CRITICAL VISIBILITY IN COLOMBIA: VICTIMHOOD, REPARATIONS, AND THE CHALLENGE OF *VISIBILIZARSE*

by

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ABSTRACT

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Critical Visibility in Colombia: Victimhood, Reparations, and the Challenge of *Visibilizarse*

Thesis directed by Associate Professor L. Kaifa Roland

Colombia—home to one of the world's longest lasting armed conflicts—is currently in the midst of a profound transformation. Over five decades of war are drawing to a close while the Colombian government continues the fraught process of reconciliation. In this critical moment, my dissertation analyzes reparation-mediated encounters between victims of conflict and state reparation administrators as constituting an emerging politics of visibility, in which victims must *visibilizarse* (make themselves visible) in order to access their rights and reparations. Victim visibility, is not just about victims' making their experiences visible to the state in order to receive reparations. It is also about the state and its (urban) citizens *seeing* and becoming conscious of the victim population and the pervasive effects of war. This dissertation builds on over 15 months of multi-sited ethnographic research with two primary groups: (1) the institutional entities that oversee Colombia's ongoing reparation and reconciliation process and (2) the communities in the predominantly Afro-Colombian rural region of María la Baja, Bolívar that are trying to gain access to their rights as victims. I examine this process through the concept of "critical visibility," which highlights the oppressive and innovative ways in which victimhood is constructed through acts of visual display and bodily performance. In parallel, critical visibility tracks the way images and public acts reverberate across the political landscape and take on new meanings—sometimes different from the creator's intention. Through the concept of critical visibility, I expose how—even in times of "peace"—the requirement of visibility perpetuates systematic violence and marginalization against victim communities, especially those of rural and ethnic minority backgrounds. Further, I highlight the creative ways in which these communities transform this requirement into a tool that challenges simplified notions of their victimization and subjectivities.

DEDICATION

To my parents for giving me the curiosity to ask questions and the confidence to push beyond my comfort zone.

To Nico for always reminding me of what is important.

Para las comunidades en María la Baja—que la paz siga creciendo en el campo.

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INTRODUCTION
Victimhood and Critical Visibility

In June 2016, I sat with a group of men and women in the early morning heat of the

community center in San José de Playón, María la Baja waiting for a meeting between community

leaders and Colombia's National Victims' Unit (*Unidad de Víctimas,* hereafter Victims' Unit). After

decades of violence and displacement, San José de Playón was the most recent community to begin

the collective reparations process in the rural region of María la Baja, Bolívar, Colombia. Community

leaders had been working with the Victims' Unit to develop their collective reparations plan that

addressed everything from infrastructural improvements to plans for an annual commemoration for

those assassinated during war.[1] After more than a year of meetings, San José de Playón's reparation

plan still existed only on paper, and the community was restless. On this particular day, Roberto, an

outspoken community leader, jumped out of his seat to motivate the committee.[2] Hands waving in

the air, he proclaimed: "If you want to become a baker, you have to learn how to make bread. To

become victims, we have to do the same by studying the Victims' Law."[3]

Roberto's message captures a fundamental aspect of victimhood in Colombia's over fifty

year-long war: the gap between living with and exhibiting one's experience with violence. Roberto's

metaphor stipulates that it is not enough to have experienced violence in order to be officially

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[1] Throughout this dissertation, I use the word "assassinate" or "assassinations" in reference to the killing of civilians in the context of the war. While in English this word is often associated with the killing of a political figure, in Colombia the term highlights that these deaths were not incidental casualties, but calculated war strategies. In some cases, assassinated individuals fit the description of prominent regional leaders, while in others they may have been average civilians.

[2] In accordance with my IRB protocol (#15-0292) and my agreements with the individuals represented here, the names of people are pseudonyms. When I reference a public figure in their public capacity, I use their first and last name to indicate that this is their real name.

[3] All translations from Spanish to English are my own. When the translation is straightforward, I provide only the English version. In cases where the translation involves interpreting the best way to capture the meaning, I provide the original quote or words in Spanish for reference.

recognized as a victim by the Colombian state. In order to receive reparations—economic and symbolic compensation for loss—victims must study the law; that is, study *how* to be a victim and *how* to make their victimhood visible in a way that corresponds with political sentiments and legal definitions.

VISIBILIZARSE (VERB)—TO MAKE ONESELF/ITSELF VISIBLE

In the heat of academic, political, and grassroots discussions about peace and reconciliation in Colombia, one concept echoes throughout: the need "to make oneself visible" or *visibilizarse*. This concept indicates that individuals affected by the conflict must search for a way to exhibit their own victimization to state entities. The reflexive Spanish verb, *visibilizarse* does not exist in the dictionary of the *Real Academia Española* (RAE), the authoritative reference for the Spanish language. Instead, the RAE points to the simple verb *visibilizar*, with the following definition: "To artificially make visible that which cannot be seen with the naked eye, such as hidden bodies with X-rays or microbes with the microscope."[4] Although the reflexive form of this verb is not yet recognized as part of the official Spanish language, its use has become widespread in Colombia and beyond, especially in activist circles that focus on "making visible" social issues or groups of people that have typically been "hidden" from plain sight. The reflexive form of this verb, however, emphasizes that the burden of visibility falls on the invisible object, issue, or person itself. Returning to the RAE's dictionary definition of *visibilizar*, the reflexive *visibilizarse*, would require the invisible microbe to make itself visible to the naked eye through its own means.[5] Importantly, this definition also presumes a natural state of invisibility that requires artificial intervention in order to be seen.

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[4] Translated from Spanish: "*Hacer visible artificialmente lo que no puede verse a simple vista, como con los rayos X los cuerpos ocultos, o con el microscopio los microbios*" (*Real Academia Española*). Accessed online on November 12, 2016: http://dle.rae.es/srv/fetch?id=bv56DEN.

[5] In Spanish, verbs with the ending "se" indicate that the verb is reflexive, or is an action that is be applied to oneself/itself. In the case of "*visibilizar*" (to make visible), the reflexive form is "*visibilizarse*" (to make oneself/itself visible).

In reaction to the development of photography and film, Walter Benjamin proposed the concept of the "optical unconscious" (1980). This concept drew attention to the fact that these new tools could offer visual access to elements of life that were previously imperceptible (visually) and thereby unconscious to humans, much like the "hidden bodies" and "microbes" cited in the definition of *visibilizar*. Victimhood in Colombia has similarly been outside of the view, and therefore consciousness, of the broader public. This unconsciousness is due to stark geographical divisions, in which the urban population is largely out of touch with the effects of war throughout the rural areas of the country. Victim visibility is not just about victims' making their experiences visible to the state in order to receive reparations. It is also about the state and its (urban) citizens *seeing* and becoming "optically conscious" of the victim population and the pervasive effects of war.

Under the presidency of Manuel Santos (2010-2018), the Colombian state shifted its focus from military battles with an array of armed groups to peace negotiations and reconciliation. This shift, in turn, has placed victimhood at the center of national politics, although in many cases only symbolically. In this context, victim visibility is central to the formation of the post-conflict nation state. Benedict Anderson's foundational work draws powerful connections to the ways in which visual forms, such as print media, maps, and museums served as the basis for establishing the nation as an "imagined" and therefore governable space (2006). However, the contemporary conditions of (re)defining nation states take place under different conditions. In her genealogy of transitional justice, Ruti Teitel claims that at the end of the 20th century "transitional justice moves from the exception to the norm to become a paradigm of rule of law" (2003, 71). These international conflict resolution models have come to define legal and political contours of establishing democratic nation-states (Hayner 2011; Hardt and Negri 2000; Merry 2006). Different from post-colonial nation formation, transitional justice purportedly seeks to establish the possibility of a future, (re)defined nation through public examination of past violence and revelation of important truths.

The pressure for victims to narrate their victimhood is a recurrent dilemma in conflict resolution processes. Scholars working in post-conflict settings and truth commissions around the world have documented the possibilities and limits of relying on victims to narrate their victimhood (Das et al. 2000; Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Humphrey 2003; Ross 2003; Theidon 2013). Critiquing oral testimony, scholars highlight the limits of language to express positivist notions of "truth" (Wilson 2001), bodily pain (Scarry 1985), acts of witnessing (Daniel 1996), and everyday suffering (Das et al. 2000). In Colombia, this dilemma has coalesced around visibility. This indicates that victims must carry the charge of making their invisible bodies, experiences, stories, resistances, and frustrations visible in order to access their rights to economic and symbolic reparations.

My research (2014-2017) overlapped with the implementation of the 2011 Law for Victims and Land Restitution, colloquially known as the Victims' Law (*Ley de Víctimas*).[6] Among its wide-ranging mandates to provide attention and assistance to the country's over eight million victims, the Victims' Law outlines victims' legal right to reparations, as coordinated by the Victims' Unit. These reparations—available to individuals and communities affected by the conflict—range from economic compensation for loss and infrastructural development projects, to symbolic acts that seek to heal the damages of violence. However, a lack of funding and administrative power has severely hindered the Victims' Unit's ability to provide reparations to all deserving citizens. While "emblematic cases" have garnered national attention for state-led reparations, many individuals and communities unable to make their stories visible, have been excluded from recognition and reparations. Even recognized communities, like San José de Playón in the opening of this chapter, struggle to transform their reparation promises into realities. These processes have been unbearably

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[6] In 2011, the Colombian government passed the Ley de Víctimas (Law 1448) or the Victims' Law. It is considered one of the most comprehensive laws in the world addressing victims' rights and reparations (Summers 2012). It is also controversial as it attempts to provide reparations prior to the end of conflict. See Chapters One and Two for a more thorough discussion of the Victims' Law and victim reparations.

slow, leading many communities to conclude that the state is more interested in promoting images of success than actually affecting lasting change in victimized communities. Over eight million war victims have been recognized by the Unified Victims' Register since 2011, yet as of August 2017 more than 90% had yet to receive full state reparations (*El Espectador* 2017).

I analyze reparation-mediated encounters between citizens and state reparation administrators as constituting an emerging politics of visibility. Victim visibility is significant to both community and state projects. Visibility can influence individual and collective claims for victims' reparations, determining which cases get attention from the state. At the same time, the government harnesses victim visibility to support particular images of peace and reconciliation (Riaño Alcalá and Uribe 2016; Teitel 2003). My research seeks to understand state and community approaches to visibility in order to analyze victimhood as a lived reality, a legal category, and a potent political identity. Through over 15 months of ethnographic research in María la Baja, Bolívar and the institutional work of the national Victims' Unit and the National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH), I examine how grassroots movements and government institutions mobilize the concept of "*visibilizarse*" to construct legal and symbolic frameworks that address past and present violence.

Questions of visibility, however, are also questions of what remains unseen. I argue that recent Colombian efforts to define victimhood and identify victims are necessary for the practical administration of reparations, but at the same time, they often foreclose the possibility of addressing long-term and systematic human rights violations that exceed the scope of war. Furthermore, national narratives of reconciliation often blur or erase complex regional histories of conflict and the gendered, racialized, and classed ways in which war was experienced.

Critical Visibility

Throughout this dissertation, I draw primarily on ethnographic research in the Afro-Colombian rural region of María la Baja, Bolívar, part of the sub-region of Montes de María (Figure

1). María la Baja is emblematic of Colombia's complex transition from war to peace. It is both the site of extreme past violence and one of the first cases of state-led reparations. For residents of the region (Maríalabajenses), their Afro-Colombian identity and war history are interconnected by violence that begins with their forcible displacement from Africa and continues into the contemporary armed conflict and state abandonment that persists in rural, ethnic minority populations. Maríalabajenses demand that the government see their victimhood in relation to these broader histories of inequality, and not solely through narrow legal definitions.

Figure 1: Map of Montes de María and Colombia. Montes de María is comprised of 15 municipalities that span two departments, Bolívar and Sucre, in rural Northern Colombia. María la Baja is located on the north edge of Montes de María. My primary urban fieldsites included: Bogotá, the capital of Colombia; Medellín, Antioquia; and Cartagena, Bolívar. Figure modified from two sources: "Region Montes de María" by Henblo, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=68777667 and "*Departamentos Colombia*" By Camilo Sanchez, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=23363356.

I use the term "critical visibility" to address the ways in which Maríalabajenses utilize visibility to gain state attention while also stretching limited legal visions of what it means to be a victim. I examine the dual nature of "critical visibility": (1) as an oppressive requirement, *critical* to access state reparations and (2) as a means through which Maríalabajenses creatively *critique* persistent forms of violence and marginalization. Through visibility acts, such as woven tapestries or displays of their own bodies, Maríalabajenses highlight broader connections between war and histories of racialized, gendered, and classed violence that fall outside of the purview of state-led reparations.

Critical visibility highlights the oppressive and innovative ways in which victimhood is constructed through acts of visual display and bodily performance. In parallel, critical visibility tracks the way images and public acts reverberate across the political landscape and take on new meanings—sometimes different from the creator's intention. Through the concept of critical visibility, I aim to expose how—even in times of "peace"—the requirement of visibility perpetuates systematic violence and marginalization against victim communities, especially those of rural and ethnic minority backgrounds. Further, I highlight the creative ways in which these communities transform this requirement into a tool that challenges simplified notions of their victimization and subjectivities.

These dual goals parallel Aimee Meredith Cox's (2015) theory of *shapeshifting*. In her work with Black girls in homeless shelters in Detroit, Cox proposes that "shapeshifting describes how young Black women living in the United States engage with, confront, challenge, invert, unsettle, and expose the material impact of systemic oppression" (2015, 7). Through this concept, Cox attempts to hold together two opposing forces: the systemic disavowal of Black girls' full access to respectability and citizenship and their abilities to re-create alternative notions of self and forms of happiness. Throughout this dissertation, I engage with the practices of critical visibility as they are

articulated along the lines of Cox's shapeshifting—both in terms of emergent and new forms of violent oppression and the creative practices that render visible the otherwise invisible.

Victimhood and (In)Visibility

"There are three levels of visibility," Eduardo offered. After months of hearing community members and government officials stress the need to *visibilizarse* (make oneself visible), I asked Eduardo his thoughts. As a victim, community leader, and recent government employee, his perspective drew from a wide range of experiences. But Eduardo did not speak to the role of visibility as a means of gaining recognition. Rather, he focused on visibility as an activist tool that also implicated danger. He outlined this danger through three levels of visibility.

> There is a low profile, which is where you're there, you maintain a low profile and nobody knows you, but you are doing work. This profile, up to a certain point, is good. There is a medium profile, where now you raise your profile a little bit and begin to *visibilizarte* (make yourself visible) in some actions, but not in others. And there is a high profile, where you say—alright, let's go full visibility! Let's move up and make an impact. Now you move on to the national level.

Eduardo went on to explain that the middle level was the most dangerous. In this zone, you are known enough to catch the attention of "actors" that may want to silence you, but you are not so well-known that your high profile protects you from violence. Eduardo spoke from experience:

> They threatened me—I was in this middle level because I thought, 'no, why are we going to *visibilizar* (make visible) so many things?' Then I understood and decided to raise my profile. Raising your profile means that you become known. You aren't untouchable, because nobody is untouchable or immortal, but the [armed] actors are going to think about it twice, because to kill [someone like me] in a municipality like María la Baja is going to cause agitation and this doesn't serve the [armed actors].

Victims are frequently called upon to make their own victimization visible in order to carve out the terms of their future (Ross 2003; Theidon 2013). Implicit in this project is the assumption that what happened in the past is no longer happening in the present, and by virtue of reconciliation processes, will not be repeated in the future. This final sentiment is echoed through the popularity of the slogan "Never Again," coined after WWII by the Jewish diaspora and which has subsequently been adopted across conflict zones engaging in transitional processes (Mookherjee 2011). It is this

final assumption in particular that causes pause in the Colombian case, as threats to victims and community leaders continue.

Beyond the politics of visibility and the assumed value of revelation, it is necessary to consider its flip-side—secrecy and concealment. As Olga González (2010) and Michael Taussig (1999, 2003) have demonstrated in their work in Peru and Colombia respectively, truths are not only revealed through public acts of testimony and visibility. To the contrary, "public secrets" are a common form through which "truths" become known, even if not readily discussed or portrayed in visual forms. Thus, peering beyond the veil of visibility and transparency requires attention to the politics of representation, how certain truths are able to become visible and known while others may remain "arrested" for later release (McGranahan 2010a) or simply as shared knowledge that is not discussed perhaps for fear of generating more violence (Gonzaléz 2010; Taussig 1991; Theidon 2013).

This final point is crucial in the context of Colombia where the persistent threat of violence is well documented. While certain sectors of Colombian society are making their victimhood visible, new victims are formed, as the margins of the war and the state are redefined. Revisiting Anderson's (2006) notion of the *Imagined Community* in Colombia, critical visibility created by victims contributes to a national imaginary of both the types of violence experienced and a face of victimhood. Their visual narratives construct a geographical map of violence—indicating to citizens and the government where the war has occurred and thus where the state's reach has historically failed. It is precisely the ability to "successfully" make this violence visible that often provokes state and international organizations to invest in reparations and in the basic needs of communities, such as sewage systems or potable water. Yet, while certain communities are reincorporated into the national imaginary, others simply are pushed further to the margins, literally and figuratively out of sight.

Nina S. de Friedemann has described Afro-Colombian populations in terms of their historic "invisibility" (1984). She argued that this "invisibility" is not due to a mere absence from national discourse but as "a strategy that ignores the present, history, and the rights of groups and individuals" (Friedemann 2007, 183). Afro-descendent populations remain marginalized in Colombian society, and discussions of invisibility continue to undergird academic texts on Afro-Colombian populations (Jaime Arocha and Maya 2008; Ibagón Martín 2016; Restrepo and Rojas 2004). Still, Pan-American shifts towards multiculturalism have led to the nominal incorporation of ethnic minority groups into the legislative and political imaginary of the Colombian state. The Colombian constitution of 1991 and subsequent ratification of Law 70 (1993) legally recognizes Afro-Colombians as an ethnic group, thereby recognizing their right to claim ancestral lands and their right to a pre-consultation with any developers that seek to alter or extract from their territory. Eduardo Restrepo posits that such transitions not only involve political recognition, but also the technical formation of new ethnic subjectivities. He argues that "techniques of enacting ethnic black political subjects and subjectivities have been multiple [...] They have involved forms of visibilities through maps, censuses, documents, and surveys" (Restrepo 2004, 704). Despite these historic gains, Jaime Arocha and Adriana Maya (2008) expose the coexistence of contradictory conditions: "the promotion and celebration of diversity and cultural patrimonies through cultural policies and constitutional reforms; and the weakening or removal of the national legal frameworks that safeguard ancestral ethnic territories and polymorphous systems of production" (2008, 401). Based on their review of political, legal, and social changes in Colombia, the relative "invisibility" described by Friedemann over 30 years ago still persists.

According to the last census, over 97% of Maríalabajenses self-identify as either Afro-

Colombian, Black, *Mulato*, or *Palenquero*[7] (DANE 2010). María la Baja also includes two Indigenous

Resguardos (Reservations), though less than 0.5% of the population self-identified as Indigenous on

the 2005 census in the region.[8] I consider my research in María la Baja as firmly informed by the

region's history and identity as an Afro-Colombian population—including the stories of invisibility

and marginalization just as much as those of creative innovation and critical visibility. I also

recognize that ethnicity—while an important element of peoples' identities—is always also part of

overlapping and complex subjectivities that exceed the scope of ethnic categories. Understanding

the violence, victimization, as well as resistance within María la Baja requires acute attention to the

way these experiences come in and out of contact with fixed and fluid notions of race.

L. Kaifa Roland's vocabulary for addressing racial formations and practices is instructive

here. Through her work in Post-Soviet Cuban tourism, Roland dissects the ways in which

delegitimized biological understandings of "race" continue to rear their head in moments of social

interactions, performances of difference, and especially in questions of belonging. In particular,

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[7] The Colombian census recognizes multiple ethnic groups that fall collectively under African-based ancestry. These include: *Afro-Colombiano/Afro-descendiente* (Afro-Colombian/Afro-descendent), *Negro* (Black), *Mulato* (of mixed African and White or Mestizo heritage), and *Palenquero* (from Palenque de San Basilio). Afro-Colombian/Afro-descendent and Black are often used in daily speech and writing interchangeably, though some individuals have a preference for one over the other. Generally speaking, Afro-Colombiano is more common in formal references. This difference parallels the use of African American and Black in the United States. "*Mulato*" is a colonial-era term developed to indicate someone with mixed African and White European or Mestizo heritage. The word is still used today, though it can be considered offensive due to its colonial origins and root word "*mula*," meaning mule (the offspring of species so divergent that it cannot procreate). "*Palenquero*" refers to the contemporary population from Palenque de San Basilio, located in the Mahates municipality to the east of María la Baja. Historically, palenques refer to cimarron villages that were established by African men and women who escaped slavery and reclaimed their freedom. María la Baja and the surrounding region was historically comprised of numerous palenques during the time of slavery. Today, only San Basilio de Palenque retains the name "Palenque." While an outside observer may recognize all dark-complexioned inhabitants of this region as Afro-Colombian/Black, locals can distinguish among Palenqueros and Afro-Colombians based on their language/accent and certain physical traits, such as skin tone and facial features.

[8] This number is likely a low estimate due to the Colombian census protocol that only allowed citizens to choose one ethnic identity.

Roland draws on Derrida to introduce the "trace of race" or "t/race" in which "the residue of an essentialist, folk 'race' concept is at play" (2013, 402). These are the moments in which fluid and performed racial categories encounter attempts to retain racist, biological fixity. I faced these moments throughout my research, especially when I spoke with individuals who lived in proximity to María la Baja but distinguished themselves from a region that they categorized as racially "Black" and socially "criminal" or culturally "backwards."

While such moments often occurred in private conversations, they also resonate in broader national sentiments that imply that violence and victimization in rural, impoverished, and ethnic minority populations is perhaps due to the inherent qualities of victimized groups. In light of this, I explore the ways in which victimhood, ethnic identities, and rural livelihoods are projected onto one another in the context of María la Baja. At times these three identifiers are collapsed and flattened, other times they are isolated and highlighted as discrete social or legal categories. In all cases, their relationships are forged from a combination of historical realities and national imaginaries that draw both from day-to-day performances of "raciality" and from the "t/race" of deterministic understandings of "race" that fix ethnic minority groups into naturalized categories of marginalization (Roland 2013).

As such, discussions of racial and *campesino* (rural farmer) identities surface throughout my analyses of victimhood—though not always in explicit ways.[9] Rather, these regional identities emerge in bureaucratic and bodily performances, in artistic and narrative renderings of violence. I consider how these identities are at once political categories that are at the same time lived and performed

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[9] Throughout this dissertation I use the Spanish term "*campesino*," in reference to the small-scale rural farmers in regions like María la Baja. While this term is often translated as "peasant farmer," the term in English can carry connotations of a passive underclass (see Seligmann 2008). By contrast, Maríalabajenses self-identify as "*campesino*" with pride, and as a means of expressing the complex realities of farming in Colombia. Claims to this occupation and lifestyle signal their ingenuity, dedication to a life of hard labor, and oppression by powerful armed and unarmed actors.

across historical and spatial landscapes. I track the role of visibility in framing the moments in which these fluid identities coalesce and transmit meaning to an observer—be it a state employee reviewing files, a paramilitary soldier determining one's fate, or a national public gaining empathy for a war they have not lived.

Victimhood and Victims: A note on language

Academic debates around the use of "victim" and "victimhood" abound. Across conflict contexts, scholars note that the label "victim" can be problematic, as it can limit individual agency (de Waardt 2016), run counter to social understandings of violence (Lacerda 2016), or create hierarchies of suffering (McEvoy and McConnachie 2012). To combat this, some individuals elect alternate words, such as "survivor." Nevertheless, each label faces the problem of defining an individual primarily in relation to their experience with violence rather than other elements of their identity.

Victimhood, by contrast, seeks to address the political, social, and legal experiences that individuals and communities face following acts of violence. In this way, victimhood focuses on the conditions that affect people—during and after violence—rather than their identity as such. In Spanish, the word victimhood does not exist. Translations of victimhood range from "*la condición de ser víctima*" (the condition of being a victim) to the invented term "*victimidad*" (Acevedo Arango 2017; Paniagua Solórzano 2010). While these concepts for victimhood exist and circulate in academic writing, they are not common in daily conversations. Instead, "victim" remains a salient political and popular term.

Academic unease with loaded terms can prevent us from recognizing that language means different things for different people at different moments in time. In this dissertation, I focus on the socio-political and subjective experiences of victimhood in Colombia. Nevertheless, I also use the word "victim" throughout this text because, in the context of my research, *víctima* was both a legal

and socially relevant term for the people I worked with. Prior to the passage of the 2011 Victims' Law, Myriam Jimeno (2010) argues that victim discourses in Colombia have created "emotional communities," in which testimonies, public marches, and other forms of activism generated a collective sense of victimhood that has been empowering. She highlights in particular how these emotional communities were key to victim-based activism that generated the eventual conditions for the creation of the 2011 Victims' Law.

While some individuals may choose not to identify as a victim, the majority of the people I worked with were well-aware that their access to economic and social resources was tied to being officially recognized as a victim of conflict under the Victims' Law. In this context, victim—rather than hindering agency—was used as a term of empowerment in daily conversations and public displays. For example, on April 9, 2016 various communities around María la Baja united in honor of the National Day for Victims. Roughly 200 people, including community members and institutional representatives, held a march from the highway to the central plaza of María la Baja. The leaders of the event proclaimed that their principal goal was to make María la Baja's victim population visible to a regional and national public. A large banner that led the march, read: "The Victims of María la Baja Constructing Peace" (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Victims' March in María la Baja on April 9, 2016. The sign reads: "The Victims of María la Baja Constructing Peace." All photographs are the author's unless otherwise noted.

The war and peace landscape in Colombia is constantly shapeshifting. Due to the vast inequality in terms of access to institutional resources, communities across the country have different relationships with the term victim and its social and legal implications. Individuals and communities at the margins of state contact expressed their confusion about the law and what it meant to be a victim and whether or not their stories fit that description. Those with knowledge of the law often proclaimed their victimhood status with conviction. In contrast, there were also individuals—often further along in the reparations processes—who began to shed the label of victim in preference of different terms. Based on this diversity, it is evident that the term victim is not static, and its meaning and value shifts across space and time. Recognizing the problematic connotations of the term victim, I often elect to use the term victimhood or the phrase: people/communities affected by the conflict. Nevertheless, when I discuss individuals or

communities that self-identify as victims, I too adopt that term in order to recognize the power it connotes for them (Burnyeat 2018; Jimeno, Varela, and Castillo 2015).

MULTI-SITED ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH METHODS

This dissertation moves across two groups that are key to understanding victimhood and victim reparations: (1) the institutional entities that oversee Colombia's ongoing reparation and reconciliation process and (2) the communities and individuals who are trying to gain access to their rights as victims. I strive to represent the overlap and moments of friction that emerge between these institutional and community spaces. In doing so, my primary goal is to communicate one of the most important lessons that I learned in María la Baja: that in order to understand the effects of war, you must understand histories of violence that extend beyond the temporal and conceptual limits of the Colombian conflict.[10] By extension, in order to understand victimhood and reparations, it is necessary to understand the bureaucratic and political mechanisms that—despite positive intentions—continue to perpetuate inequality and new forms of victimization.

I conducted over 15 months of multi-sited ethnographic research between 2014–2017 (Marcus 1995). I traversed hierarchically distinct spaces at the national and regional scales. At the national scale, I moved from central government offices in Colombia's capital, Bogotá, to the shade of mango trees in rural María la Baja. At the regional scale, I moved from the back porch of houses with spotty electricity to the air conditioned offices of María la Baja's regional government. I also conducted participant-observation in the spaces of overlap, such as meetings in which institutional representatives joined communities under mango trees, or where community members from María la Baja traveled to governmental offices to attend meetings, protest, or to comply with bureaucratic

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[10] Here I refer to "the conflict" as shorthand for the events and war that have evolved over the past fifty years in Colombia. The origins and details of the conflict are discussed in Chapter One.

processes. My experiences across these realities allowed me to return from one space with enriched questions or perspectives to deploy in the other.

Institutional Research

My early ethnographic research (2014-2015) focused primarily on the institutional events and programs organized by the National Center for Historical Memory (*Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica,* CNMH), based out of Bogotá. This government organization, formerly known as the Historical Memory Group, carries out a variety of tasks that include documenting the origins and impacts of war across the country, creating archives on violence, and recording testimonies of demobilized armed combatants. Under the 2011 Victims' Law, CNMH was also assigned the job of creating the National Museum of Memory (*Museo Nacional de Memoria*, MNM). Thus, their work has been driven by both academic and public outreach goals. In particular, they have explored artistic and visual mediums as a key means of communicating information about the war to a broad public (see Chapter Three).

In addition to my contact with CNMH, I met with representatives and attended events from regional government organizations, including the Center for Memory, Peace, and Reconciliation (Bogotá); Museum, House of Memory (Medellín), and the Casa Española (Cartagena). During this time, I attended a range of events, including panels with academics, activists, community leaders, and artists; theatrical plays; concerts and dance presentations; commemorations; documentary viewings; arts-based workshops; book launches; and gallery openings for visual arts created by professional artists, perpetrators of violence, and victims of violence. In these spaces, I engaged in participant-observation, conversed informally with participants following their presentations, and kept a textual and photographic record of displays. Through these national events, I also was able to observe the conversations and debates that sometimes emerged between institutional representatives and individuals who self-identified as victims of the conflict. Based on these experiences, I developed my

plan for long-term multi-sited research that would move between the institutional spaces I observed

in urban centers and in the rural region of María la Baja, where I hoped to understand the day-to-day

efforts to claim reparations and make victimhood visible.

During my primary, long-term research (September 2015 – August 2016), I spent the first

three months in Bogotá and the remaining nine months in María la Baja, with occasional trips to

urban centers (Bogotá, Medellín, and Cartagena) for national events. From September to November

of 2015, I worked as an intern at CNMH's Bogotá offices. My principal work involved helping the

burgeoning National Museum of Memory team with the preparation and execution of the VIII

Annual Week for Memory, which occurred between October 2-8, 2015. In particular, I aided with

the creation and analysis of an audience survey that was disseminated at all of the events. I also

attended and participated in several arts-based workshops run by the CNMH during this week.

Towards the end of my internship, I organized focus groups with CNMH employees to discuss

some of the broader goals and themes that undergirded their work. In particular, my discussions

targeted their perceptions of the role of victims and art in public narratives of the Colombian

conflict.

María la Baja

I conducted ethnographic research in María la Baja during two preliminary trips in 2014 and

2015, for nine months during my long-term research between November 2015 and August 2016,

and in a follow-up trip in August of 2017. The municipality of María la Baja is located just inland

from Colombia's Caribbean coast, approximately 45 miles from Cartagena (Figure 3). Despite the

close proximity to one of the wealthiest tourism areas, the region of María la Baja has suffered from

intense violence that peaked in the late 1990s to early 2000s. Violence in the region has been carried

out by various armed actors, including guerrillas, paramilitary groups, and the state military. More

recently, they have also endured violence associated with the introduction of the African palm oil

agroindustry that followed massive forced displacements. The conflict in Colombia has historically

targeted rural farming populations, and María la Baja is no exception. That these rural farmers, or

campesinos, generally self-identify as Black or Afro-Colombian, factors significantly in how they

understand the historic manifestation of violence in their communities.

Figure 3: Map of María la Baja, located 45 miles from Cartagena. Source: Google Maps, view of María la Baja.

Approximately 39% of María la Baja's population is included in the Unified Register of

Victims (*Registro Único de Víctimas*), the government's database of officially recognized conflict

victims.[11] Nevertheless, local leaders claim that this is a under-estimation of the actual number of

victims in María la Baja. During the majority of my research in the region there were only two

communities undergoing collective reparations processes: (1) Mampuján, which was the first

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[11] 18,665 individuals of approximately 47,749 (Alcaldía Municipal María la Baja 2016, 78) inhabitants from María la Baja were registered by the Unified Victims' Register. Data accessed on August 27, 2018: https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/es/registro-unico-de-victimas-ruv/37394.

reparations sentence under the Justice and Peace Law of 2005 (Law 975) and (2) San José de Playón, the town with which I introduced this chapter, which became a subject of collective reparations under the 2011 Victims' Law. Since the culmination of my research, several additional communities have received notification of their inclusion as collective reparation subjects. Many other communities in María la Baja were excluded from this reparation process without a clear explanation from the state.

During my time in María la Baja, I lived with a family in the urban center of the region (Figure 4; see Interludes 1 & 2). My central location allowed me to move among various communities and organizations within the region, that ranged from well-known and advanced reparation cases to communities that were still trying to initiate a relationship with Colombian institutions and reparation processes. This access allowed me to develop a rich understanding of the textures that exist across a single region. Rather than narrate the violent histories and reparation processes of one community, my research stakes its value in the ability to show the inequality that has emerged under Colombia's current conflict resolution strategies. In particular, I highlight the fact that communities across María la Baja—in spite of their shared and similar experiences with violence—have drastically different relationships with the institutions that are responsible for victims' attention and reparations.

Figure 4: Map of María la Baja municipality and its 13 counties. Source: Google Maps, view of María la Baja. Modified by author.

I used snowball sampling to meet leaders across the region of María la Baja and the greater

Montes de María. I met with more than ten communities in the region that identify as victims of the

conflict.[12] Of those, I worked closely with five groups: (1) Organizers based in María la Baja's urban

center; (2) San José de Playón, Arroyo Grande and their associated villages; (3) Mampuján; (4)

Monte Cristo; and (5) the Association of Afro-Colombian Farmers (ASOCAAFRO). My

relationship with each group was dictated first by their agreement to include me in their processes

and second by their stage in the reparations process.

Communities like Mampuján and San José de Playón were more established in their

relationship with the state. There, I attended institutional and community-based meetings,

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[12] Within María la Baja, I met with community members and/or attended meetings with the following communities: San José de Playón, Arroyo Grande, Níspero, Los Bellos, Mampuján, ASOCAAFRO, two separate communities in El Sena, Monte Cristo, and the urban center of María la Baja. Outside of María la Baja, I traveled to and attended community events in Las Brisas, San Juan Nepomuceno and San Cristobal, San Jacinto. I also attended several regional meetings and events in El Carmen de Bolívar; San Onofre, Sucre; and Sincelejo, Sucre.

commemorations, and workshops. Additionally, I met with leaders separately for formal and informal interviews based on my evolving knowledge of their cases and the issues affecting their reparations processes. While both Mampuján and San José de Playón opened up their meetings and homes to me, their institutional connections made it such that I was rarely actively involved in the nuts and bolts of their activities. In contrast, my work with ASOCAAFRO and Monte Cristo became much more hands-on, as they both lacked strong government support. Per their requests, I became involved in collecting legal testimonies for ASOCAAFRO's land restitution case and I investigated and aided in the preparation of institutional petitions to support Monte Cristo's attempt to gain recognition as a case for collective reparations. In María la Baja's urban center, I was not involved with one particular organization, but I came to know many community and institutional leaders who lived or worked there. These contacts included grassroots community organizers, educators, employees in María la Baja's victims' assistance office, employees in the Municipal Attorney's office, and musicians. My work with these individuals ranged from conducting formal interviews, to happenstance encounters in the street, to attending meetings, marches, and presentations at their invitation.

Participant-observation was an ever-changing affair throughout my research. From one day or hour to the next, my role shifted from an observer of a state-led meeting to the collector of legal testimonies. The tug and pull of these vastly different worlds—only miles apart—was exhausting to reconcile in my mind and in my weekly agenda. The inequality I witnessed was often a product of "success breeding success." Communities that were already organized and visible were generally more likely to receive further interventions and outside investment. I too had to fight the urge to simply follow these established cases. In Mampuján and San José de Playón, for example, meetings and events were in constant flow; I just needed to show up. In contrast, most of the other communities I met with demanded more time and effort from all involved. While I managed to

develop a deeper working relationship with ASOCAAFRO and Monte Cristo, there were many other communities with which I could not or did not manage to create a relationship. In some cases, this was precisely because their organization was limited and I struggled to know how to become involved without generating false hope that my presence could change their situation.

SUBJECTIVITIES, DANGER, AND WRITING

Within my first weeks in María la Baja, strangers would approach me on the street and say "you're with Mampuján, no?" Initially the question struck me as odd. I wondered why people assumed that I was "with" Mampuján, when I was living in María la Baja's urban center and at that point had only ever visited Mampuján once. Then, I started to understand. One day, I was in a bakery near the central plaza in María la Baja, when suddenly a man I had never seen before turned to me with wide eyes, a beaming smile, and outstretched arms—"*Anna, estabas perdida*!"—"Anna, you've been gone for a long time!" I was confused at first, and then smiled sheepishly explaining that I was not Anna, but a different White woman from the north. While I did not know Anna in person, I had heard that she was a former volunteer with the Mennonite Church and a local NGO called Planting Seeds of Peace (*Sembrando Semillas de Paz*). She had lived in Mampuján for over a year and was very fondly remembered. There were only a handful of foreigners that lived or worked in María la Baja during my time there, and all were affiliated with Mampuján.

During the time I lived in María la Baja, I was highly aware of my whiteness, and even more so of my foreignness—my blonde-haired blue eyed-ness—which distinguished me from most light-skinned Colombians. My profile was highly visible in María la Baja, and so expectations of me often preceded face-to-face conversations and meetings. In particular, I learned quickly to present myself and my work in a way that would dispel particular assumptions. Typically, my initial script would be something along the following:

> I am an anthropology student at a university in the United States, conducting research on victim reparations in María la Baja. I am not affiliated with any government or NGO

organization, which has advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, my research and my time is dictated by your and my interests, not by a political or funding institution. On the other hand, my lack of affiliation means that I do not have direct access to political or economic resources that can facilitate your reparation processes. I am here to listen and learn about your histories and your experiences trying to gain access to reparations. If you allow me, I would like to be able to attend community meetings and converse with members of the group over the months that I will be living in María la Baja. During this time, I will gladly support and help with any processes that you think could be beneficial for your community. Before I say any more, do you have any questions for me?

While I anticipated that many communities would not want to waste their time working with me, every community I spoke with received me with an open mind despite my repeated emphasis on my limited access to government resources. Often communities would comment that they were just relieved to not hear another empty promise. My proposal of listening and trying to understand was perhaps odd, but it was different from many government and NGO initiatives that came and went. Still, I recognized that there was power and privilege in my identity, and so I tried to the best of my ability to gauge how to ethically manage this privilege. At times this meant excusing myself from access to spaces or events. Other times, it meant trusting communities' decisions to "use" my presence to their advantage.

Privilege and Risk

During my first preliminary research trip in 2014, I met with many Colombian scholars to seek their suggestions and insights regarding my proposed research focus. I collected many pieces of advice, but one in particular stuck with me throughout my research. A well-respected historian warned me about honesty—"In the U.S., lying is bad. In Colombia," she countered, "telling the whole truth is dangerous. We are at war, and you have to tell partial truths to stay safe." I took this advice to heart—though I was never very good at it in practice. During my research in María la Baja I also saw this protective mechanism put into practice by the individuals and communities I worked with, and with their guidance, I learned to adopt a "healthy" layer of paranoia.[13]

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[13] I discuss paranoia further in Chapter Two and in Interlude 4.

Leaders, neighbors, and members of my extended host family in María la Baja helped me understand the various levels of risk that existed within the region—neighborhoods that were home to "*viciosos*" (delinquents involved in drugs and robbery); farmland that was protected by armed private security forces; and corners throughout the urban center that were populated by "*moscas*" (young men hired to watch peoples' movements like "flies"). As the motivations (and memberships) for each of these potentially violent groups were difficult to define, people in general learned to exercise caution in their interactions. Leaders of victim communities or land restitution cases in particular felt that they were being watched. As I became more integrated into existing victim-centered activism, I was told by my contacts that my subject position as a White, foreign female both protected me and potentially exposed me and my contacts to unwanted attention and possible violence.

Maríalabajenses assured me that my foreignness would likely deter potential perpetrators, as 'most would not want to risk the media attention my attack or death would cause.' Still, they guaranteed that there was no doubt that I, too, was observed by the flies. The attention that my white foreignness garnered, led communities to occasionally invite me to meetings because they felt it was helpful to show Colombian government employees and authority figures that a foreigner was watching. In such cases, my privilege was mobilized by communities to support their claims to rights and just treatment. Alternatively, there were other scenarios in which communities determined that I should not travel with them to their fields, for fear that my profile would call the attention of armed actors and label the farmers as trouble-makers. The long-term repercussions of this attention were not a risk worth taking, and so I never traveled to certain spaces that may have been key to understanding life in the countryside.

Shifting Eyes—Beyond Racial Categories

The feeling of being an outsider in María la Baja never went away, but what did go away—if just for the fleeting time that I resided in this space—were my U.S.-trained eyes. Race shapeshifted into something else. In my White-saturated Colorado world I have been indoctrinated to apply an unconscious one-drop logic to any passerby that is slightly "off-white." But, when I leave this place, these one-drop eyes are replaced by a different sense of color that parallels what L. Kaifa Roland (2011) describes in the Cuban context as a "race-color continuum." While by no means free from racism and discrimination, this color continuum in Colombia taps into a more flexible concept of color-race-class connections in which "skin color and ancestry are not the only determinants of race; such class-based considerations as property ownership, occupation, and education also come into play" (Roland 2011, 35). Color and ethnic identification never fail to be important within the Colombian context, but understanding the flexibility of race-color connections requires subtle attention to place, class, behavior, and history. In Colombia, color and place are intertwined. For example, broadly speaking, María la Baja as a coastal, rural region is Blackened in the national imaginary and Bogotá as a central, urban space is Whitened. Regionalism and racism in this context can go hand in hand. As one dark-complexioned Maríalabajense quipped reflecting on their recent experience in Bogotá, "I felt like a fly in milk!"

Beyond shifts between urban and rural spaces, racialized identities are also always engaged with other contexts within and outside of individuals' control. In particular, Maríalabajenses expressed understanding their African heritage in ways that extend beyond color and racial categories. It involved their complexions, yes, but also their geographic association, their identity as farmers linked to the land, and the ways and practices of their self-liberated African ancestors. This vision-shift is key to understanding how Maríalabajenses perform and perceive fluid categories that include, but are not limited to ethnicity. In light of this, I write consciously against the impulse to

address race/ethnicity as a separate social category, and instead present race in a way that holds true

to the fuzzy lines I saw not only within engagements with race and color, but also between identities

of race, gender, *campesino*-ness, and victimhood.

On Writing Violence

In scholarly literature within Colombia, the emphasis on violence led to the development of

violentología, the study of the social, economic, and political causes of violence (Bergquist, Peñaranda,

and Sánchez 1992, 2001; Guzmán Campos, Fals Borda, and Umaña Luna 1962; Richani 2002;

Sánchez 2003, 1992). The pervasive attention to violence—as a defining feature of Colombian

society—runs the risk of perpetuating international stereotypes. Speaking against the "culture of

violence" concept in Jamaica, anthropologist Deborah A. Thomas (2009) posits that violence has

always been central to formations of the state. To deny this link, she claims, "reproduce[s] a notion

of violence as cultural rather than structural" (2009, 90). In Colombia, to label violence as cultural

reduces violence to the problem of the lower class, as the war has proliferated in the rural areas of

the country among those with limited means of social or geographic mobility. This perspective

obscures histories of social abandonment and inequality that continue to form the basis of and

motivation for social and physical acts of violence. Further, such analyses do not address *lived*

experiences of violence that often escape the logic of sweeping causal explanations (Blair 1998; Das

et al. 2000; Riaño-Alcalá 2006; Robben and Nordstrom 1995).

Many people affected by the conflict feel that the horrors they survived are forgotten

because of the larger population's refusal to confront the gruesome realities of violence. The

decision to publically narrate or display their experiences of violence is an effort to make a broader

public see the realities of war. María Victoria Uribe—in her historic work—has also made a point to

narrate graphic details about violent techniques to resist the "amnesia" that she considers

characteristic of Colombian society (2009, 2004). There is a need and a place for such narratives;

however, I have chosen to focus the narratives in these pages on the processes by which individuals stake claims to their rights as victims, rather than the acts of violence themselves.

CHAPTER OUTLINES AND INTERLUDES

This dissertation is comprised of five main body chapters and a conclusion, each of which explores different angles of critical visibility. In addition to these chapters (outlined below) I have included short interludes between chapters. These interludes are the ligaments that hold together the concepts presented in each chapter. Rather than provide theoretical analysis, the interludes offer fieldnotes and post-field reflections about experiences and sentiments that I consider central to my research. While several interludes could be chapters with theoretical frameworks in and of themselves, I offer them in a descriptive writing voice in hopes that it provides the reader both with a pause from my theoretical analysis and with a more emotional connection to the day-to-day realities that produced this dissertation.

Chapter One tackles the ways in which frameworks that define Colombian geo-politics have also shaped the way war and peace have developed across the country. In particular, I consider the concept of "nation-territory," which linguistically divides the political and geographical centers of the country from the rural margins. While popular and political use of the nation-territory dichotomy tend to emphasize this division, I argue that it is more useful to consider nation-territory as a "contact zone" (Pratt 1992); that is, as a means of highlighting the ways in which marginalized regions of the country are also the sites of historic institutional and armed interventions. Through this angle, I discuss the history and contemporary context of Colombia's conflict, including the origins and contours of the war in María la Baja. I build on analyses of violence and terror in Colombia (eg. Taussig 1991; Uribe 2004), arguing for a renewed look at violence through the lens of peace and reconciliation efforts.

