.” Photographic still from the footage. Sara Wiederkehr González. March 13, 2015.

MEMORY AND DISCOURSE

He is aware that the mass media in Colombia is controlled by the economic and political elite, and that this has a huge influence on the discourse about the Colombian reality:

Memory and victims from Latin America, these are images built in Europe ...where does the image of the victim come from?...The organizations are showing things here [in Europe] that are not officially revealed over there: observations, thoughts, reflections on the process in Colombia, from different angles. People here, academics, scientists; they have concerns about the subject, the thinking of people, no? (Andrés. Interview with author, March 10, 2015. My translation).

This distance-proximity relationship with the victims gathered abroad—thanks to cyberspace—allows me to question why the figure of the victim seems to be more important in Europe than in the context from which it comes? How does it come about that they (migrants) begin to have a stance, as Colombian nationals, that is drawn from the figure of victim, as seen and understood abroad? Memories are not actual images formed after the object is perceived,

but the virtual image coexists with the actual perception of the object: the memory is the contemporary virtual image of the actual object: its double, its *image in the mirror*. Are we creating a memory from abroad?

Andrea uses social media to develop projects that have a direct impact in Colombia and within the Colombian film scene in Berlin. She discusses the actuality with her colleagues and family. At the same time, this constant contact and exposure in the social media affects her daily routine and her identification with a certain place and time:

I think that it affects my reality, this virtual reality, and obviously, as everything is relative, in the end there are several realities, you live in different realities at the same time. (Andrea, in discussion with the author March 31, 2015. My translation).

In this respect, Olarzabal and Reips (2012) argue that technology has a huge influence on migration. It facilitates the formation, growth and maintenance of communities in diaspora, and their family ties. Access to the internet helps to maintain and recreate informal and formal networks—in the digital as well in the physical world—reinforcing the sense of collective and individual identity.

“War and repression create an afterlife among diaspora populations” (Matsuoka/Sorenson 2005: 85 in Bernal 2005: 167). However, despite the fact that the participants I talked to during this research all came out of a violent context (the Colombian armed conflict), and can indeed be considered victims, their relation to Colombian daily reality through cyberspace—whether by watching news, reading online newspapers, keeping in touch with their families or through networking in the process of the development of cultural and/or political projects—has helped to emphasize their identity as Colombian nationals. Even more interestingly, this mode of relation has contributed to creating a genuine interest in the Colombian reality and conflict. Many of the Colombians I spoke with in Berlin looked forward to take back some processes learned here when they were able to return to Colombia.

PLANNING NEW ROUTES

Both Andrea and Andrés are going back to Colombia in a few months. Andrea wants to open a cinema/gallery/coffee house/workshop in Ubaté, in Cundinamarca, the small village where she was born in Colombia. However, now after months of planning and dreaming, she is scared, scared because her dream means creating a new, alternative, almost revolutionary project in this little town of 21,966 inhabitants. In this place, the people do not have a “culture of cinema,” and in a country where many films are made but only a few make it to the distribution chain or into the cinemas. She does not know if it will work

but she is going back because she does not know what to do here in Germany, or even in Europe. After being a stranger, a migrant, for nine years, she is now going back to being a *national* again.

Her project, *Vía Láctea*¹⁷ [“Milky Way”], is already live and on the social networks. Besides this, her almost full-time job of engaging with the Colombian and Latin American film festival in Berlin helps her to be present in the cultural scene of Colombia—meeting film directors, and festival organizers—while being physically in Berlin. The *Facebook* profile she created has already 1,222 “*Friends*,” and a daily presence. *Vía Láctea* is still in development, but it already has an actual life.

Andrés is going to Medellín, after ten years away from Colombia. He does not yet know what he is going to do: “maybe teach something related to sound and electronics, maybe find a way out as a musician,” he says. His wife, Lirio, remains in Colombia at the *Universidad Nacional de Colombia*. He is not anxious in the same way as Andrea, but is well aware that what he has been studying here—*Sound Studies*—does not exist in Colombia. He is certain that, after having done some projects in Berlin about the victims in Colombia, he will keep working on that subject. Through discussion of the art installation, he expanded on his opinion about the armed conflict. He speaks as a person that has watched this war in front of a screen, dealing only with the discourse presented by mass media; working also with materials he refers to as “cold.”

...internet, podcasts, recordings; it's a post-production work from the media, put in some online server and accessible. It helped me also to ask myself about my position as a spectator, a spectator who is now aware of the existing modulation in the thinking of war...in that zone of normalization of war. (Andrés. Interview with the author, March 31, 2015. My translation).

CONCLUSION

After conducting this fieldwork, on- and offline, there is a growing impetus to explore this issue in more depth—appearing now a wider topic than perceived at the beginning, when I first proposed the subject.

Migrants do not form a homogeneous group, nor can diaspora be understood as a universal phenomenon. To understand this transnational phenomenon, it is necessary to establish key factors: the different motivations for migrations, the various expectations of migrants, their social and economic

17 | *Facebook* page for *Vía Láctea*: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100008483440715&fref=ts>

status, gender and background. Each migrant arrives with a history, full of singularities and multiple identities; and establishes himself or herself in a particular context through which they can relate. It would be interesting to have a broader overview: a cartography of the different, individual routes—historical, geographical and emotional.

As a result of this study, it can be concluded that *class* is also virtualized; it vanishes in favor of other territorializations. One “becomes migrant,” and that is why it is so important to ask about the singularities. The concept of territory is larger than just the physical terrain, where the borders are clearly defined. It relates to agency and desire, following Deleuze and Guattari (2002). Along these lines, territories are always related to the vectors of deterritorialization and re-territorialization: a territory is more than a thing or an object, an action, a relation, a concomitant movement of territorialization and deterritorialization; a rhythm which repeats itself under control.

Tomás Guzmán, fellow anthropologist and also former migrant, argues that, “migrants represent a cut, an irruption, an exception. But nonetheless, the migrant questions the idea of what Europe is.” He explains, that this happens, despite the fact that the nation states from Europe and North America require their labor force to maintain their production rhythms, their specific social and global order. At the same time, migrants question the idea of a national history, communicating, building up certain proximities that are larger due to the distance they gain.¹⁸

Andrés and I concluded, while he was cooking lasagna following a recipe his wife had sent him by e-mail, that history itself is a virtuality. His project, narrated history through the victims, and in the process of the making, helped him to gain identity and also a position about the war. All of this work he did online. He recovered pieces of dead bodies, exposed violence, blood, tears and disappeared lives, so putting together a poetic and heartbreaking story. It is this very process that helped him overcome the horrors of the war. And it will lead him on his way back home.

18 | In personal conversation with the author. March 18, 2015.

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