“El arte urbano se toma la Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia”, reads the first sentence of a press release published by the library’s official web site, on August 12th, 2015, announcing a tribute to one of Colombia’s founding fathers, Antonio Nariño (1765 – 1823). I arrived at the Biblioteca Nacional over a month before this sentence was written, and walked in and out and around scaffoldings neatly arranged throughout the library’s main hall, thinking about the main concept that motivated my research: transition.

I often hear about transitions. Of power or regime. Of era or age. Periodic transitions with so much rigor that, thanks to a productive fieldwork, I discern a systematization of such a notion, a certain banalization of the transitional experience, generally satisfied with spotting a rupture or the reconfigured form or shape of a given structure, the finished product, as though it were a one-time step, here-there, stagnant, and not an ongoing process that manifests itself through nuances that might not necessarily alter the form or shape of a given structure but often times leave their temporary, even fleeting, mark on a space.

I thought about transitions and ways to approach this concept because the well of material that poured around my feet seemed rather overwhelming at first. Librarians at both, the Luis Ángel Arango Library and the Biblioteca Nacional made the process to access the materials rather simple: one form and a letter per each library and the entire month of July was open for me to go back and forth between both locations. At the Luis Ángel Arango Library I examined two different archives; one titled “Guerra Civil de 1876”, which contained official documents and telegrams about the war; and the other one titled “Aquileo Parra”, who was president of Colombia during the civil war, and contained his personal documents, letters sent and received by him, from fellow party members and political opponents. Among some of the most notable findings of these archives was a letter sent on August 20th, 1876, to Aquileo Parra by Manuel Briceño, political opponent and commander in chief of the “Ejército regenerador de Cundinamarca”, in which Briceño holds Parra responsible for the war and asks him to recognize them (Briceño and company) as belligerent subjects. This is revealing because such belligerence is done under what I’d like to call “retórica regeneradora”, which guided Colombia’s official discourse for the remaining of the century and motivated the following rewrite of Colombia’s constitution (in 1886). It is also notable because what would
eventually be the defeated bloc did not recognize themselves as victims but instead assumed and highlighted their condition of opponents.

It is worth mentioning that such rhetoric permeated through all parties involved, most notably Rafael Nuñez (1825 – 1894), theoretically Parra’s fellow party member and one of Colombia’s sharpest political negotiator. Nuñez’s letters to Parra are rather eloquent (available at the Luis Ángel Arango Library), especially when compared to the newspapers found at the Biblioteca Nacional. In a letter sent to Parra on December 28th, 1876, Nuñez highlights the need to stop the war and forces Parra into a meeting with Salvador Camacho Roldán (1827 – 1900) in order to negotiate and arrange a cease-fire. This is revealing because at this stage Nuñez tries to keep his distance from the “discurso regenerador”, mediating his position with figures such as Camacho Roldán, one of Colombia’s most undervalued XIX century thinkers. Nuñez’s discourse steps out of the shadows as the war ends. This could be seen through the local newspapers I examined at the Biblioteca Nacional, most notably “La Opinión”, which endorsed Nuñez’s candidacy for president after Parra’s exit.

At the Biblioteca Nacional I found myself going beyond the time-frame I had in mind: 1876 – 1877. The findings at the Luis Ángel Arango library and the newspapers at the Biblioteca Nacional encouraged me to continue digging in the configuration of a “discurso regenerador”, which spans up until the end of the XIX century and could be mapped out through some of the newspapers I examined, most notably “El demócrata”, “La opinión”, “El debate”, “El rejenerador” (sic), and “El colegio” (sic). It is worth mentioning that this was in part possible because of the easy access to the material; most of them are microfilmed and the Biblioteca Nacional has all the tools to maximize the researcher’s time, so that one can sort through and send pdf files to one’s email.

My goal was to identify a rupture or reconfigured form of a republic after having gone through a civil war. But most importantly, I was interested in analyzing the representations of the defeated bloc, and finding out more about the heterogeneity of this bloc. I hoped to spot, perhaps naively, a definite transition in the negotiation process but realized that transitions are perhaps more prosaic and ongoing, especially when the players involved do not see themselves as defeated and are, instead, all part of the same structure. I noticed this as I examined the configuration of the “discurso regenerador”, which I think would be a worthy follow-up research. This raises other questions that I hope to pursue in my academic career.
Such questions have to do with the place of enunciation of the defeated during the XIX century in Colombia. It doesn’t seem to be newspapers. According to the preliminary research I did when I returned to New Orleans, I believe it would have been better, for the purpose of my original idea, to examine musical recordings. Other questions had to do with the idea of transition in the official discourse, how it is configured and presented in daily life, for as I could see in my research in regards to the Civil War of 1876, there is a rather thin line between war and regeneration, between any transition.

Such lines are not necessarily made of dots. As one steps closer, the dots might be stars or any other shape; and as one keeps walking by the line, without acknowledging it, one can easily overlook what’s hidden behind the scaffoldings. The last day I visited the Biblioteca Nacional I realized that it was a large mural of a 21st century Antonio Nariño, drawn wearing urban 21st century clothes and swagger. Local media celebrated the initiative as a new way of writing history, a transition, a way of making official history more accessible to the masses. I can’t help but question whether this is actually a new way of writing history in order to make it more accessible; it is, after all, the same symbol: Antonio Nariño; under the same structure. I would say, however, that it is a transition between languages: from a heavily charged written language, which I saw in the archives, to a visual language, which was whispered under my eyes. A transition that doesn’t look like “El arte urbano se toma la Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia”, as the press release states; but rather la Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia se toma el arte urbano. The nuances of an ongoing process, which I am rather motivated to continue studying.