Chapter Two analyzes the political and legal structures that frame victims of war-time violence as a new type of Colombian citizen. This victim-citizenship has emerged at the intersection of Colombian histories of state absence and the current rise in government intervention and reparations. I explore the formation of victim-citizenship under the 2011 Victims' Law and the reparations process. Using the metaphor of a "house of illusions," I walk the reader through the process of entering, navigating, and exiting the victim reparations system. Multiple stories at each stage reveal the range of experiences people have as they attempt to validate their victimhood for state officials. While this process is dictated by formal steps, critical visibility continues to play a role in determining people's successful access of their rights. I demonstrate the ways in which the state's peace-building and war-making are both ultimately tied to processes of defining who belongs as citizens of the state.

Chapter Three examines the concept and execution of critical visibility through aesthetic and symbolic displays. Colombia's shift from a perpetrator- to a victim-centered approach is not only evident in new legal parameters. Here, I consider the affective and aesthetic process of making victimhood visible to broader Colombian and international audiences. Through an analysis of government-sponsored symbolic reparations and displays of victim-based initiatives, I analyze the role of aesthetics in constructing national perceptions of victimhood, reconciliation, and peace.

Chapter Four explores the relationship between collective victimhood and collective memories. I address the ways in which communities in María la Baja collect memories in order to stake claims to reparations, reconciliation, and land restitution. Each community has different levels of connection with state entities and memory collection processes. Nevertheless, they each face the challenge to report memories of violence for bureaucratic purposes at the same time as they manage the way their memories are transformed and circulated into public narratives. Across these experiences, communities harness memories to stake claims to imagined futures—futures that may

include a return to land or a return to livelihood that is dignified, sustainable, and that honors the skills and labor of rural Afro-Colombian communities. In parallel, I demonstrate the way narratives can take on lives of their own, in which their meaning and message is no longer always in the control of people who lived these experiences.

Chapter Five addresses the ways in which Afro-Colombians in María la Baja re-signify their "contentious bodies" amidst parallel peace and war efforts. In times of war and peace, the armed paramilitary forces and government agencies have framed Afro-Colombian *campesinos* as both "innocent victims" and "guerrilla combatants." Caught between these opposing labels, I discuss the ways in which these communities stake claims to lost land and violent pasts despite the fact that their very bodies are presumed to challenge their innocence. I illustrate how individuals use their "contentious bodies" to resist militant and bureaucratic attempts to label them as perpetrators of violence. Afro-Colombian farmers make visible embodied evidence, such as calloused farming hands, dark complexions, and scars, to assert their dignity and victimization. Through these corporeal and visual self-assertions, I examine the ways in which intersectional signifiers, including gender and class, are simultaneously read and performed within the context of war and peacetime violence.

Finally, the **Conclusion** turns the lens of visibility and invisibility onto the writing process itself, reflecting on the limits of ethnographic knowledge production and writing. First, I narrate three versions of a single event in order to expose the uncomfortable coexistence of violence and peace in the daily lives of communities fighting for alternative futures. Second, I highlight the limits of viewing victimhood primarily through the Victims' Law and community repair through legal reparations. In order to see beyond these limits, I discuss elements of daily life in María la Baja that rarely made it onto the pages of the dissertation. Finally, I close with an update about the political climate in Colombia from August 2016 to October 2018.

The chapters in this dissertation are presented in a linear format. That said, I do not imagine them as building one upon the other in a chronological fashion. During my research, I encountered the histories and experiences of individuals, communities, institutions, and armed actors as a web rather than a single story line. In my attempts to untangle this web, I was constantly reminded of the ways that stories repeat, diverge, and fold back on themselves. To iron out a smooth narrative was to let the core of the story fall right out of the middle (see Cox 2015, 9-10). Across each chapter I impose a certain amount of order and academic analysis in order to orient readers. Still, I have attempted throughout my writing process to also reflect the connections, frictions, and juxtapositions that swirled around me and the people with whom I worked.

María la Baja

Leaving the house near the center of María la Baja, I take the final step out from under the shade of the *tutumo* tree, the last I encounter for several blocks. Neighborhood children yell my name and giggle as I walk away in a mirage of heat waves. I could only imagine how strange it must seem to see a White, blonde young woman heading outside at the peak of midday heat. María la Baja transforms throughout the day. The bustle of early morning vendors preparing their street side carts before the sun crept over the cement walls; the midday hum of radios and TVs as people retreated for midday rest; and the evening buzz of activity as the sinking sun invited people to walk the streets, visit friends and family, share stories and small cups of sweet coffee. Regardless of the time of day, remnants of past moments left their imprint throughout the town—flies cleaning the last drops of blood from the morning's butchered meat, the residual smell of fish that lingered along the market by the cemetery where older women sold the day's catch, or the kites—homemade from palm stems and plastic bags—caught in power lines after a windy day.

Most of the town smartly dozed the afternoon away in hammocks or fanned themselves absentmindedly with the day's edition of Cartagena's popular tabloid, "Q'Hubo." Still, even in the midday sun, there were people to encounter and sights to see. The pace was slower, and it was a good time to have unexpected conversations. Weaving my way toward the central plaza, I crossed epic games of marbles. The children's read of the dirt roads—every rock, pothole, and puddle—is a marvel. I once saw a boy, no more than seven years old, hit his mark from a distance of twenty feet!

As I continue down the road, I hear coastal accordion music. A romantic *vallenato* ballad announced my arrival to the one-room cement home of the old man *gallero*, a cockfighting aficionado. The open door allows me a glimpse of the wooden poles crisscrossing the ceiling, forming a 3-D web of stoops for his fighting cocks. The thin, elderly man, the color of aged tobacco

leaves, rocks ever so slightly in his hammock, enveloped by rooster calls and piercing lyrics that lament love gone wrong. Only a half a block later, and the music and slowly rocking hammock are replaced by the blaring horns of the next bus leaving for Cartagena and the chaos of the central strip through town. The whoosh of motorcycles weaving expertly through tangles of trucks, bikes and pedestrians. Along the main strip the artisanal shops of bicycle repair, cobblers, and handmade brooms are juxtaposed against the likes of national banks, international cell phone companies, internet cafes, and stores stacked floor to ceiling with "Made in China" plastic toys and accessories, such as shoes and hair clips.

Shaded corners are packed with moto taxis. The drivers await their next ride, twirling handkerchiefs in the air to fan their face and occasionally wipe the sweat from their brow. As I pass, one or two hiss– "ssspt, ssspt, *mona*" (blondie), trying to get my attention. Women, children, men, and dogs all meander through crowded streets, zigzagging from one patch of shade to another. Stagnant water lines the streets clouded by soap residue and green algae. Candy wrappers and plastic bags dot the streets and sidewalks, to be swept up in the early morning with grass brooms or by torrential downpour. Broken glass stands ominously on the top of cement walls to discourage intruders and theft. The green, brown, and clear spears glisten in the humid sun. The cement walls are colorfully covered with hand-painted signs and ads—the barber shop with paintings of Nelson Mandela, Barack Obama, and Bob Marley. Side walls are layered with hand drawn paper flyers announcing street parties, DJs that blast music out of pick-up trucks, local festivals, and religious gatherings. Political murals on cement walls offer an archaeology of elections past, some brightly painted for the recent 2015 mayoral elections, and others overgrown with weeds, cracked from the heat and barely legible from eight years ago, two election cycles back.

Near the central plaza, I cross a mix of vendors. Older women sit on the curbs, selling *mondogo* (beef tripe) or fish. They expertly clean or descale the day's catch, while tobacco ashes

accumulate at the end of the cigarettes that hang from their mouths. Young men push carts with carefully peeled and cut green mangoes, sprinkled with salt and lime. An older man sits patiently in the shade with a block of ice, his hand-crank ice shaving machine, and rainbow of flavored syrup bottles. With each minute that passes, the block of ice melts, forming a pool at his feet. I catch the glare of the sun off the terracotta-red tile of the central plaza. The plaza holds a large cement stage at one end, a small jungle gym, and the Catholic church painted mustard yellow with white trim. A few almond trees offer speckled shade over white benches during the heat of the day. Aside from these coveted shady spots, the plaza is uninhabitable until nightfall.

I imagine the life the plaza will harbor later that evening—teenagers gossiping in groups, soccer games form on the slick tile, laughter, and music. Vendors sell hotdogs, grilled meat skewers, candies, and ice cream. A young boy taps his knife against a metal pot strung around his neck to attract the attention of potential customers—a skewer of potatoes topped by a hardboiled egg and sprinkled with salt and lime juice. But in the heat of the day, the plaza is bright with the Caribbean sun and empty. I stop for a minute in the corner bakery called "*Papi Quiero Pan*" ("Daddy, I Want Bread") to buy a small plastic bag of potable water, fighting the temptation of sticky sweet rolls. After catching up with acquaintances, I am drawn to the music outside. On the far side of the plaza, I hear the beat of drums and Pabla Flores' breathtaking voice echoing from the local House of Culture during Bullerengue practice. A marriage of African, Indigenous, and Spanish traditions, the sounds and slow rhythmic dance of Bullerengue captures María la Baja—its beauty, creativity, hope, and pain. I absorb the final echoes of the chorus as I move toward the shade of the Municipal Building.

The tall, white metal gate to the Municipal office is open, but not inviting. A tall statue at the center of the patio depicts a dark-skinned man, shirtless, carrying a cluster of plantains, attesting to the core identity of Maríalabajenses as Afro-Colombian and *campesino*. The doors and windows lining

the two-story white building have a dark tint or reflective coating, forcing patrons to plant their faces against the windows for a glimpse at the government employees inside. I often stop at the municipal office for victims' assistance on the first floor. Once inside, the air-conditioning is a shock to my system—goose bumps cover my arms and legs, and the dull burn of dry air fills my nose and the back of my throat. A quick hello to the employees and the latest gossip about what is wrong now— the computers stopped working, the government website is down, the secretary did not come into work today, the Mayor has failed to pay his employees for over two months, and the list goes on. As we talk, individuals arrive at the door after a long trip by motorcycle to get information about their victimhood status only to be told, "not today, come back tomorrow."

Colombia's History of War and Peace as a Contact Zone

FRAMING CONFLICT IN COLOMBIA

There is a tendency to frame Colombia's history along particular story lines. These stories usually rely on several well-known trends and tropes about historic violence and national divisions. Historical narratives trace the waves of violence as they have manifested across decades and even centuries. At times, scholars emphasize particular time periods—from post-colonial conflict (Bushnell 1992; LeGrand 1986) and mid-20th century violence (Guzmán Campos, Fals Borda, and Umaña Luna 1962; Roldán 2002), to armed conflict around the turn of the 21st century (Bergquist, Peñaranda, and Sánchez 2001) and the present overlaps between peace and war (Bouvier 2009). Others focus on underlying themes that persist across decades of violence, such as land and agrarian reform (LeGrand 1992; Safford and Palacios 2002) or labor and human rights (Bergquist 1992; Tate 2007; Gill 2016). One of the main explanations for continued violence is Colombia's centralist government structure, which has produced geographical and political divisions between urban centers and rural peripheries (see GMH 2013). Although these narratives of unending violence and national divisions are based on historic realities of the conflict and its contours, they also limit the possibility to analyze the conflict and country through other means.

In this chapter, I argue for two shifts in perspective in order to see the Colombian conflict in general—and in the context of María la Baja, Montes de María in particular—from new angles. First, I challenge the tendency to categorize rural conflict zones as simply representative of abandoned margins; rather, I re-conceptualize Colombia's conflict zones as "contact zones" (Pratt 1992), in which political and armed interventions have long exercised their influence. Second, I argue for a dynamic analysis of war and peace efforts. Colombia is home to the longest running war in the Western hemisphere; yet, it is also home to the longest ongoing and overlapping peace processes.

Colombia's geography, and by extension its political and social organization, is built upon on a "nation-territory" (*nación-territorio*) division. In this duality, "nation" refers primarily to urban centers in the country's interior, such as Bogotá and Medellín, and their central political and economic role in Colombia. By contrast, "territory" broadly refers to rural, agricultural lands and their local governing bodies. In addition to geographical and political divisions, the nation-territory divide is imbued with parallel social dualities: urban-rural, wealthy-poor, and lighter skin-darker skin populations. This division has also solidified hierarchies within popular and political rhetoric, in which the territory and its inhabitants are considered backwards and a hindrance to the nation's progress. In contemporary Colombian discourse, "nation-territory" simultaneously acknowledges a historic gap between central and local governments and populations while purportedly seeking to improve future articulation between the two.

I first provide a deeper analysis of the nation-territory duality in order to show its pervasive impact on Colombian society and politics, past and present. Then, I propose an approach to nation-territory that pushes beyond the surface of their historic polarization. Drawing from Mary Louise Pratt's notion of "contact zones" (1992), I aim to capture the complex encounters that occur during social movements, armed violence, policy development, and peace efforts—often between groups of unequal and shifting power.

Nation-Territory and Contact Zones

The nation-territory geographical and political divisions are simultaneously a cause and an effect of Colombia's contemporary armed conflict. The origins of the conflict were caused, in large part, by symptoms of the nation-territory divide, such as failed agrarian reforms and the central governments' lack of serious attention to the demands of rural populations. In turn, the conflict itself has persisted primarily in the rural areas of the country, leading to the massive internal displacement of over seven million Colombians (GMH 2013). The war's primary impact on the so-

called territory has only further cemented this polarized rhetoric within Colombian politics and

social movements. For example, peace and reconciliation efforts rely on the notion of territory as

code for the marginalized and rural areas most affected by conflict.

Over the last decade, the nation-territory concept appears in legal documents, government

and non-governmental programs, and general peace discourse. For example, the 2011 Victims' Law

(Law 1448), includes Article 172, "Nation-Territory Coordination and Articulation," which outlines

how efforts to provide victim attention and reparation should be coordinated across different levels

of government (República de Colombia 2011). Implicit in this mandate is the historic lack of

articulation between national and territorial entities. Likewise, the Colombian government's

"Programs for Development with Territorial Focus" (PDET) and the United Nations sponsored

"Territorial Alliances for Peace and Development,"[14] among others, use the notion of territory to

simultaneously tackle the underdevelopment of rural areas and the effects of war. In this way, these

programs explicitly connect war-torn and marginalized populations with the concept of territory.

In a similar vein, Colombia's High Commissioner for Peace, Sergio Jaramillo Caro, has

promoted the concept of "*Paz Territorial*" (Territorial Peace) (Jaramillo 2013). Recognizing the

disproportionate effects of conflict in rural areas, Jaramillo suggests that constructing sustainable

peace in Colombia must be done "[w]ith participative planning processes 'from the bottom up' in

the territories" (2013, 4).[15] Jaramillo goes on to explain that his vision for territorial peace derives

from his observations of failed state interventions. He posits, "Without denying [the state's]

achievements, I think that the centralist model, in which some [government] functionaries land like

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[14] "*Alianzas Territoriales para la Paz y el Desarrollo*," is co-sponsored by the United Nation's Development Program and Colombian national organizations. (http://www.co.undp.org/content/colombia/es/home/operations/projects/crisis_prevention_and_recovery/alianzas-territoriales-para-la-paz.html).

[15] Original text in Spanish: "*Con procesos de planeación participativa 'de abajo hacia arriba' en los territorios.*"

aliens within communities to 'bring the State,' has fallen short […] What we need is to impose a logic of *territorial inclusion and integration*, based on a new alliance between the State and communities in order to co-construct institutional structures in the territory" (Jaramillo 2013, 5, emphasis added).[16] Such efforts to recognize the longstanding impacts of war on rural areas of the country are important to correcting decades of marginalization. Still, these programs hail primarily from central government offices located in Bogotá. This top-down dynamic often reproduces the inequality and division that it seeks to abolish.

Peace and reconciliation, rather than war politics, are now dispatched from the central government to its territories. As inhabitants of rural areas witness the top-down nature of these programs, they are understandably skeptical. Sitting in front of the municipal government offices in María la Baja, Bolívar in August 2017, Eduardo, a regional leader, expressed his concern about the governments' new peace-based policies.

> I think we are working very well at the local level with the government representative for territorial development, showing her [the representative] the community structures and organizations we have in place. But, the concern is about what will happen when she reports to the offices in Bogotá. Will they come back with the same ideas that we planted, or will they come back with their ideas? It's happened to us before that they [government agencies] consult with us about our vision for development, but when they return, they bring the plan that they wanted all along, and so we are skeptical.

Reflecting on the persistence of violence—whether physical, social or economic—leaders such as Eduardo approach the peace-based programs with cautious optimism. They do so with a savvy nose for distinguishing between political talk and possibilities for real change driven *by* the territories *for* the territories.

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[16] Original text in Spanish: "*Sin negar sus logros, creo que el modelo centralista, en el que unos funcionarios aterrizan como unos marcianos entre las comunidades para 'traer el Estado', se quedó sin aire. […] Lo que necesitamos es imponer una lógica de inclusión e integración territorial, basada en una nueva alianza entre el Estado y las comunidades para construir conjuntamente institucionalidad en el territorio.*"

The nation-territory dichotomy in Colombia continues to define newspaper headings, policy initiatives, and academic investigations. The overemphasis on this dichotomy limits the ability to see variations, contradictions, and inequalities within and between nation and territory. In her book *Imperial Eyes* (1992), Mary Louise Pratt analyzes the way in which colonial and travel writers constructed and subjugated their colonial subjects through textual documents. Pratt conceives of this unequal relationship in terms of the metropolis and periphery, paralleling Colombia's use of nation and territory. Yet, Pratt disrupts the presumed relationship between these two groups, arguing that "[w]hile the imperial metropolis tends to understand itself as determining the periphery (in the emanating glow of the civilizing mission or the cash flow of development, for example), it habitually blinds itself to the ways in which the periphery determines the metropolis" (1992, 6). In order to unpack the complex relationship between these entities, Pratt develops the concept of "contact zones," which are "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (1992, 4).

The contact zones concept does not attempt to replace or diminish the existence of power dichotomies, such as colonizer-colonized or nation-territory. Rather, Pratt asserts that "a 'contact' perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other" (1992, 7). In the Colombian case, I consider the ways in which the territorial margins have figured predominantly as contact zones—or as spaces of encounter between national entities and rural communities. I argue that these contact zones—in times of war and peace—are spaces in which national politics and notions of belonging are co-constructed under unequal conditions of power.

Beyond identifying contact zones and their dynamics, I highlight the ways in which these spaces of encounter also reveal the diverse experiences and histories that pervade the nation-territory categories. Rather than viewing the nation as representative of monolithic state structures, I demonstrate how different institutions, individuals, and events can transmit a variety of mixed

messages about the state's goals, procedures, and priorities. Likewise, research within a region such as María la Baja reveals the drastically uneven ways in which neighboring rural communities have experienced violence, government resources, and peace and reconciliation politics.

The primary focus of this dissertation is to ethnographically analyze victimhood visibility in the aftermath of intense violence. Here, I first provide an overview of Colombia's conflict in general and within the region of María la Baja, Montes de María. Subsequently, I discuss parallel peace and reconciliation efforts. Through the lens of a contact zone, I present these histories as fluid processes that shift meanings as they cross geographical and social contexts. This is akin to Pilar Riaño Alcalá's vision in which "history [is] not understood as factual and linear, but as a dynamic process where past, present, and future are mutually determined by complex historical and cultural relations" (2002, 224).

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE COLOMBIAN CONFLICT

Colombia's contemporary conflict has persisted for over fifty years and involves a wide range of actors, including numerous illegal armed groups, drug cartels, private industries, politicians, and international bodies. Such a long and complex conflict defies simple explanation, and is beyond the scope of this chapter. A more detailed historical overview can be found in Appendix I. In this brief history of the conflict, I aim to provide a general overview of the groups involved, their ideological motivations, and the resulting impact of this violence. I follow this summary with a discussion of relevant historical events in the region of María la Baja, leading up to and during the armed conflict. These historical events—both in terms of political and violent interventions—constitute María la Baja as a conflict zone and a contact zone.

The Colombian conflict has historically involved three armed group categories: (1) leftist guerrilla groups, (2) conservative-backed paramilitary groups, and (3) the Colombian State military (see Table 1 for an abbreviated summary). The Colombian military—while the only legal armed

group of the three—has also carried out severe human rights abuses, including in collaboration with paramilitary groups. Before discussing the formation and actions of each group, I address the political and economic climate as a precursor to the contemporary armed conflict.

Conflict during the first half of the twentieth century in Colombia is often attributed to bipartisan tensions between the Conservative and Liberal parties. These tensions coalesced during the period known as *La Violencia* (The Violence) (1946-1954), in which both Liberals and Conservatives assassinated their opposition, even when they belonged to the same communities (Uribe 2004). While bipartisan conflict existed at all levels of society, politics were still firmly controlled on both sides by the elite class. In the 1940s, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán—a Liberal populist from a humble background—challenged the political status quo, and he quickly became the voice of the people and a front-runner for the 1950 presidential election. This political movement came to an end on April 9, 1948, when Gaitán was assassinated. Violence broke out in the streets of the capital city, Bogotá, and quickly spread to other parts of the country where Conservative and Liberal conflict was already underway (Bushnell 1993). After the short-lived dictatorship of General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (1953-1957), the two party system regained control and initiated an agreement known as the National Front, which mandated that presidential leadership alternate between the Conservative and Liberal parties each four-year term. While this approach was meant to assuage conflict between the two parties, it only enraged dissenting third party groups, whose voices remained omitted from national politics (Tate 2007, 38).

	Guerrilla Insurgents	Paramilitary Counter-Insurgent	Colombian State Military
Origins	Numerous leftist insurgent groups formed in the 1960s. Main groups: - Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP) - National Liberation Army (ELN) - Popular Liberation Army (EPL) - Movement of April 19th (M-19)	Numerous private security forces supported by conservative elite in the late 1960s-80s to protect against the insurgent guerrilla movements. Private security forces consolidated into the Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) in 1994.	Weak state military and lack of presence in remote areas of the country in the 1960s allowed insurgent guerrilla groups to form without strong resistance. The state military relied on counter-insurgent support from private security/paramilitary forces.
Ideology/Goals	Leftist revolutionary ideologies, including: Leninist-Marxist, Maoist, and Liberation Theology. Sought to challenge economic and political inequality and advocate for agrarian and political reform through armed revolution.	Counter-insurgent, anti-guerrilla forces that sought to protect those in economic and political power. Served as a legal extension of the Colombian state military until declared illegal in 1989. Continued to support private land owners, political elite, and state military illegally.	Counter-insurgent force that sought to protect the Colombian government and nation against insurgent groups. After 1989, paramilitary groups were declared illegal and a threat to national security. However, collusion between the military and paramilitary is well-documented into the 2000s.
Representative Violent Crimes	- Extortion - Kidnapping - Landmines - Drug trade - Recruitment of minors - Assassinations - Sexual violence	- Massive displacement of rural populations - Assassinations and disappearances - Massacres of civilian population - Drug trade - Political corruption - Sexual violence	- Collusion with paramilitary violence - "False-positives" – killed innocent civilians and claimed they were guerrillas - Disappearances and assassinations - Sexual violence
Demobilization Processes	- M-19 (Demobilized in 1989) - EPL (Demobilized in 1990) - FARC-EP (Ratified peace accord with government in Nov 2016) - ELN (Undergoing peace negotiations as of Dec 2017)	- AUC (Demobilized under the Justice and Peace Law in 2005) - New groups, broadly referred to as Criminal Bands (BACRIM), have since re-formed with various names and motivations.	- N/A

Table 1: Breakdown of three main categories of armed actors in the Colombian conflict: Guerrilla Insurgents, Paramilitary Counter-Insurgents, and the Colombian State Military.

Insurgent Guerrilla Groups

In the midst of these bipartisan tensions, numerous leftist guerrilla groups emerged between the 1960s and 1970s from different corners of Colombia.[17] The mission of each group was distinct; however, each called for various extremes of socialist changes to the country's politics. With particular focus on the plight of *campesinos*, many guerrilla groups called for agrarian reform that would redistribute fertile land. Each guerrilla group employed a range of violent acts, though they are often most associated with kidnapping, land mines, and the recruitment of minors. Many of these groups gave up their arms in the 1980s and 1990s, and have since been pardoned by the state and allowed to create political parties outside of the long-standing bipartisan system (Tate 2007). Two guerrilla groups continued armed combat into the 21ˢᵗ century: FARC-EP (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army) and the ELN (National Liberation Army). The FARC underwent demobilization processes in 2017 and the ELN have been in peace talks with the Colombian government since 2017 (for more details, see Peace Politics below).

Counter-Insurgent Paramilitary Groups

While some guerrilla groups demobilized in the 1980s, the landscape of violence became more complex during that same period with the formation of paramilitary groups and self-defense groups with complicated ties to the Colombian government, economic elites, and the state military.[18] As anthropologist Winifred Tate explains, "Colombian paramilitary forces, like similar groups

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[17] The most prominent guerrilla groups include: (1) Rural peasants with ties to resistance groups from the 1920s and 1930s—Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC) [1964-2016]; (2) University students influenced by the Cuban revolution and liberation theology from the Colombian Catholic Church—National Liberation Army (ELN) [1964-present]); (3) Middle class intellectuals—Movement of the 19th of April (M-19) [1972-1989]; and (4) Members of the Communist Youth influenced by Marxist-Leninist Communism—Popular Liberation Army (PCML/EPL), [1967-1990] (Pizarro 1992; Tate 2007).

[18] According to Michael Taussig (2003, 141–43), assassins during the period of *La Violencia,* known as *pájaros* and *chulavitas* can be seen as precursors to the paramilitary groups that formed in the 1980s and 1990s. Similar to the *pájaros* and *chulavitas*, paramilitary groups were financed by elite conservatives to protect their interests as wealthy land owners against the leftist guerrilla groups that called for agrarian reform, among other socialist changes to the country.

throughout Latin America, worked covertly with military forces in counter-insurgency operations characterized by death squad operations that targeted activists and opposition political parties" (2007, 50). Despite the 1968 law that legalized these paramilitary groups and associated their efforts with the government's fight against guerrilla rebels, the paramilitary groups soon operated on independent agendas, backed by wealthy elite conservatives and funded through the illegal drug trade.[19] By 1989, the Colombian government revoked the legal status of paramilitary forces, but in the 1990s they gained momentum anew, joining together under the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*—AUC). Massacres, disappearances, and the use of torture became common tactics used by the paramilitary groups as they sought to eliminate leftist guerrillas and their (presumed) sympathizers—especially in rural areas of the country.

Colombian State Military and Foreign Interventions

Although the relationship between the Colombian state military and the paramilitary was declared illegal in 1989, documented collaborations between the military and the paramilitary AUC against guerrilla insurgents continued into the 2000s (García-Peña Jaramillo 2005). Additionally, in 2006 under the presidency of Álvaro Uribe, more than 30% of members of the Colombian Congress were implicated for their collusion with the paramilitary. The "para-political scandal," as it was known, only further demonstrated that the conflict defended the interests of land-owning and political elite—often at the expense of civilian life.[20] Despite well-documented human rights abuses committed by the Colombian military and their paramilitary allies, the United States of America

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[19] The boom in the illegal drug trade at this time, with the height of Pablo Escobar and the Medellín Drug Cartel in the 1980s, also contributed to the confusing landscape of perpetrators, as drug money financed both the FARC, ELN and the AUC (Sanford 2003).

[20] The para-political scandal exposed mutually beneficial relationships between politicians and paramilitary AUC members, often including money transfers from paramilitaries to politicians (Hristov 2009). Since 2006, over 190 congress people have been investigated, tried, or convicted (Isacson 2013; *Semana* 2016). Within this group are several high profile figures, including then Minister of Defense and later President, Juan Manuel Santos, and Mario Uribe, relative of President Álvaro Uribe and co-writer of the Justice and Peace Law (Hristov 2009).

provided military training and funding throughout the early 2000s under the pretext of the War on Drugs and the War on Terror. Such cases of military collaboration and political corruption have led citizens affected by conflict to lose trust in the Colombian state and its ability to establish peace.

The Impacts of Conflict

The formation of the conflict and its effects reflect the nation-territory division discussed in the opening of this chapter. Drastic economic and political inequity inspired the formation of insurgent guerrilla groups primarily in rural areas of the country. Likewise, the lack of a strong state presence in these rural areas, made it such that the formation of privately-backed paramilitary groups was considered necessary to combat guerrillas. The result has been mass violence against and displacement of civilians. Between 1958 and 2018, over seven million citizens have been internally displaced and 215,005 civilians have been killed in the context of Colombia's conflict.[21] This violence has disproportionately affected rural areas and ethnic minority groups—especially Indigenous and Afro-Colombian. The areas previously viewed as the marginalized territory are now also the areas that are most deeply affected by decades of violent conflict.

While the origin of the conflict was born of deep economic inequality, the effects have been to increase—rather than decrease—inequality. The paramilitary's initial mandate was to protect large land owners from the violence and extortion of guerrilla rebels. Yet, by the 1990s and early 2000s, the AUC paramilitary extended their force to strategically displace rural civilian populations. After clearing fertile farming land of its inhabitants, large land owners and agro-industrial operations often "purchased" or occupied the land. Rather than the agrarian reform for which the left fought, the

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[21] These figures come from two online government databases: (1) The National Center of Historical Memory's "Memory and Conflict Observatory" (*Observatorio de Memoria y Conflicto*): http://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/observatorio/ (Accessed October 11, 2018). (2) Victims' Unit's "Unified Victims' Registry" (*Registro Único de Víctimas*): https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/es/registro-unico-de-victimas-ruv/37394 (Accessed October 11, 2018).

conflict has largely resulted in the further consolidation of land into the hands of a few.[22] The

human and economic effects of war have further cemented the concept of the nation-territory in

discussions of reconciliation and reparations. In the following section, I contextualize the broad

strokes of this conflict within the region of María la Baja. Through a discussion of the precursors

and contours of violence within this region, I argue for an analysis that recognizes the ways in which

María la Baja is simultaneously at the margin of the nation and at the center of violent and political

events.

MARÍA LA BAJA—CONFLICT AND CONTACT ZONE

In the nation-territory dichotomy, María la Baja is part of the territory. This is due to its rural

location and its agricultural- and livestock-based economy. Additionally, as a predominantly Afro-

Colombian region, María la Baja's residents also fit national associations between territory and ethnic

minority groups. Rural regions, labeled as territory, have certainly endured historic state

abandonment. Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to characterize rural regions such as María la

Baja as isolated from national and international interventions. In this section, I consider four

principal interventions that mark María la Baja as a contact zone. First, I briefly present colonial

histories of slavery and María la Baja as a region of palenques—communities founded by Africans

who escaped slavery to reclaim their freedom. Second, I discuss government efforts in the 1960s to

implement agrarian reform and an irrigation system in María la Baja. Third, I outline the effects of

guerrilla, paramilitary, and military combat in the region. Finally, I address the subsequent influx of

African palm oil throughout María la Baja as a strategic outcome of war. I consider how these

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[22] The Gini coefficient measures the dispersion of wealth, income, and land within a country on a 0 to 100 scale, with zero indicating a fully equal society. According to the World Bank's Gini data on wealth distribution, Colombia is the 12th most unequal country in the world, with an index of 50.1 in 2016 (https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=CO). In 2011, the United Nations Development Program conducted a study to measure the Gini in relation to land and property distribution. They found that in 2009, Colombia's index was 87.5, and had increased over the past decade, making it one of the most unequal countries in the world (PNUD 2011, 197–200).

different forms of contact with politically and physically powerful sources have long been a defining feature of the region and its experiences in times of war and peace.

Territory of Palenques

Spanish colonizers forcefully displaced Africans and sold them as slaves through the Caribbean port of Cartagena, located 45 miles from María la Baja (see Introduction, Figure 3). Cartagena was the primary port during the height of chattel slavery, leading Colombia to have the second largest Afro-descendent population in Latin America after Brazil (Wade 2012). African enslavement occurred in various regions of the country, including Antioquia and along the Pacific Coast. However, Peter Wade (1993, 87) notes that slave rebellion was more common and feared along the Caribbean coast. Prior to the abolishment of slavery in Colombia in 1851, Africans along the Caribbean navigated the network of tributaries that led inland, developing escape routes to freedom. There, African men and women established palenques as liberated communities hidden in areas that were difficult for the Spanish to access.[23] Wade notes that concern over palenques in the Caribbean coast was evident in council records, as "such matters struck fear into the hearts of the general public and were a constant cause of concern for the authorities" (1993, 86). In line with Pratt's colonial-era application of "contact zones," María la Baja's history was forged in resistance to the violence of colonization and slavery. Palenques, as contact zones, generated some of the first counter narratives about the nature of the colonizer-colonized relationship. This counter narrative established palenques and their inhabitants as independent from enslavement and colonial rule roughly one century before Colombia's independence from Spain in the early 1800s and the abolishment of slavery in Colombia in 1851. The effects of the palenques echo across María la Baja's subsequent history and experiences.

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[23] Today, only San Basilio de Palenque, of the Mahates municipality retains the name "Palenque." Nevertheless, María la Baja and the surrounding region was historically comprised of numerous palenques during the time of slavery as well as several Indigenous communities.

Agrarian Reform and Irrigation Systems

A century later, in the 1960s, most of the land in María la Baja—like many rural regions of

the country—belonged to a handful of powerful land owners. While such land disparity was

common in Colombia, the political atmosphere during the Cold War provoked fear that these deep-

set inequalities would generate 'another Cuba' in Latin America, referring to the spread of Fidel

Castro's 1959 Revolution. The land and labor inequality, as well as María la Baja's location near

Colombia's Caribbean coast, marked the region as particularly susceptible to the ideals of the Cuban

Revolution. To prevent this, government interventions—backed by the United States' Alliance for

Progress program—targeted María la Baja with agrarian reform projects (Aguirre Alcalá et al. 2016).

In addition to buying and redistributing plots of land to landless farmers, the project built a regional

irrigation system to distribute water to small plots of farming land across the region (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Map of water in María la Baja. Includes natural bodies of water, two dams, and the irrigation channels created by the government in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Source: (Aguirre Alcalá et al. 2016).

Despite these efforts to redistribute land, fear campaigns led many farmers to refuse the

plots offered by the government. Sitting on the back porch of the house where I lived in María la

Baja, Flora rocked slowly in a creaky wooden chair as she recalled the history of land tenure. She was

only a child when the agrarian reform occurred, but she remembered that her father was too scared

to accept the offer. There was a radio program that narrated the supposed terrors left by the Cuban

revolution, and agrarian reform was touted as the first dangerous step towards communism. Flora

also recalled paper signs posted around María la Baja that depicted Black men and women in

shackles. The signs warned *campesinos* that if they accepted the land, they would return to slavery.

Flora shook her head and laughed at the thought, lamenting all of the farmers—like her father—

who missed their opportunity to own property.

The irrigation system meant to provide water to the small-scale farmers also involved a

strong institutional presence that is still felt across María la Baja's landscape. Old institutional

buildings that have been repurposed over the years are reminders of these development projects.

Men in their 60s and 70s meet up for a game of dominoes to talk about their government pension

payments from their days constructing the irrigation system. Women of the same age spin tales

about finding love or lust during the years when they would set up outdoor kitchens in the

countryside to sell lunch to the irrigation construction workers. The effects of these interventions

are also remembered in terms of community destruction. For example, the dams created to feed the

irrigation system displaced the community of Palo Alto Hicotea, in the higher region of María la

Baja. Inhabitants were forced to sell or lose their family land to the government development

project. These families speak of their loss as the displacement that preceded guerrilla and

paramilitary violence in María la Baja.

Guerrilla and Paramilitary Effects

María la Baja faced the effects of guerrilla, paramilitary, and military violence. The FARC,

ELN, and some small, local-level guerrilla organizations were the main guerrilla groups present in

the area in the 1970s and 1980s. While the land was never planted with illicit crops, members of the

illegal drug trade also carried out business in the area in the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1990s, the

violence increased with the influx of paramilitary AUC division named "*Los Héroes de los Montes de*

María" (The Heroes of Montes de María)(Grupo Regional de Memoria Histórica 2017). The

paramilitary ostensibly entered to eradicate the guerrilla presence in the region, but used indiscriminant violence and displacement against the civilian population in the process. While both guerrilla and paramilitary groups committed severe human rights abuses in María la Baja, many I encountered in the course of my research blamed the paramilitary for the escalation and most intense acts of violence that led to several massacres, selective assassinations, disappearances, and massive forced displacement.

The effects of this violence have transformed communities, social dynamics, and the geography of the municipality. While certain individuals and families were displaced from their homes due to individual threats or fear, other towns suffered massive forced displacement. In both cases, the rural populations were forced to flee to the municipality center of María la Baja or to other urban centers, such as Cartagena or Bogotá in search of refuge. The remnants of this displacement are evident today in the neighborhoods and the make-shift towns that emerged in the wake of violence. Beyond the physical remains, violence in María la Baja also affected the population socially, psychologically, and economically.

African Palm Oil

The violence affecting rural communities was initially understood as civilians caught in the crossfire of guerrilla and paramilitary combat. However, the paramilitary's forced displacement of communities in fertile, water-rich regions like María la Baja appears to have been a strategy rather than a byproduct of war. As described above, María la Baja's wetlands, two dams, and the government built irrigation system made the region ideal for agro-industrial monocrops. Following a decade of massive paramilitary-led displacement of the rural population, the land in María la Baja was purchased by external investors under supposedly legal pretenses. The majority of these new land owners converted cattle and local crop fields into African palm oil plantations. African palm oil is not a source of food; it is a biofuel with a growing international market. Additionally, African

palm oil investors hail from Colombia's highest political ranks, including the former Minister of

Agriculture, Carlos Murgas Guerrero, owner of María la Baja's African palm oil plantations and

processing plant (Ojeda et al. 2015; Verdad Abierta 2018) (Figure 2). The introduction of African

palm oil has limited the presence of key staple food crops in the region. Additionally, communities

complain that the palm oil cooperative is now the unofficial owner of the water.[24] Pesticide runoff

has also affected the safety of the regional water, causing health problems in communities that rely

on local water for bathing and consumption (Canchila 2018; Montaño 2017; Verdad Abierta 2015).

Figure 2: African palm oil in María la Baja. **Left—**View of African palm oil from the Caribbean highway in María la Baja. **Right—**María la Baja's African palm oil processing plant, owned by Carlos Murgas.

Viewed from the nation's capital, María la Baja is considered just another rural territory,

broadly associated with poverty and violence. María la Baja's unpaved roads, brackish waters that

run freely down the street, and high crime rates further confirm the perception of María la Baja as a

historically marginalized region. These perceptions are not incorrect, but they miss a large part of the

story. María la Baja is also a contact zone built upon failed agrarian reform, massive and poorly

marketed development pilot projects, armed combat, and agro-industrial investments. To write the

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[24] A study by the Corporation of Development in Solidarity (*Corporación de Desarrollo Solidario*, CDS) found that of the land served by the irrigation system, 82% is planted in African palm oil, while only 12% is planted in rice (Canchila 2018).

history of rural territories as simply the backwaters of the nation misses the opportunity to

understand the ways in which their marginalization is coupled with their prominence as a strategic

battle ground for political and economic power. I have detailed the precursors and effects of conflict

through the lens of a contact zone. In the next sections, I turn to the role of peace politics that have

paralleled war for over four decades. After a general overview of peace and reconciliation histories, I

conclude once again with María la Baja as it continues to be a contact zone for the deployment of

peace and reconciliation techniques.

PEACE POLITICS

In November 2016, the Colombian government under President Juan Manuel Santos ratified

peace accords with the guerrilla FARC-EP. While the success of these accords have garnered

international attention, peace negotiations and reconciliation efforts are not new to the Colombian

landscape. Since the 1980s, peace and war policies have operated in tandem. Still, the orientation of

peace and reconciliation has undergone important shifts. Namely, while the government has

negotiated demobilization deals with various illegal armed groups for over 30 years, they have only

devoted serious attention and resources to victims of conflict during the past decade. I trace the

evolution of peace-oriented politics through three general time periods and phases (see Table 2 for

summary). First, the Colombian government carried out successful peace negotiations and

demobilization with four primary guerrilla groups in the 1980s and 1990s. The focus during this time

period was to disarm and reintegrate guerrilla fighters into society and legal politics. Next, the early

2000s marked a shift to demobilization efforts with the paramilitary. This effort culminated with

Law 975, the 2005 Justice and Peace Law (discussed below). Finally, the 2010s feature a victim-

centered approach to peace. This shift is most clearly exemplified by the 2011 Law 1448, the Law of

Victims and Land Restitution (Victims' Law – also discussed below). Further, a victim-centered

approach was applied to the peace negotiations with the FARC (2012-2016).

	Peace Negotiations	Transitional Justice and Demobilization	Victim-centered Laws
Guerrilla Demobilization 1980s and 1990s	**1984:** Cease-fire with four armed guerrilla groups **1989 – 1994:** Colombian government under Presidents Barco and Gaviria with various guerrilla groups. Focused on bringing guerrilla groups out of armed revolution and into politics.	**1989:** M-19 demobilization and reintegration into society and politics **1990:** Demobilization and reintegration of three guerrilla groups: People's Liberation Army (EPL); Quintin Lame; and Revolutionary Workers' Party (PRT). **Law 418 (1997):** Granted immunity to combatants who chose to participate in an individual or collective demobilization.	**1997 – Law 387:** established mechanisms to care for internally displaced citizens and prevent future displacement. Did not explicitly recognize the victimhood status of the population or offer reparations.
Paramilitary Demobilization 2000s	**1999 – 2002 (Unsuccessful):** Colombian government under President Pastrana and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) **2002 – 2005 (Successful):** Colombian government under President Álvaro Uribe and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) (2002-2005).	**2005 – Law 975, Justice and Peace Law:** adjudicated the demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration of illegal armed actors, primarily from the paramilitary AUC.	**2004 – Constitutional Court Decision T-025:** Recognizes displaced citizens as victims of conflict **2005 – Law 975, Justice and Peace Law:** Victims recognition and reparations to be carried out in connection to the identified perpetrator. Formation of the National Center for Reconciliation and Reparation (CNRR) and the Historical Memory Group (GMH).
Victim-Centered Reconciliation and Guerrilla Demobilization 2010s	**2012 – 2016 (Successful):** Colombian government under President Manuel Santos and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army (FARC-EP). **2017 – Present:** Colombian government and the National Liberation Army (ELN)	**2016 – Peace Accords:** Outlines the procedures for the demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration of FARC-EP combatants under special judicial conditions.	**2010 – Law 1408:** Recognizes victims of forced displacement and creates measures to locate and identify the disappeared. **2011 – Law 1448, Law of Victims and Land Restitution:** Provides broad definition of victimhood regardless of perpetrator identification. Offers economic and symbolic reparations, land restitution, and the rights to "no repetition."

Table 2: Peace-politics across three time periods: (a) Guerrilla Demobilizations (1980s – 1990s), (b) Paramilitary Demobilization (2000s), and (c) Victim-centered Reconciliation and Guerrilla Demobilizations (2010s).

Early Guerrilla Demobilization (1980s and 1990s)

The Colombian government initiated peace negotiations with numerous guerrilla groups in the late 1980s and early 1990s.[25] The goals of these negotiations were to demobilize the armed groups and to reintegrate them into society and official politics. In particular, the groups were incentivized by the possibility of participating in the re-writing of the Colombian constitution. The two largest guerrilla groups, the FARC and the ELN, did not participate in these negotiations (Pizarro 1992; Tate 2007).

The guerrilla demobilizations produced mixed results. On the one hand, guerrilla ideologies influenced politics, including the writing of the 1991 constitution. On the other hand, more than 3,000 members of guerrilla-based political groups—and three presidential candidates—were assassinated by the early 1990s (Romero Ospina 2012). This dire result only further confirmed to the remaining FARC and ELN guerrilla groups that armed revolution was the only option for pursuing their political interests. The FARC did not engage in dialogues with the Colombian government until the negotiations of 1999-2002. The failure of these talks led the majority of the population to conclude that the FARC never had genuine intentions to negotiate. Broad frustration and disillusionment with the process effectively ended any political or popular interest in negotiating with guerrilla groups. Instead, the government shifted gears towards aggressive military actions against the FARC and ELN, and a focus on the demobilization of the paramilitary AUC.

Paramilitary Demobilization (2000s)

In 2002, President Uribe initiated peace talks with the paramilitary AUC. After much debate over the terms of demobilization, the government passed the Justice and Peace Law (Law 975) in 2005 with a transitional justice and a truth component. Notably, since 2005 more than 32,000 members of the right-wing paramilitary AUC have been demobilized and more than 16,000 FARC

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[25] Between 1989-1990, five guerrilla groups accepted the government's offer of demobilization and amnesty (GMH 2013).

and ELN combatants individually demobilized. Yet, the efficacy of the demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) process is questionable, as many former paramilitary and guerrilla combatants have joined newly formed criminal groups known in Colombia as BACRIM (*bandas criminales*—criminal bands) rather than reintegrating into civilian life (Theidon 2007).[26]

In addition to the legal actions taken to demobilize paramilitary combatants, the Justice and Peace law introduced some of the first legislation directed at truth-telling initiatives and victims reparations through the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation (CNRR) and the Historical Memory Group (Vidal-López 2012). The law incentivized demobilized paramilitary combatants to offer information about their operations or the location of mass graves in exchange for lighter sentences. However, since the initiation of the transitional justice process, 30 paramilitary leaders have been extradited to the United States on drug trafficking charges, diminishing hopes that the transitional justice process would provide information about massacres, disappearances, and torture practices that scar communities and survivors (Isacson 2013; Lozano and Morris 2010).[27]

Victim-Centered Peace and Reconciliation (2010s)

Six years after the transitional justice process began under the Justice and Peace Law, President Santos' government developed comprehensive legislation to address the millions of citizens affected by the conflict. In 2011, Congress passed the Victims' Law to establish a process for recognizing and providing reparations to the country's victims. The Victims' Law is not the first

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[26] Of the more than 32,000 demobilized AUC members, only 4,237 faced human rights charges serious enough to require them to pass through the Justice and Peace process, whereas the vast majority were immediately pardoned and set on a reintegration track. As of September 2013, only sixty-three paramilitaries were convicted of human rights violations under the Justice and Peace Law (Amnesty International 2016).

