

Research Article



# **28A- Puerto Resistencia: Anti-monuments, Memory, and Mourning**

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*This paper explores the concept of anti-monuments as living symbols of resistance and the performance of memory and mourning in public spaces during the 2021 Colombian uprising in Cali. Through interviews with family and friends, and through my own experience as a participant, I examine how anti-monuments reconfigure public space as acts of resistance and mourning. I frame this text within what Haraway (1988) called situated knowledge, and it forms part of a collective process of catharsis for those of us who lived through the uprising. The participants in these interviews are my family and friends who still live in Puerto Resistencia, the heart of the protest.*

The social protests of 2021 in Colombia, particularly in Cali, were deeply rooted in political and social grievances that had been building for years. In 2019, protests erupted across the country in response to President Iván Duque's reforms that targeted labor, pensions, and education, which were perceived as favoring the elites. These protests were met with violent suppression that resulted in deaths and injuries. Additionally, Duque's administration faced criticism for undermining the 2016 Peace Agreement with the FARC, particularly by failing to implement rural development and reintegration provisions, which led to increased violence in rural areas and against social leaders (Ramírez Monsalve & Vargas Naranjo, 2023; Uprimny, 2022).

By 2021, tensions peaked with Duque's proposed tax reform, which aimed to raise taxes on essential goods and disproportionately affected the poorest citizens amid the COVID-19 pandemic. As a city with a history of deep inequalities and strong social movements, Cali became the epicentre of the protests. The government's response to these protests was marked by severe human rights violations. According to ONG Temblores (2021), more than 30 protesters were killed, including at least 20 by police gunfire. Over 1,100 people were injured, including nine who suffered permanent eye damage from non-lethal weapons like tear gas and stun grenades. In addition, there were reports of over 400 disappearances and multiple cases of sexual violence perpetrated by the police. The harsh repression in Cali solidified its role as a symbol of resistance against state violence and inequality. Duque, the nefarious president, proposed a reform that would burden those already devastated by the pandemic with taxes: impoverished women, non-white individuals, unemployed youth, and the elderly — those who did not matter if they died of hunger (Betancourth, 2021). Despite various social organizations demanding the withdrawal of the tax proposal from Congress, the government presented it anyway (Vélez-Torres et al., 2023). The government's disconnection from the public was starkly highlighted when the finance minister, during a media interview, quoted a wildly outdated price for a carton of eggs. This blunder became a symbol of how out of touch the government was with the daily struggles of ordinary Colombians, further fuelling public outrage and protests.

In this context, Cali, Colombia's third-largest city with the second-largest Afro-descendant population in Latin America, symbolized resistance during the 2021 social uprising. With a history of colonization, peasant uprisings, and enduring structural racism, Cali faced high levels of unemployment and poverty. The pandemic severely impacted the city. As a gateway to Indigenous and Afro-Colombian territories, it became the focal point of both widespread protests and violent state repression (Temblores ONG

et al., 2021).

I recount how protest groups redefined public spaces in Cali during the 2021 social uprising, particularly in Puerto Resistencia. Grounded in the idea that embodied voices generate knowledge (Ellingson, 2006), this reflection is based on interviews with my family and friends, as well as on my personal experience. Unlike traditional monuments, which often reflect elite narratives, “La Mano” and “La Olla” are anti-monuments, or symbols of collective memory, resistance, and mourning that belong to the people (Seligmann-Silva, 2020). Most interviewees remain anonymous due to ongoing judicial persecution, and all sensitive evidence has been deleted to protect their identities.



Photo 1: Arias S, L. (2024). La Mano, Antimonument Puerto Resistencia, Cali Colombia,[Photograph].

The conversation around counter-monuments and anti-monuments has developed over several decades, with each concept addressing public memory in distinct ways. While they share similarities in challenging traditional monumental forms and provoking critical reflection on history, memory, and social justice, their focus and approach differ.

Counter-monuments gained prominence in the 1980s, particularly in Germany, where artists like Jochen Gerz used this form to critique traditional monuments that glorified the past. These monuments provoke reflection and discomfort, often highlighting the silences or gaps left by official historical narratives and focusing on what is omitted or forgotten (Niven, 2013; Young, 1992).

In contrast, anti-monuments became more prominent in Latin America, particularly in Mexico. They emerge from grassroots activism, especially within the feminist movement. Anti-monuments are often created temporarily by communities to commemorate ongoing struggles against state violence and injustice. Unlike counter-monuments, which critique existing structures, anti-monuments focus on collective resistance, making them more present, dynamic and interactive. These structures represent the voices of marginalized groups and serve as symbols of ongoing social struggles, as exemplified by the feminist *Antimonumenta Vivas Nos Queremos* in Mexico City (McCutcheon, 2022).