[27] As noted above, many challenge the success of the DDR process. For example, Hristov (2009) argues that the transitional justice process has simply resulted in "reorganized, recomposed, and 'cleansed' paramilitary groups that now operate under new names" (2009:13). Theidon (2007), in a similar vein, calls attention to the lack of reintegration resources and preparation of communities set to receive demobilized AUC members. Even combatants with a genuine interest in returning to civilian life are left without many viable options.

to recognize victimhood. Previous laws focused on particular elements of the conflict.[28] However, the Victims' Law is unique for its comprehensive definition of victimhood and ambitious plans to provide victim reparations (Summers 2012). As of October 2018, 8.7 million individuals—approximately one out of every six Colombians—were nationally registered as victims of the internal armed conflict.[29]

The Victims' Law outlines a range of symbolic and financial reparations as well as land restitution. Symbolic and financial reparations are coordinated primarily through the Victims' Unit. Symbolic reparations include state-sponsored commemorations of acts of violence, access to truth, and the creation of national and local museums of memory. Financial reparations provide initial humanitarian aid and financial compensation to victims or family members of victims. These ambitious reparation goals have garnered both praise and criticism, as many critiques consider the lofty goals as admirable but unrealistic. In August of 2017, six years after the implementation of the law, an analysis by external reviewers demonstrated that 93% of individual reparation cases had still not received their final reparation payment. More damning still, the report found that of the 522 cases of collective reparation, zero cases had been completed (*El Espectador* 2017). This report was released at the law's half-life, as it is set to expire in 2021.

Despite its shortcomings, the Victims' Law has generated a widespread shift in the politics of peacemaking in Colombia. Beyond the official offices for victims' assistance and land restitution, the law generated a landscape amenable to placing victimhood at the center of national dialogues about war and peace. Governmental and non-governmental agencies have made victimhood visible through the circulation of stories, billboards, films, plays, and dialogues that center victims'

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[28] See Summers (2012, 223) for a review of legislation addressing victimhood in Colombia.

[29] Statistics gathered from the Victims' Unit website: http://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/ (Accessed October 11, 2018).

experiences. In 2011, the Victims' Law bolstered the role of the National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH), including tasking them with the creation of a National Museum of Memory. Notably the CNMH—through publications, art exhibits, and public commemorations—has further contributed to the public visibility of victimhood in Colombian society (discussed further in Chapter Three). Victims have also played a role in recent peace and reconciliation efforts. For example, the negotiations between the Colombian government and the guerrilla FARC (2012-2016) included a delegation of victims at the negotiating table. This marked the first instance in Colombia in which victims of conflict were directly part of the negotiation process.

The resulting peace accords, which were ratified in November 2016, include agreements on victim reparations (separate from the Victims' Law), land reform in the "territory," among others. The series of demobilizations and peace efforts have had mixed results. Critics of these policies often return to the nation-territory division as a way to explain such failures. For example, Eduardo—the community leader in María la Baja from the beginning of the chapter—expressed his concern that the policies from the nation's capital would erase the vision of the territories. In the following section, I close with an examination of the ways in which María la Baja has endured the influx of peace politics as the new form of nation-territory contact. While power over reconciliatory policies still lies heavily in the hands of national politics, I draw attention to the ways in which social movements within María la Baja, Montes de María re-center discussions of peace within territorial contact zones.

MARÍA LA BAJA – PEACE POLITICS

María la Baja is one of fifteen municipalities that comprise the rural region of Montes de María (see Introduction, Figure 1), a rural farming region in Northern Colombia. Government institutions ranging from the National Center of Historical Memory (CNMH) and the Unit for Attention and Integral Reparation of Victims (Victims' Unit) have identified the region of Montes de

María as emblematic of the country's conflict. In part, this emblematic status is linked to the number and severity of violent acts committed against the civilian population by guerrilla, paramilitary, and state military groups alike during the height of conflict. Additionally, Montes de María is representative of rural social movements and organizations.[30] Due to the political and violent histories of the region, Montes de María has also figured prominently in processes of demobilizations and reconciliation efforts.

María la Baja hosted guerrilla and paramilitary demobilization camps between the 1990s and 2000s. Debates at the national level sparked outrage or contentment at the demobilization process. In the meantime, communities in María la Baja faced the realities of these demobilizations, as former combatants reintegrated into society or joined new illegal armed groups that were formed under new names. In addition to these experiences with the demobilization process, María la Baja has been at the center of victim-centered reparations. María la Baja is home to the town of Mampuján, one of the first cases of community reparations under the 2005 Justice and Peace Law. Although Mampuján's reparations have yet to be fulfilled by the government as of 2018, their inclusion in this test case has placed Mampuján at the center of national and international reconciliation-based interventions. To the frustration of the broader region, this contact has often not reached the rest of the affected communities in María la Baja. I highlight this regional inequality throughout the pages of this dissertation—as a testament to the diversity that exists within territories and the uneven ways in which contact zones leave their mark.

During my primary field research between 2014-2016, the successes and failures of the peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the guerrilla FARC served as a constant backdrop to the day-to-day efforts to construct reconciliation on the ground. The trials and

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[30] For example, Montes de María has a strong representation of the National Association of *Campesinos* of Colombia (*Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos de Colombia,* ANUC).

tribulations of the peace negotiations were woven into the fabric of daily life during that period—

from radio programs and daily news to workshops on the potential impacts of the peace accords.

Still, many communities in María la Baja and across Montes de María expressed frustration about the

way the peace accords reproduced the nation-territory divide. The war and its effects occurred

primarily within the territory, and yet, the success or failure of the negotiations would be determined

with limited input from those most affected. In 2015, the success of the peace accords was doubtful,

and leaders throughout Montes de María took it upon themselves to send a message to the national

stage.

CONCLUSION—A MARCH FOR PEACE

On March 15, 2015, leaders and community members from across Montes de María in

Northern Colombia led a march for peace in El Carmen de Bolívar. Four years of peace negotiations

between the Colombian government and the FARC intended to end over 50 years of war. Yet,

violations of the bilateral cease-fire and smear campaigns against the negotiations threatened the

credibility of the peace talks and left them hanging by a thread. In light of this tenuous moment,

leaders from across the 15 municipalities that comprise Montes de María organized a symbolic event

to "sign the peace" (Figure 3). The tone of the day's event projected a sense of urgency and deep

commitment to peace based on decades of victimization and resistance. As several leaders repeated

throughout the day: "Come what may with the peace accords, we will continue constructing peace in

Colombia."

Figure 3: The March to Sign the Peace in El Carmen de Bolívar, Montes de María. (March 15, 2016). The sign that reads: "In Montes de María we sign peace."

As the marchers arrived at the outdoor amphitheater in El Carmen de Bolívar, we formed a circle around an open space in the center. Our matching white t-shirts—marked with a dove and the phrase "In Montes de María, we sign the peace on March 15th"—reflected the late morning sun, lighting up the center stage for the emcees. A stout man dressed in all white linen stood at the center with a signature *sombrero volteado,* Colombian cowboy hat, on his head. Singing improvised verses of poetry, called *décimas*, he began to orchestrate the next event: the symbolic burial of violence (Figure 4). Individuals carried cardboard coffins, each labeled with a different form of violence: war, violence against women, violence against children, corruption, demagoguery, and dispossession.[31] Seamlessly, the *decimero* (verse singer) crafted poetic lyrics to lament each form of violence and call for its final burial. The organizers also explained to those gathered that the carriers of the coffins were meant to represent the diversity of victims: women, men, Blacks, Indigenous, youth, and

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[31] I have translated the final two forms of violence as demagoguery and dispossession, though these are imperfect translations. The original terms in Spanish were *politiquería* and *despojo*, respectively.

campesinos. Throughout the event, leaders articulated a notion of "peace" that did not begin or end

with the peace accords negotiated between politicians. Rather, they emphasized the fact that their

efforts to construct peace from the territory—the center of conflict—will continue no matter what

happens on paper.

Figure 4: Presentations after the March to Sign the Peace. **Left—**After the march, the emcee sang improvisational verses to the crowd. **Right—**Volunteers held cardboard coffins to symbolically bury the effects of war.

The official peace accords between the guerrilla FARC and the Colombian government were

eventually ratified in November 2016, eight months after Montes de María held their symbolic

signing. The peace accords were the culmination of four years of negotiations (2012-2016), a failed

public referendum in October 2016, and a final re-negotiation and ratification. The peace accords

have important implications for the future of reconciliation and reparation work. Yet, as the march

to "Sign the Peace" demonstrates, reconciliatory processes were underway and moving forward with

or without the formal peace accords. My research draws on such public and private moments,

capturing the two years prior to the peace accord's ratification. I traversed rural and urban efforts

toward peace and victims' reparations, where institutional and regional efforts intersected.

Currently María la Baja, Montes de María is considered a relatively safe place to mobilize for

peace. However, community leaders across the region confront death threats on a regular basis,

especially those working on "post-conflict" land restitution that threaten political and economic

interests in the area. The peace-signing event in Montes de María in 2015 called for peace against a

backdrop of new formations of violence that threatened their lives. The coexistence of war and

peace is not only a unique element of Colombia's conflict; it is a defining feature of the past four

decades. Victim communities in particular confront this dichotomy in their day-to-day struggles to

simultaneously navigate post-conflict peace and reconciliation programs while continuing to fend off

shapeshifting forms of violence. Signing for peace, the organizers emphasized, did not necessarily

signal an end to violence, but served as a tool through which communities could continue the fight

for *their* version of dignity and *buen vivir*, or "good living."[32] This means reclaiming their territorial

autonomy and livelihoods as *campesinos* and ethnic minority communities. My research draws on

these community and institutional efforts towards peace and victims' reparations, paying particular

attention to the contact zones in which these groups intersect. As the next chapter will explore,

staking claims to regional peace reconciliation is often filtered through legal processes of declaring

and gaining state recognition as a victim or victim community. Maintaining sight of the complex

relationship between nation-territory, I unravel the diverse experiences of Maríalabajenses navigating

victimhood in the contact zone.

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[32] "Good living" (*buen vivir*), is a phrase used across Latin America to express basic human rights to a good life as defined by diverse groups and ways of thinking. In Colombia, this concept is currently circulating in the context of the 2016 Peace Accords with the FARC. "*Bienestar y Buen Vivir*" (Well-being and Good Living) is a central tenet of the peace accords. The accords elaborate "that the ultimate objective is the eradication of poverty and full satisfaction of the needs of citizens of rural areas, so that as soon as possible *campesinos*, *campesinas* and communities, including Afro-descendants and Indigenous peoples, fully exercise their rights, reaching a convergence between the quality of urban life and the quality of rural life, while respecting a territorial perspective, a gendered perspective and the ethnic and cultural diversity of communities." (República de Colombia 2016, 12)

Grey Areas—life in a conflict zone

When I first arrived to María la Baja, I had one contact: Camilo. Over the phone he instructed me to take the bus from the airport to the regional bus station on the edge of Cartagena. From there, I was told to take a bus to María la Baja and get off at "*La Curva*"—the curve that marked the entrance to the municipality center. When I got off the bus, he told me I would encounter young men offering moto-taxi services. I should pick one and ask them to take me to the central plaza of María la Baja. Camilo would wait for me at the municipality's House of Culture. I followed his instructions without major incident, and when I arrived at the door of the House of Culture he greeted me warmly and with a sly smile. "I didn't think you would actually make it…welcome!" Camilo was my first contact in María la Baja, and my network developed through him and his promise of protection. While I did not know him before our initial meeting that day, I was comforted by his leadership positions, his work as an educator, love of the local music— Bullerengue—and his general charisma.

When I returned to María la Baja months later to carry out longer preliminary research, Camilo suggested that I could rent a room and eat meals at his parents' house. I would have my own room, and he insisted that I would be part of the family. He assured me that I would love his mother, María, and her cooking, as she was known to have "good seasoning." I accepted the offer, and in many ways, Camilo's promises became the reality. María and Héctor, Camilo's adoptive father, treated me like family. They worried about me when I was away from home and scolded me when I thanked them for things, saying "please, you're like a daughter." María made me little treats when I was working from home and she gave me raw honey with lime when I was fighting a bad cold. When my unaccustomed skin swelled from hundreds of bug bites, Héctor shared his special home treatment of white rum infused with local herbs. Twice a day he would bring out the bottle so

I could rub the translucent brown liquid on my bright red speckled skin. I thought of María and Héctor as grandparents. While I could never repay them for their kindness, I tried to show my gratitude with little details, such as bringing home their favorite candies from the street carts in María la Baja, administering eye drops for Héctor's cataracts, and offering lotion for María's sore feet.

Within the first day of meeting María and arriving at the house, I learned that she and Héctor had lost a son, Arturo. At the time, María simply stated: "*Le mataron*" – "They killed him." I expressed my condolences, but did not think it polite to ask more. Only a few weeks later I began to learn what happened. During one of my first meetings with Verónica, a local leader, she abruptly shifted our conversation—"Do you know about Camilo's brother?" Her stern look gave me pause. I shook my head, mumbling that I knew he had been killed. Verónica told me with an assertive tone and raised eyebrows that Arturo had been a paramilitary soldier. Arturo was a paramilitary and he had been killed by his own men several years back in front of the home where I lived. Verónica expressed that she felt sorry for Arturo—a kid that got lost and never escaped. Nevertheless, she presented this information with urgency and she encouraged me to understand that the weight of my association was not insignificant. Over the months, I would come to hear various parts of Arturo's story from the family themselves. Arturo was gunned down under the *tutumo* tree where we sat every afternoon to escape the heat. The evening that the hitmen arrived, Camilo was sitting on the front porch with Arturo, and Camilo was also shot and gravely wounded in the process. María doesn't say much about that day. She was on the back patio when the shots were fired. It was night and she thought they were fireworks. When she headed to the front door, she found that her two sons had been shot. She lost Arturo and she almost lost Camilo.

The first time I learned the story of Arturo, it hit me like a train. I thought:

I live in the home of a former paramilitary. I live in the home where he was killed. My network is built around the family of a man who carried out assassinations and violence in the communities I am trying to work with. How did this happen? How can I continue?

I went through shock, fear, and finally reconciliation—this was part of living in María la Baja. I lived in a home with complex histories and ties to the conflict. I lived in the home of parents mourning the loss of their son. I had connections to a man who missed his brother deeply. Camilo would often speak of Arturo's character and good heart, his voice cracking and tears welling in his eyes. I lived in a home that embodied the many layers of living in a zone of conflict—and a zone of contact—including the deeply uncomfortable reality that perpetrators are also family, woven into the fabric of María la Baja's social life. Arturo's eyes watched over the living room of the house. A colored chalk drawing captured a realistic-style portrait of Arturo with his widowed wife and her two children from a previous relationship. The drawing, often crooked against the bright blue cement wall, was a reminder of the weight of his life and death.

Arturo was only one of many armed actors whose actions rippled across the communities in María la Baja, even years after their death. Government officials in María la Baja had paramilitary siblings and members of several victim organizations had family members who were affiliated with the guerrilla and paramilitary. These cases defy categorizations and challenge bureaucratic systems that seek clear distinctions between perpetrator and victim. It would be easy to see these cases as contradictions—that the family of a perpetrator is the government recipient of victimhood declarations or that family members of a guerrilla and paramilitary combatants are also victims of those same armed groups. Yet to see these as contradictions is to assume that such relationships are naturally separate and polarized. They are not. The histories in and around war produce relationships that resist such clear divisions.

CHAPTER TWO

Victim-Citizenship: The Victims' Law, Reparations, and the Fight for a "Dignified Life"

The [Victims'] law regulates matters relating to humanitarian aid, attention, assistance, and reparation of victims […], offering tools so that [victims] may reclaim their dignity and assume their full citizenship.[33]

-The 2011 Victims' Law (Law 1448), Article 2

INTRODUCTION

"Turn 1,348," a voice yells out from the distance to never-ending lines of victims that stretch over rolling hills and fade into the distance. An onlooker wonders, "Does the Regional Center [for Victims' Attention] only have four government employees?" Others wish that they could just go back to the old system for victims, the UAO (Unit for the Attention and Orientation of Displaced Persons). A woman at the back of one line with a child in her arms complains, "There are no gentlemen here." Another man considers his dire prospects, "Uff…this is going to be for 2014 [three years later]."

Figure 1: "Untitled" (Long lines) pencil and charcoal drawing on paper by Rafael Posso. Reproduced with permission from artist.

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[33] Original text: "La presente ley regula lo concerniente a ayuda humanitaria, atención, asistencia y reparación de las víctimas de que trata el artículo 3º de la presente ley, ofreciendo herramientas para que estas reivindiquen su dignidad y asuman su plena ciudadanía" (Law 1448, Article 2).

A smoky haze envelopes the protagonists in a nightmarish cycle of victimhood. A woman looks forlorn into the distance with tears running down her face as she worries: "I'm not from here" … "Now who will help me." As if foretelling her future, a couple in the background holds out papers to a man in a business suit at a desk surrounded by a mirage of symbols of governmental and non-governmental entities—The Justice and Peace Law, Municipal Attorney, Regional Center for Victims' Attention, Social Action, and Movement for Peace. The man's face blurs as he turns from task to task, his hands simultaneously typing on two different laptops. A voice informs the couple, "Come back another time, there aren't any forms left." Below the man at the desk, another voice informs a woman "You don't appear in the [Victims'] Register…You have to submit papers!..."

Figure 2: "Untitled" (Bureaucracy) pencil and charcoal drawing on paper by Rafael Posso. Reproduced with permission from artist.

The 2011 Victims' Law intends to offer "tools so that [victims] may reclaim their dignity and assume their full citizenship" (Law 1448, Article 2). In contrast, the drawings above (Figures 1 and 2) depict the dire effects of the Victims' Law on the individuals that seek to claim their rights. These drawings, part of a larger series critiquing the experience of victimhood, are not artist Rafael "Rafa" Posso's first attempt to communicate through visual arts. A life-long wood craftsman, Rafa has always loved to express himself artistically. His shift to more politically and emotionally charged work began after the paramilitary massacre that killed 12 people in his community of Las Brisas, San Juan Nepomuceno, Bolívar—just south of María la Baja. Through a series of pencil and charcoal drawings Rafa sought to communicate the destruction and emotions that words could not. These drawings, graphic and haunting, have circulated throughout Colombia in exhibits and in documentaries. In fact, I had seen these drawings in an exhibit in 2014 before ever meeting Rafa in person (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Drawings by Rafael Posso depicting the Paramilitary massacre and forced displacement in Las Brisas, San Juan Nepomuceno, Bolívar on March 11, 2000. On display in Cartagena, Colombia in the exhibit, "Basta Ya!"—Enough Already! (Photo taken October 11, 2014).

More than a decade after the March 11, 2000 massacre in Las Brisas took three of his family members, Rafa started a new series of drawings. Rather than depict images of forced displacement, torture, and assassination, he began to depict new forms of victimization that occurred at the hands of the very institutions created to serve the victim population. Visual critiques of victim-oriented institutions are not the kind of images that are in high demand for national exhibits on reconciliation; nonetheless, they depict an important and complex reality about the nature of state-citizen relationships that form around victimhood in a way that aptly frame this chapter.

The history of Colombian state neglect in the rural territories stands in stark contrast to the current rise in government intervention and reparations. In this context, what does it mean to re-create a citizen-state relationship through the lens of victimhood? Through an analysis of victims' reparations under the 2011 Victims' Law, I examine how individuals affected by conflict navigate the government structures that simultaneously seek to provide compensations for the tolls of war and to re-define the relationship between victims and the state. Individuals affected by war often harness their visibility to gain government recognition and access to victims' reparations. Here, I analyze the way making victimhood visible produces political and subjective relationships between victims and the state that frame victims of war-time violence as a new type of Colombian citizen. Specifically, the reparations and reconciliation process has generated a new subjective category that I term "victim-citizenship." [34]

The relationship between citizenship and victimhood predates the passage of the 2011 Victims' Law. Myriam Jimeno (2010) astutely recognized the relationship between victimhood and

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[34] I conceive of victim-citizenship in a way that parallels what Adriana Petryna (2002) calls "biological citizenship." In the context of post-Chernobyl Ukraine, Petryna's work tracing the toxic fallout of the disaster and its medical impacts, argues that citizenship rights to state welfare services and care are premised upon one's ability to show biological evidence of harm.

citizenship in Colombia forming through social movements. Tracing the social formation of a victim-based discourse, Jimeno considers political marches and campaigns, especially those led by Indigenous communities, in the years leading up to the passage of the 2011 Victims' Law. Her analysis suggests that prior to this legal framework, testimony and protest forged "emotional communities" that allowed victims to collectively denounce violence committed against them and demand that society at large recognize their blight and afford them a return to their civil rights. Austin Zeiderman's (Zeiderman 2013) research in the urban periphery of Bogotá has also drawn attention to the ways in which certain citizens' rights are not based on a shared political belonging, but to their state of vulnerability. As such, he concludes that "in Colombia, we find collective categories of governmental intervention and political subjectivity based on ethnicity, language, race, territory, and religion but also on biopolitical criteria, such as vulnerability and victimhood" (2013, 77). In light of the precedent for victim-citizen politics, this chapter examines the effects of the Victims' Law and its aftermath. The desire for victim recognition and citizenship witnessed by Jimeno (2010) have continued into the present. However, the realities of victim-citizenship have rarely lived up to the expectations expressed in victim movements or in the Victims' Law itself.

The 2011 Victims' Law mediates victim-state relationships to the point that one's citizenship is qualified through their victimhood status. The Victims' Law calls on pre-existing government agencies—such as those for housing, education, and social services—to serve victims of the conflict with particular urgency and preference due to their vulnerability. While this much-needed and long-overdue attention to victimhood is valuable, it is necessary to examine how citizens fare in the process. Namely, how do victims' supposed preferential treatment in the system play out in practice? Additionally, in what ways does victim-citizenship highlight or limit victim subjectivities and narratives?

I address these questions by studying the dynamics of victim-citizenship through the lived experiences of entering and navigating the complex legal and social support system. Building from Rafa's drawings, this chapter considers government bureaucracy and legal structures as a "house of illusions." Through the stories of individuals trying to navigate the system, I critically examine the government's promise to offer "dignity" and "full citizenship." In the house of illusions, individuals see distorted projections of themselves and their victimhood through the eyes of the state. Subsequently, individuals feel pressure to present themselves in line with such state projections of victimhood or risk rendering themselves invisible. Such visibility and invisibility are key components for analyzing the mutual production of victimhood subjectivities. Drawing on James Scott's *Seeing like a State* (1998), I ask: what does it mean to be seen as a victim by the state? Alternatively, what does it mean to see the state through the eyes of victims?

Through narratives of individuals and communities navigating the reparations process, I reveal how these institutional structures not only affect peoples' access to their rights as victims, but also how they discipline victim-citizen subjectivities into digestible categories for government tabulation. This discipline, however, is neither homogenous nor totalizing. Rather, the diverse experiences and fissures that emerge in the victim-citizenship construct reveal how communities continue to stake claims to alternative subjectivities and forms of visibility that challenge and stretch state perceptions, such as Rafa's critical drawings. While victimhood may be the cornerstone of renewed citizen relationships with the state, communities makes clear that "victimhood" alone cannot encompass their diverse experiences and histories as *campesino* and Afro-descendent communities.

VICTIM-CITIZENSHIP AND THE 2011 VICTIMS' LAW

The 2011 Victims' Law (Law 1448) primarily aims to provide victims of conflict with comprehensive assistance and reparations, including humanitarian aid, economic compensation,

symbolic recognition, and land restitution. To gain access to these rights, individuals must formally declare stories of victimization in order to be included in the national Unified Victim Registry (*Registro Único de Víctimas* —RUV). This victimhood status is supposed to enable individuals in the RUV access to government resources as well as social and psychological aid. While in some cases these services are tailored to the needs of conflict victims, they also include basic services such as healthcare and education. Importantly, for many individuals from Colombia's most marginalized communities learning their rights under the Victims' Law is also their first opportunity to learn about their rights as citizens.

Eduardo is part of a growing group of self-identified victims and community leaders in María la Baja who have become organic intellectuals and government employees in order to change the system from within. During an interview in 2016, Eduardo spoke to me about the potential of the Victims' Law as well as its severe shortcomings. Many critics highlight the sheer lack of resources available to carry out the law, but Eduardo highlighted a more fundamental problem with the way people (mis)understand the law and its purpose. In particular, Eduardo emphasized the lack of knowledge about what constituted one's rights as a citizen versus as a registered victim.

> Many think that their rights [as victims] only mean that the government is going to give them humanitarian aid, and with this they will solve the issues of today and tomorrow, you see. They think that the fact that a victim has access to education is a form of reparation, when in reality you have rights to all public services like education and health from the time you are a Colombian citizen. So, there are people who see it as a favor that the government attends to them, but this occurs because the majority of the victims don't know; they aren't empowered by the law.

Paralleling the way Adriana Petryna (2002) describes biological citizenship in Ukraine, under the Victims' Law, humanitarian aid and reparations become conflated with basic citizenship rights. While gaining access to education or health services via victimhood is an improvement, it only highlights the disenfranchisement many Maríalabajenses experienced prior to and during the conflict. Indeed, Eduardo's analysis points to a broader history within Colombia, in which Afro-

descendent and Indigenous populations have been excluded from full access to citizenship rights. For Afro-Colombian populations, the fight for full citizenship dates from a drawn-out and incomplete emancipation process in the late 1800s (McGraw 2014) to contemporary struggles for territorial control and autonomy (Escobar 2008; Ng'weno 2007).

Rural Afro-Colombian populations, such as María la Baja, have further faced marginalization and stigma that depict farmers as backwards, ignorant, and therefore only partially worthy of Colombian citizenship. In María la Baja, the effects of this marginalization are tangible, as the municipality is greatly underdeveloped by Colombian standards. The majority of the roads in the municipality remain unpaved, access to education and health care are limited, and according to the 2005 national census, more than 80% of the population does not have access to running water or a sewage system (DANE 2010). In such racialized municipalities that suffer from long-term underdevelopment, victim-oriented reparations are often the predominant path to infrastructural development.

Maríalabajenses often blame the current conditions in the region on "*el abandono total del estado*" (total state abandonment). Local and national governing bodies have an obligation to provide basic services to all citizens regardless of the armed conflict. Still, in regions deeply affected by war like María la Baja, such interventions are filtered through victimhood and the Victims' Law. That is, victim reparations under the Victims' Law have become a tool for general development. In order to incentivize local governments to participate and support victim reparations, the national government offered a deal—for every Colombian peso a municipality spends on victims, they will receive an equivalent deduction in the municipality debt.[35] This offer and the popularity of victim-oriented politics under the Santos presidency have increased administrative support of victims in María la

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[35] Personal communications with employees from the Victims' Unit and María la Baja's municipal government.

Baja. Still, such politics generate a dynamic in which general development in the region occurs haphazardly based on which individuals and communities successfully make their victimhood cases visible to the national Victims' Unit.

Victimhood offers both a path to gain reparations and to reclaim citizen rights. In order to explore the implications of this dynamic, I turn to the reparation process as detailed by the 2011 Victims' Law. After outlining the formal process in theory, I transition to a discussion of the reparations process in practice where I will invoke the house of illusions as a metaphor for the reparations process. I draw on a range of stories and experiences of people who try to enter, navigate, and escape the house of illusions. The staggering diversity of experiences, even from within one municipality, is telling of the nature of the reparations process and resulting citizen-state relationships.

2011 Victims' Law: Attention, Assistance, and Integral Reparation

Before discussing people's experiences with the Victims' Law, this section outlines the law's mandate and scope for victim attention, assistance, and integral reparation. The Victims' Law defines victimhood as: "Those individuals who individually or collectively have suffered harm due to events that occurred since January 1st, 1985, as a consequence of infractions against International Human Rights or grave violations of the international norms for Human Rights that occurred in relation to [Colombia's] internal armed conflict" (Law 1448, Article 3). Within this definition, the Victims' Law recognizes both individual and collective forms of violence, such as an assassination or massive forced displacement, respectively. Consequently, the Victims' Law offers both individual and collective reparations. Individual reparations identify the specific individual victimization in order to provide their due compensation. By contrast, collective reparations generate a reparative plan for members of a victimized community. In this way, the collective reparation plan focuses on rebuilding a community through development projects and symbolic acts of reconciliation.

Collective and individual reparations are not necessarily mutually exclusive; nevertheless, I address

each independently in what follows.[36]

Individual Reparations

Retrieved from the Victims' Unit's "frequently asked questions," Figure 4 depicts the four-

step process through which individuals can access their rights to assistance and reparations through

the Victims' Law. In Step One, all individuals have the right to "immediate assistance" in the case of

an act of violence, such as displacement. However, as the majority of individuals were affected by

the conflict prior to the passage of the Victims' Law, they begin the process at Step Two,

"Declaration and Registration." In order to access the rights to attention, assistance, and reparations

under the Victims' Law, individuals must declare their victimhood and achieve inclusion in the

Unified Register of Victims (RUV). The Victims' Unit reviews and verifies all victim declarations,

determining which individuals enter into the RUV and which are denied. All forms of possible

reparations or government aid are predicated first and foremost on one's inclusion in the RUV. The

anguish of this inclusion is captured in Rafa's drawing above (Figure 2), where he depicts a scene in

which a woman is informed that she is not in the registry and that she needs to submit more papers.

Individuals who wish to declare their victimhood for inclusion in the RUV must bring their stories

and any evidence of victimization to one of four governing bodies that span the local, regional, and

national scale.[37] Upon receiving a declaration, these entities must send the declaration to the Victims'

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[36] In addition to reparations, the Victims' Law includes a program for Land Restitution. Land restitution—carried out by the Unit for the Land Restitution—works with individuals or collective groups who lost their land due to the conflict. This component of the law is not within the scope of this chapter (see Chapter Four).

[37] Individuals can declare their victimhood to the following entities, in order of local to national: (1) The Municipal Attorney's Office (*Personería*); (2) The Regional Center for Victims' Attention (created under the Victims' Law); (3) Regional Office of the Ombudsman (*Defensoría del Pueblo*); (4) The Office of the Inspector General (*Procuraduría*).

Unit in Bogotá for analysis. In this way, the victimhood assessment process mirrors the broader

centralized government structures discussed in Chapter One.
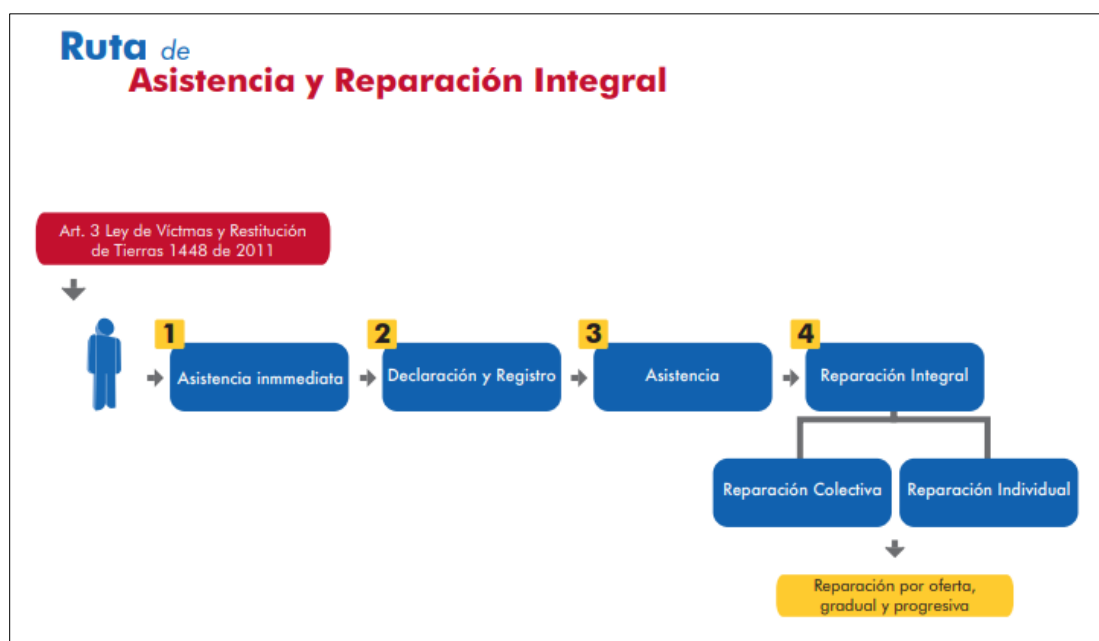
Figure 4: Diagram depicting the "Route of Assistance and Integral Reparation" (indivisual).
Source: "*Derecho a la Reparación Integral a las Víctimas del Conflicto Armado: Preguntas Frecuentes*"
(UARIV 2013, 21).

Once included in the RUV, victims have access to various forms of government attention,

assistance, and reparation measures depending on the specifics of their victimization. As

demonstrated in Figure 4, the Victims' Law considers "assistance" (Step Three) as separate from

"integral reparation" (Step Four). Attention and assistance under the Victims' Law is broadly

conceived as preferential access to an array of government-based institutions and social support,

such as humanitarian aid, health, education, financial support for funeral costs, access to Colombian

identification papers, and sustenance (Law 1448, Article 49). In this way, attention and assistance

contemplated in the 2011 Victims' Law offers modified welfare aid that is already outlined in the

Colombian Constitution of 1991.

For individual reparations, the victimizing act and the date of the event determine the type

of reparations due to the individual or family unit. For example, individuals who endured forced

displacement, the assassination of a loved one, sexual violence, or torture are each assigned different levels of compensation by the law. Additionally, the timing of victimizing acts determines whether individuals are due economic or symbolic reparations.[38] Depending on the particular case, individuals included in the RUV broadly have the right to access five types of reparation: (1) *land restitution* if displaced within the viable timeframe; (2) psychological and physical *rehabilitation*; (3) *economic compensation* based on type of victimization; (4) *measures of satisfaction* that re-establish victims' dignity and provide truth about the conflict; and (5) *guarantees of "no repetition"* (Law 1448, Article 69).

Collective Reparations

In contrast to individual reparations, collective reparations address the needs of a larger community or organization that has suffered collectively due to conflict-based violence (Law 1448, Articles 151 and 152). Massive forced displacement and massacres are particularly apt scenarios for the application of collective reparations due to the broad impact of such severe violence. That said, collective reparations can also apply to communities or organizations that endured chronic violence over a long period of time. As collective reparations address the collective, rather than the individual, many of the interventions parallel rural development projects, such as building a new school, improving road access, and facilitating access to clean water.

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[38] For example, individuals who experienced a victimizing act prior to 1985, only have the right to symbolic reparations—such as commemorations—but not economic compensations. In terms of forced displacement, displacements that occurred between January 1, 1991 and the start of the Victims' Law on June 10, 2011 must be reported within the first two years of the law in order to receive the possibility of land restitution. For displacements that occur after the start of the law, those affected have two years from the time of the displacement to declare their victimhood.
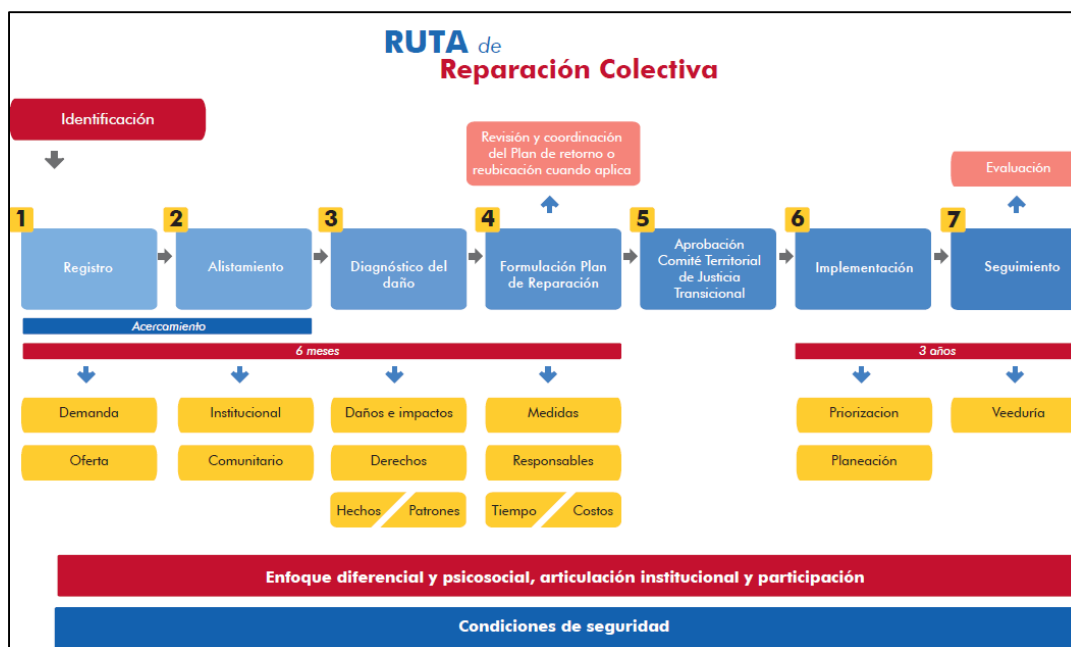
Figure 5: Diagram depicting the "Route of Assistance and Integral Reparation" (collective). Source: "*Derecho a la Reparación Integral a las Víctimas del Conflicto Armado: Preguntas Frecuentes*" (UARIV 2013, 21).

Collective reparations entail a more complex set of steps (Figure 5). The process starts with identification (Step One). Communities can become a "subject of collective reparations" through two means known as "*oferta o demanda*" (offer or claim). Offers occur when the government identifies and approaches a community to offer them the opportunity to initiate the collective reparations process. Alternatively, communities can file a claim with the state to petition their ability to pass through the collective reparations process.[39] Once identified, the communities complete a "diagnostic of damages," in which they generate a history of the various acts of violence that affected the community during the course of conflict (Step Three). Upon completion, this diagnosis serves as the basis for creating a Plan of Collective Integral Reparation (*Plan de Reparación Integral*

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[39] I have translated "*oferta o demanda*" as "offer or claim" to best capture the legal rhetoric of the collective reparations process. However, "*oferta y demanda*" in an economic context would be translated as "supply and demand." While supply and demand is not the appropriate English translation in the context of the Victims' Law, it is worth noting that in Spanish the law borrows the economic terminology of "supply and demand" to talk about how it disseminates limited resources to communities affected by conflict.

Colectiva—PIRC) (Step Four). Once this plan is approved by the regional Transitional Justice Committee (Step Five), the reparation measures can be implemented (Step Six).

The individual and collective reparations outlined in the Victims' Law are considered exceptional by international standards for conflict resolution. It was common throughout my research to hear Maríalabajenses applaud the letter of the law. Nevertheless, in the same breath, many would also assert that the problem is not what the law says, but *how* it is executed, or not. Whether due to lack of funds, employees, or "*buena voluntad*" (good will), the promise of the Victims' Law rarely came to fruition. Rather, I posit that in practice, victims experienced the reparations process as a house of illusions.

VICTIMHOOD AND THE HOUSE OF ILLUSIONS

The *campesino* people are so strong that they have tried to overcome [the conflict] and tried to get out by their own means, but then here comes the [Victims'] Law *ilusionando a la gente* (getting the people's hopes up). Because it *is an illusion* that the people have now. They say "well, since I lost [everything], the law will provide me reparations."

-Eduardo (my emphasis)

The peace and reconciliation process in Colombia is based on the fraught relationship between visibility and invisibility. Whereas victimhood is premised on an individual's ability to make their experiences with violence visible, the state institutions that evaluate such claims and provide reparations are often invisible or obscured from the victims' perspective. This dynamic parallels what Allen Feldman (2004) refers to as "structures of deniability," the contradictory structures undergirding post-conflict processes where "the impetus for biographical visibility and its public presentation was precipitated from the militarization and erasure of the structures of the everyday, through which personhood was once sustained" (Feldman 2004, 172). Colombia's declaration process demands victims' transparency. Meanwhile, the government structures meant to serve them seem to purposefully obfuscate attempts to locate the source of institutional accountability. I suggest here that for those seeking victimhood status, these state structures operate similarly to a house of

illusions. At first entrance into the house of illusions, it is easy to mistake fact for fiction. The confusion therein is not based on the inability to see. Rather, it is based on tricks of the eye that conflate illusion with reality. In Spanish the word for illusion, *ilusión,* encapsulates multiple meanings that range from hope to delusion. In this vein, reparations represent a form of illusion—a sense of hope that teeters on the verge of a delusional mirage. The house of illusions lures people in because of what it projects—the promise of gaining reparations and support from a state that has largely been absent in rural areas of the country. Yet, with each step, that promise seems less probable.

The house of illusions represents the vast array of governmental organizations and laws meant to serve victims. Not all individuals I worked with in María la Baja chose to enter the house of illusions, and those who did navigated distinct pathways through the system. Across these experiences, Maríalabajenses concluded that escaping was unlikely. While I spoke with communities and leaders who were fighting to find a way in, others felt that they had been trapped inside for years, only to conclude that there was no possibility for successful exit. Progress, or the illusion of progress, was built into the governments' multi-step plan towards reparations, as seen in Figures 4 and 5. Nevertheless, the promised payouts or development projects were so slow-moving that they often exacerbated problems. For example, leaders lamented that the false promise of victims' assistance led many communities to fight amongst each other.

In the previous section, the steps to become a victim and access ones' rights are listed as a series of tasks. Colorful diagrams from the Victims' Unit depict linear processes that begin with declaration and end with integral reparation (Figures 4 and 5). These processes, however, stand in stark contrast to Rafa's drawings that open this chapter (Figures 1 and 2). In the following sections I draw on the stories of individuals—government employees and those seeking victims' rights—navigating the system. Through these stories, I do not seek to capture a singular narrative about what it means to be a victim or what victim-citizenship entails. Rather, these accounts reveal a

diversity of experiences that populate a system that is simultaneously depicted as a clear process towards "dignity and full citizenship" and lived as a de-humanizing and never-ending process that generates new forms of victimization.[40]

Entrance—Declaring Victimhood to the State

For individuals informed about the Victims' Law, access and safety were common barriers to the declaration process. Relative to the nation as a whole, María la Baja was "micro-focalized" by the government in 2013 as a zone of former conflict that was deemed stable and promising for government intervention (García Reyes et al. 2015).[41] Still, security concerns were a constant and common discussion amongst all of the groups and individuals I worked with in the region. Assassinations, robberies, and spies were woven into the realm of possible threats that weighed on peoples' minds, even if they also recognized the atmosphere to be markedly better than it was "*antes*"—before—during the height of conflict. This contradictory situation—a zone declared safe for intervention where threats still linger—made victim visibility a particularly anxious affair.

Public leaders of victim-based groups shared their knowledge of corners of María la Baja that were known as lookout points. Young men in María la Baja, known as "*moscas*" or flies, were hired by unknown sources to observe the movements of possible 'trouble-makers,' which included community leaders and people seeking land restitution or victim reparations. The full motivations of these *moscas* were never clear, but theories about their employers ranged from drug traffickers, land owners, politicians, or some combination of the three. In light of this, many public figures working for victims' rights exercised precaution, such as not traveling alone at night or censoring

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[40] I distinguish the stories that follow with an indented paragraph format. This stylistic approach is meant to signal to the reader that the stories offer an opportunity to temporarily leave the chapter, journeying into the reparations process alongside the individuals who have navigated the system.

[41] The broader region of Montes de María was "macro-focalized" in 2012 as part of the governments' analysis of areas where reparations and land restitution were most likely to have success. While violence and threats continue to affect Montes de María into the present (2018), this designation recognized the relative calm of the region compared to areas of the country that are still embroiled in active combat.

conversations with friends and family about their work and whereabouts. I also became engulfed in this pattern of caution and paranoia. I learned to be vague about my contacts or where I was going. I also constantly assessed my safety and the risk my presence could pose to the people around me. This tense climate in 2015–2016 was, nonetheless, a great improvement from previous years and decades.

Across the nation, declaring victimhood has been limited by such local security contexts, the integrity of personnel in government offices, and fear for retribution. In María la Baja, such fears were present not just due to ongoing threats, but due to the personnel in the very offices meant to help them. From the mid-2000s to the time of my research, an employee in María la Baja's local government was the brother of a prominent local paramilitary leader, now deceased. The fact of the employee's relation to the paramilitary leader did not mean that he was complicit in paramilitary actions. Still, the mere familial face of a well-known perpetrator discouraged people from entering the municipal office, let alone declaring victimizing acts that may have implicated the employee's brother. Such connections between the paramilitary and politics in María la Baja run deep. From 2011-2015 the mayor of María la Baja was the sister of an ex-paramilitary regional sub-commander. The hospital in María la Baja has also historically been a source of deep corruption and scandal. It was common knowledge among Maríalabajenses that in the early 2000s the director of the local hospital was the wife of a former paramilitary commander in the region.

Government offices at regional and national levels also receive victim declarations so as to mitigate such complications of local politics and safety. Still, declaring to a regional entity first requires knowledge about these resources and secondly requires the financial ability to travel from rural areas to regional centers. Even five years after the start of the Victims' Law, in 2016, such access was limited for many communities, especially those in more remote locations. Individuals who chose to declare their victimhood at the municipal level despite their fears were also frequently

met with judgement and ridicule by authorities who challenged local claims to victimhood. During

the course of my research, I heard many stories of individuals who were left out of the RUV after

declaring their victimhood in María la Baja. From their perspective it was unclear exactly why they

had been denied, but they felt that the Municipal Attorney was responsible.

Denied Victimhood

      Samuel lives in a remote area of María la Baja, about one-hour motorcycle ride from the

municipal center. Sitting at his home one afternoon, he told me stories of threats against his

life, sleeping in the forest to avoid night-time assassinations, and eventually the displacement

of his nuclear family for a period of time. When he finally went to the Municipal Attorney,

he said that he was met with the response that "nobody was displaced in that town."

Samuel explained that the Attorney's misconception was the result of complex histories in

his community. During the height of violence in the early 2000s, victimhood was linked to

accusations of guerrilla activity. To be a victim or to be part of a victimized population often

led to the presumption that the community must have done something to deserve it. In

order to combat such judgements, several community leaders in Samuel's town made a

public effort in the early 2000s to emphasize that their community was free from violence,

and thereby free from the associated stigma of victimization. Years later, in the context of a

new legal and political validation of victimhood, these protective narratives have hindered

people like Samuel and his family from legitimating their experiences with violence. The

Municipal Attorney, versed in the local denial of violence in Samuel's town was impervious

to these stories of assassination threats and displacement. Samuel eventually had to take his

case to a regional office to avoid judgement based on the presumption of local knowledge

about who is a victim and what constitutes victimhood.

Within community-based victim organizations, there were also stories that circulated about the mistreatment at the hands of government authority figures. Perhaps one of the most common stories that I heard was about a woman I never met.

According to the story, the woman was from a town known to have experienced high levels of guerrilla and paramilitary violence in María la Baja. Unlike the massive forced displacement of towns like Mampuján, this woman was from a town that never endured a clear moment of displacement. Still, due to violence in the community the woman, along with other members of the community, decided to leave her home and everything she had to escape the threat of violence. When the woman declared her displacement to the Municipal Attorney, he asked why she chose to leave her home when most of her community stayed. She responded that she left her home "out of fear." According to the story, the Municipal Attorney responded, "nobody displaces themselves because of fear." Based on this perception, the woman was denied access to the reparations process.

After hearing these, and many other stories, about the ways in which individuals were questioned from the moment they attempted to declare their victimhood, I sought an interview with the Municipal Attorney. After several canceled meetings and long waits, I was finally able to sit down with him in his office in María la Baja's municipal center. Piles of papers covered every square inch of his desk. His laptop—wrapped in a peeling plastic cover with an image of a race car—was propped up in the middle of stacks of declarations, testimonies, and government books. I had interacted with the Municipal Attorney at different public meetings in the past, and it was well-known at this point in my research that I circulated among various victim organizations and community leaders working for victims' reparations. He seemed wary of me and what knowledge or perceptions I may bring to the table based on my contacts.

During most of the interview, the Municipal Attorney represented himself as a tireless public servant. He explained to me that often victims don't know the right words to use when they make their declarations. To help their cases, he said that he would correct the victim to emphasize the right elements of their story and adjust mixed-up dates of events that would possibly call into question the validity of their claims. While his description made the interventions seem honorable, I questioned him further in order to discover how his interventions may also hinder, rather than help, victim declarations. The Municipal Attorney admitted that the required form allowed him, as the recipient of declarations, to record his observations before sending it off to the Victims' Unit for analysis. He further acknowledged that sometimes people said they were displaced, but he *knew* that it was not true. In such cases, he said that his observations may have informed the Victims' Unit that his local knowledge did not corroborate the claims made by the declaration. I was unable to determine how much, if at all, these observations were considered by analysts at the Victims' Unit in Bogotá. Nevertheless, the Municipal Attorney's interventions—whether in an attempt to aid or discredit declarations—are consistent with perceptions depicted by Rafa's drawings and peoples' stories that consider "becoming a victim" less than straightforward.

In a book meant to aid potential victims better understand the Victims' Law, this first stage of entering the RUV is aptly, if ironically, captured as a labyrinth (Figure 6). Beginning with the declaration, the labyrinth weaves through the different entities until eventually a case resolution is returned to the declarant, determining whether or not they are included in the RUV. Importantly, this labyrinth only represents the first stage to accessing support and reparations, or the entrance to the house of illusions.

Figure 6: "You Do the Route" Diagram. The instructions read: "With one line take your declaration through each one of the stages until you have the Resolution [of inclusion in the RUV] in your hands. Within the labyrinth there are numbers to orient you so that you will know if you are on the right track or not." Source: (UARIV 2015, 15).

These stories—like this illustration—demonstrate that declaring and "becoming" a victim is not straightforward. This process was further complicated in 2015 when the declaration process expired. When the Victims' Law was ratified in 2011, the guerrilla FARC and ELN were still in full combat, there were new armed groups emerging from demobilized paramilitary combatants, and the war's end was far from clear. Despite ongoing violence and the daily formation of "new victims," the Victims' Law was designed to expire after 10 years, in 2021, so as to assess the changing political and conflict landscapes. In order to fulfill the ambitious assistance and reparations tasks, the law also stipulated that individuals and communities could only declare their victimhood during the first four years of the law, or until June 10, 2015. After this date, the Victims' Law stated that it would no longer receive declarations of victimhood, except under particular circumstances.[42] During the

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[42] There were three principal exceptions that allowed people to declare after June 10, 2015: (1) Individuals who experienced victimization after the 2011 passage of the Victims' Law had two years from the time of the

remaining six years (2015-2021), the Victims' Unit and associated government institutions were to focus on providing assistance and reparations to those individuals already included in the RUV prior to the June 2015 deadline.

Closing declarations was effectively a way to limit the insurmountable number of individuals in the RUV. With over 8.6 million individuals registered, 6.7 million of whom   are due some form of reparations, the Victims' Unit and associated institutions are financially overwhelmed. Indeed, it seems highly unlikely that the state will be able to complete the current reparations by 2021. Still, this transition in the law highlighted other deep-seated issues with government reparations. First, it highlighted the severe lack of communication or mis-communication that exists between the government institutions and the population they seek to serve. Second, the four-year limit was a gross underestimate of how long the population would need to gain access to information and the conditions to be able to report their experiences with violence. Finally, the shortsighted declaration timeframe sheds light on state's reliance on emblematic cases and victim visibility to determine how the limited reparations should be disseminated. Overall, individuals who declared their victimhood in time were often those who received institutional assistance or guidance or who were identified early on as an emblematic case that would be "easy" to pass through the reparations process. This means that many groups that were fragmented, displaced to different urban areas, or that had a deep fear of speaking up, were afforded limited access to government reparations or even knowledge of the Victims' Law and their rights afforded therein.

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victimizing event to declare, (2) Individuals unable to declare previously due to fear or threats against their life, and (3) Communities that are legally organized and recognized as ethnic communities (Indigenous *Cabildo* or Afro-Colombian *Consejo Comunitario*). In María la Baja, the movement to become recognized as a *Consejo Comunitario* (Community Advisory) was gaining momentum during my research, as several communities established themselves as such during my fieldwork. Three *Consejo Comunitarios* in María la Baja were included as collective reparation cases after the June 2015 deadline: María la Baja's urban center, Níspero, and Flamenco.

Declarations Come to a Close

In December of 2016, Sara, a local organizer, encouraged me to visit the community of

Monte Cristo in María la Baja. Before arriving at their displaced settlement along the side of

the Caribbean highway, Sara informed me that the community had been displaced twice by

the paramilitary and that the government didn't seem to give a damn about them. When I

arrived to the community, I was shocked to discover that it was less than a kilometer away

from Mampuján—a place I had visited many times since 2014 and where government and

non-governmental reparative interventions are exceptionally high. Despite the fact that

Monte Cristo and Mampuján were both displaced by paramilitary troops and re-built their

displaced communities alongside the same highway, their experiences and access to

government reparations were as different as night and day.

After several hours of conversation with the members of the community, it was clear that

their primary concern was to gain state recognition as a subject of collective reparation

(recall Figure 5 above). Most individuals from the town were included in the RUV, but they

felt that they were lacking comprehensive attention as a displaced community. In particular,

they wanted to "create historical memory" and improve their access to housing, primary

education, and clean water, among other things. Earlier in 2015, they were denied access to

the collective reparations process without a clear explanation from the government. I

promised to contact an employee at the regional Victims' Unit and get back to them with

some more information. When I called my contact in Cartagena, to my surprise, he told me

that all declarations for reparations—collective and individual—had closed in June of 2015,

almost six months earlier.

When I got off the phone, I felt dumbstruck and embarrassed that I did not already know

that the declaration period was over. Soon, however, I discovered that almost no one in my

institutional or community-based circles had any idea that declarations were closed. I asked

an employee of the Victims' Unit who worked at the headquarters in Bogotá. He laughed at the idea and told me that the employee in the Cartagena office did not know what he was talking about. I mentioned it to a government employee working in the Victims' Office in María la Baja and he looked at me puzzled, "How can they close the declarations process when so many people are just now discovering what it means to be a victim?"

Over the next several months, I witnessed this "myth" become "fact." Nearly ten months after the door closed for declarations, conversations swirled about the meaning of this fact and how institutions should respond. Debates were particularly heated around the issues of "accepting" or "denying" new declarations. Whereas the Municipal Attorney of María la Baja was adamant that he should not accept any declarations from people now that the law closed the process, other government entities, such as the Office of the Ombudsman and even representatives from the Victims' Unit felt otherwise. The latter employees argued that the state should keep a database of late declarations in limbo, explaining to declarants that their case currently would not be reviewed by the Victims' Unit because of the time limits of the law. While this was a less-than-desirable outcome, many government employees felt that they had no choice but to hope that the law would be extended given the number of people left outside of the process. In the case that the law re-opens, these declarations would in theory be the first in line for review.

Community members in Monte Cristo were left without a clear path for action. They continued to solicit support from the government via land restitution and individual paths for reparations, but there was no viable path for them to access collective reparations. On the other side, government employees and NGOs scrambled to come to terms with this poorly-understood aspect of the law. Among one of their biggest concerns was about continuing to spread the word to

communities about the Victims' Law, reparations, victimhood, and human rights, when victims'

access would ultimately be denied.

The entrance into the house of illusions is far from straightforward. Whether deterred by

active threats of violence, government gatekeepers, or the temporal limits of the law itself, many

individuals are unable to even begin the reparations process. The fact that such roadblocks are

prominent in María la Baja—a region declared relatively pacified—only further highlights the limits

of the Victims' Law. Despite these limitations, over eight million Colombians have successfully

entered into Unified Victims' Register (RUV). Whether they all find their way through successfully

remains to be seen. In the following section, I turn to a discussion of Maríalabajenses' varied

experiences within the individual and collective reparations process.

Inside the House of Illusions—Managing Victimhood, Identity, and Rights

In María la Baja, the most recent demographic data shows that 18,665 individuals—over one

third of the population—are registered victims of the armed conflict.[43] Due to many of the factors

outlined above, local government employees and Maríalabajenses who worked with victim

populations considered this to be a severe underrepresentation. This section focuses on individuals

and communities that successfully declared their victimhood to a state entity and were included in

the RUV and/or the collective reparations process. The Victims' Law offers a range of assistance

and reparations depending on the status of each individual. While the law implies that the linear

process will carry each person and community through the appropriate path in due time, individuals

confront a system that is often just an extension of the declaration labyrinth (Figure 6 above).

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[43] 18,665 individuals of approximately 47,749 (Alcaldía Municipal María la Baja 2016, 78) inhabitants from
María la Baja were registered by the Unified Victims' Register. Data accessed on August 27, 2018:
https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/es/registro-unico-de-victimas-ruv/37394.

As a state-recognized victim or victim community, managing the inner-workings of the reparations process entails a mixture of bureaucratic tasks such as filing the proper paperwork, taking phone or online surveys so that the state can continuously assess and re-assess the victims' status and vulnerability, collecting humanitarian aid, and attending workshops and meetings. Beyond these bureaucratic processes, victimhood has, for some, become about managing public appearances and political affiliations. As victimhood has gained traction on the national political stage in recent years, some individuals have become nationally and even internationally known for their stories of violence and work with affected communities. These individuals are invited to stand with the President at public rallies and speak at national events about peace and reconciliation. While this recognition and visibility has certainly bestowed certain benefits upon particular individuals and their communities, it is tireless work that is almost always uncompensated and is physically and emotionally taxing. The following experiences represent an array of victimhood interactions with the reparations process, which entails a constant analysis of the overlap between "hope" and "delusion."

Public Figures

At roughly ten o'clock in the evening, over 15 hours of marches, long car rides, and ceremonies came to a surprising close. I stood in the Central Plaza of El Carmen de Bolívar, posing for a group picture with an unlikely group of people: two police officers who were stationed in Mampuján and two of the most nationally recognized female leaders fighting for victim rights and dignity in Montes de María—Juana Alicia Ruíz from Mampuján, María la Baja, and Soraya Bayuelo from El Carmen de Bolívar. The photograph, taken of the group at the request of the police officers, was a final memento to capture the conversations and shared experiences that occurred during the previous six hours of car rides from El Carmen to Cartagena and back again:

Communities from all over Montes de María gathered in El Carmen de Bolívar starting at around 8 a.m. on the morning of March 15, 2016. Regional leaders organized the event to symbolically sign the peace accords between the Colombian government and the guerrilla FARC (Figures 7 and 8). After hours of marches, musical presentations, poetry and speakers, the event came to a close and I searched for transportation back to María la Baja. Instead an opportunity arose, and I accepted Juana's invitation to accompany her and Soraya to Cartagena. They were receiving an award from the Departmental Government of Bolívar for their community work and achievements as female leaders. The event, located in a fancy hotel in the historic downtown of Cartagena, was set to begin soon, so Soraya and Juana were in a rush to get there as soon as possible after the march. Two police officers who were stationed in Mampuján, and therefore associated with Juana, were on the job to serve as their personal escorts that day. We all jumped into the police truck and began the two-hour drive to Cartagena.

Figure 7: The March for Peace events in El Carmen de Bolívar. **Left—**A police officer from Mampuján drove Juana and the singers on stage to the event and later transported Juana and Soraya back and forth from Cartagena. **Right—**Juana presents a new quilt, titled "*Y Dio a Luz La Paz*" or "And She Gave Birth to Peace" at the events for the symbolic signing of the peace.

Figure 8: Juana presents the "*Y Dio a Luz La Paz*" (And She Gave Birth to Peace) quilt at an awards ceremony in a hotel in Cartagena.

Once we arrived, Juana and Soraya were quickly ushered onto the stage and Juana displayed one of the latest quilts she and a group of women had created. The quilt depicted a woman giving birth to peace, represented by an agricultural scene of harvest and rural hills (Figure 8). Juana and Soraya each received a large certificate in a bound leather book and took pictures with important politicians. I juggled both of their cell phones, taking video and photographs of the event. Afterward, a senator's aide approached me, wanting to coordinate a breakfast between Juana and the senator to talk about possible future collaborations. Feeling like I was managing a high-profile artist, I took down the contact. The event was followed by a cocktail hour with fancy appetizers—skewers of tomatoes, mozzarella, and basil along with plastic flutes of champagne. Our hearty lunch in El Carmen of boiled yucca, fried pork, and a plastic bag filled with tamarind juice felt like a world away. Almost as soon as we arrived it was time to leave, and we ran out the door with as many appetizers as we could each carry in small plastic cups and wrapped in napkins.

The drive back would be a long one, with a trip back to El Carmen to drop off Soraya and then finally to María la Baja. Another foreigner eager to learn about Soraya's work had joined

us, so we squeezed uncomfortably with four in the back of the truck and began to drive the two hours back to El Carmen. On our way out of Cartagena, we stopped at the house of one of the police officers. We expected to wait in the car, but he invited us in, insisting that he wanted to offer his hospitality, even if only for 15 minutes. We each sat in wicker chairs his living room, drinking Coca-Cola out of tall glasses. While seemingly insignificant, the idea that two female leaders of victim communities and a *gringa* anthropologist would be drinking soda at a police officer's house would have been nearly impossible to imagine even just a few years before. The historically ambiguous relationships between military, police, and paramilitary in Montes de María had left most rural communities understandably skeptical of all armed representatives of the state.

Eventually we said our goodbyes and returned to the car. By the time we were exiting the city, the sun had set and we entered the winding roads up to El Carmen in the dark. Meanwhile, Soraya answered emails and Whatsapp messages non-stop, most in relation to the march and symbolic signing of the peace event from earlier in the day. Then, a radio station called to conduct an interview with Soraya and Juana. We pulled over at the top of a hill where the cellular signal was best, and they each offered their take on the march and the importance of this symbolic act.

Once we pulled back onto the road, conversations moved rapidly back and forth between the two officers, Soraya, and Juana. They discussed the violence that occurred in these regions and Soraya lamented that there is so much that will never be told or resolved, such as all of the disappeared and assassinated individuals who were fed to hungry caimans. The police nodded, adding that they had heard there was one famous caiman as big as their truck. Then they turned to the hard reality that for many communities the police and military were one and the same with the paramilitary. Because of this, Soraya added that she would never

have gotten into this police truck for transportation if it were not for the fact that Juana trusted these police officers due to their work in Mampuján. In addition to these conversations about distrust and past violence, they debated the pending peace accords between the government and the guerrilla FARC. The police officers expressed that they were wary of the process, so Juana and Soraya dispelled myths about disarmament and demobilization, citing international precedent for such actions. Their explanations eventually provoked thoughtful nods from the officers as they reconsidered their position. Rushing from a symbolic march to a fancy award ceremony, then to Coca-Cola and conversations about peace and violence with the police is enough to give anyone whiplash. These surreal experiences highlight the frenzy of victimhood work. When we finally arrived to El Carmen, Soraya invited us all to *butifarra*, spicy sausages, and tamarind juice in the central plaza. After eating and chatting for a bit, the two police officers insisted that we all take a picture to mark the occasion that they saw as a step forward in the reconciliation between police and communities affected by conflict.[44] After the photo, Juana and I got back into the police car for one final hour-long ride back to María la Baja. As we arrived, the unpaved roads, erratic electricity, and unfinished sewage system were a final reminder that no amount of awards and publicity can compensate for the lack of basic investment in most marginalized communities affected by war.

Juana and Soraya's experience "inside" the house of illusions represents a small minority of victim-citizens managing victimhood on the national stage. This labor is often celebrated with public events and award ceremonies, but the difficult work that it entails is rarely visible. The day described above, while an extreme case, offers a window into the intensity of such victimhood work. Public

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[44] Unfortunately, the police officer who took the photograph never sent me a copy.

leaders must manage public appearances, photo shoots, and interviews, all while ensuring that they are serving the diverse interests of their communities. While public events and publicity may call attention to the needs of leaders' communities or of victims more broadly, these events can also exploit community leaders, in which their public presence may generate accolades for politicians or organizations in exchange for empty promises. In contrast to those with national recognition, the majority of individuals in the RUV lack the ability or desire to engage in public activism. For every public figure like Juana or Soraya, there are thousands of individuals struggling to make sense of the system and navigate its twists and turns in relative isolation. Many individuals—whether hyper visible or not—face the challenge to assert their claims to victims' rights without flattening their complex identities into simplistic "victim" categories. In María la Baja, this challenge is especially relevant in terms of representing the intersections of ethnicity, gender, and victimhood.

Bureaucratic Bubbles

Alba and I sat inside of the bright orange, cement kiosk in Monte Cristo, María la Baja. Halfway through an online government form for victims, we were stuck on the question of "ethnicity." I read off the options, "Black, Indigenous, Raizal,[45] or Gypsy," and lamented that the form would only allow her to pick one. She mulled over the possibilities and acknowledged both her Indigenous and Black heritage, before saying "I guess I'm more Black than Indigenous." But just as I was about to click the online bubble, she interjected: "or should I just put *desplazada* (displaced)?"

Alba, along with her family and other community members, had been forcibly displaced by paramilitary and guerrilla violence on two separate occasions. Thus, "displaced" is her individual victimhood status with the Colombian government, linked to financial and social aid from the state. While I knew that this was her legal status, I still could not understand

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[45] Raizal refers to inhabitants of San Andres islands off the Caribbean coast of Colombia.

why she considered "displacement" relevant for the question of ethnicity. Alba explained

that on multiple occasions she has participated in the notoriously long government phone

surveys for state-registered victims,[46] and when they asked her about ethnicity, they would

ask: "are you Black, Indigenous, Raizal, Gypsy, or "just displaced"? When asked this

question over the phone, Alba responded "just displaced," as she interpreted the surveyor to

ask her to choose *between* her ethnic identity and her victimhood status.

On Colombian government forms ethnicity, rather than race, is the category used to

differentiate minority ethnic groups from the general category of *mestizos* or people of

"mixed" heritage. While *mestizos* are generally considered to have a mix of Indigenous,

Spanish and African heritage, the category itself is de-racialized, or de-ethnicized, much in

the way whiteness in the United States has been crafted as non-racial and unmarked. Yet,

unlike census materials in the United States, which allow people to identify themselves as

white, *mestizo* does not appear on the list of ethnicities at all. In Colombian government

questionnaires, such as paperwork for victims, "ethnicity" would be left blank for individuals

who self-identify as *mestizo*.

The phone surveyors' poorly-phrased question: "Are you Black, Indigenous, Raizal, Gypsy,

or just displaced?" sounded as if the government was asking Alba to choose between an

ethnicity or victimhood status. Worried that claiming a Black identity would forego her

access to victims' rights, Alba chose to emphasize her victimhood. Based on conversations

with representatives from the Victim's Unit, it is clear to me that no such zero-sum

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[46] The survey Alba took at the time was called the Plan of Attention, Assistance, and Integral Reparation (PAARI). This survey method was replaced by the Unified Survey (*Encuesta Unica*) in 2016 in order to streamline the process and reduce time. According to a report by Alan Jara, Victims' Unit Director from June 2016-August 2017, the PAARI survey lasted an average of one hour and 40 minutes per person, whereas the Unified Survey takes on average 18 minutes per person (Jara Urzola 2017).

distinction between ethnicity and victimhood exists. Rather, the intended question was: "Are you an "ethnic" victim or are you just an "unmarked, mestizo" victim?" Either answer would have afforded Alba her rights as a displaced person. However, contrary to Alba's perception, recognition as an "ethnic victim" would have provided her additional consideration as part of a population considered more vulnerable due to their minority status.

This story on its own could be read as simply a case of misunderstanding and flawed survey methods. Yet, both the careless word choice used by surveyors and Alba's confusion highlight broader grey areas around victim-citizenship and racial identities. Choosing a particular racial identity in Colombia, such as Indigenous or Black, highlights contradictions between race-based labels and the social understandings of race as based in mixture or *mestizaje*. In Colombia and throughout most of Latin America, racial identities are viewed as fluid and along a spectrum of mixed ethnic heritage. Phenotypic traits, along with markers of class, nationality, and gender can all contribute to the lightening or darkening of an individuals' presumed racial identity. In Colombia, my research suggests that victimhood and perpetrator status can also affect reads on a person's racial identity. Despite the fluid and social nature of racial construction in Colombia, the government survey on victimhood relies on discrete categories of race. Alba's experience highlights the incompatibility between such single-option government surveys and complex racialized identities.

In such encounters with victim-citizenship bureaucracy, individuals navigating their identities are often unclear about how and when to present the different aspects of their experiences and subjectivity. This reality is further evident in statistical data on victims' ethnic identity in María la Baja. While over 97% of María la Baja's general population self-identifies as Black or Afro-Colombian, only 47% of registered victims in María la Baja included this as their ethnic identity. The majority (51.5%) of registered victims from María la Baja are listed as having no ethnic minority status (Alcaldía Municipal María la Baja 2016).

In the transition to post-conflict Colombia, the formal presence of the state in people's lives is unmatched by any previous time in recent memory; this is especially true in markedly marginalized and racialized parts of the country. Yet as individuals are tasked with making their lives and identities known to state officials and institutions, there are moments of disconnection, in which people's experiences and the categorical expectations of the state do not line up. Not only does this mean the potential misunderstanding in which Alba has been labeled "just displaced" rather than a "displaced Afro-Indigenous woman," but it also means limited ability for individuals and state institutions to craft more complex narratives about how victimization and historic ethnic marginalization are neither one and the same, nor completely independent.

Collective Lessons Learned

Parallel to the individual reparations process, collective reparations aim to improve the conditions for entire communities. As such, collective reparations have the potential to be more resource efficient. For example, it appears more effective to invest in a road or school that serves hundreds, rather than trying to target the impoverished conditions of each community member individually. Nevertheless, in 2017, the annual review of the Victims' Law released a damning report. Only 7% of individual reparations and 0% of collective reparations were complete after six years of the law's implementation. The report came with only four years remaining until the laws' termination in 2021, leaving little hope that the government will have time to fulfill the collective reparations cases currently underway. Before these official numbers were released, the harsh reality was visible within communities in and around María la Baja. While communities such as Monte Cristo, discussed in the previous section, have been unable to successfully begin the collective reparations process, others were losing hope that it was worth the trouble.

In June 2016, San José de Playón, María la Baja organized a two-day event to gather together community members from collective reparation processes throughout Montes de María. The group included some of the most recognized veteran communities alongside communities in

the middle of the reparations process, such as San José de Playón, and several communities who just received government approval to begin the process. For two days, presentations and activities allowed community representatives to discuss the successes and failures of collective reparations. Meals of fried fish, coconut rice, salad, and fresh fruit juices, coffee breaks, and late night activities also provided time for side conversations and friendships to form. Often these conversations revolved around the more experienced communities offering their wisdom and advice about how to manage the system.

The weekend was deemed a success by leaders, as it generated stronger networks and bonds among communities. Nevertheless, the tone of the gathering was often somber because of the core message offered by veteran communities: 'The collective reparations process does not work and will not work.' After more than five years in the process, communities such as El Salado, one of the most well-known emblematic cases in Colombia, felt that for all of the interventions they have received, reparations were incomplete and would never be fulfilled. As one community member quipped, "We just go from workshop to workshop like a bunch of carpenters!" These jaded community leaders tried to be supportive of the incoming groups, but they were frank in telling them that they saw no success route through the reparation process. For them, the house of illusions was not just a disorienting process, it was a false promise with no resolution.

The meeting was telling of multiple truths about the collective reparations process. On the one hand, veteran communities warned that all of the labor and goal-setting carried out by communities may be for nothing if the state cannot actually fulfill its reparative promise. On the other hand, the regional communities used the encounter to build bridges and establish a new vision of collective repair that focused on reclaiming land and livelihood. The community leaders present were adamant that the autonomous space of this two-day encounter was crucial for regional

empowerment. Through shared stories and strategies, regional leaders identified patterns of disenfranchisement and abuse, as well as possibilities for resistance and autonomy. For example, the leaders critiqued the encroachment of massive agroindustry—including African palm oil plantations, invasive teak and eucalyptus forests, and pineapple plantations—that has affected every corner of Montes de María. The communities clearly identify the influx of such agro-industries as an outcome and extension of violent conflict. The communities strategized how to communicate that their "victimhood" is not simply limited to past human rights violations carried out by armed actors. Reparations and peace would remain illusions if these regional threats to land and livelihood were left unchecked. Reclaiming "dignity" for them was about more than receiving recognition as victims of conflict or the loss of lives. It was about the ability to pursue a livelihood in rural Colombia in ways that challenged the power structures left by war.

The stories included in this section only scratch the surface of experiences within the reparations process. Nevertheless, the breadth of these few stories capture the variety of hoops that await each and every individual and community that enters the system. As alluded to by veteran communities in this last story, disillusionment can sometimes be enough to lead people to give up on the process all together.

In Search of an Exit—Reluctance and Resignation

The previous two sections have focused on varied experiences individuals and communities have within the reparations systems. For some, victims' reparations are an illusion—one in which the promise of aid and reparations is not only false, but is purposefully deceptive. For others, the process carries positive and negative results. Regardless, I have focused primarily on stories of individuals and communities that share a desire to forge and maintain a relationship with the state, despite its failures. In this section, I consider the rough edges around reparation processes. I look at

some of the factors that deter people from seeking government reparations and why others have abandoned or avoided the process altogether. The diverse attitudes toward the state and NGO interventions is captured by the shifting role of "attendance lists."

Attendance Lists

Listas de asistencia (attendance lists) record the names and identification numbers of attendees at government and non-governmental events, such as workshops or commemorations. While a seemingly insignificant bureaucratic piece of paper, attendance lists are also representative of shifting relationships between institutions and communities. Attendance sheets provoke a range of emotions for individuals meant to sign them—fear, hope, disillusionment, and even anger. Such emotions also reflect broader sentiments surrounding victimhood and the relationship between citizens and institutions as concerns the house of illusions.

At every institutional meeting, governmental or non-governmental, the organizers circulate a sign-up sheet. These sheets typically require that people list their name, Colombian ID number, organization/town affiliation, and a signature. Some ask for additional identifying information, such as gender, ethnicity, or age. At the time of my research, the attendance lists primarily served as proof to the organizing body that their event was attended by real people. The number of lunches, snacks, or transportation compensation provided to attendees should match the number of individuals on the list in order to justify institutional spending. When no food or funds were provided, the list served to justify the presence of organizers, by showing that their work did indeed serve the intended population. At large events, such as a commemoration, it was common to see five or more attendance lists circulating around from all of the NGOs and government organizations that contributed funds to the process. In several of these larger events, where hundreds of people were trying to sign up, I was often recruited to help with intake. This entailed sitting with the attendance

lists, while locals crowded around in the hot sun, holding out their Colombian IDs as I attempted to record their information. Based on these experiences, I understood attendance lists to be a relatively tedious, but generally accepted bureaucratic process. This was not always the case.

One day, talking with Juana, the well-known leader from Mampuján discussed above, she joked about the changing relationships people have with attendance lists. She recalled that the first attempt to gather lists in Mampuján was met with deep fear and trepidation. Many residents refused to include their name in the paperwork for reparations out of fear of possible retaliation. Juana explained that this fear was justified by past events. In the 1990s, regional lists were collected with the names of relatives of former guerrilla members. People signed the lists under the impression that it would entitle them to some form of aid, only to find out that the lists were disseminated to armed groups that sought to assassinate them. Nevertheless, Juana explained that as the years went by and many Mampuján inhabitants benefitted from reparations, people's mentality began to shift. Juana laughed, saying "Now if there is an attendance list, people are like 'sign me up!'" By the time of my research in 2015–2016, the majority of groups I worked with shared this sentiment. Attendance lists were viewed as a source of hope because of their presumed ability to bring economic resources or aid. Nevertheless, I still encountered individuals hesitant to include their identification on government paperwork for fear that asking for recognition as a victim would potentially lead to retribution. On the other hand, several groups that had more advanced relationships with the government became resentful of the attendance sheets and used them as a way to protest.

Communities with years of experience working with the government determined that attendance lists were not about helping the community; attendance lists were about checking

boxes and ensuring the salary of sub-par government workers. Analyzing the value of these lists, the communities determined that their names and ID numbers were a form of currency. Community members resolved to withhold their data from the organizations as a way to protest the inefficacy of their work. A blank attendance list, they hoped, would raise red flags to the organizing body and call attention to their dissatisfaction. They sought visibility through calculated absence.

Attendance lists, like illusions, embody a mixture of hope, betrayal and deception. The narrative that I offer about attendance lists follows a chronological path from fear of signing, to signing with hope, to withholding signatures as protest. While this evolution may reflect the trajectory of many individuals, it is also true that these three "stages" coexist. At the same time as one community has decided to withhold signatures to protest, others are signing every list they can in hope of access, and still others refuse to sign out of fear. This is not only the case as one moves across regions of Colombia more or less recovered from combat; these are the range of attitudes that co-exist within María la Baja. As such, attendance lists encapsulate the complications that fray at the edges of reparations and victimhood between reluctance and resignation. Such emotions are further captured by individuals who chose alternative relationships to reparations.

Opting Out

Mari, a community leader in San José de Playón, embodies a common yet seemingly contradictory approach to victimhood among leaders. On the one hand, she has developed a keen understanding of the Victims' Law and victims' rights, allowing her to support members of her communit y and offer advice. On the other hand, she has elected not to use this knowledge to pursue her own rights and individual reparations as a victim of conflict. In April 2016, I sat with Mari and several members of María la Baja's municipal *Mesa de Víctimas* (Victims' Round Table), waiting restlessly for a meeting that would eventually be cancelled. As we sat along a cement wall in the shade of a small tree, a woman passing by

approached the group. She recognized several of the members and wanted to share her frustration about a letter she just received from the Victims' Unit. The letter declared that the government would compensate her with three million Colombian Pesos (roughly USD $1,000 in April 2016). While she did not discuss the particulars of her case, she made it clear to the group that she considered this meager payment insulting. She wrote a letter to the Victims' Unit in response and dug it out of her purse to show the group. She pulled the letter out of a plastic envelope overflowing with worn, but important documents, many creased to the point of breaking, brown at the edges. Mari read the letter and offered her frank criticism. "It sounds like you are asking them for a favor with these words, but it's their job! You have to demand it." Mari's advice, based on years of experience working on these issues, was well-taken by the woman. She eventually folded up her papers and continued on her path.

Shortly after the woman moved along with her bag of documents, another local leader and government employee in María la Baja's office for victims' assistance happened upon our group. Eduardo chatted with the group and told them to spread the word that his office was going to provide services on Fridays for people interested in checking on their victimhood status in the national database. Mari retorted that she had no idea what her status was. Eduardo laughed, saying "imagine that, a leader like Mari and she doesn't even know her victim status." The group chuckled, but Mari's ambivalence was not that uncommon. In fact, many of the most prominent community leaders I knew had relinquished access to their individual rights as victims for a variety of reasons. Most cited the fact that the more they learned about the system, the less faith they had in its ability to work. Alternatively, several leaders cited the danger of people assuming that as the leader of victims you were only in it for personal financial benefit. In order to push back against possible jealousy and malicious

rumors, many leaders preferred to clearly declare that they were not even included in RUV or that they were not actively pursuing the rights afforded to them through the Victims' Law. Mari's response parallels this trend, as she asserted back to the group, "I don't lose time in that any more. Should I receive a house and aid? Yes, definitely, but it's not worth it for the anguish and the stress and the time it takes away from everything else."

Many community leaders I worked with either never entered in the RUV or decided not to pursue their individual reparation after successful entrance. This is not to say that these individuals gave up on their relationship with the state. Leaders were often more integrated into government organizations and politics than the rest of their community. Nevertheless, it is telling that Mari would conclude that "it's not worth the anguish and the stress," while at the same time serving as a local go-to on navigating that very system. This may seem like a contradiction, yet, it aptly reflects the complexity of victim-citizenship and the house of illusions. While many leaders were adamant that the state owed their communities, they also often recognized that reparations could not truly replace all that they lost to the war.[47]

Reparation Limits

Eduardo did not receive formal professional training for his municipal job and leadership work, as the war prevented him from pursuing higher education. Over the past decade he has taken advantage of workshops and courses offered by governmental and non-governmental organizations to learn about the law and human rights. Through this process, Eduardo has become one of the most well-informed individuals I worked with in María la Baja. Not only did he understand the Victims' Law and the rights it afforded citizens, but he

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[47] Gwen Burnyeat's (2018) ethnography of the Colombian Peace Community of San José Apartadó, Urabá is relevant here. While my research encountered individuals in María la Baja who chose not to engage in the reparations system, Burnyeat's work highlights an extreme version of "opting out." She traces how the Peace Community as a whole has refused to engage with the Colombian state's war and peace-based institutions as part of their politics of "neutrality" and "rupture."

also offered complex analyses of the multiple and contradictory effects of the Victims' Law on populations in María la Baja and across the country. In particular, Eduardo recognized that the quality of life before the conflict in many ways could never be replaced by government interventions. Eduardo used himself as an example to communicate the life that people had before the conflict:

> All my life I have said: if the paramilitaries hadn't taken away so much from me, from my family—and they took away a lot—in this moment, I would be living well. My kids would be studying at a good university […] and I would have had the money to pay off their studies. I mean, I was carrying an immense future—I had 50 cows, I had my house, I had my farm parceled out, I had fish, I had hens, I mean, I had everything!

Eduardo offered this list not to dwell in all that was taken from him, but rather to highlight that he, and his fellow farmers had a good life because they worked for it. He was careful to emphasize that they had all of this and "without accessing the rights that we had [from the government]." It was about hard work, he emphasized, "Because *that* is how we were educated and *that* is how we were taught." For Eduardo, the Victims' Law created a complicated relationship between rural citizens affected by conflict and the state, as the very nature of handing out reparations went against the mentality of *campesinos*. Eduardo did not suggest that the government should be off the hook on their responsibilities to citizens. As far as he was concerned, a meager humanitarian aid check or a paved road here and there would not reestablish his sense of "*una vida digna*" (a dignified life).

In meetings with several communities seeking collective reparations, it was common to hear people reminisce about a time before the war. '*Antes,*' people would assert, 'this town was a paradise.' Houses were made out of sticks and mud with a thatch roof, communal water wells were built by the community for the community. Alicia recalled the stories of her parents, where "when something happened to you, I felt it too because we were a community." Social ties, communal forms of labor, and access to land were all deeply affected by the traumas of war. That is, the

foundational features of life in María la Baja that allowed for Eduardo to have and "immense future" without the support of the government, were dismantled under decades of intense violence. The nostalgia for *antes*, before the conflict, was not just about longing for the past. In many ways this nostalgia was also a reaction to the state's inability to replace these social structures through the victim-citizenship relationship (see Han 2012). Indeed, the communal structure that existed before the war, was largely a product of state absence, not state intervention. While reparations under the Victims' Law may offer limited access to rights and compensation, many like Eduardo and Mari have also reached the conclusion that such reparations are not capable of fulfilling local understandings of dignity or full citizenship.

CONCLUSION

The Victims' Law and the pervasive politics of victimhood in Colombia during my research generated new relationships between the state and individuals affected most directly by the war. Yet, these relationships did not follow the by-the-book pathway outlined by the law. Instead, the uneven and unequal application of the Victims' Law generated confusion and frustration, as individuals and communities sought to understand their rights and how to access them. As Alicia, a female leader in María la Baja, explained to me, "In truth, I don't see the [governments'] will to see to it that the people really understand that they have rights. I think […] that there is more of a will to create confusion, so that the people are confused and don't know that they have rights." Having studied the law and attended government workshops, Alicia spoke from her immersed understanding of the law as inherently disorienting.

As evidenced across the stories in this chapter, victim-citizenship cannot be summarized in broad strokes. The fact that the neighboring communities of Mampuján, Monte Cristo, San José de Playón, and many others could share overlapping histories of war, but receive entirely different treatments under the Victims' Law is not only unjust; such disparities have also exacerbated rather

than alleviated the tense social and economic conditions in María la Baja. The Victims' Law encourages people to consider their victimhood at the individual or community level. Yet, there is little ability to address broad regional harm or lost sociality and ways of life that involved trade and travel across communal land. The reparative structures outlined by the state and the victim-citizen models put forth tend to divide regions—by both literally dividing regions into reparation cases, and socially dividing regions as communities compete for limited government attention. Often lost within the reparations process, are the regional and historic sensibilities about what truly constitutes "dignity," "citizenship," and "*buen vivir*" (good life) for Maríalabajenses.

While the Victims' Law seeks to extend full citizenship to victims, it is evident that this goal is rarely fulfilled in practice. Even the communities in María la Baja with the highest levels of state interventions are often discouraged and dismayed by the process. Access to basic human rights, education, or healthcare is not the end-all-be-all for communities that have endured centuries of marginalization at the hands of racist and regionalist discrimination. After such legacies of abandonment, to be seen nationally as a victim in need of citizenship rights is hardly adequate to make up for all that was lost during and beyond years of war. Describing the Jamaican context, Deborah Thomas encourages us to re-think notions of citizenship that rely solely on access to rights. She calls for research to "make visible the creative and dynamic ways people make new worlds out of their own 'bare life' instead of assuming that what marginalized citizens want is merely the extension of rights" (2011, 7). In this vein, the stories in this chapter should be understood as more than just citizens struggling to access rights under the Victims' Law. Rafa's drawings, the quilt Juana transported between social marches and high-class hotels, and Mari's refusal to participate in the system, all offer examples of the "creative and dynamic ways people make new worlds" (ibid, 7). In the following chapter, I turn to a discussion of victim visibility where it bleeds beyond legal protocols and reparation models. The affective and aesthetic effects of visibility and invisibility

demonstrate parallel narratives of victimhood that emerge with and against the grain of legal

attempts to forge victim-citizenship.

INTERLUDE 3
Sweat and Styrofoam Boxes

Drowsiness descended upon 15 or so community members in rural María la Baja. After more than two hours of tedious work with the Victim's Unit, the mid-day heat was draining their last drops of energy. José, a government employee visiting from Bogotá, noticed the community members' fatigue and seemed relieved when several women arrived with lunch. Heavy plastic sacks were packed full with Styrofoam boxes leaking grease from a combination of meat, starch, and salad. An array of volunteers, both men and women, quickly awoke from their near comatose state to hand out food to all of the workshop participants. The Styrofoam boxes squeaked and creaked as they rubbed against one another, and the accompanying small plastic bags full of ice-cold fruit juice jiggled and sloshed.

These Styrofoam boxes, filled with food from local restaurants or cooks known for their "good flavor," are characteristic of government meetings. While the meal-time ritual felt normal to most of the community members, José, the government employee, seemed particularly uncomfortable and unable to enjoy his hot meal. Many visitors from inland Colombia or abroad need time for their bodies to acclimate to the heat, and José's 24-hour trip was not enough. During the meeting, his body betrayed him: bright red neck and face, sweat rolling down his brow into his eyes, and a blue shirt turned black by sweat. José's obvious discomfort was a painful reminder of the physical and social distance between him and the communities he sought to serve, as these brief, in-and-out meetings often define government and community relationships.

Governmental officials hold meetings and workshops with communities to fulfill legal mandates set by the Victims' Law. Nevertheless, some government employees act as if these workshops are favors that they offer to communities out of goodwill. Community members have a different take. Workshops and meetings are seen as the government's duty, not a gift. These

gatherings are time consuming and inefficient, which means that participants attend at the expense of a day's worth of work. At the end of a frustrating day, participants often lament the laundry that didn't get hung out to dry or a day of paid labor that was lost. The sacrifice of attending government meetings is high and the promise of lunch with the possibility of an extra Styrofoam box to take home is one small tangible recognition of this sacrifice.

As the meal comes to a close, the community members regroup and prepare to continue the meeting. Neighborhood dogs arrive on cue to clean out the last grains of rice and pork bones from the sleek white foam.

CHAPTER THREE

Exhibiting Victimhood: Art Therapy, Symbolic Reparations, and Producing Empathy

The afternoon sun cast long shadows across the hilly landscape as a small group of us walked down the dusty steep path to the tamarind tree. For the community of Las Brisas, San Juan Nepomuceno this tree is significant in a number of ways. Prior to the violence that tore the community apart, the tamarind tree was a place of encounter. Located in a valley between dramatic hillsides, the flat area around the tree was a perfect spot for pick-up soccer games or a shady place to sit and catch up with neighbors. On March 11, 2000 the paramilitary AUC division known as the "Heroes of Montes de María" entered the community and accused its members of being guerrillas. They tortured and killed 12 men, one of whom was left hanging in the tamarind tree. The use of the tamarind tree in this violent act transformed the tree's meaning into both a reminder of a time before violence and a painful memory of the violence itself.

It was March 11, 2016—sixteen years after the massive forced displacement of Mampuján, María la Baja and the subsequent massacre in Las Brisas, San Juan Nepomuceno. To commemorate the day, roughly 50 people had gathered in Las Brisas, nestled in rolling hills just to the east of María la Baja. The event included speeches from community members of Las Brisas, songs, displays of art, a Catholic mass, and a hearty communal lunch of boiled yucca root stew with aged white cheese. At the front of the commemoration, a large black and white photograph of the tamarind tree sat at the base of the front table—almost as if to mourn and honor of this communal icon along with the assassinated community members (Figure 1). At the end of the ceremony, several regional officials departed down the rocky road in their government-issued cars, while community members and other visitors waited for rides in the rustic Jeep Willys. The first round of rides departed, and a small group of us were left to wait another few hours for their return. Jaime, one of the community

leaders in Las Brisas, took the opportunity to suggest that we walk to see the tamarind tree for ourselves.

Figure 1: The 16th commemoration of the paramilitary massacre of 12 men in Las Brisas. A large black and white photograph of the tamarind tree was placed in the center of the presentation table. In the twelve posts of the communal center each displayed tapestries depicting the individuals killed and the context of their death. These tapestries were created by the Women Weavers of Mampuján with the collaboration of the families in Las Brisas.

We walked up and down rolling hills and crossed a small stream. As we climbed the last hill, I caught my first glimpse of the tamarind tree, surrounded by trails that wove their way to the tree's base like a lines on a treasure map. As we walked down, Jaime explained that after the massacre, the tamarind tree stopped bearing fruit and dried up. The community understood the tree's barren state as its way of mourning the death of the *campesinos* and lamenting its unwilling participation in the acts of violence. As we reached the base of the tree, Jaime smiled, telling us that the tree bore fruit again for the first time this year—16 years after the massacre. He encouraged us to take pictures of the

tree and to gather seeds to take with us, because the tree's recovery was proof of resistance and life

after death (Figure 2).

Figure 2: The tamarind tree in Las Brisas, bearing fruit for the first time since the massacre in 2000. Photo taken in March 2016.