La Mano, or The Hand, located in Puerto Resistencia in eastern Cali (see photo 1), is an anti-monument that does not glorify the military, politicians, or white men. It is a raised left fist, holding a large sign that reads “resist,” with the faces of those who died during the 2021 protests “tattooed” on its arm. Surrounding it are improvised shields made of various materials, crafted by the men and women who decided to protect the civilian population from police repression while armed only with sticks and stones. They built barricades to prevent further deaths. This space has become a symbol of their uprising and resistance (Aguilar-Forero, 2022; Murcia Parra & Ariza Rivera, 2022).

La Olla, or The Pot, is in front of La Mano and, ironically, La Olla rests next to a police station and says, “Food sovereignty.” This is something odd considering that during the outburst, one of the police’s objectives was to attack the pots because that is where the protesters concentrated to eat (see photo 2). While La Mano represents the struggle on the frontlines of repression, La Olla symbolizes those, mostly women, who cared for those in the confrontation. Without La Olla, the protests simply wouldn’t have been sustained.





Photo: 2: Arias S, L. (2024). La Olla, Antimonument Puerto Resistencia, Cali Colombia.[Photograph]

Although correct to refer to Puerto Resistencia as a place with anti-monuments and as the most iconic site of what happened in 2021 in Colombia, what it represents is beyond that. It represents the redefinition and reappropriation of more than fourteen other locations throughout the city during the protests, and it exemplifies the transformation of public space as an act of resistance. Throughout the more than three months of protests and blockades, people not only occupied these spaces but also renamed and repurposed places that symbolized repression and marginalization. Police stations were transformed into libraries, roundabouts became community kitchens, bridges were turned into concert stages, and playgrounds and murals were painted to narrate the ongoing struggle. Even large construction containers were repurposed into barricades by the protesters.

In addition to Puerto Resistencia, several other locations were renamed: “Paso del Comercio” became “Paso del Aguante” (Endurance Passage), “Loma de la Cruz” was renamed “Loma de la Dignidad” (Hill of Dignity), “Puente de los Mil Días” became “Puente de las Mil Luchas” (Bridge of a Thousand Struggles), “Estación Universidades” became “Uniresistencia” (Uni-resistance), and “Calipso” was renamed “Apocalipso” (see figure 1).