As we gathered some of the seeds at our feet, Jaime spoke of the communities' idea for

future commemorations. Now that the tree is bearing fruit, they wanted to use the seeds to plant 12

new tamarind trees—one for every person killed during the massacre. But first, Jaime explained,

they needed to get institutional buy-in and support. One of the individuals who had joined the walk

noted that Las Brisas is a community of farmers, and so he wondered what was stopping them from

planting the trees themselves. Jaime shook his head and clarified that they did not need money or

technical help planting the trees. What they needed was help to make the act visible. Without the

institutional support, he worried that this symbolic tree planting would go unnoticed by the larger regional and national community. The hazy blue sky slowly softened as the sun continued to sink lower, backlighting the tamarind tree's web of tangled branches. We stayed at the base of the tree for a bit longer and then started the walk back to wait for our rides.

The tamarind tree's significance for Las Brisas is clear from the tree's role in the community before, during, and after the conflict. It is less obvious why Jaime considered that the success of their commemorative tree planting depended on national recognition and visibility. This chapter explores the relationship between community and state-backed exhibitions of victimhood, violence, and reconciliation. In particular, it examines the artistic works created by, or in collaboration with, victims and victim communities. I define victims' art as the objects, performances, and symbolic acts that victims generate for personal, communal, or public display. Additionally, I consider the institutionalized art that transforms victims' images and testimonies into visual representations of victimhood. These works vary in their purpose from individual or communal healing to public displays meant to educate and emotionally "move" national audiences.

I trace the development and circulation of victims' artistic mediums in three primary contexts. First, I provide context for the public circulation of victims' art and a small sample of artistic practices. In this section, my descriptions provide context, but my aim is to create an exhibit-like experience for the reader that mimics the way a viewer may encounter this work on public display. Second, I consider the ways in which victim communities' diverse cultural and artistic expressions have inspired the government to use artful interventions as a form of symbolic reparation under the 2011 Victims' Law. Finally, I examine how the National Center of Historical Memory (CNMH) and their team working on the National Museum of Memory (MNM) have incorporated this array of visual works into their museological approach to communicate

information about the conflict to a broader Colombian public. The three sections may seem to offer

a chronological history of victims' art in Colombia; however, these processes are overlapping and in

constant flux. While the intentions vary across community and national state projects, these efforts

share a common belief in the value of artistic and symbolic mediums to reveal complex truths about

the conflict and generate emotional transformations.

VICTIMS' ART—THERAPY, MEMORY, AND TRANSFORMATION

Victims' art in Colombia has emerged on the national stage over the past decade, especially

following the passage of the Victims' Law in 2011. While the circulation of victims' art was relatively

new for a national public, professional art in Colombia has historically served as an important

medium for transmitting political messages about the conflict (Bal 2010; Jimeno 2013; Rappaport

2018; Satizábal 2005; Uribe 1999).[48] Myriam Jimeno, for example, draws attention to the remarkable

number of novels written about the period of *La Violencia*. She argues that in an atmosphere of

silence and censorship "literature was a resource, a cultural language well known to the literate

classes, for narrating and denouncing"(2013, 63).[49] Likewise, in an essay on the exhibit "Art and

Violence in Colombia since 1948," María Victoria Uribe discusses the inefficacy of academic reports

and raw images of violence to articulate and evoke emotion. Rather, Uribe suggests that the artist

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[48] Since the beginning of the internal conflict in the 1950s, professional artists in Colombia have used visual mediums to comment on the conflict, violence, disappearances, and surrounding politics. For example, in 1999, the Museum of Modern Art of Bogotá curated "*Arte y Violencia en Colombia desde 1948*" (Art and Violence in Colombia since 1948), which showcased the work of Colombian artists as political critiques of the country's violence, including internationally known artists—Fernando Botero, Alejandro Obregón, and Doris Salcedo. Scholars have attended to this genre of work through the lens of political art, aesthetic analyses, and in deep conversation with the history of Colombia's conflict (for example: Bal 2010; Bennett 2005; Ordóñez Ortegón 2013; Schuster 2005; Silva-Cañaveral 2012; Uribe 1999). These analyses draw in different ways from Holocaust studies and Frankfurt School theories on aesthetics and politics (Adorno 1997; Benjamin 1968; Huyssen 2003), taking seriously the relationship between art and the politics of conflict and societal trauma.

[49] Original text in Spanish: "*la literatura fue un recurso, un lenguaje cultural bien conocido por las capas letradas, para narrar y denunciar*" (Jimeno 2013, 63).

"considers that the wealth and complexity lie in the margins and not in the explicit violent act" (1999, 285).[50]

Similar to professional art that came before it, victims' art has addressed the atrocities of war. Yet, whereas most professional artists depicted the victimization of others, victims' art emphasizes the subjectivity of the artists and their direct experience of war. These creations speak to experiences of victimhood, ranging from the acts of violence themselves to expressions of resistance and visions of peaceful futures. The intentions behind these works also vary widely, including as a form of therapy, denouncing violence, protest, political claims, entrepreneurship, or some combination of these. Across these cases, the artistic and aesthetic qualities are often the secondary focus for museum and gallery curators. Rather, victims' art is valued primarily as an emotional and potentially transformative view into the realities of the war.

I briefly outline several works and creations that demonstrate the array of victims' art.[51] While many of these initiatives began as individual and community-based works, my knowledge and first-hand encounter with the works and their creators occurred in the context of their subsequent public display or performance.

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[50] Original text in Spanish: "*considera que la riqueza y la complejidad yacen en los márgenes y no en el hecho violento explícito*" (Uribe 1999, 285).

[51] This list is only a fraction of the art circulating in Colombia. The National Museum of Memory website offers the following database with a more comprehensive, though still incomplete, review of artistic and cultural practices: http://museodememoria.gov.co/arte-y-cultura/ (Accessed on October 11, 2018).

Cathartic Drawings

      While the majority of art practices I came to know were created collectively, there are also examples of individual artists. The work of Rafael Posso, featured at the opening of Chapter Two, is one such artist. His initial body of work includes 10 charcoal pencil drawings that depict the massacre in Las Brisas described in the opening of this chapter. While Rafa was not in the community when the paramilitary arrived on March 11, 2000, he was part of the group that returned to Las Brisas without protection to collect the bodies of the deceased. He describes these drawings as a form of personal catharsis that helped him release the images seared in his mind during their mission to transport the dead out of the community to be buried (Figure 4). He then started drawing his reconstruction of how the men were tortured and killed (Figure 3). After depicting the experiences of his own family members, he gained permission of other community members to artistically reconstruct the deaths of the other men murdered by the paramilitary. These pieces have since been on display at national exhibits and featured in news articles.

<div align="center">

Figure 3   **Figure 4**

</div>
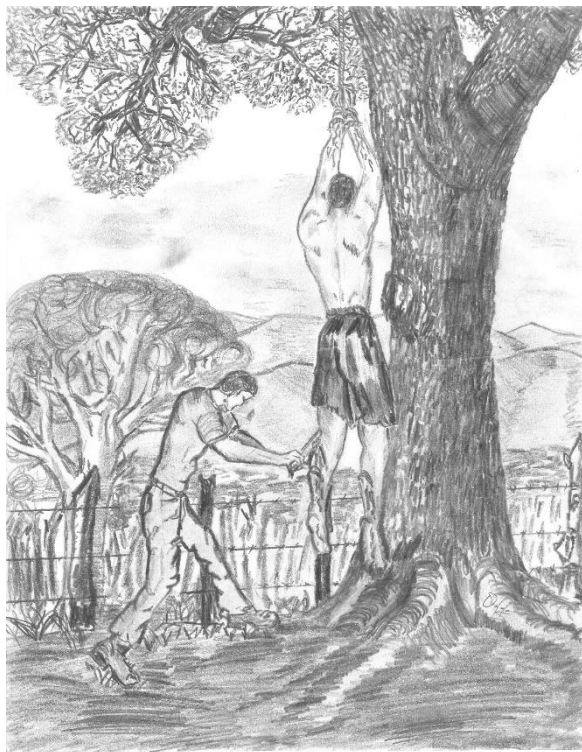
Figure 3 (Left): "*Tortura en el Tamarindo*" (Torture in the Tamarind [tree]), by Rafael Posso.

Figure 4 (Right): "*Dolor Familia Posso*" (Posso Family Pain), by Rafael Posso.

Narrating Violence through Body Mapping

In 2009, researchers from the National Center of Historical Memory utilized a technique called body mapping with a group of women from the Northern Magdalena regions near Colombia's Caribbean coast. The intentions of this work were to help women process and communicate stories about their experiences with violence and sexual violence to be used in a CNMH publication (GMH 2009; GMH 2011). For the activity, the women laid on top of a large sheet of paper while a partner traced the outline of their body. Within the lines of their life-size outline, the women added imagery, color, and marks to indicate how the trauma has affected their bodies (Figure 5). While this exercise began as a tool for capturing memories of trauma, the resulting images were eventually displayed in a gallery space in Bogotá after professional Colombian artist Beatriz Gonzales saw them and noted that they should be valued as aesthetic objects and not just vehicles of testimony (Personal communication with CNMH employee).

Figure 5: "*Mapa del cuerpo de una víctima de violación sexual*" (Body map of a victim of sexual assault). Source: Memory Workshop, Magdalena, 2009 (GMH 2011b, 256).

Therapeutic Quilting

"*Artesana* (artisan)! it's even in the term itself," Juana exclaimed. Playing with words, Juana noted that the Spanish term for artisan, combines the words for "art" and "to heal," such that saying the word "artisan" (*artesana*) slowly, is the same as saying "art heals" ([el] *arte…sana*). Juana Alicia Ruiz Hernández is one of the leaders in Mampuján and the group Women Weaving Dreams and Flavors of Peace (*Mujeres Tejiendo Sueños y Sabores de Paz*). Through the support of the Mennonite Church and the Colombian NGO *Sembrando Semillas de Paz* (Planting Seeds of Peace), these women began quilting to narrate their massive forced displacement and heal the trauma that it left behind. In addition to Mampuján's work within their own community, the women traveled across Montes de María during ongoing conflict to teach their technique to communities that had yet to encounter psychological or other resources to help them process their experiences (Figures 6 and 7).

Figure 6: Quilting workshop in Mampuján with women from the Montes de María region. June 2016.

Figure 7: The Association Women Weaving Dreams and Flavors of Peace sewing in Mampujancito. Source: (Montaño 2015).

Denouncing Crime through Performance

The Mothers' of Soacha, are a group of women from a neighborhood on the southern edge of Bogotá. These women united because their sons were killed by the Colombian military during the government's "False Positives" scandal. Under President Uribe, the Colombian state military kidnapped young men—often from lower class backgrounds—transported them to conflict areas, killed them, and dressed them in guerrilla fatigues. These deaths were then used to boost the military's statistics for successful combat against the guerrilla enemy. Mothers of these kidnapped and assassinated young men created the play "*Antígonas, Tribunal de Mujeres*" (Antigones, Tribunal of Women) with the help of professional actresses in order to denounce the state's crime and publically reveal the identities and fates of their sons (Figure 8). They have performed this play across Colombia, in Europe, and various countries throughout the Americas.

Figure 8: Photograph of the actresses on stage during the production of "*Antígonas, Tribunal de Mujeres*" (Antigones, Tribunal of Women). Source: *Las2Orillas* (https://www.las2orillas.co/mujeres-victimas-del-conflicto-se-convierten-en-antigonas/), photograph by *Corporación Colombiana de Teatro.*

Burial Practices and Reclaiming the Disappeared

The rural community of Puerto Berrío is located along the Magdalena River in the department of Antioquia—the capital of which is Medellín. Over decades, community members discovered the bodies of individuals who had been killed upstream to the south and disposed of in the river's rushing waters. The community did not know the identity of the deceased or where they came from; they were N.N., or "No Names." Rather than place the unidentified dead in mass graves, the community began to bury the dead as if they were family. During the height of violence, the community carried out this practice outside of the public gaze. However, their care for the dead became known nationally when professional artist Juan Manuel Echavarría learned of the practice and began a documentary and photographic project with the community. Echavarría's photographic documentation of the above ground tombs has exhibited nationally and internationally. As depicted below, the installation, called "Requiem N.N Wall," is a life-size hologram that offers a before and after view of the tombs: standing to the left of the piece, the viewer sees the "before" image of dilapidated tombs, and as the viewer walks from left to right, the images transform into "after" shots of the brightly painted and sealed graves with flowers or other details. Figure 9 depicts a mixture of the before and after tombs.

Figure 9: Requiem N.N. Wall. Photographic installation by Juan Manuel Echavarría (2006–2012). Source: http://www.jmechavarria.com/requiemnn/requiemnn_mural.html.

Hip Hop and Graffiti

The Comuna 13 is a historically marginalized neighborhood in Colombia's second largest city, Medellín. Following intense urban violence in the 1980s and 1990s around Pablo Escobar and the Medellín Drug Cartel, the Comuna 13 and other impoverished neighborhoods became targets for paramilitary and military operations that sought to rid these neighborhoods of supposed guerrillas, criminals, and other "undesirables." In the aftermath of massacres, military raids, and general terror, a group of young men founded Casa Kolacho, with the slogan "*Hip Hop como estilo de vida*" (Hip Hop as a life-style). Through hip hop music, dance, and graffiti art, the group denounces violence and reconstructs narratives about the history and future of their neighborhood. Their work has garnered national and international attention, and they now run a public "Grafitour" for national and international tourists to learn about the history of violence, resistance, and recovery (Figure 10).

Figure 10: The Casa Kolacho team and their graffiti work in Comuna 13. Source: Casa Kolacho Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/LaCasaKolacho/photos/a.195516090650670/714488598753414/?type=1&theater and the Grafitour website: http://www.comuna13tours.com/.

Bullerengue—Poetic History

  Bullerengue music, popular in María la Baja, is a blend of African, Indigenous, and Spanish cultural influences. The music typically unites a lead singer, chorus, drums, clapping, and dancers. María la Baja resident, Ceferina Banquez, is one of the most recognized Bullerengue singers in Colombia, known for her poetic compositions and powerful voice (Figures 11 and 12). The two links below offer a sample of the way her music has served as a form of testimony and historical reflection. In the first recording, Ceferina explains that she composed the song, "*Yo Quiero Pegar un Brinco*" ("I Just Want to Leap") as a reflection about the way her African ancestors must have felt when they arrived on the Caribbean shores in Cartagena. She imagines that they dreamed of leaping from the shore back to their homeland. Seeing only the sea in front of them, they turned their gaze inland instead and found paths to freedoms in the palenques. The second video (starting at minute 1:43) shows a portion of her song "*Desplazada*" ("Displaced"), in which she sings about her displacement in Montes de María. At the end of the film, Ceferina reflects in an interview, "I don't consider myself just a sad *campesina* anymore. Years back, I never imagined I would get to where I am now. Music has changed my life."

1) "*Yo Quiero Pegar un Brinco*" – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TjH8ATj2RdY

2) "*Desplazada*" https://youtu.be/nC9M_DnFGKg?t=1m43s

| Figure 11 | Figure 12 |

Figure 11 (Left): Ceferina Banquez singing "Yo Quiero Pegar un Brinco." Source: Still shot from video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TjH8ATj2RdY.

Figure 12 (Right): Ceferina Banquez singing at the Annual Bullerengue Festival in María la Baja, December 2015. Photo by: Alexis Diaz.

I have drawn attention to the conditions that have made the public display of such works possible and desirable. These works are part of a broader social and political moment in Colombia in which victims' images and voices are in high demand as part of a broader shift toward victim-centered reconciliation.

In recent years, conflict resolution literature has drawn attention to the value of artistic practices. This literature tends to value artistic expressions for their exceptional ability to show elements that otherwise are lost in textual or oral renderings of violence (Cohen 2003; Liebmann 1996; Shank and Schirch 2008; Zelizer 2003). In reference to post-conflict Peru, Cynthia Milton (2013) argues that "[b]ecause art is perhaps less tethered to the past and to facts than other media of truth-telling, art makes the 'unimaginable' imaginable and provides new frames—*marcos* or *cuadros*—with which to construct new narratives" (ibid, 18). These sentiments about art are particularly evident in literature focused on works created by victims of violence. Victims' art is often considered a source of "alternative" memory and truth-telling, a source of healing, and as a form of witnessing that potentially subverts the structural limitations of oral testimony and written text (Adams 2013; Agosin 1996; Isbell 1990; Milton 2009; Riaño-Alcalá 2006). The stories I have heard on public stages and in one-on-one conversations with artists echo these claims, as artistic mediums have offered many individuals an ability to denounce violence and generate alternative frameworks for displaying the effects of conflict.

Without negating art's potentially therapeutic and subversive capabilities, it is important to also consider the ways in which these works have become part of state-sanctioned discourses about war and peace. In particular, the popularity of victims' art highlights the assumed relationship between vision, truth, and transparency, which undergirds international approaches to conflict resolution. Under the premise of the Enlightenment and scientific discovery, Western tradition has privileged vision for its purported power to discern certain facts and "truths" about the world

around us in ways that other senses cannot (Haraway 1988; Jay 1991; Seremetakis 1994).[52]

Transitional justice and truth and reconciliation commissions, similarly draw from a vision-centered perspective. Moving beyond violence to a democratic future is premised on the power of transitional justice to provide clarity and transparency in terms of past events (Bickford 2000; Hardt and Negri 2000; Hayner 2011; Teitel 2002, 2003). In Colombia, victims' artistic forms circulate parallel to conflict resolution processes—methods that germinate from Western-based emphases on the power of the visual to reveal or make transparent facts about the past.

In the context of violence in Latin America, several scholars have analyzed the use of photographic and media displays of violence as a form of visually and viscerally bringing violence into the domestic space (Laplante and Phenicie 2010; Poole and Rojas Pérez 2010; Torres 2014). Diana Taylor (1997) has highlighted the role of performance in acts of both violence and resistance. Across these analyses, scholars expose the way images generate and reflect social realities. Karen Strassler's (2004, 2010) work in Indonesia similarly addresses the allure of the photograph as a source of objectivity, truth, and transparency. Examining debates around rape in Indonesia, Strassler argues that it is precisely because of photography's supposed transparency that it is necessary to "investigate how visuality itself is implicated in the maintenance of a gendered sphere of political recognition" (2004, 691).

Victims' art in Colombia has joined the politics of conflict resolution; they have become part of political campaigns, museums, and other aesthetic tools of governance. In Colombia's pre-post-conflict moment, such artistic works approximate truth commission testimonials. National entities

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[52] Though as Michel Foucault (1995, 1991) demonstrated through his analysis of the panopticon, vision's potential for revelation has also become a form of surveillance in which the power of the "gaze" is central to governmentality and biopolitics. This includes, of course, its opposite—that is, the use of censorship or forced disappearances as a form of violence that similarly finds its logic in the ideology of vision (Taussig 1992).

like the National Center of Historical Memory have adopted artistic mediums as a way not just to communicate truths and offer transparency, but as a means of sensitizing and evoking public empathy. As these images circulate in regional, national, and international contexts, not only do they come into new "frames of reference" (Spyer and Steedly 2013), but they face the limited vision by their vast public (Strathern 1993). To explore the circulation of victims' art, I turn to the work of the National Center of Historical Memory and their efforts to narrate conflict, provide victims symbolic reparations, and generate national empathy.

THE NATIONAL CENTER OF HISTORICAL MEMORY—VICTIMS' ART AND NATIONAL EMPATHY

In 2006, the Historical Memory Group (GMH) formed to investigate the origins and contours of the war.[53] From this moment, and continuing into the group's later transformation into the National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH), "the GMH chose to work with 'emblematic cases of violence' which exemplified systematic and generalized patterns of human rights abuses" (Riaño Alcalá and Uribe 2016, 8). Pilar Riaño Alacalá and María Victoria Uribe, researchers in the GMH, explain that the GMH specifically focused on massacres along with such themes as "the dispossession of land, sexual and gender-based violence, forced displacement, kidnapping and forced disappearances" (2016, 9). These themes sought to cover the breadth of violence committed in Colombia, while also establishing manageable parameters.

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[53] As noted in the Introduction, the National Center of Historical Memory (CNMH) was formed from the Historical Memory Group (Grupo Memoria Histórica—GMH), which began investigating the historical origins of the conflict after the establishment of the Justice and Peace Law in 2005 and the National Center of Reconciliation and Reparation (CNRR). In addition to changing their name, this shift placed the CNMH under the *Departamento para la Prosperidad Social* (DPS—Department for Social Prosperity) within the President's office. The Unit of Attention and Integral Reparation to Victims (Victims' Unit) also falls under this department. This placement was a concerted effort on the part of CNMH members who advocated to not be placed under other governmental branches, such as the Ministry of Culture, which they feared would devalue their work and decrease the impact of the information they produced (personal communication with María Emma Wills, Researcher for CNMH. May 2014).

The CNMH's historical memory work has provided wide-reaching analyses of the conflict and its impact that were previously unavailable. Still, emblematic case-studies tend to focus on acts of violence that are more limited in space and time, often in situations where it is easier to identify a clear victim–perpetrator relationship. For example, acute events, such as massive forced displacements fit this focus, whereas the subtler, but long-term threats of violence do not. Emblematic cases have not only guided historical investigations; rather, the Victims' Unit has also adopted the logic of emblematic cases to influence how and where the government should distribute its limited reparations resources. This application is troublesome, as communities are often included or excluded from state benefits based on perceptions about the emblematic nature of their victimhood. As scholar Juan Felipe Hoyos asks, "What suffering is not emblematic for the person who experiences it?" (2015).

Emblematic cases cannot capture the diverse experiences of over eight million victims and 50 years of war. Nevertheless, these investigations have provided an alternative to decades of media coverage that has been inconsistent and often clouded by political corruption. Many Colombians are desensitized to headlines about the conflict after decades of repetitive reports of FARC kidnappings, narcotraffickers planting car bombs, and mass displacements or massacres carried out by the paramilitary AUC. Such headlines have become background noise, inspiring little confidence that the "real" story is out there or that authorities will hold perpetrators accountable for their crimes. The historical investigations of the CNMH sought to remedy this lack of information, not just by providing more textual documentation of war, but by adopting a victim-centered approach to narrating the conflict.

While the CNMH's research has no judicial power and is not a formal truth commission, they have provided some of the first, in-depth analyses of the origins and impacts of the conflict

based on victim testimonials (GMH 2013).[54] The importance of victimhood is part of a broader trend across government institutions that lead peace and reconciliation efforts. For example, the government sent several delegations of victims to participate in the peace negotiations with the guerrilla FARC in Havana, Cuba between 2014-2016. Similarly, the 2011 Victims' Law has placed legal emphasis on victim reparations and aid. Such shifts also parallel international conflict resolution politics that favor combining transitional justice with truth commissions and victims' reparations. These approaches to post-conflict methods consider that lasting peace cannot be based on the disarmament of armed actors alone. Rather, victims' testimonies and rights to reparative actions are central to national efforts to reconcile the source of violence and its impact on society (Hayner 2011).

The 2011 Victims' Law bolstered the role of the CNMH in the peace and reconciliation process. First, CNMH became one of more than fifty state institutions that are responsible for carrying out victims' reparations. In particular, the CNMH is charged with providing symbolic reparations, which can include monuments, commemorative acts, or other symbolic interventions deemed appropriate and reparative by the victim community. Second, the CNMH was tasked with the creation of the National Museum of Memory in Bogotá. In both of these endeavors— reparations and exhibits—artistic mediums have been central to the CNMH approach.

Art and Symbolic Reparations

The 2011 Victims' Law defines symbolic reparations as: "Any services provided to victims or the community as a whole that tends to ensure the preservation of historical memory, that there is 'no repetition' of victimizing acts, the public acknowledgement of the violent acts, public requests

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[54] The books and other written and visual materials produced by the GMH and CNMH are public property and available for free online (www.centromemoriahistorica.gov.co).

for forgiveness, and the reestablishment of the dignity of the victims" (Law 1448, Article 141).[55]

Based on this description, more concrete forms of symbolic reparation include apologies from

perpetrators or access to information about the perpetrators and context of violence. By contrast,

the "preservation of historical memory" and the "reestablishment of dignity" can carry different

meanings for different groups. These mandates, coordinated primarily by the CNMH, have taken

the form of commemorative acts, historical memory projects, and other local interventions that seek

to repair individuals and communities through symbolic actions.

Yolanda Sierra León, and her investigative team, *Derechos Culturales: Derecho, Arte y Cultura*

(Cultural Rights: Law, Art, and Culture), focus on the relationship between art, human rights, and

symbolic reparations. Sierra León offers a valuable framework for evaluating the various forms of art

generated about the conflict and in relation to victims' reparations. Sierra León proposes three

categories: "1. Works that originate from a judicial or state decision as a means of victims'

reparations; 2. Works of art that stem from the initiative of artists, and 3. Artistic works or practices

realized by victims who have suffered human rights violations" (2014, 77).[56] Sierra León explains

that, without negating the importance and value of this third category of victims' artistic projects,

these works cannot be considered part of victims' integral reparations. By law, the Colombian state

is responsible for providing the resources and actions necessary for reparations to victims. Victims'

initiatives may serve as a form of self-healing, but they cannot remove the state's responsibility to

repair. Although Sierra León's categorization is legally accurate, my experience in communities and

government offices suggests that the lines between these categories are not always clear.

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[55] Original text in Spanish: "*Se entiende por reparación simbólica toda prestación realizada a favor de las víctimas o de la comunidad en general que tienda a asegurar la preservación de la memoria histórica, la no repetición de los hechos victimizantes, la aceptación pública de los hechos, la solicitud de perdón público y el restablecimiento de la dignidad de las víctima*s."

[56] Original text in Spanish: "*1. Obras originadas en una decisión judicial o estatal como medio de reparación a las víctimas; 2. Obras de arte provenientes de la propia iniciativa de los artistas, y 3. Obras o prácticas artísticas que realizan las víctimas que han sufrido violaciones a sus derechos humanos.*"

Government agencies responsible for symbolic reparations draw inspiration from the work victims'

and artists have carried out. Likewise, victims—as in the case of Jaime and the tamarind tree in Las

Brisas—may choose to include responsible state entities in their actions as a way of making their

community's story legible to a broader public.

In a focus group interview with a team at the CNMH, my questions about their use of

artistic mediums for the museum led us into a discussion about the role of symbolic reparations. The

CNMH team's explanation demonstrates the delicate balance they try to strike between fulfilling the

state's responsibility and also merging state reparations with already existing symbolism.

> **DRM:** So, from what you are saying it seems like the art initiatives come from two points. From the communities that are perhaps already carrying out their own projects or saying that 'this is a medium that makes sense to us,' but it is also coming from the legal part about symbolic reparations, if I understood correctly.

> **Diana:** The thing is that the 'symbolic' comes about precisely because the [Victims'] Law recognizes that within these [artistic] practices is the possibility of symbolic reparation, and so everything mixes, right? As in, my read on it is not unidirectional. A study is done of what is happening and so the institution adapts […] and tries to allow for this law that includes a mandate to provide symbolic reparation. But on the other hand, [the institution tries] to recognize that the people are making memory in this way [through artistic practices]. The CNMH, I think, is like a bridge between these two things.

> **Carlos:** I would like to clarify something about this theme […] it is really important, especially for our [CNMH] work, to make it very clear what each thing means. One thing is the reparative *effects* that artistic and cultural practices generate when they stem from the initiatives of victims or human rights organizations that work with victims. And the other is the reparative function that is anchored in the state's legal obligation to [construct] memory and the state's legal obligation to provide reparations. […]
> So, artistic practices in particular have a very powerful reparative effect, perhaps much more powerful than many other types of expressive mediums. […] Victims manage somehow—through art and culture—to feel better and at the same time make their demands visible in a deeper way. Nevertheless, this is not reparation. *The reparation is anchored in the state's legal obligation.* So, even when these initiatives have reparative effects, they are only converted into reparations when the state assumes this reparative effect and strengthens it institutionally […] Because, if not, *we would be divesting the state of its social and political responsibility to victims, basically, supporting the perverse idea that the victims repair themselves.* […] Basically, the idea of the Museum [MNM] from this point of view, is to assume its reparative obligation by empowering the reparative effects that the very victims have within their practices. (emphasis added)

Carlos' clarification followed Sierra León's (2014) clear distinction between state-driven reparations and victim-driven actions. Still, Diana's and Carlos' explanations also show the overlap between these two categories. Diana emphasized the back and forth relationship. On the one hand, victims' artistic practices influence symbolic reparations, and on the other, symbolic reparations generate new or expanded artistic practices. Carlos, though more concerned about the state's legal obligation, similarly highlights this porous relationship in which the state fulfills its mandate by adopting and strengthening the cultural and artistic practices that already exist. Throughout our longer conversation, the team recognized that the power of artistic mediums predates the state's interventions. Nevertheless, the adoption or cooptation of these mediums by the state is what transforms art from a mode of personal healing into a state-fulfilled reparation.

While the team maintained their conviction that these tools and mediums were appropriate, they expressed doubt about how symbolic reparations fit into the broader reparations process. Another team member, Carla, explained that within the reparations process there are institutional limitations:

> For example, in judicial sentences [for victim reparations], much of the time symbolic reparations arrive [to communities] first, without the administrative [reparation component]. And this is a difficult battle because [the victim communities] are not protected, they don't have electricity, there is not water, they are waiting for their economic reparations, there are still threats to security, and then someone shows up saying, 'Ok, well, let's make a plaque, with the names of all of those who died.' And, well, so I find this is totally aggressive in terms of the logic.

These symbolic reparations are only one component of integral reparations discussed in Chapter Two. Yet, as Carla noted, symbolic work often precedes the infrastructural, economic, and security interventions that are necessary to provide communities with access to peaceful and dignified futures. The disconnect between symbolic actions and material realities are evident within the communities themselves, as commemorative acts are carried out alongside dilapidated infrastructure, food insecurity, and toxic water. Such contradictory images are not projected onto the

national stage, when victims' artistic and symbolic works are circulated to a broader national public. Outside of personal healing and symbolic reparations, the visual remnants of these artistic practices play an important role in constructing a national consciousness of victimhood, conflict, and healing. This is most evident through the CNMH's work on the National Museum of Memory.

National Museum of Memory and the Art of Exhibiting War

In November 2015, Sandra—a leader of National Museum of Memory (MNM) project in Bogotá—entered the open office space of the roughly 20-person team and did something uncharacteristic. Rather than head straight to her private office, she plopped down on an open chair near me, clearly eager to share a few thoughts. Sandra and I, along with several other employees, had attended a lecture earlier that day by Veena Das who spoke on everyday violence, empire, and life as continuous waiting—a concept that resonates strongly with Colombia´s ongoing war and peace processes. Addressing a comment made by Das about art as expression rather than representation, Sandra countered that in her opinion art was both. Five nearby office employees turned their chairs to listen, also perhaps recognizing the unusual "shop talk" that was taking place this Wednesday afternoon. Sandra went on to discuss a book that argued against the "instrumentalization" of art. "Those are the purists," retorted one employee. "Right," chimed Sandra, "they can say that the artists don't *want* to instrumentalize their work, but we do! We [MNM] use art as an instrument to communicate and sensitize."

In the office space of the Direction of the National Museum of Memory (MNM) in Bogotá, art and memory are constantly discussed, perhaps only second to the institutional concerns with budgets. The material presence of art spilling into the office space provided additional evidence of the attention to aesthetic mediums. As the MNM is not set to open until 2020, the small office space—crammed with around 25 desks and often over 30 people—also served as a temporary storage for future materials for the museum. Over the course of several months, I watched works of

art and art materials pile up on top of the one unassigned "intern" desk and under tables—wherever

there was room: rolled up mural paintings, spray paint cans, florescent painted tubes used for

interactive performances, stacks of CDs with songs from all over Colombia about the conflict, and

commemorative chalk portraits of disappeared citizens.

The MNM team is charged with creating the National Museum of Memory in Colombia

about over five decades of war that persists in the present (see Chapter One and Appendix I). In

coordination with other branches that report on the "historical memory" of the conflict, the MNM

plays an integral role in determining how the conflict will be represented to a national public in the

main museum in Bogotá and in the network of smaller museums they will support throughout the

country. While the investigative branch of the CNMH has maintained its academic roots, publishing

over 150 books about the conflict, the MNM branch has expanded their work beyond textual

documentation. Instead, the MNM has taken cue not only from the content of stories told about the

conflict, but also of the mediums through which they are told. Martha Nubia Bello, then director of

the MNM, explained this distinction in her opening presentation at a music concert about the

conflict:

> Our approach, very marked by academia, was through interviews, through the search for archives, but when we went to the territories [remote areas most affected by conflict], we were honestly surprised […] by the numerous forms of expression through which the people processed and denounced their past. And the majority of these expressions passed through resources that in many cases we (academics) were unaware of and that we underestimated. They are the resources of art—with their thousands of expressions of stitching cloth, singing, dancing, theatrical expressions, connections with objects, and painting. And through these expressions we have learned perhaps much more than in other resources because all of these expressions are bearers of history and they are bearers of explanations as well.[57]

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[57] Presentation of *Tocó cantar: travesía contra el olvido* (Just Had to Sing: Traverse Against Forgetting). Centro Cultural Gabriel García Márquez, October 8, 2015. Translated from Spanish: "*Nuestra manera de acercamiento, muy marcada por la academia, era a través de las entrevistas, a través de la búsqueda de los archivos, pero cuando íbamos a los territorios, de verdad que empezamos a sorprendernos […] con la cantidad de maneras, de expresiones, con que la gente procesaba su pasado, lo denunciaba; y la mayoría de esas expresiones pasaban por unos recursos que nosotros en muchos casos desconocíamos y subestimábamos. Son los recursos del arte. En sus mil expresiones de bordar una tela, cantar, danzar, expresiones teatrales, conexión con los objetos, pintar. Y con esas expresiones hemos aprendido tal vez muchísimo más que con otros recursos, porque todas estas expresiones son portadoras de historias, son portadoras de explicaciones también.*"

I heard this story repeatedly in formal public presentations and in casual conversations or meetings within the CNMH. The origin story of "art and memory" for the CNMH is in many ways a classic tale of ethnographic induction: the academic headed off to rural areas to collect testimony, stories, and "truths" for their reports, but what they discovered is that the communities have been finding creative ways to express their experiences with violence long before the violence ended and before any institution could investigate decades of armed conflict. In particular, it was "them" (the victim communities) who showed "us" (the academics) that art was a powerful and perhaps the only medium at times through which they could address violence. Community members comment on the way artistic expression simply became the thing they had to do to get through the pain, because if you could not talk, then you sang (or danced or stitched).

Drawing from the CNMH's general focus on emblematic cases of victimhood, testimonial quotes and high-quality photographs of victims have become central to the CNMH's aesthetic approach. These snapshots have been transformed into institutional paraphernalia, such as notebooks, pens, handbags, brochures, magazines, billboards, and exhibits on street corners and in museum spaces. One prominent example was the display from roughly 2014-2017 of two large-scale photographs over the central Plaza Bolívar in Colombia's capital, Bogotá (Figure 13). While the average passerby most likely did not know the story of the women depicted in these photographs, there is a public consciousness about their signification of victimhood and the conflict. Additionally, the photos' placement at the heart of the nation's central government offices is indicative of political shifts to highlight, rather than diminish, victimhood. CNMH's work has focused on not only disseminating facts about the conflict, but about generating empathy in a national audience. [58]

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[58] Carla Jones' (2010) work on an Islamic fashion magazine in Indonesia calls attention to the importance of a gendered analysis of images. While Jones' work is distant from the context of Colombian representations of victimhood, her analysis is instructive for thinking about the ways in which the female form is simultaneously a sight of social anxiety and one that incites desire. That the billboards in downtown Bogotá are unmarked *female* victims is not irrelevant. In these particular images, the women represent motherhood—one on a bed

Figure 13: Large-scale photographs of (decontextualized) female victims of the conflict overlooking the central Plaza Bolívar in Bogotá, Colombia.

"Whisperers": The Art of Seeing and Hearing Victims

The lights went dark with a full audience in the auditorium at the Gabriel García Márquez Cultural Center in the heart of downtown Bogotá. I could feel my heart beating, as I nervously raised a four-foot long thick cardboard tube into the air. Black lights flipped on, and suddenly the audience could see that they were surrounded by roughly 30 of these cardboard tubes, each glowing with florescent paint—green, yellow, or orange. As we had practiced, the group of interns and volunteers from the CNMH began with a coordinated movement of our florescent tubes, making a wave-like movement around the audience. Then, we put the tubes up to our mouths and created an orchestra of sounds meant to imitate the noises of the countryside. Some were assigned to produce low humming, others made bird calls or the sound of cicadas. As the audiences' sensorial experience moved them from the city to the countryside, half of the performance group spread out around the

surrounded by images of her disappeared son, the other breast feeding as she looks off into the distance. Their femininity is central to the depiction of victimhood, as the emotional work of such images capture the intimate trauma of motherly loss while inciting empathy in a broad public.

auditorium to interact with the audience. The tubes—which we called "whisperers"—were the link between the performers and the audience members. I identified a member of the audience and sought his nod of approval for me to place the other end of the whisperer against his ear. Then, in a soft whisper, I recited the quote I was assigned: "Sometimes I'm drawn to look out the window to remember the days when it was possible to live in the countryside."[59]

This interactive performance occurred in the context of the VIII Annual Week of Memory, preceding a standard academic roundtable of speakers discussing topics related to conflict and representation in the future National Museum of Memory. The organizers chose to open the day's events with this interactive performance, tapping into the audiences' senses. The decision to recreate the countryside was premised on two basic presumptions—(1) that audience members understood the historic link between the rural countryside and violent conflict and (2) that most of the audience members were from the city and therefore physically and experientially distant from the world of rural conflict. Those of us in charge of using the whisperers, were given small strips of paper a day earlier with typed quotes (Figures 14 and 15). Though the quotes offered no context or attribution, we were told that these were all drawn from victims' testimonies.[60]

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[59] Original text in Spanish: *De vez en cuando me da por mirar por la ventana para recordar esos días en los que era posible vivir en el campo.*

[60] By chance, I later discovered that my quote came from Rita Mercedes Castillar, a community member of Las Brisas. Her memory of the day of the massacre and later reflections are included in the book, *Del Ñame Espino al Calabazo: Objetos que despiertan Memorias* (CNMH 2015, 65).

| **Figure 14** | **Figure 15** |

Figure 14 (Left): Testimonial quotes on strips of paper. Each participant was to take one, and memorize the line for whispering into the ears of audience members.

Figure 15 (Right): The team practicing with the "whisperers" for our performance the next day.

The support of artistic mediums is not limited to the National Museum of Memory team.

Gonzalo Sánchez (2009), historian and director of the CNMH, and Humberto de La Calle (2014),

head of the Government negotiating team in the dialogues of peace with the FARC-EP, have both

voiced their support of visual arts as a means of narrating history and constructing peace.

Additionally—as Bello asserted—victims, activists and ex-combatants of several armed groups have

expressed their conviction that art has symbolic and emotional potential to communicate essential

truths about the conflict that escape academic and legal arenas.[61]

The initial question from CNMH researchers may have been: "why art?," "why is art the

preferred narrative medium for memories of the Colombian conflict?" Now, the CNMH's questions

and assertions take for granted the medium itself. In lunches, group meetings, casual conversations,

and formal roundtable discussions, CNMH employees ask new questions about art's potential:

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[61] For example, ex-combatants from the Colombian military, paramilitary, and guerrilla groups participated in painting workshops under the supervision of artist, Juan Manuel Echavarría. The resulting exhibit, "*La Guerra que no Hemos Visto*" (The War we have not Seen), opened in Bogotá's Modern Art Museum (*Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá*, MAMBO) in 2009. Images and essays about the paintings are accessible on the exhibit website: http://www.laguerraquenohemosvisto.com.

"How does art allow for the resignification of historical memory in society?" "What capacities does art have in terms of 'sensitizing' and creating empathy in a national public?" "How does art show and communicate subtle messages about memory, conflict, peace, democracy in ways that written documents cannot?" "How can art serve as a medium for testimony, denouncement, truth, and healing?" "What are the possible dangers of aestheticizing violence?"

The CNMH's aspirations and concerns can be captured by what Jennifer Shannon (2014) calls "creative bureaucracy." In her ethnography of the development of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), Shannon traces the co-curation of exhibits by museum and community experts. In this setting, creative bureaucracy "refers to the ways in which the NMAI has dealt with the intersection between bureaucratic and Native sensibilities, the ways in which it has responded to the needs and ethics of Native peoples by creatively navigating the Smithsonian's rules and regulations in its quest for best practices in the museum" (2014, 62). While my research with the CNMH and MNM team did not coincide with the construction of exhibit content, this balancing act resonated even at an early stage. The employees frequently expressed concerns about how to fulfill their legal mandates to display the conflict while also ensuring their ethical care for victims' cultural and creative sensibilities. This creative and bureaucratic process was cause for hope and anxiety, as employees worried about exhibits that may make violence seem banal or beautiful and how displaying artistic representations may also fall into the trap of "re-victimization." Nevertheless, there was relatively little concern about whether or not art was the appropriate medium. They pointed to the origin story and the fact that this medium came from the "bottom-up."

Public Desires to "See" Victims

In November 2015, I was walking home with Ángela after another day of work in the offices at the National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH). Ángela, an artist and anthropologist, had been working at CNMH for several years, and currently found herself in the department working on

the forthcoming National Museum of Memory. It was already dark as we walked briskly past the National Park in Bogotá where the smog of the city was temporarily replaced by the smell of the park's eucalyptus forest mixed with marijuana smoke. I had been volunteering at CNMH since September 2015, with a particular focus on the events around the VIII Annual Week for Memory. During the week I aided in the design and analysis of a survey created to gauge the audience's reaction to the events. The survey was meant to provide insights to the MNM and their ongoing work to provide public events and their long-term work to create the museum.

As we left the office after a day of analyzing the survey data, Ángela and I were developing broad conclusions about public opinions. The survey data revealed that for the predominantly urban public, the most impactful events included any moment—planned or otherwise—that allowed them to hear stories directly from victims of the conflict. Further, there was a call for the use of art as the medium of expression and in many cases attendees noted interest in viewing the art created by victims of the conflict. For Ángela, this was indicative of the fact that the relationship between victims, testimony, and art needed to be discussed and deepened by the MNM. Additionally, we noted that the respondent population was over 90% urban and most likely less directly impacted by the conflict. Therefore, for a museum in Bogotá, the attendees clearly pointed to a desire to "feel" and "see" the effects of the conflict. Dodging skateboarders and traffic, I expressed concern about this conclusion, questioning the potential dangers of requiring victims to be the ones to have to always tell and re-tell their story to a national public. She smiled and paused, but then quickly reminded me that I did not understand that Colombians—especially urban dwellers—had waited decades to be able to see and hear the tale directly from the victims themselves.

Stuart Hall (1989a) highlights the relationship between popular culture and hegemonic adaptations. Hall argues the dominant classes seek access to the authentic and gritty elements of the marginalized in order to feel a sense of national identity. While the desire to "see" the conflict is

partially about accessing information about the effects of war, these artistic and cultural productions also serve as a way to access the cultural diversity of Colombia. As the regions most affected by conflict tend to come from ethnic minority and *campesino* backgrounds, there is a sense that the conflict has isolated the urban population from Colombia's diverse cultural roots. In this way, the circulation of victims' art is as much about a reconnection with those affected by conflict as it is about reconnecting with national cultural diversity and identity.

Pressing further, I asked how the MNM would determine who should represent their testimony and how would they deal with those who could not or did not want to represent themselves. Ángela, like many of the employees I met at CNMH, emphasized the importance of will and desire on the part of the victim. For those individuals interested in telling their stories, Ángela added that they would need to receive training. The goal of this training would be to ensure that the victim can tell their story publically without causing more trauma to themselves and without revealing details that are too horrific for the public.

The problem of narrating violence is that there is often not a vocabulary or social context to express such experiences (Scarry 1985). Employees from CNMH explained that information about violence must be filtered both verbally and aesthetically. For example, in an interview with the MNM Art and Cultural Initiatives team in November 2016, they discussed the problem of translating experiences to a national public. They mocked and rolled their eyes about the need for "key terms" in order to make your story intelligible. "*¡Tejido social!*" muttered Carla, referring to the buzz word in humanitarian work that means "social fabric" or the abstract idea of social networks and community. Carla continued, "nobody was talking about their *tejido social* before all of this violence, but now people can say that they lost their *tejido social* and it's understood." The list of key words feels endless: "visibility," "reparations," "displaced," "demobilized," "memory,"

"reconciliation," "victim," and so on. Nevertheless, the employees considered these words to be necessary evils in the process of transmitting stories to a national public.

In terms of art and aesthetics, they similarly pointed out that certain forms of art are perhaps too dark or specific for the general public to understand and appreciate. I again raised my concern about relying on victims to tell their stories publically. Similar to Ángela, the group countered by telling me "what I did not understand." Diana, noting that she herself is a victim, kindly and patiently told me that what I needed to see is that people crave this contact. For the first time, it is possible to hear about acts of violence directly from survivors. Colombian citizens are tired of hearing about what happened from the news, politicians, and academics. Rather, they want to hear the testimony to feel connected to the person and their story. The team recognized the possible danger of over-emphasizing the voice of victims, but that did not cloud their perception of the important moment Colombia is in: the moment in which victims' voices can reach a national population—theoretically unmitigated by the noise of media and political parades.

Performing Victimhood and Empathetic Witnessing

The auditorium at the Museum, House of Memory in Medellín was dark and the stage was lit by shifting fuchsia, blue, and red light (Figure 16). A group of women from Antioquia, known as *Las Madres de la Candelaria* (the Mothers of the Candelaria), entered the stage to perform their play, "*Las Costureras"* (The Seamstresses) for the 2014 National Week against Forced Disappearances. After a light-hearted reenactment and stories of country life, the tone shifted and the women ran, screamed, threw down their pots and brooms, seeming to escape frantically from an invisible threat of violence. Finally, each of the women collapsed on the floor with their belongings in disarray. One of the older women in the group came forward, carrying a large quilt. The women collected their belongings and tucked them under the quilt, and the scene once again transitioned to a future moment of collective therapy. The women, circled around the quilt, began to sew and to speak of the violence. Taking turns, the women shared stories of lost loved ones, abuse, and displacement.

Suddenly, one woman began to cry audibly, unable to continue sewing. As the other women

continued to recite their lines, a neighboring woman consoled the crying woman, stroking her hair

and back. The play closed as the women lifted up the quilt—the physical result of their collective

work on trauma. I noticed people around me sniffling and wiping away tears. I too was moved by

the performance, and particularly unsettled by the woman's tears, as I was not sure if they were part

of her role acting out the groups' grief or if the play itself had triggered her emotional response on

stage. It wasn't until almost a year later, that—speaking with a representative from the Museum,

House of Memory—I learned that the woman's tears were not part of the script and that she was

known to break down during the final act.

Figure 16: The Mothers of the Candelaria, performing their play: "The Seamstresses" at the Museum, House of Memory in Medellín during the National Week Against Forced Disappearances (May 30, 2014).

This play occurred during my first preliminary research visit to Colombia, and I was unable

to follow-up with this particular group of women at the time to learn more about their histories or

perceptions about the process of dramatizing violence and healing for an audience. As an audience

member, this performance stayed in my memory because it captured the uncomfortable intersection

between art's potential role as therapy and as a medium to sensitize the public. Employees from the CNMH and MNM often articulated the need for emotional—but not too emotional—displays of victimhood for a national public. These performances or displays, they hoped, would offer an apathetic public access to the realities of conflict through the relative comfort of art (Bennett 2005). Yet, the woman's off-script crying transgressed the invisible line between personal pain and public consciousness. I witnessed such unscripted moments of public emotion throughout my research. Whereas emotions behind closed doors were considered expected and normal, public displays often caught mediators and audience members off guard. These individuals were perhaps not prepared to offer a testimony that was sufficiently real without traumatizing the public.

Underlying the CNMH's formation of the National Museum of Memory is a focus on the good of victims' testimonies for the "nation" or for an imaginary "desensitized" public. The extraction of victims' images and stories for political ends does not adequately address systematic violence against marginalized populations or the lack of full reparations. This is especially evident considering the number of communities that were still trying to gain legal recognition from the state during my research, let alone manage the aesthetic narratives of their victimhood. Nonetheless, visibility reigns as a requisite for government attention and intervention. This visibility often falls outside of the aesthetic mold crafted by symbolic reparations and national exhibitions.

Behind these efforts to aesthetically portray victimhood and violence, there remain millions of victims that are not part of an "emblematic case" or not linked to a state-recognized artistic project.

CRITICAL VISIBILITY—THE FIGHT FOR RECOGNITION
Strategic Letter

Throughout my research in María la Baja, people would often comment, "you know who really suffered the most in this region? San José de Playón." Immediately following this remark, they would lament that this was also the town most forgotten by the government. San José de Playón's

experience is characteristic of many towns deeply affected by violence in the broader region of María la Baja and across Colombia, yet these are not the cases that you hear about most. In contrast to several high-profile cases in the area, San José de Playón did not have just one specific date to commemorate massive displacement. Rather, they had a string of dates that spanned decades, and sometimes included massacres of three to six people or partial displacements. This is not the story that achieves "emblematic case" status. Still, over the past decade, leaders have organized and fought for the community's right to government recognition and reparations as a victim community.

In November 2015, seated in a bakery and soda shop on the corner of the central plaza in María la Baja, I asked Roberto—a local leader—to tell me how San José de Playón established their status as a victim-community. Roberto acknowledged that the community was organized and that they had filed the appropriate legal papers, but he minimized the importance of these formal actions. The key moment, he told me, was the community's savvy intervention during a public commemoration for the displacement of the nearby and well-known town of Mampuján. Within María la Baja, Mampuján is *the* emblematic case, as the government elected the town's massive forced displacement by the paramilitary AUC as a test case for government reparations. Given Mampuján's national recognition, the community of San José de Playón prepared for the commemorative event, knowing that then President Juan Manuel Santos would be present.

Smiling, Roberto recalled that they wrote a letter addressed to President Santos. He used his index fingers to outline an imaginary piece of paper on the sticky surface of the bakery table. The leaders of San José de Playón attended the event, and then, at just the right moment, they gave the letter directly to the President. While Roberto could not recall the exact words of the letter, the sentiment was to *visibilizar* (make visible) the suffering in San José de Playón so that President Santos would recognize that they too deserved to be included in the reparations program. There is no proof that this letter is what motivated the community's state recognition, but it is the story that the

community widely tells and highlights as the moment their case caught traction with the national

institutions.

Months later, in an interview with Jorge, a government employee for the National Victims'

Unit, I asked him about the institution's progress on San José de Playón's reparation case. The

regional Victims' Unit employee offices for the department of Bolívar were located in the port city

of Cartagena on the Caribbean Sea. The colonial era columns, air conditioning, and bright white of

the office space stood out in stark contrast to the worn-down infrastructure in the towns that this

office serves. While Jorge was not fully willing to accept that San José de Playón's letter to the

President had influenced their case, he acknowledged that it is also not *impossible*. When I pressed

him to reflect on the idea of *visibilizarse*, he explained,

> "Public offer (*oferta*) is limited. And with a limited public offer, communities, quote unquote, 'compete' for these institutional resources. Therefore, public entities and non-governmental organizations tell the communities that they have to make themselves visible, *visibilizarse*. So each [community] tries to show their case as an emblematic case, saying that this case is important because *this* happened and because we played *this* role in the conflict. […] The communities have to make themselves visible" (Personal Communication May 4, 2016).

Making your story visible in the context of emblematic cases was one way to improve your

chances of being seen. However, in a case such as San José de Playón, making long-term, multi-actor

violence visible is not simple and it often does not fit the logic of an emblematic case even if it is

representative of what many communities experienced. Visibility, in this case, took the form of a

community letter strategically made visible to the highest power in the country. San José de Playón

disrupted and expanded the President's vision, aiding in their access to legal reparations.

Chained—"Showing" Victimhood

In June 2015, Cartagena's principal newspaper, *El Universal*, ran the headline: "Conflict

Victims Demand their Rights." The article reported that 30 victims began a protest outside of the

offices of the Victims' Unit in Cartagena, demanding that the government fulfill their legal rights to

assistance and reparations. In particular, the article highlighted the case of Abel Piedrahíta, who

chained himself by his neck to the door of the Victims' Unit and began a hunger strike, demanding

that the government solve his dire situation (Figure 17). Several days later, a follow-up article

updated his case; Piedrahita ultimately ended his hunger strike after making a deal with government

representatives. Despite the apparent success of his protest, government officials told a different

story. Regional Victims' Unit Director, Arturo Zea, emphasized that the victim attention centers are

"properly structured to […] carry out individual and collective solutions, therefore it is not necessary

to resort to these measures of despair, which only results in health consequences for the victims."[62]

Figure 17: Hunger Strike. Image published by *El Universal* on June 2nd, 2015. The caption reads: "Abel Piedrahíta decided to chain himself and begin an indefinite hunger strike yesterday morning." Photo credit: Julio Castaño—*El Universal*. Source: (Meza Altamar 2015).

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[62] The quote in Spanish reads: "*Son centros de atención debidamente estructurados para hacer los correspondientes trámites y gestiones de solución individual y colectiva, por consiguiente no es necesario acudir a estas medidas de desespero, que lo que generan son secuelas en la salud de las víctimas.*"

Despite the regional director's objection to this extreme act, Piedrahíta is not the only person resorting to protest in order to demand attention and action from government institutions. These include large scale actions, such as the march to symbolically sign the peace accords discussed at the end of Chapter One. The march simultaneously highlighted the failures of the state to establish a final peace accord, while also making visible the commitment from victim communities across Montes de María. On a smaller scale, government-sponsored events frequently generate public critique and anger during question and answer sessions. Audience members—often starting with a reference to their victimhood—use these public forum opportunities to express their discontent with public officials and policies or demand attention to their cases. Frequently, these interventions ran for as long as ten minutes, as moderators would desperately try to reclaim the microphone and end the individual's rant. Across these examples, visibility continues to serve as a medium for exhibiting victimhood. Yet, images of an elderly man chained by his neck to the doors of the Victims' Unit is far from the aesthetic depictions that fill gallery spaces or urban billboards.

In Veena Das' work on victimhood, she addresses subjective experiences of exceptional as well as everyday pain and violence. In regard to how such experiences are communicated, Das draws attention to the "contrast between saying and showing" (2003, 300). She recalls a moment during her research in which rumors circulated that Mother Teresa was planning to visit a locality where women were in mourning. The women refused to engage in daily hygienic practices or performances of normal life. Despite attempts to make them clean their bodies and homes, in anticipation of Mother Teresa's visit, the women refused to perform "normalcy." For Das, the women's act highlighted the subjectivity of "victim/survivors" for their "ability to recraft the symbols and genres of mourning that made them active in the highly contested domain of politics" (2003, 301). In a similar vein, the embodied actions discussed above—refusing to eat, chaining one's body, or speaking out of turn—are forms of "showing" the raw and unpleasant realities of victimhood and

re-victimization. While the changes that these actions generate may be limited in scope, their visibility highlights an alternative view of victimhood that exceeds the aesthetic of mourning or reconciliation. Instead, these acts of critical visibility highlight the failures of the state and new forms of victimization.

CONCLUSION—RESISTING AESTHETICS

Although the case of San José de Playón defies the scope of emblematic cases and was left invisible for many years, the community is now a "success" story in the region of María la Baja. After many years of organizing and fighting, they are among the minority of community cases that are currently working with the Victims' Unit to claim their right to government reparations. In contrast, neighboring towns in all directions are still in the initial stages of learning what it means to be a victim according to the logic of the state and legal rhetoric. Members of the central organizational committee in San José de Playón are empowered by the trainings they have received about the Victims' Law. They are developing a different language for talking about their victimization and how it relates to particular human rights violations and state obligations. When the community leaders talk with less-informed people they also laugh, remembering their past selves and the fact that many did not even know they were "victims." This is still a reality for some communities in María la Baja.

The question of gaining access to government reparations is only the start. Once part of the institutional process, San José de Playón, along with other cases of reparation, recognize that their voice and desires as a community are often only partially heard or addressed. Rather, high-profile commemorative events—like the one in Mampuján when representatives delivered the famous letter to the President—are now taking place in San José de Playón with results that resonate with the house of illusions (Chapter Two). In August 2015, with support from CNMH, San José de Playón hosted their first annual commemoration to recognize community members killed in the context of

the conflict. The event served as one form of state-sponsored symbolic reparation. The community

constructed paper kites for every person that had been killed in San José de Playón, and in honor of

their lives, they flew these kites near the water reserve and filled the sky with a rainbow of color

(Figure 18).

Figure 18: Commemorative event in San José de Playón on August 18, 2015. Source: (Zúñiga 2016).

Nearly a year later, in June 2016, the Victims' Unit wanted to officially present San José de

Playón with the documents that declared them a case for collective reparations—a fact that had

been established months earlier, but without an official ceremony. Several community leaders told

me in frustrated tones that the Victims' Unit employees had asked the community to bring white

table cloths and several kites from the 2015 commemoration. The community had always spoken

fondly of this commemorative event, and so I was initially surprised to hear their frustration about

the request. Then they explained that the kites were last year's symbol, and that they were not

interested in providing the government with easy photo opportunities. The community felt that their

case was not moving forward and they were losing faith in the reparations process. Echoing CNMH

employee Carla's comments, the community resented the fact that symbolic reparations and actions

were taking precedent over the economic and infrastructural changes the community desperately

needed.

When the Victims' Unit employees arrived, they noted the absence of the kites with some disappointment. Regardless, the government team had prepared several activities in which the symbolism of flying a kite was already integrated. The Victims' Unit psychologist handed out sheets of white paper with a kite icon in the corner, asking non-members of the community to write a note about our commitments to support the reparation and reconciliation process in San José de Playón (Figure 19).

Figure 19: Kite exercise. **Left**—Participants at the event were given a sheet of paper with images of kites and the phrase: "Subject of Collective Reparation, San José de Playón—step by step we construct our history of reparation, reconciliation and the construction of peace." **Right**—The board of commitments to support their process and pinned it to a board.

San José de Playón's negative reaction to the recycled kites stands in contrast to the story of the tamarind tree in Las Brisas that opened this chapter. Both communities have worked in creative ways to demand the attention and support of state entities. Yet, once incorporated into the realm of victim-citizenship, these communities encounter new forms of visibility in which their successful reconciliation and reparation processes are transmitted to a broader public. Jaime viewed the visibility of a symbolic tree-planting as important both for his community and for the message it could send broadly about healing and peace, especially in the tense moments around the peace negotiations between the FARC and the Colombian government. By contrast, leaders from San José

de Playón considered the table cloths and kites as part of a publicity stunt that would transform their case into a glossy magazine photo of successful state intervention.

CNMH researchers' have narrated the history of the conflict through the plurality of victims' experiences and emblematic cases. Symbolic and aesthetic renderings of victimhood in particular have become key mediums through which state entities craft national sentiments about war and peace politics. These shifts to recognize and support victims of conflict in Colombia were overdue and welcome. However, Riaño Alcalá and Uribe caution that "GMH's written and visual products and investigative work ended up facilitating the instauration of an institutionalized discourse concerning victims, and a certain kind of moral entitlement for those who use this discourse" (2016, 16). This discourse has generated a market for victims' public appearances—as icons of morality and of particular emotions that support peace and reconciliation. While this can place an immense burden on "emblematic" victims, government institutions like the Victims' Unit and CNMH argue that this risk is justified because of the belief that by "seeing" victims, one may also see the truth behind a notoriously complex and long conflict.

The use of visibility to identify victims under the Victims' Law, however, causes more reason for concern. Although the law does not officially require acts of visibility to gain recognition, the desire for visibility is built into the logic of the system. Victims' artistic visibility has successfully garnered state and non-state attention. State-led reparative interventions claim to take their cue from victims' cultural and artistic practices. By adopting these artistic practices, the state aims to fulfill reparative mandates that legitimize victims' experiences through symbolic acts. The subsequent circulation of these images to a broader public serve two primary purposes: to demonstrate the state's successful interventions and to craft empathetic images of victimhood for public consumption. This cycle, though purportedly an organic response to victims' art, has established a scenario in which groups that lack such cultural and artistic projects are rendered invisible.

INTERLUDE 4
Paranoia

Between June 19-24, 2016, two older male farmers were found dead in their respective fields with evidence of violent deaths. Following these unexplained deaths, paranoia swept over groups of farmers who are fighting to reclaim land that they lost due to the conflict. The following fieldnote excerpts are from June 26, 2016 in María la Baja. I used initials instead of names to protect the individuals' identities given my paranoid state.

In D's house organizing papers and preparing letters for D and F's trip to Bogotá [where they are searching for allies for their land case]. F gets a phone call from a friend who says that three armed men came up to F's land near the [plot of contested land] asking for him by name. One neighbor took off running out of fear.

This is the latest of many threats against F. In fact, F had just shown me the letter he received regarding protection from the state. They said they would give him a bullet-proof vest and that he should talk to the Human Rights Division of the National Police about other preventative measures. This is a joke, he tells me, because if they want you dead they will just shoot you in the head.

F left with fellow farmer, J, to go to the police station, report the threat and show them the letter about increasing his protection. The police claimed that they do patrols by his home, but F says he never sees them. The police accompanied him to his house to see exactly where he lives and they told him to call "*cualquier cosa*"—for anything.

After F left, D started thinking—"*será que no debería ir a Bogotá? ¿Será que saben que va para Bogotá y por eso están tratando de intimidarlo?*" [Maybe he shouldn't go to Bogotá. Could it be that they know he's going to Bogotá and that's why they are trying to intimidate him?]

J retorts— *¿Cómo van a saber?* [How are they going to know?]

D, yelling back—"*De mí, si yo soy la infiltrada*!" [From me, if I'm the infiltrator!]

As we sat, D began to reflect on events from earlier that day. In the afternoon, leaving the farmers' weekly meetings, D, several other farmers, and I were stuck by the side of the main road in a downpour—in plain sight of anyone passing by and near the corner where the young men "*moscas*" were always watching. D asked me if I had noticed anything strange. I was surprised at her question, but I had an answer. I told her I remembered noticing a black and orange motorcycle go by twice in the same direction with no passenger [rare as most motorcyclists are taxi drivers]. It was a young guy with light skin and white ear buds in his ears. Then D mentioned that she had noticed the same car drive slowly by three to five times, but she wasn't absolutely sure if it was the same car.

Then we sat in silence. We were paranoid…we are paranoid.

Memory and Narrative: Re-claiming Livelihoods through Stories of Survival

INTRODUCTION

In my first meeting with community members in Monte Cristo, María la Baja the group of roughly 15 men and women explained that their community had been forgotten by the state. Over the course of an hour, they wove together stories of their first and second paramilitary-orchestrated displacements, their eventual settlement along the highway in María la Baja, and their futile efforts to be seen by the government as a viable case for collective reparations. Their location near state-recognized collective reparation cases—such as Mampuján and San José de Playón—made them acutely aware of the resources that they had been denied. While many community members were individually recognized as victims by the state, they felt strongly that without recognition as a "collective," they were unable to heal and move forward. In particular, one of the older men emphasized, "*Necesitamos construir memoría histórica*!"—"We need to construct historical memory!"

In Colombia's victim-centered reconciliation process, memories of violence have currency in a national market of stories about what happened, with what effect, and why. As explained in Chapter Three, national audiences desire to "see" violence through the recollections of those who experienced it directly. Similarly, many communities in María la Baja expressed that part of the value of narrating memory was to have their story heard. Monte Cristo's urgent desire to "construct historical memory" was not based on a concern that they would forget what happened to them. They worried that their story and their livelihoods would go unseen and forgotten by a broader, imagined public.

In Colombia, a memory boom is echoing across the country. Memory—as if a tangible object—is commonly referred to as something that you lose, recover, collect or construct. Memories

are recalled, shaped, and performed for particular ends. They develop a life of their own and confront the shifting landscape of possible post-conflict futures. In the previous chapter, I was concerned with the state's adoption of artistic expressions of victimhood as vehicles for political and emotional work. Here, I focus on the ways in which victims' memories of war come into contact with bureaucratic documentations of victimhood and national narratives of conflict.

Over the last decade, there are two primary ways in which memories of violence come into contact with Colombian state institutions. First, as discussed in Chapter Two, the reparations process requires individuals to provide oral or written testimony of their past experiences with violence in order to be recognized as victims. These declarations are private and used for bureaucratic classifications of individual or collective victimhood. Unlike international cases such as the Eichmann Trials after WWII or the Truth Commissions in South Africa, Peru, and Argentina, these testimonies were not collected to generate historical narratives for subsequent publication. The second form—as referenced by community members in Monte Cristo—is the "construction of historical memory." In this process, memories of violence are collected and publically circulated through written documents, films, artworks, gallery displays, and commemorations. These memory processes overlap in Colombia, as certain stories of violence are memorialized just as other communities are still searching for the path to declare their victimhood. Central to both expressions of memory are the concepts of collective victimhood and collected memories.

Collective Victimhood and Collected Memories

Violence in Colombia has affected individuals through acts such as disappearances, assassinations, sexual violence, and kidnapping. Yet, the strategies of paramilitary warfare against the guerrilla groups, in particular, affected primarily rural, farming populations as collective groups. Through displacement, terror campaigns, and threats from all sides of the armed conflict, communities were physically and socially torn apart. The nature of this violence has led community

and government structures alike to approach victimhood collectively. This is reflected, for example, in the use of "collective reparations" as a way to repair community harm and in the use of the term "psyco-social" support as a psychological tool that seeks to address individual trauma as socially grounded. Communities in María la Baja also frequently talked about the damages of war in terms of community changes, such as distrust among neighbors and the dissolution of a collaborative work ethic. In this way, a "collective victimhood" is articulated through what Maurice Halbwachs (1992) termed "collective memory." Halbwachs argued that memories should not be viewed as private matters of the individual mind, but as social processes inasmuch as "it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (1992, 38).

While the collective experience of violence in Colombia is evident, it is less clear how to locate "collectivity" under Halbwachs' broad reference to "society." It could refer to an individual community or group, a region, a demographic, or the nation as a whole. Delineating "collectivity" has real impacts on the construction of history and a post-conflict landscape. From an institutional perspective, the Victims' Unit defines subjects of "collective" reparations as towns or organizations that suffered collectively from the conflict. Communities within María la Baja and the greater region of Montes de María have noted that this definition of "collective" has limited the ability to see regional patterns of harm and necessity, such as massive agro industrial impacts or the lack of inter-municipality roadways. In a more fluid view of collectivity, Pilar Riaño Alcalá (2006) uses the concept of "communities of memory" in her work with urban youth in Medellín, Colombia. Riaño Alcalá explores this concept through the intimacies of individual memories as they reverberate across the social realm of urban space and place. Winifred Tate (2007), by contrast, considers the collective in terms of the Colombian nation. She argues "that the story of violence does not belong just to the victims; it belongs to all society. [...] National narratives of violence are crucial for

refashioning national identities after violent conflict" (2007:21). In light of this spectrum, I address "collectivity" not as a static category of community, region, or nation, but rather as a shifting lens that comes in and out of focus depending on ones' perspective. I examine localized processes and practices of constructing memory, as well as how memory narratives are circulated and made meaningful for a broader Colombian public.

Elizabeth Jelin's understanding of collective memories is instructive here, as she focuses more on an evolving process in which "the collective aspect of memory is the interweaving of traditions and individual memories in dialogue with others and in a state of constant flux" (2003, 12). Examining collective memories in the context of violence, Jelin notes that the result of this process is also influenced by power inequalities, "where some voices are stronger than others because they have greater access to resources and to public stages" (2003, 12). Memory circulation is not only controlled by who has access to public stages. It is also influenced by broader political discourses (Foucault 1980) that can determine how such memories are understood or if they are heard at all. Marnie Thomson (2016)—considering the resettlement cases of Congolese refugees in Tanzania—terms this process "narrative resonance," referring to the ways in which particular narratives gain salience when they "resemble bits and pieces of other known narratives" (2016, 33). In this way, formerly accepted narratives of violence become the only legitimate narratives in the humanitarian system.

I turn to James E. Young's (1993) concept of "collected memory" in order to consider how memories of violence transform into narratives or stay buried in the shadows. Departing from the notion of shared collective memories, Young draws our attention instead to the ways in which "the many discrete memories that are gathered into common memorial spaces…[are] assigned common meaning" (1993, xi). In his work on Holocaust monuments, Young critically analyzes the visual rendering of unrepresentable experiences of violence. Memory remains anchored in the social, but

Young pays particular attention to the friction that arises when collected memory is publicized for a public that does not share the same experience with the violence represented (1993). Indeed, such consideration resonates in the Colombian case as well.

In this chapter, I explore how three communities in María la Baja collect memories in order to stake claims to reparations, reconciliation, and land restitution—Mampuján, San José de Playón, and a farming collective known as ASOCAAFRO. The communities have different levels of connection with state entities and memory collection processes. Nevertheless, they each face the challenge to report memories of violence for bureaucratic purposes at the same time as they manage the way their memories are transformed and circulated into public narratives. I explore how each community harnesses memories to stake claims to imagined futures—futures that may include a return to land or a return to livelihood that is dignified, sustainable, and that honors the skills and labor of rural Afro-Colombian communities. In parallel, I address the way narratives can take on lives of their own, in which their meaning and message is no longer always in the control of people who lived these experiences.

MAMPUJÁN—POLISHED MEMORIES AND NARRATIVE LABOR

The first time I traveled to María la Baja, I had only heard about one town in the region: Mampuján. While I knew that the region as a whole had been affected by conflict, Mampuján was the only community that I could read about ahead of time in newspaper and academic articles (for example: Estripeaut-Bourjac 2013; García-Leguizamón 2014; Osorio 2012; *Semana* 2012; *Verdad Abierta* 2010). During my pilot visit to María la Baja, I relied on my primary contacts to reach leaders in several different communities across the region. When I arrived to Mampuján for the first time in 2014, I met with one of the community leaders, Eva. As I had with leaders from several other towns, I introduced myself and explained that I intended to come back the following year in order to conduct longer term research about victim reparations. When I sat down with Eva, she gave me a

puzzled look and asked, "aren't you going to record me?" "No," I replied, a bit taken aback by the

question and suddenly feeling insecure in my role. I stumbled to clarify that I was just here to

introduce myself and that with their consent I would return with time for longer conversations. She

shrugged, and started to tell me the story of Mampuján's forced displacement and how years later a

group of women began sewing tapestries, called *tapices*, to depict their story and to heal trauma. I

listened, surprised at the polished nature of her story. By the end of the conversation, I had heard an

abbreviated version of the articles I read months earlier, at points almost verbatim.

Mampuján's Story

The story of Mampuján's displacement and subsequent journey towards healing and

reconciliation has circulated widely through popular and academic articles, government documents,

documentaries, books, gallery displays, and public talks, including in a TEDx in Bogotá. One of the

first books published on their displacement and struggle for rights and reconciliation was based on

the collective work of Mampujáneros and written by one of their community leaders, Juana Alicia

Ruiz Hernández. *Vivensías* (2013) narrates the story of their displacement as the following:

> On March 10, 2000, [...] members of the paramilitary group "Heroes of Montes de María"
> entered the village of Mampuján, using intimidation and death threats, accused the
> community of being subversive and collaborators of the guerrillas. Their urgent order, as
> they later pointed out before the court, was to "kill them all" and massacre the community as
> they had done a month earlier in the village of "El Salado," in the municipality of Carmen de
> Bolívar, in the Montes of María. However, by an act that the community attributes to a
> miracle of God, the commander in charge of the paramilitary group received a call in which
> he was instructed to suspend the action as the community was considered innocent. In spite
> of this, in the next moment, the armed group ordered the entire community to leave the
> territory and go to the town center of María la Baja and take refuge at the mayor's office.
> After leaving the town, that same night the group of armed men went to the village of Las
> Brisas, where later it was learned that they massacred 12 farmers, looted and burned their
> homes, and ordered the displacement of the entire community, causing massive
> displacement from the villages of Arroyohondo, Aguas Blancas, Pelaelojo and Casinguí to
> the county of San Cayetano, where they took refuge. The relatives of the victims who had
> been tortured and massacred went to their native municipality of San Juan [Nepomuceno].[63]
> (Ruiz Hernández 2013, 1)

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[63] *Original in Spanish: El 10 de marzo del 2000 […] miembros del grupo paramilitar "Héroes de los Montes de María"
entraron al corregimiento de Mampuján con intimidaciones y amenazas de muerte, señalando a la comunidad como subversiva y
colaboradora de la guerrilla. Su orden apremiante, como señalaron luego ante la justicia, era "matarlos a todos" y masacrar a la*

As I continued my research, Mampuján's story and the custom of narrating an abbreviated version of their massive displacement would become so common that I felt I could predict the words as they formed during conversations. Nearly every time I traveled to Mampuján, there were outside visitors there for a day, a week, or a month to learn more about the community's story first hand. I met national and international academics, artists, architects, photographers, documentary makers, politicians, private business representatives, college students on study abroad, lawyers, and NGO volunteers. There was rarely ever a time that my visits to Mampuján did not coincide with drop-in visits from someone passing through who wanted an interview or a tour of the displaced town of Mampuján.

In stark contrast to the constant traffic within Mampuján, most of the surrounding towns had limited to no contact with government and non-governmental institutions working on topics related to conflict and victimhood. In Mampuján I often found it difficult to have conversations that were not structured by peoples' expectations about the narrative I wanted to hear. By contrast, in other towns, I often became an empathetic ear to raw narratives of violence.

Mampuján's well-circulated story has served as a regional "emblematic case." Their story, in abbreviated form, is iconic for both the violence and reconciliation of the region. Because of this national recognition, Mampuján has received attention and economic investment that often does not reach neighboring communities that lack this visibility. Nevertheless, for all of Mampuján's recognition, the government has failed to meet the judicial promises made to the community in their

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comunidad como, lo habían hecho un mes antes en el caserío de "El Salado", en el Municipio del Carmen de Bolívar, en los Montes de María. Sin embargo, por un acto que la comunidad atribuye a un milagro de Dios, el comandante a cargo del grupo paramilitar recibió una llamada en la que se le indicaba suspender la acción por considerar la comunidad inocente. A pesar de ello, momento seguido, el grupo armado, ordenó a toda la comunidad abandonar el territorio y dirigirse al casco urbano del municipio de Maríalabaja y resguardarse en la alcaldía. Luego de abandonar el pueblo, el grupo de hombres armados se dirigieron esa misma noche hacia la vereda de Las Brisas, donde posteriormente se conociera que masacraron a 12 campesinos, saquearon y quemaron sus viviendas y ordenaron el desplazamiento de toda la comunidad, ocasionando desplazamiento masivo de las veredas Arroyohondo, Aguas Blancas, Pelaelojo y Casinguí hasta el corregimiento de San Cayetano, donde se refugiaron. Los familiares de las victimas torturadas y masacradas se fueron al municipio de San Juan de donde son oriundos.

reparations process. The pieces of the reparations sentence that have been fulfilled were due to community organization and protests. For example, in December 2011 the community organized a march from Mampuján, María la Baja to Cartagena—72 kilometers away along a mostly unshaded highway.

"Emblematic Cases": How Mampuján's story became known

Mampuján is among the first cases of collective reparations in Colombia under the Justice and Peace Law of 2006. In 2011 Mampuján, along with San Cayetano county, were elected to be the first cases of community-based reparations.[64] Mampuján was elected as a trial case for Justice and Peace likely due to a number of factors. For example, their massive forced displacement was a relatively clear and concise case of paramilitary violence against a civilian population. Additionally, the majority of the displaced community remained geographically united in their resettled location just outside of María la Baja's urban center. By contrast, many displaced communities dispersed across the country over an extended period of time, making it difficult for the government to locate community members and carry out collective reparations. Finally, the original town of Mampuján was not occupied by new land owners as frequently happened following displacement. This meant that legal land battles would not hinder the community's return to their homes.

While Mampuján's entrance on the national stage may have been driven by the state's functional analysis, Mampujáneros' participation in the legal process generated narratives of violence, survival, and reconciliation that made their story iconic. Several examples from their early entrance on the national stage are worth mentioning. First, the community made collective decisions to choose a path of forgiveness based on their Evangelical faith. This decision was put on display in

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[64] The reparations process under the Justice and Peace Law did not continue after this initial set of cases. The Victims' Law developed a different approach to collective reparations in 2011 that made several changes to the process. Importantly, the Victims' Law processes reparations "administratively" rather than "judicially," meaning that Victims' Unit does not have the judicial power to enforce reparation plans.

2010 at the Justice and Peace interrogation trials. Alexánder Villarreal and other representatives from

Mampuján attended the trial in which they would have the opportunity to address the paramilitary

leaders responsible for their displacement, Edward Cobos Téllez and Uber Enrique Banquez.

Alexánder carried out the community's wishes, offering a bible to their perpetrators as a symbol of

forgiveness. Second, the Justice and Peace trials also served as the debut display of the quilted *tapices*

collectively made by women in the community to represent their experiences with violence and

collective healing. They displayed three of their pieces, titled "Displacement," "Kidnapping," and

"Overcrowding" at the trials in Bogotá (Figures 1, 2, and 3).

Figure 1: "*Desplazamiento*" (Displacement) quilt (2009). The hands over the sun and the angels in the mountains are based on community members' vision of God's miracle when they were told their lives would be saved. Source: http://fundacionpuntosdeencuentro.org/los-tapices-de-mampujan/#1521143617023-065a51cb-7274.

Figure 2: "*Secuestro*" (Kidnapping) quilt (2009). This quilt depicts the aftermath of displacement and the kidnapping of seven Mampujáneros who were forced to guide the paramilitary troops to the town of Las Brisas, San Juan Nepomuceno. Source: http://fundacionpuntosdeencuentro.org/los-tapices-de-mampujan/#1521143617023-065a51cb-7274.

Figure 3: "*Hacinamiento*" (Overcrowding) quilt (2009). This quilt depicts Mampujánero's trying to survive in the urban center of María la Baja. Several women are labeled by their work, such as cooking, washing, and selling fish. In contrast, male figures are labeled "pensive" due to the fact that they were unable to continue their farming labor in the countryside. Source: http://fundacionpuntosdeencuentro.org/los-tapices-de-mampujan/#1521143617023-065a51cb-7274.

Following this pinnacle moment, Mampuján has become one of the most well-known

emblematic cases in Colombia and world-wide. There are more articles, films, and exhibits about

Mampuján than about almost any other single community in Colombia. It is difficult to trace the

web of contacts and interventions that have formed around Mampuján and the waves they have

generated. For example, Bogotá-based internationally renowned artist, Juan Manuel Echavarría

learned of the quilts from Mampuján in 2008. Since that time he became involved in supporting the womens' work and promoting the *tapices'* circulation to a national and international audience. Subsequently, the group of quilters created their own organization called Women Weaving Dreams and Flavors of Peace (*Mujeres Tejiendo Sueños y Sabores de Paz*). They were awarded the National Colombian Peace Prize in 2015 and have made alliances with restaurants and hotels to sell their quilts and marmalades. The reparations process also provided monetary payments to families and resulted in the construction of new houses in the old town of Mampuján. Artists have collaborated with the community to create murals and documentaries and numerous NGOs have provided brief interventions, such as installing a handful of solar panels.

Despite all of this attention, Mampuján's reparations sentence has not been fulfilled by the state. What has been fulfilled was due to intense labor, social movements, grassroots education and legal battles. Mampuján's narrative appears polished and performed due to its wide circulation. Nevertheless, there are always stories beyond that narrative that rarely become part of public knowledge or political discourses about communities seeking collective reparations and reconciliation. As Carole McGrahanan argues, "the conversion of experience to narration and the social recognition of such narration are all processes as generative of dispossession as they are of possession" (2010b, 769). Narratives are not static, they are refined and adapted to the conditions of the present and future. This means that while some stories circulate with ease, others face "narrative dispossession" (McGranahan 2010b).

The Stories behind the Story

The narrative of Mampuján's displacement and recovery was so heavily circulated and repeated that it was difficult during the early stages of my research to get a sense of the complexities behind them. As I spent more time in and around Mampuján, I caught glimpses of the complex reality that undergirded national representations of their supposedly successful reparations, including

community members' exhaustion from telling and re-telling their stories to outsiders like myself. During this process, I also came to see the ways in which some of the omissions or errors in national stories about Mampuján were due to factors outside of the control of the community. Incorrect or over-simplified reporting can generate misinformation that sticks in public discourse, and the government's desire to present a success story can obscure the failures of the reparations process. Here I offer just a few examples of stories behind the story of Mampuján.

"No hubo masacre en Mampuján" – "There was no massacre in Mampuján"

It was the end of another roundtable session of academics discussing violence and victimhood in Colombia at the VIII Annual Week for Memory in Bogotá in October 2015. While the hours of sessions were at times excessively academic and tedious, the Q&A sessions were always the highlight of the event for me. Members of the audience frequently used the space as a platform, and many individuals who identified as victims used the opportunity to critique the dialogue or offer alternative narratives. On this particular day, Rafael (Rafa) Posso, an artist and community leader from Las Brisas, San Juan Nepomuceno (see Chapter Two and Three) called for the mic. I had not met Rafa personally at this point, but I had seen him speak publically on many occasions and I was always interested to hear his perspective. After addressing the topic of the panel and speaking from his own experience with art, Rafa asked the crowd, "who knows about what happened in Las Brisas?"–only a couple of hands went into the air. "Okay," he continued, "who has heard of the massacre of Mampuján?" At that, roughly 20 or more hands were lifted in the auditorium. After a dramatic pause, Rafa broke the silence and challenged the certainty of those with their hands lifted: "there was NO massacre in Mampuján."

When Mampuján was chosen to be among the first cases of reparations, their case included communities from San Cayetano county in the neighboring municipality San Juan Nepomuceno. The villages of Las Brisas and Mampuján in particular are linked in their histories of victimhood because the paramilitary group first displaced the entire town of Mampuján on March 10, 2000 and

then traveled east into the hills toward Las Brisas. Word reached the population of Las Brisas that Mampuján had been forced to leave their homes under the threat of death and that the paramilitary was moving in their direction. Many inhabitants from Las Brisas fled the town out of fear, but some inhabitants stayed in their homes to defend their land. The next day, March 11, 2000, the paramilitary group arrived and killed 12 male *campesinos*, using various forms of torture. Surviving community members were psychologically tortured and forcibly displaced from their homes.

Over the years, the narrative regarding Mampuján has been miscommunicated by academics, journalists, and politicians. The story of paramilitary violence on March 10 and 11, 2000 has been conflated to the "massacre of Mampuján" rather than the displacement of Mampuján and the massacre of Las Brisas. In the book written by Mampuján, referenced above, the distinction is made clear and they include sections on the stories of Las Brisas, San Cayetano, and several surrounding villages to complement the story of Mampuján. Nevertheless, the misconception at the national level persists. For the community of Las Brisas, this mistake is painful as they feel it delegitimizes their loss and places their rights to reparations in the shadows of Mampuján.

Rafa's quiz of a Bogotá-based public was testament to the spread of this misinformation via the wide circulation of Mampuján's name in discussions of violence. Such narrative errors have generated tensions among communities and have led to debates about levels of suffering. As noted in Mampuján's narrative of their displacement above, the fact that there was no death during their displacement was viewed as a miracle and a divine intervention. Yet, this miracle has also transformed into a source of bitterness in which communities throughout the region often commented to me that, 'in Mampuján they didn't even kill anyone, whereas in [such and such] town many people were killed.'

New Houses for Mampuján

      Between 2012 and 2015 the government fulfilled two mandates included in Mampuján's

collective reparation sentence: they provided land titles to the people of Mampuján for their formal

land restitution and they constructed new homes in Old Mampuján. The delivery of the land titles

was celebrated with the presence of Colombia's then president, Juan Manuel Santos, and touted as a

testament to the success of victim reparations and government commitment to generate a post-

conflict Colombia (Figure 4).

Figure 4: President Santos in Mampuján in 2012. The caption reads: "President
Juan Manuel Santos Calderón delivered land property titles yesterday to 31
families from Mampuján (Maríalabaja, Bolívar)." Source: (Castro Pineda 2012).

During President Santos' speech, he also indicated that Mampujáneros would be moving back to

their original town by 2013. Four years after this speech, in 2016, fewer than 10 of the homes were

occupied. When I first visited the community in 2014, it was like walking into a ghost town where

new cement block homes were interwoven into the ruins of the old buildings left behind (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Images of Mampuján *Viejo* (old). **Left**—An example of the remaining ruins of the original town (2016). **Right**—Shows the juxtaposition between the new—and mostly unoccupied—homes built next to the ruins of old homes (2014).

The resettled town of Mampuján, known as Mampujáncito, is only a 20-minute motorcycle ride away, located near the entrance to María la Baja's urban center. With the financial help of María la Baja's former Catholic priest, Father Salvador Mura, the community obtained this land in 2001 and over several years received help to build their new homes. Over a decade later, when the government completed the new homes in old Mampuján, most residents were not interested in moving back for a number of reasons. First, the government had not re-installed electricity in the community, a resource that they had prior to displacement. Additionally, other improvements guaranteed by the reparations process were still lacking, including improved roads to ease access and a new bridge to allow motorcycles and cars to enter the town. For other community members, the convenience of living closer to the urban center was preferred over returning to a more rural area. Further, for younger generations, Mampujáncito was all they knew as home.

Weaving Other Narratives

Mampuján's struggle to gain visibility and demand their reparations involved many creative tactics. Their quilted tapestries have perhaps become the single most recognized symbol of both

their displacement and their subsequent healing process. As discussed above, their work gained recognition by national artist Juan Manuel Echavarría in 2008 and subsequently it was displayed at the Bogotá Tribunal during the Justice and Peace trials in 2010. Since then, they have been recognized with prizes, business and museum contracts, and attention from a wide range of journalists, academics, and artists.

The women who formed the original group of *tejedoras*, explain their use of quilting as a story of collective mourning, healing, and eventually one of empowerment. Frequently, women would reference the process as one that began with tears and ended with laughter. Once they saw the impact the quilts made on their own lives, they connected with regional communities and spread the healing technique to other women.

The group, Women Weaving Dreams and Flavors of Peace, now sees themselves as entrepreneurs, as they have started a business to sell their homemade marmalades and tapestries with scenes of rural life. In 2015, the group was awarded Colombia's National Peace Prize. Coordinator of the prize, Juliana Vergara, explained that "Women Weaving Dreams and Flavors of Peace have focused on pacific mechanisms that seek resilience, forgiveness, and reconciliation, transmitting their experiences to other female victims of the armed conflict"[65] (PNUD 2015). In this national prize and in many other venues of recognition, the women's story is one of collective healing from the destruction of conflict. While this is the take-away most often circulated, the women in Mampuján, from an early stage, also used their weavings to generate a more complex narrative about their concept of displacement.

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[65] "*Mujeres Tejiendo Sueños y Sabores de Paz, se han enfocado en mecanismos pacíficos que buscan la resiliencia, el perdón y la reconciliación, transmitiendo sus experiencias a otras mujeres víctimas del conflicto armado.*" (http://www.co.undp.org/content/colombia/es/home/presscenter/articles/2015/11/19/premio-nacional-de-paz-a-tejedoras-de-mampuj-n.html).

As leaders Juana Alicia Ruiz and Alexandra Valdéz explained, understanding their paramilitary displacement required first depicting their ancestors' displacement from Africa.[66] They created a series between 2008-2010 of large tapestries depicting the history of their ancestral dislocation. One *tapiz*, entitled "Africa, Free Roots" (Figure 6) depicts their ancestors in scenes of daily life in their homeland.
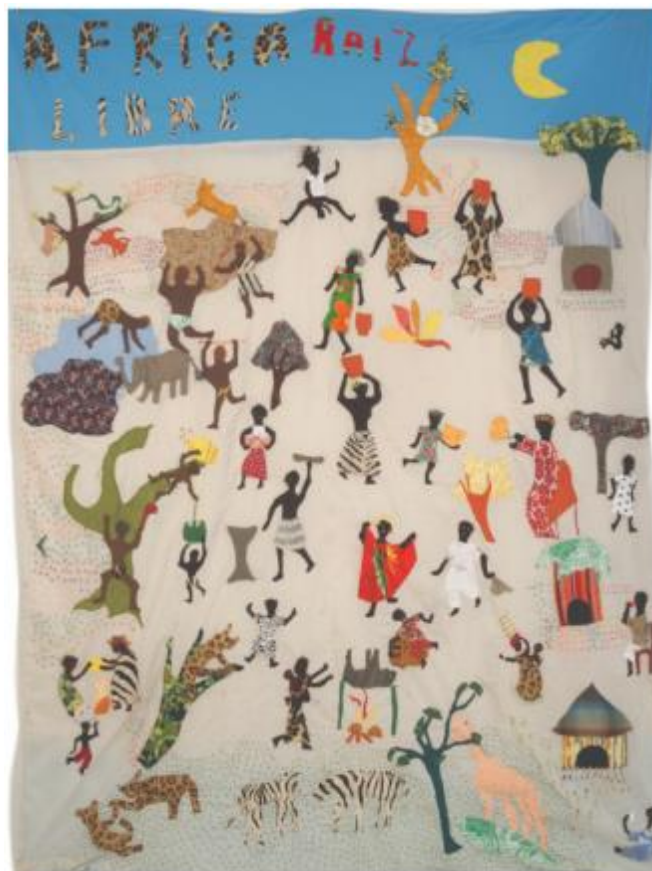
Figure 6: *"África, Raíz Libre"* (Africa, Free Roots) quilt (2009). Source: http://fundacionpuntosdeencuentro.org/los-tapices-de-mampujan/#1521143617023-065a51cb-7274.

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[66] Here and throughout the dissertation, I honor the way Maríalabajenses' express their relationship to the past and their ancestors' identities. As captured in this series of *tapices*, the histories and identities of their African ancestors precede and replace the violence of slavery. As such, I do not identify their ancestors as "slaves" or "escaped slaves," but rather I emphasize the colonial displacement and enslavement of Africans.

Then a series depicts their ancestors' forcible displacement from Africa, enslavement, and fight to regain their freedom through the *tapices*: "Traverse," "Auction," "Rebellion," "Cimarron Arrival to Freedom," and "Daily Cimarron Activity" (for example, Figures 7 and 8). While these tapestries have circulated nationally and internationally, it is noteworthy that the legacy of violence they communicate is not within the scope of Colombian narratives of the conflict. Both for Indigenous and African descendent communities in Colombia, the legal parameters of victimhood dating to the 1980s fail to capture the centuries of violence they have resisted. In this way, the women's tapestries are a form of critical visibility that open a space to consider the cyclical violence committed against African and Afro-Colombian populations. Their decision to display their dual displacement shows that for Mampuján, the repetition of violence across centuries is not coincidental, but part of systematic oppression dating from colonial to contemporary politics.