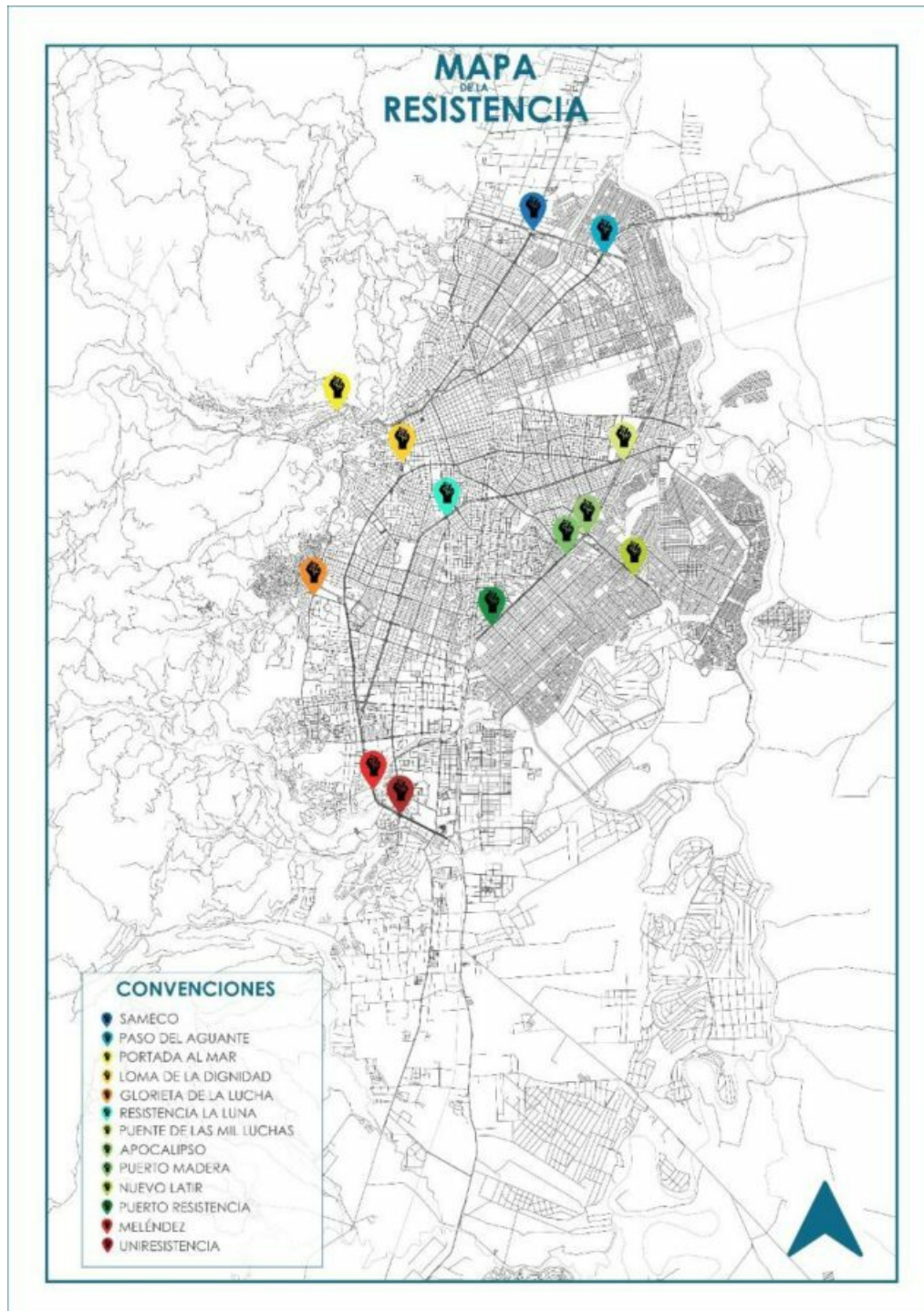


Figure 1: Céspedes Mendoza, J. S. (2021). Observatorio de DDHH de Indepaz *Observatory of Human Rights of Indepaz*.

The way that people in Cali occupied public spaces during the 2021 protests spread quickly to other cities like Bogotá and Medellín. This “occupation” of public spaces by individuals who were often regarded as “nobodies” was seen as an affront to Duque’s government. In response, the government militarized these cities, treating citizens as if



they were enemies in a war. According to the NGO Temblores, the protests resulted in at least 47 killings, with 36 of these occurring in Cali alone. Additionally, there were hundreds of disappearances, particularly affecting young people who were demanding fair social policies. The protests also saw widespread reports of police violence, including arbitrary detentions and sexual violence, reflecting the severe repression of the demonstrations. So, while Puerto Resistencia represents a series of city occupations as acts of resistance, it is also an act of mourning, still demanding justice for the disappearances, gender-based violence, and the people who were killed. It is not a monument of victory but a demand for memory and reparations.

The outburst affected me in many ways, not only because it happened in my country and city, but also because my maternal family is from Puerto Resistencia. While my cousins, sisters-in-law, aunts, and friends were tending to the wounded, facing the police, and preparing food, where was I? The outburst caught me pregnant, outside of Cali. My family and friends insisted that my role was different, so I used academia from activism—raising funds to support community kitchens, buying medicine, and even helping to purchase an ambulance. We were monitoring people irregularly detained by the police, staying up during sleepless nights to care for loved ones from a distance, and mobilizing and denouncing human rights violations. I also explained what was happening through alternative media in both English and Spanish, using social media to counter the government's narrative, which claimed on national and international platforms that the protesters were organized by illegal armed groups as a way to justify the violence and repression that we faced. Our goal was to help the people in the city resist until the government withdrew the reform from Congress. . However, this article is not about me, although several of my family members appear in the excerpts that I cite. This article aims to explain what happened to the people who put their bodies on the frontlines of the protests in Cali and how a part of the city became intertwined with the events. It also explores how anti-monuments like La Mano in Puerto Resistencia and La Olla capture the collective anger of the people, and keep alive the names of those who were killed and the memory of an uprising that ultimately led to one of the most significant political shifts in Colombia's history: the rise of the left to power.

### **Puerto Resistencia: Anti-monuments, Memory, and Mourning**

“We made this hand together; the iron to lift it was taken from that [points to a camera on a pole], the iron used to protect the cameras, we used it, everyone helped.” El Corto is the nickname of one of the bricklayers who participated in the construction of The Hand of PR: “Do you see that shield with that hole? That was the bullet that killed her.” El Corto talks about a piece of metal, the remainder of a cover or some metallic object embedded in the arm of The Hand with the name “Johana” inscribed on it, and yes, there is the bullet hole. The outburst was three years ago, and since then, The Hand has become one of the most visited sites in the city, despite being in one of the least trendy areas for tourists in Cali.