Figure 7: *"Traversia"* (Traverse) quilt (2009). Source: http://fundacionpuntosdeencuentro.org/los-tapices-de-mampujan/#1521143617023-065a51cb-7274.

Figure 8: "*Subasta*" (Auction) quilt (2009). Source:
http://fundacionpuntosdeencuentro.org/los-tapices-de-mampujan/#1521143617023-065a51cb-7274.

Narratives and Silences

Following the boom of Mampuján's national and international recognition, they have been the recipients of attention from a wide range of organizations and individuals. In my experiences, the kindness and patience of many community members was exceptional given the constant request that they donate their time to other people's projects, including my own. Still, the constant interventions proposed by state and non-state entities has also created exhaustion and a sense of deep distrust. Community leaders have endured many false promises or the cooptation of their story and name in order to celebrate the supposed success of an NGO intervention. Yet, the narratives

that the community itself has written demonstrate the house of illusions they traversed to gain

access to the promises made in their reparations sentence. In their book *Vivensías*, they explain:

> For the town of Mampuján, the path has been full of twists and turns as we went from the displacement and the nightmare it became, to being victims drowning in a sea of laws and decrees that are not effectively fulfilled. In this sense, what the victims thought was the end of a long path of seven years [since displacement] became the beginning of a new "stations of the cross" (path of suffering) because of the fact that now they are not only victims of conflict, but also victims of institutional paperwork and bureaucracy" (2013, 184).

Michel-Rolph Trouillot claims that "historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences"

(1995, 27). Analyzing Mampuján's narrative entails untangling this "bundle of silences" as well as

considering how narratives can generate false or exaggerated perceptions of success. Trouillot

highlights the ways in which historical narrative is not merely about the list of events as such, but

about the processes by which these events become narratives. Inevitably, narratives omit elements of

the story and these silences not only limit our vision of "what happened" but they also influence

social understandings of the present.

In the case of Mampuján, the public narratives—erroneous stories of the "massacre in

Mampuján" and the selective stories of reparative success—tell more about the condition of post-

conflict Colombia than they do about the lived reality of either violent or reparative events. The

collection of such memories and their narratives may circulate for a national sense of collective

healing and redemption. However, in the process they can obscure the lives of individuals within

Mampuján, as their success story precedes and exceeds the reality of their struggle. By contrast,

Mampuján's quilted depictions of ancestral life in Africa and their brutal displacement and

enslavement, weave contemporary stories of conflict into a violent past that is often silenced.

Trouillot considers two types of erasures that occur within historical narratives: (1) the outright

erasure or omission of events and (2) the "banalization" of events to the point that their power and

meaning is stripped (1995, 96). Mampujáneros encountered perhaps a third manifestation of erasure,

in which two historical narratives are held separate as categorically disconnected. The temporal

distance between their ancestor's displacement from Africa and Mampuján's displacement by the

paramilitary were considered historical events of inconsequential connection. Through their quilts,

Mampujánero's corrected this erasure, demanding that the narrative expand and give meaning to

these interconnected histories. Such acts, reframe collective violence and collected memory—not

only in terms of geography or communal belonging—but in terms of time and ancestry.

SAN JOSÉ DE PLAYÓN—INCOMPLETE MEMORIES

In June 2016, the community of San José de Playón was at a crucial point in their collective

reparations process.[67] While their work with the Victims' Unit was at times unbearably slow, they

were advancing in the process and nearing the final stage in which the collective Reparation Plan

would be approved by the regional Transitional Justice Committee. Once approved, the state has the

responsibility to convert the plan into a reality. At this crucial moment in their path to collective

reparations, the community decided to stall the process to the dismay of Victims' Unit employees.

At the core of the conflict were different understandings about the value and purpose of collecting

memories of violence.

Over the course of two months after the announced delay, I attended meetings and heard

the arguments on each side of the conflict between the community and the government employees.

As the community's decision played out, the two sides only became more polarized. In one ear I

would hear sighs of relief from the community, expressing that they had made the right decision in

stalling the process. By doing so, they had collected memories from community members that

previously were left off of the community's historical record. In the other ear, I heard the

exasperation of the government employees who felt that the community had thrown away their

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[67] During the collective reparations process, one village (Arroyo Grande) within San José de Playón, had its status changed to county. The collective reparations process still covers all of the communities initially included, now under the name, "San José de Playón, Arroyo Grande, and their villages" to recognize both counties. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the case as San José de Playón.

opportunity to obtain reparations. For the government employees, the addition of more memories

of violence would not alter the collective reparation plan and was therefore not worth the delay.

Both sides had good intentions behind their divergent opinions, but the disagreement highlighted a

deeper debate about the social and political value of collective and collected memories.

Collective Reparations for San José de Playón

San José de Playón county is located near the southern border of María la Baja and the

Playón Reservoir (see Chapter One, Figure 4). Their location next to the fresh water reserve, made it

a strategic point of contact between lower María la Baja and the hills of Montes de María to the

south. As such, it became a battle ground between guerrilla and paramilitary forces, with the

community caught in the crossfire. Unlike Mampuján, San José de Playón never experienced a

massive forced displacement. Over years, many community members left their homes and others

stayed, enduring intense violence. The community identifies August 18, 1999 as one of the most

prominent days of violence when the paramilitary massacred six people and set fire to several cars

and a granary. Other acts of violence—such as selective assassinations, disappearances, sexual

violence, and the destruction of homes and community buildings—mark years of terror.

San José de Playón was not originally identified by the state as an emblematic case for

collective reparations. They organized themselves in order to petition the state for recognition,

showing that they were both organized, collectively inhabiting their town, and well-positioned to

receive reparations. This eventually led the state to recognize their case and provide them the "offer"

to initiate the collective reparations process with the Victims' Unit.

When I arrived to María la Baja for the bulk of my research in September 2015, San José de

Playón was already progressing with the Victims' Unit towards their plan for collective reparations.

This process involves three primary steps: the "Diagnostic of Harm," the "Reparation Measures,"

and the "Reparation Plan."[68] The Diagnostic of Harm is essentially a chronological list and narrative

of all of the violent events that occurred in the community as a result of the armed conflict. Based

on this list, the community develops Reparation Measures that aim to remedy the harm outlined.

For example, the Diagnostic of Harm may include the assassinations of community members and

the destruction of community homes. In response, the Reparation Measures may include an annual

commemoration to honor the dead and a project to build new homes, respectively. Based on the

final list of Reparation Measures, the Victims' Unit and the community create the final Integral Plan

for Collective Reparation (*Plan Integral de Reparación Colectiva*—PIRC). This plan must receive

approval from the local government and Regional Committee of Transitional Justice. With this final

approval, the Victims' Unit employees begin to coordinate with fifty state institutions that are

responsible for carrying out the reparation measures. Using the above example, the Victims' Unit

may coordinate with the National Center for Historical Memory regarding financial and

organizational support for an annual commemoration. Likewise, the Victims' Unit would contact the

Ministry of Housing in order to fulfill the reparation measure for new housing.

The final process to execute the promises made in the PIRC proved to be the most

complicated and frustrating for communities and government employees alike. Limited government

budgets and a lack of proper coordination between agencies often created red tape that delayed

progress indefinitely. San José de Playón, however, had one potential advantage over previous

collective reparation cases because they were completing their PIRC during a local election year. The

incoming government was in the process of generating their four-year plan, including budgetary and

political promises for the projects and investments they would make. The Victims' Unit and several

NGOs saw this opportunity as the key to Playón's successful collective reparations because they

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[68] The longer collective reparations process is depicted in Chapter Two, Figure 5.

could integrate the Reparation Plan into the new government's four-year plan with money and a written promise to fulfill elements of their reparation measures. While the government employees were understandably eager to push the plan forward, the community expressed their concern and sought ways to delay the process and return to the previous step in the process: The Diagnostic of Harm.

San José de Playón's Delay

Playón's community leaders were aware that news of their meetings with the Victims' Unit had not reached all corners of the county. Because of this, they considered that the list of violence—the names of the dead and the details of their deaths—was incomplete. In particular, some individuals who lived in more remote areas of the county were not even aware that they were undergoing a collective reparations process. In order to carry out additional meetings and fill in the gaps, they solicited help from two trusted regional NGOs: Corporation for Solidarity Development (*Corporación Desarrollo Solidario*—CDS) and the Consultation Firm for Human Rights and Displacement (*Consultorio para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento*—CODHES). The project had two primary goals: (1) disseminate the concept of victimhood and collective reparations to all community members and (2) solicit memories from previously excluded community members regarding violent events that occurred over the course of the armed conflict.

During these meetings it was telling to see the gap between the leaders who had learned the lexicon of government entities and the Victims' Law versus those individuals who were learning of their rights as victims for the first time. During one meeting, Roberto, a central leader began to discuss the concepts of reparation. Soon he was rattling off sentences that contained nearly equal parts acronym to words. Alicia, another leader well-versed in the law, interrupted him, "Speak in Spanish, Roberto!" Her frustration was justified, as many of the community members listening were lost in Roberto's legal talk.

This dissemination process, in and of itself was deemed valuable by the community, as they considered that leaving people behind would only create divisions. The process also resulted in the addition of previously omitted acts of violence and several edits to existing information. Community leaders would express, 'Thank God we went through this process, because there were assassinations we didn't know about and dates or names that we had wrong.' In light of these results, the leadership was relieved that they had the foresight to slow things down. The addition of new information and correction of incorrect information was not just about ensuring that the list was comprehensive. It was also about avoiding a scenario in which the community would be fractured out of hurt and resentment.

The Victims' Unit's Frustration

While the community viewed this intervention as positive, the government employees from the Victims' Unit considered that this delay would potentially ruin Playón's chances at seeing their Reparation Plan fulfilled. At this late point in the Victims' Law, the Victims' Unit employees were aware that their administrative power was limited and only worked when coupled with political interests. In January 2016, Carlos Coronel was the incumbent Mayor of María la Baja, and the first months of the year were spent establishing the new government's four-year plan. Mayor Coronel was replacing a government infamous for its complete disregard for victims' rights, and so his election was partially based on his promise to run a government that would support victim-based initiatives. Victims' Unit employees sought to hold him to his word by ensuring that the four-year plan and budget dedicated resources to Playón's reparation plan. Frank Patiño, a Victims' Unit employee and Playón's assigned representative, considered that if the reparation plan was not included in the local government four-year goals, then it was almost impossible for the reparations to succeed. From experience, he knew that a collective reparation plan could be "*bonito y todo*" (beautiful and all), but if there was no commitment from the institutions, then it was as good as

useless. For this reason, many communities find themselves five or six years down the collective reparations process with a lofty stack of papers describing the community that they envisioned but will likely never have, as the Victims' Unit has no judicial power to obligate institutions to act.

Given the pressing political moment and the Victims' Unit concern for showing successful reparation cases, the community's delay was considered unnecessary and harmful. From a bureaucratic perspective, the edits to the Diagnostic of Harm and the socialization process were unimportant at this junction. Adding a death or correcting details of an attack would have no effect on the Reparation Measures or on the Reparation Plan. For the government employees, this meant that correcting the timeline was not worth the precious time that was lost in the process.

Memory Collection for Different Ends

Playón may have limited their chances of getting true institutional support for their reparations. Yet, they also avoided a potentially catastrophic scenario in which their community would have been deeply divided. This is not a baseless fear, as many high profile reparation cases have resulted in fractured communities. In a discussion with leaders from two important reparation cases in Montes de María—El Salado and Las Palmas—they lamented that the divisions in the community ran so deep that there was hardly communication across factions. One leader from El Salado even suggested that he has come to believe that the government's approach to reparations encourages community divisions. He considered, cynically, that such divisions were desirable if they prevented united community movements to demand the completion of reparation plans. Based on these antecedents, the leaders in Playón decided that gaining their reparations may not be worth it if the bedrock of community was toxic from the perception of neglected recognition.

In August 2017, one year after my long-term fieldwork, I returned to María la Baja to understand the effects of the peace process and the shifting role of the Victims' Law. My visit

overlapped with the commemoration of the massacre of San José de Playón that occurred on August 18, 1999. The event began with a march under the bright mid-morning sun, followed by a Catholic mass, and speeches from several leaders in the community, music and dance by a local group called "*Juventud en Desarrollo*," (Youth in Development) and a lunch served in Styrofoam boxes (Figure 9).

Figure 9: March in commemoration of the massacre in San José de Playón. Photo: August 18, 2017.

I arrived to San José de Playón in the early morning with a roll of poster papers and markers for making signs—my contribution at the request of the event leaders. As I walked up towards the light peach church in the central plaza, I saw many members of San José de Playón for the first time in over a year. We hugged and chatted about life. I admired the central committee members' new matching polo shirts—baby blue with red block letters on the back "S. R. C." and blue letters below spelling out the acronym: "SUJECTO DE REPARACION COLECTIVA, SAN JOSÉ DE PLAYÓN, ARROYO GRANDE, Y SUS VEREDAS" (Subject of Collective Reparations, San José de Playón, Arroyo Grande, and their Villages). They laughed, saying that the shirts made them more official than before (Figure 10).

Figure 10: San José de Playón Central Committee. **Left**—The Central Committee from San José de Playón, Arroyo Grande, and their villages at the second annual commemoration. August 18, 2017. **Right**—The back of the committee's shirts.

Leaders delegated jobs, and they assigned me to the sign-making team along with four other members of the committee. The committee members studied the number of poster papers and decided that one should be dedicated to the five individuals and one unborn child killed on the August 18, 1999. The remaining sheets of paper required more thought as there was not enough room to include the more than 65 individuals that had been killed in San José de Playón over the course of the conflict. In order to decide who to represent on the limited paper, the group stepped out of the Catholic church where we had been working on the cold ceramic tile, to review two large posters leaning against the entrance of the church. The posters were produced in 2016 with support from the National Center of Historical Memory and the Victims' Unit to display information about those assassinated. While the specific commemoration day recognizes the massacre that occurred on August 18, 1999, the posters chronicled all of the deaths listed in the communities' original Diagnostic of Harm. One poster included a numbered, chronological list of deaths with the person's name, a brief description of their assassination, and their perpetrators, if known (Figure 11).
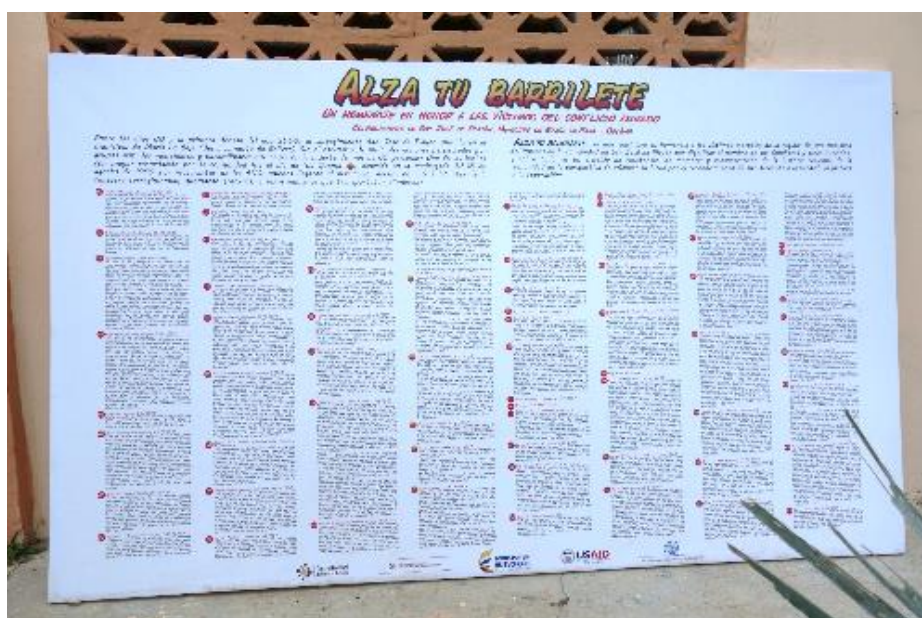
Figure 11: "Launch Your Kite: A Homage in Honor of the Victims of the Armed Conflict. San José de Playón County, María la Baja Municipality of Bolívar."

The second poster included a map of the community (Figure 12). Red circles with numbers corresponded to the list of assassinations and showed the locations of the assassinations or disappearances. The map also included silhouetted figures holding kites with the names of some of those killed. This imagery in the poster was created to reflect the community's decision in 2015 to create one homemade kite for every person killed as a way to honor the dead during the commemoration.
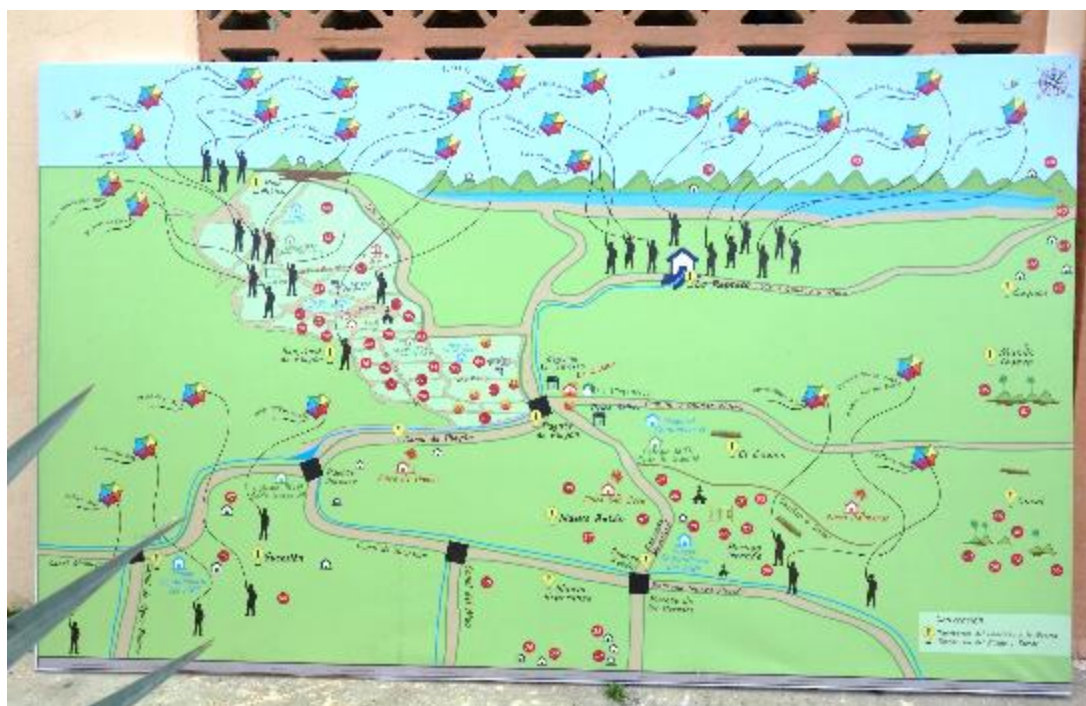
Figure 12: Map of assassinations committed in San José de Playón, Arroyo Grande and their surrounding villages.

After reviewing the list, the committee members started naming off deaths that were particularly impactful for the community. They would point to a name, and I would jot down the facts on a scratch piece of paper, later to be transferred onto the colorful poster paper. After several high-profile names were listed, the committee members began to think more in terms of representation. Similar to their reasons for slowing down the reparation process, the committee began to worry that if they did not include deaths from all sectors of the community, it would potentially lead to animosity. After they agreed on a representative—though not comprehensive—

list of names, we began to transfer them to the posters. After we finished, we reviewed the collection as a whole. Emma, a committee member from a more rural part of the county, looked at the posters with concern and she walked out of the church saying "*ya vengo*" (I'll be right back). Five minutes later, she returned with two additional poster papers that she bought at the corner store, explaining that she could just hear the people critiquing the signs, saying 'how come you didn't include our deaths?' She carefully chose a few more names from the list for the final posters. With that we gathered the posters, slightly wrinkled from our sweaty hands, and we rushed to the outskirts of town to distribute the posters to gathering marchers—school children, adolescents, a youth music and dance group, mothers, fathers, and a few institutional representatives (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Signs created for the commemoration in San José de Playón on August 18, 2017. The signs listed numerous assassinations in the communities of San José de Playón, Arroyo Grande, and their surrounding villages. The deaths listed occurred between 1989 to 2013 and include guerrilla, paramilitary, and criminal band perpetrators.

The posters—though necessarily incomplete records of lost lives—provided a reminder of

the relationship between collected memories and collective victimhood. For the Victims' Unit,

memories were collected for the sake of categorizing and repairing violence through state

interventions. For the community, memories were about the (re)construction of community as a

necessary first step for future reparations to have any real impact. It is difficult to predict whether or

not San José de Playón will receive their reparations or maintain a united community. Following the

months of tension around the reparation plan, the Victims' Unit employees' deepest fear came true.

María la Baja's Municipal Development Plan for 2016-2019 only contains one brief mention of San

José de Playón's reparation case: "In the municipality there exists one subject of collective

reparation, the county of San José de Playón, with a constructed reparation plan, but that is not

approved by the Municipal Transitional Justice Committee"[69] (Alcaldía Municipal María la Baja 2016,

87). This result, while potentially damaging to the completion of the reparation plan, is understood

differently by the community. The act of collecting memories for community narratives—delaying

the reparation plan process—was a key act in which the community itself defined what narratives are

valued and meaningful, and who belongs to the San José Playón of the future.

ASOCAAFRO—MEMORY AS CONTESTED PROOF OF LOST LAND

"The story is clear to us. Now we just have to pray to God that the government employees understand the massacre that happened here."
- Member of ASOCAAFRO after reviewing the written testimonies for their legal case March 2016

The state-assigned lawyer sat across the plastic table from us, dressed in linen khakis and a

white linen *guayabera* button up shirt customary to the Caribbean coast of Colombia. The gleam off

of his watch and gold bracelet caught my eye as he flicked through the piles of documents relevant

to the legal case of the Association of Afro-Colombian *Campesinos* (ASOCAAFRO) from rural María

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[69] Original in Spanish: "*Existe un sujeto de reparación colectiva el corregimiento de San José de Playón, en el municipio con plan de reparación construido pero no aprobado en Comité de Justicia Transicional Municipal.*"

la Baja. That morning in April 2016, I accompanied five members of the Association on the four a.m. bus from María la Baja to the nearby port city of Cartagena. The goal of the meeting was to understand the charges recently filed against them by Carlos Murgas, former Minister of Agriculture of Colombia and powerful landowner known colloquially as the Czar of African palm oil—the monocrop that has strategically replaced much of the farming land previously embroiled in violent conflict near the Caribbean coast.

The lawyer looked up from the papers, eyeing the group of *campesinos*, and attempted to boil down their case: "so this is about the farm called, 'La Candelaria' and your attempt to reclaim this land?" Gerardo, the Association's president, shook his head, "no," and for the second time attempted to patiently explain to the lawyer the history of this land conflict. After much practice, Gerardo's story is roughly chronological and concise, covering three decades of history in less than ten minutes. Nevertheless, time and time again I watched lawyers, human rights advocates, and government representatives struggle to grasp this story. I developed a deeper understanding of the history only after hearing numerous personal accounts and seeing sketches of the land on scratch pieces of paper. Much of the complication of their story revolves around the difficulty of narrating cyclical and repetitive histories of dispossession and violence.

The land restitution case of the Association of Afro-Colombian *Campesinos*, or ASOCAAFRO by its Spanish acronym, has to date been denied by the Land Restitution Unit. Since their first appeal to the Land Restitution Unit in 2014, ASOCAAFRO has also endured armed threats, a kidnapping, and false accusations of trespassing from associates of the current owner of the disputed land, Carlos Murgas. The success of their land restitution case relies in large part on their ability to successfully communicate memories of violence that occurred in and around the

disputed territory. Additionally, their safety both from armed private security and state accusations of false reporting, relies on generating a narrative that can circulate to a broader public.

I dissect divergent understandings of land and memory related to ASOCAAFRO's case in order to make two claims. First, the Land Restitution Unit's concept of land and memory prohibits complex cases—like that of ASOCAAFRO—from recovering land that was lost due to violence. Second, ASOCAAFRO members' narration of land loss offers an alternative framework for understanding land and memory that is more attuned to the realities of rural Colombian *campesinos*. Specifically, it provides a lens through which to analyze the experiences of collective farming practices amidst cyclical violence.

The National Land Restitution Unit relies on a model of private property and land titles to consider the terrain in question. Additionally, in the process of evaluating legal claims, this government institution imposes historical limits. For instance, land can only be reclaimed if it was lost after 1991, despite the fact that the conflict precedes this date by decades. Further, the bureaucratic process favors chronological narratives that provide clear-cut evidence of culpability. These structures, while organizationally helpful, are not necessarily reflective of the lived reality of the people who seek land restitution.

Through the land restitution case of ASOCAAFRO, it is evident that the technocratic process demands a chronological rendition of events that is neither natural in the farmers' memory nor does it adequately capture the cyclical nature of their experience. Indeed, the repetitive and cyclical pattern of violence—while confusing for institutions—is a crucial part of the story ASOCAAFRO wants to tell about the shapeshifting forms of violence that they continue to confront. In other words, chronology may provide the veneer of clarity, but cyclical webs of memory highlight the underbelly of violent conflict where monocrop industries, paramilitary death squads, and mysterious threats intertwine. These stories reveal the paranoia, trauma, and persistence

that undergirds the impossible task of reclaiming land from one of the most powerful and politically protected land owners in Colombia.

ASOCAAFRO

Sunday afternoons mark a farmers' day of rest and the traditional meeting day for members of ASOCAAFRO. On a typical Sunday, 20 or more men and women from ASOCAAFRO arrive to a small farm on the side of the highway to discuss the latest updates on their legal battle. Each member arrives from their respective neighborhood within the municipality of María la Baja, Bolívar, just inland from the Caribbean coast. Seated on plastic chairs under a mango tree, old friends catch up on the week's events. Several of the women start to prepare lunch, sending one of the men with a machete to cut down some green plantains for the midday pot of *sancocho* stew (Figure 14). As its name implies, ASOCAAFRO members identify as *campesinos* and as Afro-Colombians. While ASOCAAFRO members do not share a town that they call home, they are united by their former place of labor and subsequent dispossession from a farm known as La Candelaria. Since 2014, they have filed formal claims with the Colombian Land Restitution Unit in attempts regain control over this land.

Figure 14: Sunday ASOCAAFRO meetings around the pot of *sancocho* stew.

Over the course of six months, I followed the case of ASOCAAFRO closely, attending their Sunday meetings and consultations with lawyers, as well as spending time with ASOCAAFRO members at local festivals and on front porches. Per their request, I also recorded and transcribed testimonies of several ASOCAAFRO members to be used in their legal land battle. During this process, I developed a dual understanding of their case: one that followed the logic desired by the state, and one that followed ASOCAAFRO members' narratives of their personal and collective experience in and around the farm.

La Candelaria—a brief history

The farm, known as La Candelaria, is roughly 440 hectares in size and is located in María la Baja. In 1980, the long-time owner of the farm sold the land to the "Gacha Brothers"—high profile narcotraffickers from the Medellín drug cartel. For several years the farm operated under the name "Nuts and Bolts" and later "La Pampa," shell businesses that served as a front for the mafia owners. One *campesino* from the region explained that people knew them to be narcotraffickers "because sometimes […] you would see some luxurious cars pass by. [La Candelaria] even had a swimming pool inside and it had two houses." During this time, the local administrators of the farm allowed small groups of landless *campesinos* to enter and use the land to plant their crops. By 1989, José Gacha was killed by the Colombian government and the ownership of the farm was in question. Rumors circled that Gacha's partner and infamous leader of the Medellín drug cartel, Pablo Escobar, visited the farm to take over ownership. However, Escobar's death four years later in 1993, left La Candelaria abandoned and without a clear owner.

Miguel, a life-long *campesino* and member of ASOCAAFRO relayed to me: "Once they killed Pablo Escobar, that was when the farm returned to being an untamed forest. A year or two later people from [various towns] entered the land to work. Since there wasn't anybody there and it was thought that it had been abandoned, [ASOCAAFRO] entered [La Candelaria] as possessors of the

terrain because we believed that this was now ours." As is commonly the case for small-scale farmers throughout rural Colombia, the ASOCAAFRO *campesinos* never acquired a land ownership title for La Candelaria (Latorre 2015). Still, under Colombian law, the "possession" of abandoned land, uncontested for at least ten years, gives squatters legal rights to claim ownership of the land. The basis of ASOCAAFRO's claim to ownership relied on this legal notion of "possession."

For the next ten years (1994–2004), the *campesinos* worked the land in groups, planting staple crops from the region: yucca, corn, ñame (a large potato-like starch), and plantains. These ten years carried mixed feelings. It was a time of excitement and hope for the *campesinos* as they had their own piece of land that would allow them to support their families. At the same time, the war was intensifying among guerrilla, paramilitary, and military groups, with *campesinos* caught in the battleground. Despite the violence in the region, and individual experiences with displacement, assassinations of family members, and kidnappings, they continued to work the land as best they could.

In 2004, paramilitary leaders from the region descended on the farm to forcibly remove the *campesinos* from the land, stating that it was now property of Carlos Murgas. The *campesinos* felt that Carlos Murgas was stealing their land, but there was no room to debate with armed paramilitary. Furthermore, Carlos Murgas represented economic and political power, as he was a former Minister of Agriculture and was responsible for the spread of the African palm oil that has taken over the region since the early 2000s. In light of this, the farmers harvested the crops they could and left La Candelaria for good. In 2014, ten years later, they filed their first petition to the Land Restitution Unit.

Land, Livelihoods, and Memory

Land restitution focuses on (re)establishing proper ownership and belonging to a plot of land. Nevertheless, across Colombia, many rural farmers lack formal land titles that prove their

lawful possession of land that is now in the hands of a new owner who *does* have official papers (see

Latorre 2015). When there are no titles, individuals must demonstrate their possession and regionally

recognized ownership of the land via narratives of the past. Testimonies from the claimants and

neighboring witnesses must demonstrate the longevity and nature of a farmer's possession when no

official paperwork exists. Within the land restitution process, however, government frameworks of

analysis enforce particular notions of history, land tenure, and belonging that exclude the

experiences of *campesinos* in the region of María la Baja. These frameworks not only limit which land

restitution cases can be successful, but also what types of violence can be seen and analyzed by the

state.

Spatial borders for the Land Restitution Unit involve the technical geographical boundaries

that define a plot of land. These boundaries serve as the reference point for investigating legal titles

and other state records. In terms of historical records, the Land Restitution Unit adopts a linear

timeline that tracks violent events in relation to broader historical reference points. For example, the

timeline is confined by the fact that the law only allows for the restitution of land lost due to

violence that occurred after January 1, 1991. Additionally, the demobilization of the paramilitary

troops in 2005, mark a presumed drop in violence after which it may be considered less likely for

displacement to occur. Events that occur beyond these temporal boundaries challenge the state's

perception of legitimate displacement. Importantly, the linear chronology of events is also confined

within the boundaries of the land in question. Successfully registering lost land is predicated on the

ability to provide evidence of the violent events that occurred *within* these physical boundaries, and

that ultimately led to forced displacement or dispossession.

Based on these spatial and temporal models, the story of ASOCAAFRO and La Candelaria

can be summarized as the following: La Candelaria farm includes approximately 440 hectares. In

1994, the members of ASOCAAFRO entered La Candelaria to work collectively on the land, as it

had been abandoned by its previous owners who were said to be narcotraffickers. They worked

within La Candelaria for 10 years, until in 2004 they were met with armed paramilitary officers who

told them that they had to leave the land because it was now owned by Carlos Murgas. Current legal

titles show that Carlos Murgas purchased the land in 2004 from a cattle ranching company called, La

Pampa. The official record does not reflect that La Pampa was widely known to be a front business

for the deceased narcotrafficker, José Gacha. For members of ASOCAAFRO, this detail is

important because they question how Murgas could have legally purchased a money laundering front

from a deceased narcotrafficker.

Re-imagining Land Possession through Cyclical Memories
ASOCAAFRO members recall their story with a different understanding of land tenure and

cyclical violence. Land restitution often deals with cases in which *campesinos* lived and worked on the

land before their displacement or dispossession. ASOCAAFRO members did not live within La

Candelaria's borders; they traveled to La Candelaria every day from their individual homes around

María la Baja. Instead of conceiving of their ownership in terms of living within the boundaries of

La Candelaria, ASOCAAFRO members articulate their connection to the land based on labor and

social relationships. As Luis recalled, the violence shaped their collective practice: "We always

worked in groups—if we went to plant one hectare, all forty of us went to work in my hectare, and

then we all go to someone else's hectare…Because of the violence we always try not to be separated,

because together they respect us more."

The land was also intimately connected to ASOCAAFRO members' home lives; it was the

lifeline that provided food and savings for their families. Nevertheless, violence often separated the

campesinos from La Candelaria, prohibiting them from accessing their crops and animals. Daniel, with

a fast-paced whisper, communicated the uncertainty of being a *campesino* during this time:

> When the Paramilitary (AUC) appeared up there and everything went crazy, there were
> days when you were on your way [to the farm] and they sent you back. They say: 'if you

go over there, you won't return.' And we lived with this tension. I can't count the number of times I left food tossed along the path as I was escaping from a shootout up above. One isn't capable of retaining in the memory what we lived through around here.

ASOCAAFRO members' experience requires a new optic that recognizes land tenure and violence not as geographically confined, but as interconnected and mobile. With this vision, there is a new ability to "see" stories of violence that did not always occur within La Candelaria, but that profoundly shape the experiences of those who traveled daily to the land. As the farmers from ASOCAAFRO did not live within the boundaries of La Candelaria, their "displacement" from the land is more difficult to show and to tell. Instead, stories revolved around running back home from La Candelaria when violence struck. Several men, including Daniel above, focused on the loss of food, claiming that on many occasions they had to leave stew boiling on the fire as they ran for their lives.

ASOCAAFRO members also challenged the demands for chronological and linear stories. In my brief history of their case, I provided a chronological tale of farming and displacement for the sake of clarity. Yet, this is not the way the story was told to me. Rather, I first heard of events that occurred in 2015 that are well off of the timeline that could be considered relevant to the ASOCAAFRO case. From there, over many conversations and drawings, ASOCAAFRO members wove together individual and collective stories of loss that danced between memories of the 1980s, 90s, 2000s and to the present struggle to find a piece of land to call their own.

During the collection of testimonies, ASOCAAFRO members requested that I help with the writing and recording process. Santiago (Santi) was the first person, of six testimonials we collected, and immediately I felt the pain of memory collection. While he is no longer part of ASOCAAFRO, Santi and his brother worked among the *campesinos* in La Candelaria before Murgas arrived. I sat with two members of ASOCAAFRO, taking notes as Santi gave his testimony for ASOCAAFRO's legal case. His former partners in La Candelaria led the process, asking him to relate his memories from

those years. His story stopped and started with long pauses between events, as his eyes shifted side to side and he rubbed his dark brown, calloused hands together. During the time Santi worked in La Candelaria, two of his brothers were assassinated in María la Baja. Later, his family was forcibly displaced from their home in Matuya, María la Baja and his brother-in-law was disappeared. They were accused of being guerrillas just by virtue of the location of their home on the south side of the road and because of their work in *el monte* (the countryside). As these memories formed into words, Santi leaned back in his seat, and put a hand up to his face to push away the tears forming in his eyes. ASOCAAFRO members offered consoling words, and Santi just shook his head, noting that he had not talked about all of those experiences in a very long time. He also explained that he and his family never received support from the government despite attempts to declare their victimhood to the state.

Santi's circular, painful story of multiple losses was hard to follow and, at times, it felt like we were reliving the moments with him as they re-entered his mind and emerged in half-finished phrases. Yet, the final document I produced smoothed out his story into a chronological list of violence and losses—much like the "Diagnostic of Harm" produced for cases of collective reparations. For Santi, and each subsequent testimony, I transcribed sometimes hours of testimony and then reorganized their memories, with the help of ASOCAAFRO leaders, into categorical narratives along a timeline. While the final testimonies were faithful to the words and events told by each person, I felt obligated to edit the cyclical and sometimes confusing accounts of violence that emerged through each and every testimony. This alternate sense of time is central to the stories themselves, and it was lost in the process. Rather than the linear organization of time dictated by the testimony, these narratives are better understood as a spiral, in which repetitive forms of violence and resistance layer one upon the other cyclically. To demonstrate these alternative models for

thinking about land tenure and memory narrative, I conclude my discussion of ASOCAAFRO's case by turning to the events that occurred in 2015.

La Franja – The Border Zone

In 2015, eleven years after ASOCAAFRO members were forcibly removed from La Candelaria, the *campesinos* saw an opportunity to occupy a piece of state-owned land that rests between La Candelaria and the edge of the water reserve, known as "*la franja*" or the border zone. The state has historically provided landless farmers access to these "border zones" to grow subsistence crops—a subpar replacement for legitimate agrarian reform—but an opportunity nonetheless. After months of collective work, the group cleared the overgrown vegetation. Just as they planted their crops, private security forces from La Candelaria forcibly removed them, wielding weapons and stating that this land also belonged to Carlos Murgas. Since then, Murgas appropriated the state land illegally, as it is not meant for large land owners. La Candelaria along with the border zone are now filled with African palm plants.

This more recent story of displacement and violence fits neither the historical nor geographic record on file with the Land Restitution Unit. References to the border zone do not appear officially in documents relevant to ASOCAAFRO's case. The border zone is not within the geographical limits of the land they are fighting to reclaim from Carlos Murgas, and the events occurred beyond the temporal scale of events related to La Candelaria that the government would recognize.

Seen through a spiral, their violent removal from the border zone in 2015 collapses onto their displacement by paramilitary leaders who announced that Murgas was the new owner in 2004, and the fear that circulated the land when it moved in and out of the hands of the narcotraffickers in the early to mid-1990s. The non-linear path of these stories is not just telling of the way memory "works." Like the quilters' graphic narration of their multiple displacement, it also highlights the

need for non-linear analyses that can consider how repetitive violence is interconnected. Furthermore, ASOCAAFRO's work and eventual displacement in the literal "border zone" highlights the way land use and tenure blur in practice. While the border zone does not belong to La Candelaria, Murgas and his lawyers have subsequently used the border zone dispute to formally accuse the *campesinos* of theft and land invasion. It was this accusation, filed in 2016, that led ASOCAAFRO members to meet with the lawyer in Cartagena described in the opening of this section. Yet, the lawyer's confusion made it difficult for him to comprehend how the accusation of wrong-doing in the border zone had anything to do with the multiple decades of history in La Candelaria. For members of ASOCAAFRO the connection was clear, Murgas was using political and economic power to wear them down. In a series of Whatsapp messages, one of the leaders of ASOCAAFRO first notified me about the accusation, stating "Murgas wants to declare a dirty war against us." Across these experiences, ASOCAAFRO members confront a system that through violence or paper make clear that *campesinos* don't belong in the land and the land doesn't belong to them.

The Land Restitution Unit denied ASOCAAFRO's 2014 formal request to consider La Candelaria as land lost due to violence. The 2014 solicitation began with one sheet of paper and a half-page declaration. Since then, that piece of paper has multiplied into stacks of manila envelopes filled with testimonies, records of assassination threats against leaders, and institutional letters (Figure 15). To date, the Land Restitution Unit has denied ASOCAAFRO's appeals and new evidence.

Figure 15: Stacks of ASOCAAFRO's case papers spread over the kitchen table. July 2017.

CONCLUSIONS—MEMORIES AND NARRATIVES

After my initial meeting with Monte Cristo, I spoke with contacts in the Victims' Unit and the National Center of Historical Memory in order to better understand their options for gaining attention from the state as a community. My contact at the CNMH told me that the easiest way to develop a historical memory project with them was through the collective reparations process. However, as I discussed in Chapter Two, the Victims' Unit employee explained that communities were ineligible for collective reparations because the process had closed in June 2015. Given that the reparations route was no longer an option, the CNMH employee suggested that we file a petition online, as it was possible that the CNMH could take up extra memory projects.

Over the course of several weeks, I met with the community regularly to construct a letter that would briefly convey their history of displacement and their current inability to gain attention from the state. Several weeks after submitting the petition, the community contacted me with excitement because they had received a response—something that was exceptional in their experiences communicating with state entities. We opened the email together, and with disappointment read the formal letter that in so many words explained that they could not offer any

assistance at this time. Instead they sent links to methodological books about the collection of historical memory.[70] I commented that we could try to use the book as a resource if they were interested. Their response, however, was that it was better to wait. Again, it was not just about the act of remembering, it was about the institutional connection that would allow their collective story to circulate beyond Monte Cristo and beyond María la Baja. Additionally, their correspondence with various governmental and non-governmental entities led them to understand that "having" historical memory would open doors to more resources. Juan, one of the older male leaders, summarized it this way: "We need historical memory to exist. The way to exist is through historical memory."

Reparation structures isolate communities into discrete units. This separation generates competition among neighbors and borders where before there was fluidity. In doing so, national level discussions of violence in Colombia has become highly focused on the stories of individual communities or towns. While my research has moved across the María la Baja region, it is still difficult to capture the diversity and complexity of experiences. On the one hand, movement across multiple communities made it difficult to delve deeper into the histories of any one of them. Additionally, the influence of the reparations process has made it such that my experiences within María la Baja was to encounter discrete communities with widely different experiences with and understandings of their rights under the Victims' Law. As such, this chapter in many ways replicates the divisions created by the reparations process, as I discuss Monte Cristo, Mampuján, San José de Playón, and ASOCAAFRO as independent cases. While these divisions are real, there are also

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[70] The letter included links to several of their books on the conflict and one book of pedagogical tools: *Narrate and Remember the Conflict: Tools to Reconstruct Historical Memory* (CNMH 2013): http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/informes/publicaciones-por-ano/2009/recordar-y-narrar-el-conflicto.

connections that defy the reparation's community-centric approach to collective and collected memories.

Against the logic of collective reparations and animosity that has formed out of regional inequality, many communities are working to generate alternate perceptions of "collectivity" by instigating their own process of memory collection and circulation. For example, Mampuján has long worked with various communities in the region, trying to spread knowledge of their therapeutic techniques. Additionally, they have partnered with Las Brisas during the events of their annual commemoration around March 10th and 11th. In 2016, the commemoration held in Las Brisas included screen print portraits of the 12 men assassinated there, adorned with quilting by the women in Mampuján (Figure 16).

Figure 16: 2016 Commemoration for the massacre in Las Brisas. **Left**—The commemorative gazebo in Las Brisas, San Juan Nepomuceno, Bolívar. The 12 posts of the circular gazebo represent each of the individuals killed on March 11, 2000 by the paramilitary "Heroes of Montes de María." On the commemoration of this day in 2016, each post was decorated by *tapices* made in collaboration between the community of Las Brisas and the women of Mampuján. **Right**—"Q.E.P.D (*Que en Paz Descanse*—Rest in Peace) Pedro Adolfo Castellano Cuten." One of the 12 *campesinos* killed on March 11, 2000. Each *tapiz* includes a screen print of the individuals' identity card photo, and a depiction of the scene of their death.

In San José de Playón, the community's decision to slow down the reparations process was based on their understanding that collecting memories was a political and social act that

simultaneously would affect their sense of collectivity. They also used this time to host a two-day workshop that included collective reparations cases from across Montes de María. Their goal was for these individual cases to unite under one roof to share stories, failures, strategies, and insights. They also used the time to see their common struggles as a region—a sense of collective harm from violence even if it did not fit within the scope of collective reparations.

ASOCAAFRO's battle to communicate their stories of labor and loss also struggled to show how *campesinos* from across a region united under the opportunity of land to call their own. They did not represent a "community" in the strict geographical sense, but their connection to the land and to a collective form of labor is what continues to inspire their fight for a return to La Candelaria. Collecting memories for them has been perhaps the most strained of the cases mentioned here, as recent threats and kidnappings seek to deter them from continuing the process. In this way, armed and un-armed actors recognize the link between collected memories and the group's collective identity under ASOCAAFRO. Whether through their physical removal from their place of encounter—La Candelaria—or through legal and physical threats, ASOCAAFRO's members continue to fight to maintain their unity, objectives, and hope. Their inability to narrate their memories of displacement in a way that is acceptable to the state severely threatens their ability to reclaim their rights to land and livelihood.

In her analysis of Dutch colonial records, Ann Stoler (2010) warns against event-centered histories in which the focus often becomes about dominant versus counter-memories. Stoler argues that this model overlooks the "sentiments and sensibilities that cast a much longer shadow over people's lives" (ibid:170). The reparations process in Colombia draws heavily on an event-focused model. Memories of violence are reduced to categorical forms of violence and equated with respective cures. Yet, the excess memories—that refuse to transform into neat scripts, that challenge the desired message, or that simply do not fit on a government form—are the pieces that offer

deeper insights into the "longer shadows" referenced by Stoler. As each case described above has

shown, these shadows are cast in multiple directions—deep into the past and into the projected

future.

INTERLUDE 5
Blackouts

Before—when the paramilitary ruled María la Baja—blackouts generated fear. When the electricity cut, people moved inside quickly and locked their doors. Some recall sleeping under the bed, dreading a fateful knock on the door that meant someone would be taken, disappeared into the night. The paramilitary controlled the electricity in order to surveille and terrorize María la Baja. Now, blackouts carry mixed meanings.

Blackout by Night

Seated in the door of the house one evening, we chatted through the sounds of *champeta* dance music, *telenovelas*, and *vallenato* ballads bellowing from the neighborhood billiards hall and nearby homes. Suddenly, the electricity cut and the layered buzz was replaced first by silence and then a collective groan across María la Baja—another sweltering night without fans! I sat out with María, Héctor, and the neighbors in the darkness for a bit longer. We glanced overhead and saw the crystal clear stars above us. If it wasn't a storm, what could it be this time?