I waited for my cousin in front of The Hand (also La Mano). La Mano and La Olla are pure colour and shine; it does not seem that three years have passed. El Corto told me: “This is

renewed regularly. We do not let them die.” He is talking about La Mano and La Olla, and it seems as if he referring to people; La Olla and La Mano are alive. “Now there is the flag of Palestine [pointing out].”

As I waited for my cousin, El Corto and I talked in front of La Mano, located in the middle of a major avenue. Everyone in Cali and Colombia widely recognizes La Mano of Puerto Resistencia. While sitting there, I observed various people arriving, and El Corto recounted to each how he had contributed to its construction. Some individuals pointed to the faces on La Mano, while others touched it with reverence, some even moved to tears, as though it held a sacred significance. I noted to El Corto that many people come to see the monument, to which he responded, “Here lie the faces and symbols of those who died as part of La Primera Línea, from the different point of Cali. That is why so many people come.” La Primera Línea refers to the group of individuals who chose to confront police repression with improvised shields, helmets, sticks, and stones — a fact I know well because my cousin, whom I was waiting for, was part of this movement.

Finally, my cousin, whom we will call M, arrived late and was accompanied by her daughter. I shared with her what El Corto had told me, and she responded, “It is true, several of those who were with me are there.” This led me to ask her how a young woman like herself decided to join the group that directly confronted the police.

My sister-in-law and cousins were nurses during the outburst. They responded to the same question:

“I did it for my children. I come from a working-class family that has not benefited from the system. We do not receive overtime pay or vacation time. My aunt (you know her) has worked as a domestic worker for over 12 hours daily, earning the same wage for the past ten years. My grandparents do not have a pension, and I will never have a pension, nor will my children. I joined the Primera Línea because all of this makes me angry. I did it for them.”

“We only want to help our friends and neighbours. In the end, we had to cover our faces; the police were shooting at us, chasing us because they knew we were going to help the people in La Primera Línea. They [police] were the ones who forced us to hide as if we were criminals when all we were doing was caring for the wounded.”

M recounts how she was outraged by the police repression of the first protest led by students from Universidad del Valle, the most important public university in the country’s south. She explained that in the early days of the protests, the police consistently responded with violence to peaceful actions such as sit-ins and artistic expressions. To prevent further protests, the police would go to meeting points and gathering locations to stop people from assembling. It was in this context that the first person was killed in Puerto Resistencia, at the very place where people were again gathering to march in protest. After that, the police began entering neighborhoods and firing tear gas into houses, which led to several people suffocating to death.

Puerto Resistencia serves as the gateway to several working-class neighborhoods in Cali. When the police were willing to go as far as people’s homes to suppress them, they could not be allowed to enter the neighbourhoods. At that moment, the Primera Línea was born



— a group of young people and women who decided to build barricades to prevent the police from entering and repressing those who were protesting peacefully. They occupied the place if they were not allowed to march, and no one would force them out. In Puerto Resistencia, the barricade was established where the first protester was killed.

“We sat on the ground, and when people started getting up, they (the police) started attacking us with water. People sat down as a sign of peace, and yet they attacked us. That is when the confrontation began. They started throwing tear gas, dispersing everyone, and that day resulted in the first person killed; there [points out] right where the monument is [The Hand]. Horrible! They shot him in cold blood; they [the police] say they were traumatic [weapons], but a traumatic one does not kill you. Amid the smoke and many people running, we could not see much, but when the smoke cleared, we saw him and heard the screams. After a while, we got the news that he died, and that is when a non-stop confrontation started.”

My cousin said that she was part of the Primera Línea for her children. “There were people from many places there, many young men, but there were also women like me with children. I would see some of them around, we would make a gesture signalling we know each other from somewhere, and that is it, we would continue.” The question of why they were part of the Primera Línea reflects the same profound sentiment: outrage at police repression.”. As F, another Primera Línea member, told me, “It was seeing people like us die, hard-working people, people who only wanted a fairer state.” The vast majority of the Primera Línea were unemployed young people with no educational opportunities (Temblores ONG et al., 2021). F explained who constituted La Primera Línea:

“Those of us who decided to take the lead in the front were people who had nothing to lose, and, for the first time, we felt that we were doing something important. Some ladies gave us food, and people looked at us proudly.”

After the first month of the uprising, clashes with the police always resulted in casualties, including children (Temblores ONG et al., 2021). That is why the main priority was to prevent the police from entering residential areas to hunt and shoot civilians, and because of that, people took possession of the construction site and the containers owned by the construction company. The residents shifted these to turn them into shelter and barricades, becoming the first symbol of the resistance occupation. Afterward, it was common to see people in unmarked ghost vans shooting at people who were protesting without any warning. The goal was to kill as many protesters as possible, and this was how several people were killed (Temblores ONG et al., 2021; Vélez-Torres et al., 2023).

“Those containers — if they still exist today, because the police made them disappear as soon as they had the chance — hold many stories. The containers had bullet holes; construction helmets turned into war helmets, sticks, stones, and blood. We painted them together in many colors, along with street artists, locals, and everyone who wanted to help. We witnessed so much there. One night, because we could not sleep, we told each other that the containers would become a museum when it all ended. We hoped that, as time passed, what happened would not be forgotten. Then we took over the police station and turned it into a library for four months. Our mothers, aunts, and sisters cooked food for everyone there [points to the sculpture of the pot]. It did not matter who you were; food was always in the pot. It was special because some children, in their regular lives, would only eat once a day.”

About La Mano's idea, F said:

"One day, after the idea of the museum was discussed, I went home to sleep. I do not know if the others shared the plan, but by the next day's evening, people were already gathering materials to build La Mano. The neighborhood's bricklayers, women, and everyone contributed something. In 20 days, La Mano was raised."

The rapid construction of The Hand was another way to talk about how, for years, the state failed to provide infrastructure, and when it did, the projects took years to complete. The Hand is an anonymous anti-monument; it has never been known for certain who came up with the idea. What is certain is that The Hand and The Pot are both collective properties, and both spaces are considered by those who were there to be an eternal extension of what they experienced. It is not a tribute to someone but to everyone, making it an anti-monument. Many scholars (Mbembe, 2019; Polgovsky Ezcurra, 2023; Sánchez Hernández, 2022; Seligmann-Silva, 2020; Viveros Vigoya, 2017) have said that anti-monuments express a painful past, a way to maintain mourning that reconfigures space and memory performance. I believe that Puerto Resistencia is a performance of mourning that has marked memory, a living place that still hurts. But I think that what F says is more illustrative:

"The Hand and The Pot are anti-monuments because no single person made them, yet at the same time, we all did. Both were constructed with the materials and objects used during the protests: the shields and helmets are there, and for us, they are alive. Touch them (the monuments), and you will feel how half of Colombia rises again. The Hand has become so important that whenever the President visits Cali, he gathers in this popular neighborhood. We have rebuilt a new center; the people meet where the people fell. The President says he wants to declare The Hand a cultural heritage item, but I believe that would diminish its significance as an anti-monument. I would rather leave it as it is because that hand is alive; it is not just a statue."

F is right; the uprising resulted in a significant political shift in the country's history, as a left-wing president came to power for the first time in many years. I asked F and my cousin what they believed were the greatest achievements of the uprising, and they jokingly replied, "Well, we changed the names of many places in the city." They also said, "We saw those videos from Medellín that named Cali 'the capital of resistance,' and in Bogotá and throughout the country, this place is now called Puerto Resistencia."

When I asked whether, in hindsight, they thought it was worth rising, they said: "Although there are many things we do not like about this government, and we still mourn the dead and wait for the missing, four years are not enough; we need more time for change. But I do believe it has been worth it. The 28th of April gave birth to us. We are new to this, and we are walking the path, but we still have a long way to go."

## Conclusions

The social uprising in Cali in 2021 not only protested and challenged the government's policies but also redefined public space and collective memory in a way that continues to resonate today. Drawing on interviews, Puerto Resistencia and anti-monuments like La Mano and La Olla embody the resistance and the shared grief of those who took to the

streets. The community built these spaces with materials from the protests — shields, helmets, and barricades — which hold significant emotional and symbolic power. The interviews reveal that people viewed these places not just as memorials but as living embodiments of the struggle, keeping the names and stories of the fallen alive. This sense of collective action and resistance helped rename spaces in the city, like Paso del Aguante and Loma de la Dignidad, creating a new geography of resistance that still holds meaning for the people of Cali today.

Through the lens of anti-monuments, we see how Cali's public spaces became battlegrounds for memory and justice. Unlike traditional monuments that often glorify power or historical figures, anti-monuments like those in Cali are organic, built by the people, and represent ongoing struggles. They do not stand to celebrate past victories but to demand change and remembrance of social justices for the present and future. The political shift that followed, resulting in the rise of a left-wing government, was one of the many outcomes of this movement. However, as the interviews reflect, the battle is not over. The renaming of spaces and the creation of anti-monuments symbolize a continuing journey, reminding us that, as the participants stated, there is a long road ahead. However, the foundations of change have been laid.

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