These blackouts provoke memories of past fear, and elicit stories now told with a small laugh. Now, rather than worry about the paramilitary, people complain about the failures of the government in María la Baja. The electricity goes out when there is a strong wind or a storm rolling in off the Caribbean coast. The electricity goes out when the air is still and the sky is clear. People joke that the power outages are so frequent and the infrastructure so dilapidated that the electricity in María la Baja must be held together by spit. Bitter laughter echoes against white cement walls lit by moonlight. But soon the darkness cuts conversations short because concerns about delinquency are alive and well. We move the plastic chairs inside, and I watch as Héctor unscrews the lightbulb from the front porch—"they will even steal light bulbs these days!" he tells me shaking his head in frustration.

The next morning, we learn that the blackout was orchestrated by the local police. Similar to the disappearances conducted by the paramilitary under the cover of darkness, the police cut the power in order to raid a nearby neighborhood. I had been warned not to walk down those streets because '*los viciosos* (delinquents) live there and they would steal anything for a high.' Twenty-four young men were reportedly captured and detained under the cover of darkness. While some Maríalabajenses were satisfied to see that the police were cleaning up the town, others expressed mixed feelings. Within the group of men were nephews, cousins, former students, and sons. I was told by one woman that the boys, her nephew included, were held without charges and without access to legal representation. Some blackouts are caused by faulty infrastructure and lightning storms. Some blackouts are still linked to state-sponsored force and surveillance.

Blackout by Day

After months of tense meetings, testimonies, encounters with lawyers, and managing threats, it was time to relax. I was nearing the end of my fieldwork, and the members of ASOCAAFRO and I organized a small afternoon gathering with food, music, drink, and dancing. The women in the group tended the *sancocho* beef stew as it bubbled in a massive iron pot over the fire, while the men gathered in a circle under the mango tree. Francisco moved between the two groups with a bottle of *Antioqueño* white rum and a tiny white plastic shot glass, offering a small sip and a beaming grin to each *compañero y compañera*. Grey afternoon clouds were building overhead, and we prayed for rain. The farmers' crops were suffering from drought, and we welcomed the rush of cool air that follows a storm.

The clouds continued to tease us as we slurped the thick, steaming *sancocho* out of gourd bowls. Meanwhile a portable speaker played a mix of *vallenato*, *reggaetón*, and *champeta* hits, setting the festive mood. The *ánimo* of the group was visceral; feet started tapping and people swayed rhythmically in their chairs, arms outstretched as if holding their dance partner in a tight embrace. It

wasn't long before *sancocho* bowls were set aside and we were on our feet dancing, but then—silence—the electricity went out. We moaned, thinking that the party was cut short, but the joyful *alegría* of the group was too much for this setback. Soon, several of the men and women took turns singing their favorite *vallenato* songs while the rest filled in with the chorus. As one song ended, we would applaud and call on the next person to take the center stage. Then two of the men in the group began a battle of verses. We cheered and giggled as they poked fun at one another through their poetic lyrics. The rain never came that day, and I don't remember when the electricity came back. We stayed for hours, eating cake, singing, and laughing. Blackouts can end parties, but they can also make them.

Contentious Bodies: The Place, Race, and Gender of Victimhood

INTRODUCTION—THE DAY OF THE FARMER
"Mataron a dos campesinos, pero no se metían con nadie."
"Two farmers were killed, but they never bothered anyone."

-Whispers spreading throughout María la Baja, June, 2016

On June 19, 2016 the central plaza of María la Baja, normally uninhabitable in the mid-day sun, was full of farmers celebrating Colombia's "*El Día del Campesino,*" The National Day of the Farmer (Figure 1). While typically a joyous occasion, the celebration was eclipsed by events that occurred before and after the festivities. Over the course of several days, two farmers from María la Baja were killed separately for no clear reason. The two *Afro-campesino* men were life-long farmers in their late 60s. They were remembered as simple men who went to their respective fields before dawn every day, never made much money, and never bothered anyone. They were "nobodies," and by the same token, they could have been any farmer in María la Baja, providing a cruel reminder that national celebrations could not erase decades of violence threatening *campesino* lives and livelihoods.

Figure 1: Central Plaza of María la Baja, Bolívar, Colombia during The Day of the Farmer. June 19, 2016.

While the police released reports of natural and accidental deaths, word soon spread through town that the first farmer's body was covered in deep cuts from machete strikes. The second farmer "went missing" and was found dead at the edge of a creek a day later. The police reported that he died from a heart attack. But the group of farmers who found his body contradicted the official narrative and claimed that his mouth had been cut open and he had suffered a blow to his head, providing proof of a violent death. In the days that followed, the atmosphere of the town felt heavy with grief. While violent deaths are deeply engrained in the minds of many Maríalabajenses, the inexplicable killings of 'poor, hardworking farmers' and the lack of justice conjured painful memories. Over the next weeks, people across María la Baja discussed the two farmers' deaths and drew parallels to assassinations and threats that occurred during the height of paramilitary control in the region by the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) between the late 1990s and early 2000s. While this peak of violence had largely subsided since the demobilization of the AUC in

2005, these unclaimed killings in 2016 were potent reminders that threats against rural farmers had not diminished and that authorities had little interest in pursuing justice for these deaths.

At the time of these killings, I had been living in María la Baja consecutively for over six months. While I was accustomed to hearing about past violence in the region, the death of these two men generated stories from neighbors and friends whom I had never heard discuss the armed conflict. Seated under the shade of the *tutumo* tree in front of the house where I lived, neighbor men and women contemplated the farmers' deaths while sipping on afternoon cups of *tinto*—coffee sweetened with caramelized sugar. Several women recounted the violent deaths of male family members from years ago, including the use of torture. One woman recounted that it took days for her family to find her brother's body in *el monte*, or the rural countryside. Flies and worms had taken over the body, preventing the family's ability to examine the cause of death or provide him a dignified burial. Separately, a local farmers' association similarly gathered to recall memories of violence they have endured for decades in the countryside and of several companions who were killed over the years. In particular, they remembered the details of one farmer who was killed by the paramilitary in the early 2000s; his body was found with his severed hands placed on top of his chest.

By telling these stories of death, I risk generating yet another sensationalized story of violence in Colombia. Still, I consider it necessary to acknowledge that the assassination of two farmers in 2016 was not an isolated event. These deaths are linked to histories of parallel, unexplained deaths of Afro-Colombian farmers in María la Baja. Further, these painful memories of deaths in María la Baja are not unique; they also share histories with violent acts of killing across the country.

In order to understand the weight of these deaths, it is necessary to delineate the relationships in Colombia among violence, geography, and bodies. As described in Chapter One,

control over rural land has been at the heart of Colombia's war. Rural farmers have typically been caught in the crossfire of insurgent and counter-insurgent battles in the countryside. Rural Colombian populations occupy territory that is simultaneously the center of violence and the margin of the nation. This reality has made it so that populations that have been historically disenfranchised—lower class and ethnic minority groups in particular—have also been most impacted by the war. Due to their location in the center of conflict, these populations further confront competing stereotypes that label them as either victims or guerrilla insurgent fighters.

Throughout the contemporary Colombian conflict, the killing of non-combatant rural farmers has been coupled with bodily disfiguration and torture. María Victoria Uribe (2004) considers these acts to fulfill perpetrators' dual mission: de-humanize the enemy "Other" and evoke terror in the surrounding population, often with the goal of displacing individuals from their land. As most of these acts were committed against rural farmers, the killing techniques were themselves grounded in rural sensibilities. Uribe notes that "an inventory of practices and techniques of bodily manipulation drew from everyday peasant life (butchery practices and the culinary preparation of wild and domestic animals) and from the ways that peasants conceived of their own bodies" (2004, 87). In these ways, the bodies of rural farmers—men and women—became the medium through which armed groups not only murdered potential enemies but also vilified an entire population and way of life. It is with this dualistic imagery—of victimized *campesinos* and dangerous rural residents— that the current chapter is concerned.

Over the past decade, peace and reconciliation politics have slowly begun to replace armed violence. This transition is incomplete and uneven across the country. Still, a partial transition to "peace" has generated numerous laws and state programs meant to provide aid and reparations to victims of the conflict. As discussed in Chapter Two, victims' programs require affected communities and individuals to translate violent experiences into official categories of victimhood.

Providing clear evidence of victimhood is often difficult and dangerous, if not impossible. This is

further complicated by decades of violence that have led state and armed actors to equate rural

farmers with subversive perpetrators. In the context of over 50 years of conflict, distinguishing

between victims and perpetrators can determine whether individuals receive victims' reparations or

are criminally charged with fraud. It can even determine whether individuals live or die. In the

previous chapters, I have examined the role of critical visibility through bureaucratic procedures, art,

and narrative. Here, I address critical visibility as it manifests through the body—often the first

visible element in human encounters.

CONTENTIOUS BODIES
"I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of
my own appearance" –Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952, 116).

In this chapter, I discuss the ways in which *campesinos'* bodies become complex signifiers of

their potential innocence or guilt. This distinction carries weight for individuals who are judged by

armed actors and bureaucrats alike to decipher how their body "fits" into broader notions of

victimhood and culpability. I highlight "contentious bodies"—those that challenge clean categories

of "innocent victim" and "guerrilla perpetrator." Through these contentious bodies I demonstrate

the way that racialized, classed, and gendered signifiers are simultaneously read and performed

within the context of war and peacetime violence in Colombia. I illustrate the presumptions about

which bodies deserve violence and which deserve social and economic aid. I argue that these

exchanges are not only indicative of the geography of violence in Colombia, but they also highlight

the intimate moments through which marginalized citizens are reincorporated (or not) into the

purview of the state.

I utilize practice-oriented theories of embodiment in order to capture this contested

formation of victim/perpetrator subjectivities in Colombia. Such approaches re-center

anthropological analyses on the body as the primary site of human collective experience (Bourdieu

1977; Mauss 1973[1934]), as well as the formation of subjectivities through performance of the everyday (Ortner 2006). "Habitus," according to Marcel Mauss (1973[1934]) refers to the individual and collective bodily techniques that are socially learned. Yet, this concept offers limited insights into the ways in which bodies have also served as the basis for marking difference and inequality. The individuals I highlight in this chapter, while read through the lens of socially learned bodily techniques, are contentious precisely because their bodies challenge societal scripts and the presumed significance of this bodily practice. Their stories also reveal the ways in which inequality is generated from crude readings of racialized, gendered, and classed bodies. The evasive nature of contentious bodies requires a more critical approach to embodied practice that highlights, rather than blurs, the ways in which inequality has always been tied to colonial and neo-colonial subject-making.

Critical race and post-colonial theories contribute a more nuanced understanding of embodied practice. Through this lens, embodied practice is understood within the constraints of racialized, gendered, and classed hierarchies, among others. Ann Stoler's (2010) colonial reading of Foucault, brings discipline and subjective knowledge into conversation with racialized and colonial state formation. Deborah Thomas (2011) further extends this analysis to the post-colonial and neoliberal state, in which she places histories of slavery and colonization in conversation with post-colonial violence and the formation of modern citizenship in Jamaica. Grounded firmly in histories of race and racism, both Stoler and Thomas reveal the ways in which bodily markers and practices map onto histories of inequality and social assumptions about the value of certain bodies over others. These works highlight the ways in which "race" has been inscribed by political systems in colonial settings, and further points to post-colonial and neo-colonial racial formations that coincide with new forms of global political and economic domination.

In post-conflict settings, the (re)formation of the state is central to peace politics. Similar to analyses of colonial and neoliberal subjectivities, I consider citizen subjectivities in Colombia as crucial to the formation and maintenance of Colombia's proclamation of a post-conflict state. In this context, citizen subjectivities are built upon individuals' experiences vis-à-vis the war—as perpetrators, victims, or innocent/complicit bystanders. Here, I argue that encounters between citizens and their observers, whether armed actors or state employees, are mediated initially by their physical bodies. How individuals are read in these encounters reveal broader presumptions about which bodies index subversive or innocent subjects. Further, misreadings can result in the denial of one's rights to state benefits, the formal recognition of victimhood status, or even loss of life.

In her analysis of "terrorist assemblages," Jasbir Puar (2007) articulates the visual and affective components of (mis)interpreting bodies. Puar argues that tendencies to read Sikhs as Muslim terrorists are not just about wrongly indexing the meaning of visual cues such as a turban. Rather, she claims that it is the "broader affective frame where the reason for the alikeness may be vague or repressed" (187). Puar's analysis unites visual cues with emotions, demonstrating that bodies are read through historical constructions that demarcate "us" and "them." Donna Goldstein (2013[2003]) elaborates on the racialized, classed, and gendered contours of embodiment in Brazil, arguing that hierarchies are established along racial lines, with whitened bodies occupying the top and darkened bodies the bottom. Yet, Goldstein elucidates how racist presumptions about class and belonging were exposed through the news story of the "black Cinderella," in which a Black woman was physically assaulted for holding up an elevator. The woman was a governor's daughter, yet her skin complexion alone led her attackers to assume that she was lower class, and therefore out of place and out of line. These divisions can be linked to Alexander Weheliye's notion of racializing assemblages, "a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans" (2014, 4). Bodies are not repositories of innocence, danger, and

"Otherness" in and of themselves. Rather, bodies are imbued with meaning during social interactions. Projected emotions and presumptions about guilt and innocence coalesce in a moment of bodily interaction.

While many physical elements of bodies are readily visible, such as skin color, scars, age, and gender, I argue that "seeing" the ways multiple identities are performed and perceived requires an understanding of how bodies become repositories and signifiers of broader regional histories. For example, in the context of María la Baja, both Afro-Colombian and *campesino* farming identities are central to local interpretations of historical and contemporary violence, resistance, and livelihoods. Bodies—including dress, gait, hand gestures, skin tone, eyes, speech—tell stories. But individuals are not always in control of the story their bodies tell. Rather, subtle signs map onto broader categories and perceptions of identities that are raced, classed, gendered, and—in the Colombian context— "victimized" (perceived as being a victim of the conflict).

In the stories that follow, people's contentious bodies and sense of identity are put into contact and conversation with bureaucracy, violence, and legal categories. Through these stories, I show how something that is intimately tied first and foremost to the corporeal experience of individuals comes to develop multiple meanings as it encounters external and sometimes abstract observers, including the ethnographer. I discuss place, race, and gender as they connect to violence and people's embodied relationship to this violence. While I address each separately, the stories across these sections reveal the ways that these identifying marks are intimately interconnected. I first discuss the "place" of violence in Colombia and how this violence has mapped onto particular groups of people and ways of life. Following this, I consider the "race" of violence, arguing that the disproportionate violence against ethnic minority communities is not a coincidence of war; it is a defining feature of the conflict that targets populations whose lives and land have historically been threatened, especially when they "obstruct" political and economic interests. Finally, I consider the

"gender" of violence and the way that notions of innocence and guilt correlate to perceptions of femininity and masculinity, respectively. In each of these sections, I use stories of contentious bodies to expose both institutional desires for clear-cut categories and the slippage that particular bodies produce when they challenge their observers' eyes.

GUERRILLA OR VICTIM?—"PLACING" VIOLENCE

Campesino life is often expressed as both a blessing and a curse. The work of a farmer—though hard and undervalued—is still considered by many Maríalabajenses a beautiful source of freedom and autonomy. It is a profession and a source of pride. But, in the eyes of the Colombian state and paramilitary forces, farmers' work and presence in *el monte* has historically associated farmers (especially men) with guerrilla fighters or sympathizers. While women also participated in guerrilla group combat, the stereotype that connected farm work to guerrilla sympathizers was mainly applied to male farmers. As I detail below, exceptions to this were often tied to women who broke the social norms of their gender role more broadly, through outspoken political engagement.

Guerrilla groups that formed in the early 1960s claimed to be the voice of the landless peasant, but ironically, this ideology put a target on the back of every rural farmer. As guerrillas were seen as sympathetic to the plight of the landless peasant and the beacon of hope for agrarian reform, the farmers in rural areas were likewise assumed to be sympathetic towards or converted into guerrillas. Thus, counter-insurgent paramilitary and state forces used the fact of agricultural labor as a justification for decades of violence against civilian populations.

The contours of war are reproduced at different scales in Colombia: from the macro/national, down to regional and local-level. From a macro scale, the conflict in Colombia can be read through national maps in which urban centers are small oases of relative calm surrounded by rural areas caught in active war (Figure 2). At the regional scale the connection between place and suspicious bodies is more complex. For example, city-dwellers from the port city of Cartagena on

the Caribbean coast may generically consider the entire region of María la Baja and the greater

Montes de María as an area of violent conflict (Figure 3). Yet, within María la Baja, indicators such

as roads and bodies of water mark perceived divisions between citizens, guerrillas, and paramilitary

at the local level (Figure 4).

Figure 2: National scale map of urban-rural divisions. Source with modifications: "Map of forced displacement in the Colombian armed conflict (1996-2012)." (GMH 2013, 74). The five most populated cities (Bogotá [capital], Medellín, Cali, Barranquilla, and Cartagena) are more removed from the areas of massive forced displacement.
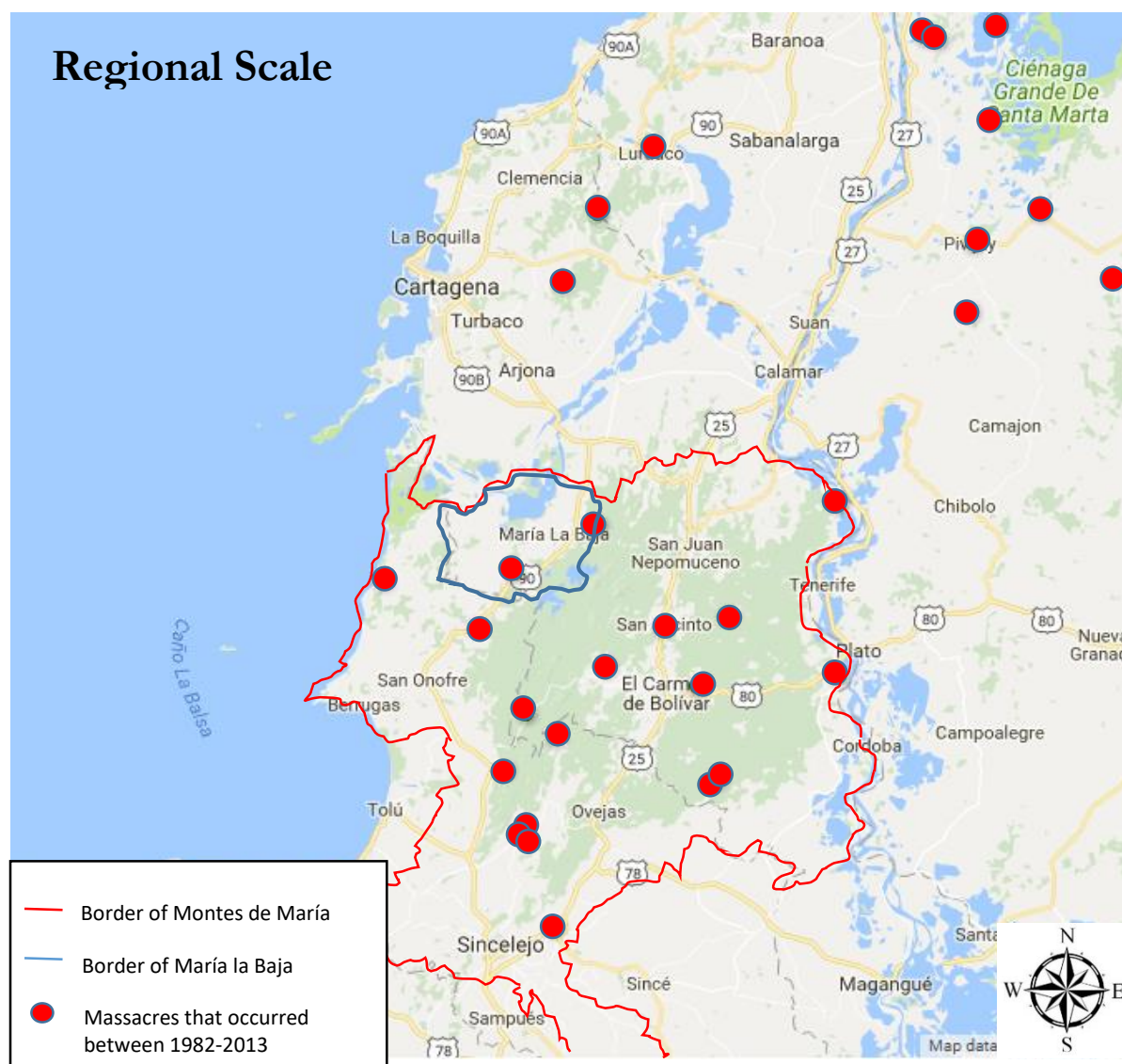
Figure 3: Regional scale of urban-rural divisions. Map of Montes de María (outlined in red) and María la Baja (outlined in blue.). The red dots represent massacres committed between 1982-2013, leading the urban population from neighboring Cartagena to associate the entire region with conflict. Modified from source: Rutas del Conflicto, "Cartografía del Conflicto," http://rutasdelconflicto.com/geografia-del-terror/masacres-por-anio.php.
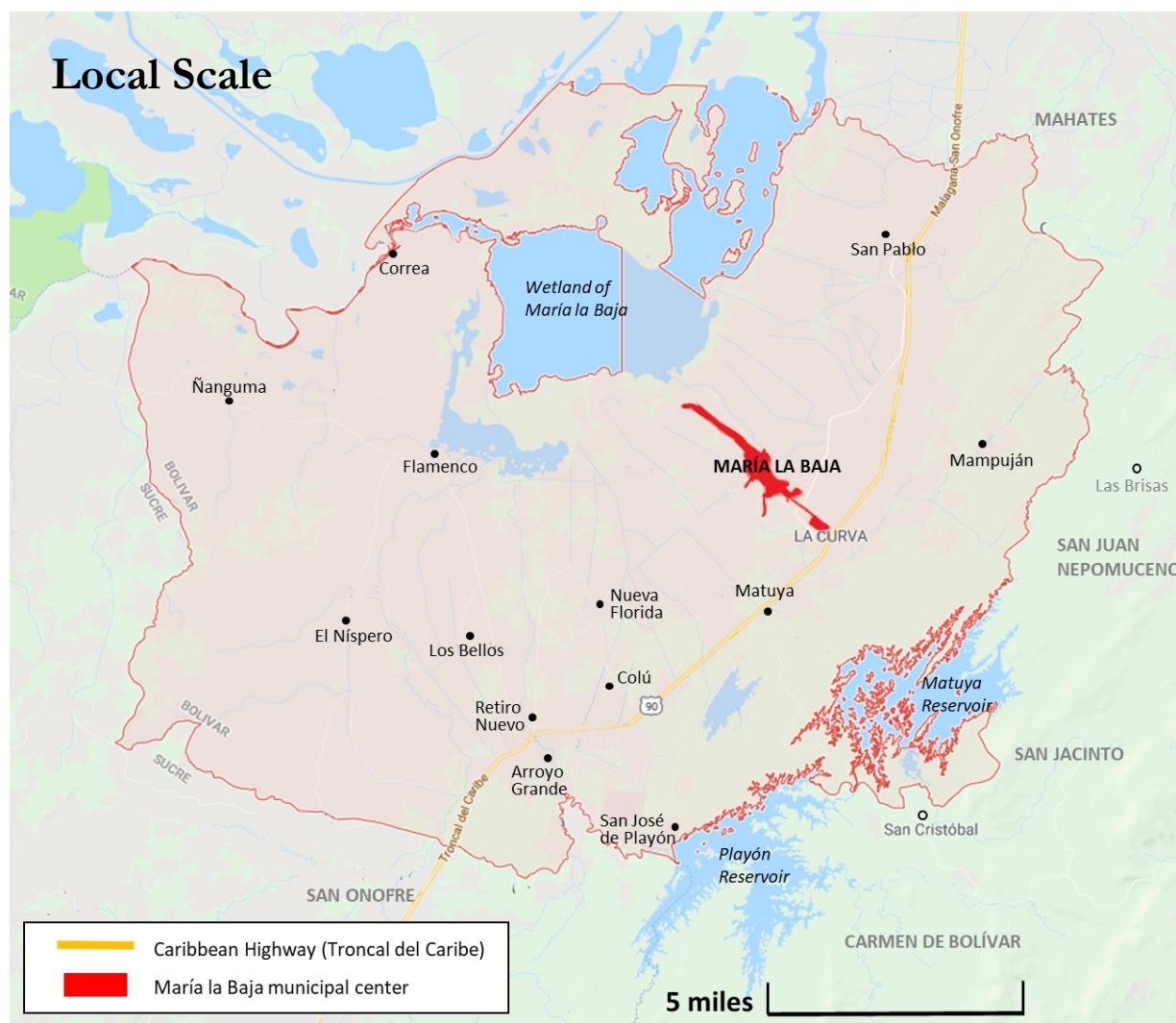
Figure 4: Local scale divisions. Municipality of María la Baja. The yellow line represents the main highway, which was often referenced as a geographical marker that labeled individuals working or living southeast of the line as complicit in the armed conflict. Modified from source: Google Maps, view of María la Baja.

Santi, a farmer in María la Baja, considered paramilitary profiling in relation to the main highway. As he reflected on the paramilitary-led threats, assassinations, and displacement that has affected his family, he interjected that "for the paramilitary, if you lived on that side of the road [pointing to the hills] you were a guerrilla." Santi, like many other farmers in the region, was born in the countryside and raised working on farms. That these farms happen to fall on the "wrong side of the road" meant that Santi's livelihood put his life at risk. The exaggerated connection between farmers and guerrilla fighters ultimately led farmers to become the largest civilian victim population

of the armed conflict. More troubling still, farmers must now stake their claim to victimhood on the basis of their rural, *campesino* identities. These are the same identities that provoked violence against them as supposed guerrillas in the first place.

Innocent Hands

To know a *campesino* is to know their hands.

Farmers in María la Baja often told me that you cannot fake the hands of a *campesino*. The strong, calloused, and warped fingers are a sure-fire way to distinguish a life-long *campesino* from a city-dweller. Even the farmer forcibly displaced by violence in the countryside carries the evidence of their livelihood in their hands. Over the course of my research, I became used to feeling hands as part of a subtle read on people's lives. At first meeting, men and women typically shook hands, which later evolved into embraces. Those handshakes told stories—the rough touch of the hand, firm grasp, and atrophied fingers stained with dirt were all part of a larger history about land, labor, pride, loss, and violence.

Care for hands is also wedded to farming life. When I had a jammed index finger from a pick-up basketball game, Señor Marco saw me struggle to open a bottle of water, and asked to see my hand. "I'm no doctor like you," he said with a small laugh, "but I know a thing or two about fixing hands." With my nod of approval, he set about feeling all of the ligaments, rotating the finger, and diagnosing the problem. Once he determined the issue, he swiftly moved the finger and popped it back into place so it could heal. He told me to take some string and tie it to the neighboring finger for the next week. When I asked Señor Marco how he learned to do this he just laughed and said it was part of being *campesino*.

I became even more alert to the importance of hands when I traveled one day to Cartagena with ASOCAAFRO members working to reclaim land that they lost to paramilitary violence in the early 2000s. We arrived at a government office to meet with their state-assigned lawyer. When I

shook the lawyer's hand, I hid the shock from my face with difficulty—his petite, pudgy, smooth white hand turned to mush in my grasp. I felt myself recoil slightly at the implications of this difference in hand and in lifestyle. Dressed in white linen with a gold watch, the lawyer flicked his shiny, fat fingers in the air as he explained "the law" to the group of *campesinos*. This encounter also reminded me of how smooth and soft my own hands must feel to most people, and what that may convey to people who shake my hand and thereby confirm their perceptions of my foreign, white, academic life. Beyond this tactile trace of lifestyle, I learned that hands were embodied evidence of dignity and innocence. They were the physical proof of a life spent working in fields, and not wielding weapons.

Miguel is a lifelong farmer. His tall and lanky figure is complimented by kind eyes and a pencil-thin mustache perched upon his youthful smile. During one of our first conversations, Miguel told me: "I don't know how to read or write, but I *capture* things that are going on." Miguel had ethnographic sensibilities—a knack for recalling the minute details of events and interactions. Akin to what Bianca Williams [Robinson] calls "everyday experts," Miguel offered his analyses of events and drew big conclusions about their deeper meaning (Robinson 2009, 16). He often regretted that, as a single man, he didn't have anyone to talk to at home. On days when his thoughts were swirling he would go out and walk to quiet down his mind. Perhaps in light of this, our encounters often turned from five minute exchanges to hour-long conversations. Miguel was eager to talk and I was eager to listen.

One day Miguel wanted to explain to me how it was that *campesinos* were treated and targeted by the paramilitaries in María la Baja. In the early 2000s, Pellito,[71] one of the local paramilitary AUC

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[71] Pellito is the nickname of the now deceased, main paramilitary leader in María la Baja.

bosses in the María la Baja region, approached Miguel at a local bar and accused him of being a guerrilla—an accusation that was also a threat against his life. According to Miguel, the basis of this threat was nothing other than the fact that Miguel's work as a farmer led him to the countryside, where it was considered likely that he was either an active or supportive guerrilla member. When Miguel countered Pellito by saying that he was only a farmer, Pellito decided to quiz him. He asked Miguel to tell him how many yucca you could plant in a hectare. Miguel carefully answered, accounting for the lay of the land, the possibility of lost crop and proper spacing. Pellito repeated the question with other local crops: corn and ñame. Again, Miguel responded in detail with his expert knowledge of farming. Finally, frustrated by the interrogation, Miguel thrusted his hands forward, challenging Pellito to feel his hands and then tell him that he was not a *campesino.* As he described this encounter, Miguel then thrusted his hands at me, shaking them in the air. They were scarred and gnarled. His fingers always seemed slightly curved from the work "with machete," as the grunt labor of farming was usually called. I reached out hesitantly to touch his hands, unsure if I was now playing the role of the paramilitary interrogator or just fulfilling Miguel's request that I, too, see and feel the proof of his innocence.

In this encounter, Miguel's contentious body nearly betrayed him. Pellito, now dead, was well-known in the community as a leader of the paramilitary AUC whose simple command could lead to a person's assassination. Miguel's work in the countryside, where the opposing FARC held their camps, made him subject to paramilitary scrutiny. Furthermore, farmers like Miguel who lacked money or their own land, were assumed to have more motivation to support the revolutionary goals of the guerrilla movement. But when Miguel's meticulous display of his knowledge of planting fields was not enough, he turned as a last resort to the very thing that made him a target in the first place: his body. Miguel sought to flip the paramilitary script, asking Pellito (and me) to explain how his

hands could look *like this* if not for his life-long dedication to his crops (Figure 5). These were not the hands of a soldier, and luckily for Miguel, Pellito recognized the difference.

Figure 5: Miguel's hands.

While the height of paramilitary and guerrilla fighting has subsided, the killings of two farmers discussed in the opening of this chapter clearly show that *campesino* lives are still under threat, though now from unknown sources. But beyond the threat of direct violence, Miguel and other farmers are coping with a new form of interrogation. Rather than facing an armed assassin, Maríalabajenses are confronting the emergence of victim reparations programs discussed in Chapter Two. These programs, though ostensibly representative of peace, carry out a mission that in many ways parallels Pellito's paramilitary accusation. That is, these reparation programs approach populations known to be caught in conflict zones and then request that individuals provide proof of their victimhood. Implicit in this request is that victims provide proof that they were not perpetrators of violence—that they did not deserve the violence brought upon them or their loved ones.

RACIALIZED VIOLENCE

"*Somos una comunidad negra,*" "We are a black community," Juan Pablo told me within the first

30 minutes of meeting him in the House of Culture of María la Baja in May 2014. María la Baja and

Maríalabajenses are often identified by their Afro-Colombian ethnic identity. In the most recent

census, more than 97% of the region's population self-identified as either Afro-descendent, Black, or

Palenquero (an identity linked to African populations that reclaimed their freedom from the Spanish

and have since maintained their own language) (DANE 2010). Throughout my research, individuals

and communities would ensure that I understood the importance of this claim to a Black identity in

Colombia generally and in relation to violence in particular. Maríalabajenses also highlight the ways

in which ethnicity was a fluid category that did not rely solely on perceptions of skin color. They

highlighted their African heritage as built into a way of life—a shared history of slavery and

marginalization, traditions, resistances, and the contemporary fight for rights as victims of

Colombia's armed conflict.

The conflict in Colombia requires attention to the ways in which violence has targeted ethnic

minority groups, especially Indigenous and Afro-descendent. Nevertheless, ethnicity-driven analyses

risk flattening complex regional histories into racial categories. Such oversimplified labels neither

help to understand experiences of violence nor reflect the diversity of people and histories

represented in regions such as María la Baja. Blackness, as expressed by Maríalabajenses, can be

better understood through Stuart Hall's call to re-think fixed notions of racialized subjects. Hall

asserts that this "entails a recognition that the central issues of race always appear historically in

articulation, in a formation, with other categories and divisions and are constantly crossed and

recrossed by the categories of class, of gender and ethnicity" (Hall 1989b, 201). Bringing this

concept to bear in Colombia, Eduardo Restrepo (2004) argues that "the ethnicization of black

political subjects and subjectivities must be understood as an ongoing process of the articulation of

blackness in Colombia that has established a specific relationship between territory, identity, cultural tradition, nature and otherness" (2004, 699). Theoretical endeavors to historicize and "shake up" racial essentialism are crucial to my analysis. This requires recognizing the cultural construction of race, while also attending to the ways in which race and racism continue to rear their heads in everyday politics and social interactions.

As Kaifa Roland (2013; 2017) has elucidated in the Cuban and U.S. context, race is a fluid and performed category. Despite this fluidity, Roland's ethnographic work on tourism in Post-Soviet Cuba demonstrates the ways in which racialized hierarchies continue to determine which bodies belong and which do not. For example, Roland tells the story of Javier, "a light-complexioned *mulato* with hazel eyes and dreadlocked hair" (2013, 210). After Javier waited for Roland outside of her hotel, she returned to find him detained by the police because they perceived his body to be out of place in this tourist district. Roland explains that "Javier's black(end) self-identification served to clarify his place as an outsider for tourism's gatekeepers" (2013, 411). Racialized violence in Colombia similarly demands attention to the racial contours of belonging, danger, and innocence. I seek to demonstrate how social constructions of Blackness(es) in Colombia—as associated with negative and undesirable behaviors—emerge in relation to historical constructions of class, place, and gender. This approach opens up concepts of race and ethnicity to broader physical, social and affective assemblages, while still attending firmly to shifting formations of racism.

Given the racialized contours of violence, it is unsurprising that national perceptions of rural farmers, guerrillas, and victims share an association with having darker complexions than urban city dwellers. The region of María la Baja, as a predominantly Afro-Colombian population, fits this broader perception. In this way, perceptions of both the farming occupation and skin complexion of many Maríalabajenses can provoke confusion as to whether or not they should be indexed as guerrillas or victims. While Miguel's daily labor in crop fields signaled his potential affiliation with

guerrillas, this next story of Victor and Emilio's experience in the city of Cartagena reveals this logic

in action beyond the geographic limits of María la Baja.

"You look like a Guerrilla"

"The police stopped me and Emilio in Cartagena last week," Victor yelled to me over the

whipping wind on the back of the motorcycle in early 2016. "What? Why?" I asked, wondering

under what circumstances two rural community leaders and college students would be stopped by

police during a visit to the bustling port city. Victor called back with a laugh, "Think about it! Two

young, black men…and Emilio with his long hair and beard!" I protested, "But what did the police

think?" Victor shouted through the humid wind, "They checked our *cédula* [Colombian ID] and then

told us we looked like *guerrilleros* [guerrilla fighters]." At that we both burst out laughing. The idea of

Victor and Emilio as guerrillas was absurd, but the reality of this profiling was not funny.

While Victor and Emilio have never had any involvement in the armed conflict, their

communities have most certainly been marked by fighting between guerrilla, paramilitary, and state

military groups. The dominant narrative within María la Baja asserts that the paramilitary groups

have caused the deepest harm in this region through massive displacement, massacres,

disappearances, and general terror.[72] The paramilitary often carried out this violence against the

civilian population based on accusations that their victims were guerrilla fighters or sympathizers.

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[72] Discourses around guerrilla, paramilitary, and military violence can vary greatly from region to region, and to a lesser extent within regions. As armed groups' strongholds varied across the country, so too did citizen perceptions of the "lesser of many evils." Grossly speaking, certain areas of the country experienced higher numbers and concentration of guerrilla-led violence, while other areas were dominated by paramilitary and military attacks. While María la Baja experienced guerrilla-, paramilitary-, and military-led violence, most academic and local analyses emphasize the paramilitary (and military by association) to be the primary source of violence against citizens. Within regions, personal economic or political affiliations often influence how people experience and later interpret violence. For example, a wealthier, land-owning, and lighter-skinned family in María la Baja often provided me with analyses of violence that countered the dominant narrative of the region to which I had grown accustomed given my academic and working class associations. They expressed their primary frustration with the guerrillas, and considered the paramilitary violence as an unfortunate but unavoidable consequence of the guerrilla actions. These sentiments are echoed more broadly by supporters of former President Álvaro Uribe, as discussed further in the Conclusion.

Thus, while we found the police accusation humorous, for many in María la Baja, like Miguel above, past accusations of "guerrilla" were potential death threats. After our initial laughter at the absurdity of the accusation, I pressed him further. "But why do you think they assumed you were guerrillas?" Victor's explanation was first "*ser negro,*" or for being black. He then added that it was about their dark complexion and maybe clothing as an indicator of their rural identity. This combination, skin color and rural class, is what Victor felt caused the police to stop them.

As we sped down the highway with me squeezed onto the back of the motorcycle, I looked left and right to see never-ending fields of African palm oil (Figure 6). Many inhabitants of María la Baja express that the influx of African palm is a constant visual and odorous reminder of the displacement caused by the paramilitary groups and the subsequent arrival of land investors to "legally" take their land. Those who reside on this land, work the land, or continue to fight for their stolen land are often still labeled as guerrillas. That is, labor and (dis)location on rural land in and of itself can be incriminating, as evidenced by the story of Miguel's hands.

Figure 6: African palm oil fields along the Caribbean highway in María la Baja.

But Victor and Emilio were not farmers, and they spent more time in community meetings and seminars than in the countryside. While native to this war-torn region, they were pursuing academic and political futures in the fallout of decades of violence. So, why, in the urban context of Cartagena, did the police slot Victor and Emilio as "guerrillas"? As Victor concluded, it was probably about perceptions of skin color and class. But in order to understand how these markers would lead the police to label them as guerrilla fighters, it is necessary to consider Victor and Emilio's bodies as complex intersections of identities that are misread during this encounter. It is through layered assumptions about the young, black, and landless peasant farmer, that a guerrilla revolutionary identity is considered viable. Similar to Javier in a Cuban tourist district, Victor and Emilio's bodies were read as structurally out of place and dangerous (Roland 2013). For Victor and Emilio, their profile led to an offensive, though ultimately inconsequential, police stop in 2016. This same layered identity is what has led to the assassination of thousands of *campesinos* around the country since the 1960s; it is what still supports threats against the life of farmers in María la Baja as recently as July 2016; and it is what continues to call into suspicion people's claim to victimhood.

In August of 2017, over a year later, I learned that Emilio's trouble with the police had continued. Cecilia, a local community activist, relayed tersely that Emilio faced routine, arbitrary police stops and profiling when he traveled through cities to the south of his rural village—cities known for racism against Afro-Colombians. Cecilia's analysis of Emilio's situation once again settled on the intersection between his black body, his rural origins, and his image as a leader who was fighting for community land rights. Profiling and policing of this sort may still rely on the term "guerrilla" to accuse individuals of improper behavior, despite the fact that guerrilla groups have not had a strong presence in María la Baja for decades. Furthermore, individuals such as Miguel, Victor, and Emilio were never accused of belonging to the paramilitary, even though the paramilitary troops in the region also included combatants, such as Pellito, who would be identified as Black. In this

way, the police officer's "guerrilla" reference was not so much about accusing these young men of armed revolution. Rather, it was about surveilling Victor and Emilio's contentious bodies as they represented the new perceived threat to economic and political power (see Roland 2017). While the guerrillas may have represented this threat in decades past, I posit that today these threats have shapeshifted, embodied by people like Emilio and Victor who seek social change through un-armed activism and community empowerment. Contrary to the promises of victim-citizenship discussed in Chapter Two, this racialized policing echoes Christen Smith's understanding of limited Black citizenship in Brazil, where "the biopolitical practices of subjectification occur in order to pacify and control black bodies but not necessarily assimilate them into the nation-state" (2016, 80).

THE GENDER OF INNOCENCE

Studies of Colombia's conflict and resolution process often adopt a gender-neutral stance. Yet, a gendered analysis not only highlights varied experiences with violence, but also reveals how peace and reconciliation processes carry presumptions about the relationship between gender and the perpetrator–victim binary. A statistical review of the conflict reveals that it has been male-dominated—both in terms of combatants and civilian fatalities. Paramilitary groups presented the lowest estimated number of females in their ranks at 2-4%, while guerrilla groups enlisted more women, representing an estimated 30% of the FARC combatants (Tate 2007, 54). Of the estimated 218,000 individuals killed between 1958 and 2012 due to the conflict, 81% were non-combatant civilians. Still, male casualties far outweigh female, with men representing approximately nine out of every ten deaths (GMH 2013). Males have typically been targeted by assassinations due to their presumed or invented connections to opposing combatant groups. This is particularly evident in the case of "false positives" in which the Colombian military killed innocent young men, transported them to combat zones, and dressed them in guerrilla fatigues. While women are underrepresented in statistics on violence resulting in death, they are affected by other forms of violence, such as sexual

violence and displacement. Additionally, women have often been left as the sole bread-winners of their families due to the murder of male family members (GMH 2013; Meertens 2001).

In 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1325, directed at the inclusion of women in peacekeeping and conflict resolution strategies (Bell and O'Rourke 2011). Echoing these international measures, Colombian reconciliation work conducted by the National Center for Historical Memory and the Victims' Unit devote subsections of their research and services to gender-based issues. Importantly, this work argues that violence against women cannot be seen as merely a byproduct of war, but instead should be analyzed as a systematic strategy of war. Further, this research recognizes that as survivors of violence, women play a crucial role the conflict resolution process (GMH 2010b, 2011a, 2011b, 2012). The relatively new attention to women in transitional justice and conflict resolution literature is necessary and yet still underrepresented in truth commissions (Bell and O'Rourke 2011). Nevertheless, the "gender" work produced by international and Colombian organizations primarily equates *gender* with *female victim* and *gendered violence* to be *sexual*.

In her work on the Peruvian Truth Commission and with demobilized combatants in Colombia, anthropologist Kimberly Theidon argues that gender cannot simply serve as a synonym for "women" (Theidon 2009, 2013). In the Colombian context, Theidon uses ethnographic research with primarily male demobilized paramilitary and guerrilla combatants to "examine the salient links between weapons, masculinities, and violence" (2009, 2). Thus, rather than view men as a neutral gender category, Theidon emphasizes the importance of understanding how violence forms around the performance of masculinity. Analyses of female combatants, in contrast, often emphasize the contradictory or "double-sided" experience of negotiating femininity in a predominantly masculine sphere (Bayard de Volo 2018; Lara 2000; Meertens 2001) and the rigorous gendered assumptions

that define the terms of demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) campaigns and protocols (Theidon 2009).

In written reports by the National Center for Historical Memory, masculinity is not fully omitted from the discussion. Reports acknowledge the ways in which violence and displacement have altered traditional masculine roles. Additionally, the experience of bearing witness to violence enacted on the bodies of female kin are seen as explicit efforts to "emasculate" men in their inability to prevent such harm (GMH 2011a, 2013). These analyses take important steps to acknowledge the breadth of the gendered impacts of violence. However, the overwhelming predominance of narratives focusing on female victims as well as the strong presence of female actors in the search for justice and peace, also limits the national, legal/political possibility of seeing men as victim-survivors of conflict. Yet if women are overrepresented as the bearers of memory and mourning, they are underrepresented in the realm of political negotiations.[73] This is not to say that women are absent from public debates; they are active and present. Still, gendered ideas about proper ways to mourn, protest, and organize, have often decentered female voices—especially if they are seen as too angry, emotional, or aggressive. On the other hand, women who are known to be more outspoken are often targeted by death threats, receiving similar treatment as their male counterparts who are accused of being guerrillas. Sara's story illustrates this gendered double-standard.

"Revolutionary"

Before I ever met Sara, I was told that she was known in María la Baja as a *revolucionaria*—a female fighter for revolution—and also a trouble-maker. She lived up to this description. Short black hair streaked with bright-colored dye contrasts against Sara's caramel complexioned face. Her

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[73] In Colombia, the public circulation of women's stories often emphasize loss and mourning over stories of action in combat or otherwise. In a similar vein, McGranahan (2010) proposes the concept of "narrative dispossession," in which female combatants from the Tibetan resistance army were limited in their ability to express their stories of war due to political, gendered, and classed constraints.

occasional smile is offset by piercing eyes that are typically buried under a furrowed brow. I learned

to speak with care around Sara, as she was prone to assume that people were out to take advantage

of her or do her physical harm. This was especially apparent during meetings with government or

NGO workers, where her attitude in a room let people know that she was ready to fight, regardless

of their supposedly good intentions. Conversations with Sara were also unpredictable and her voice

usually projected a raspy whisper, which was paradoxically also on the verge of passionate yelling.

Sara grew up in *el monte* (the rural countryside), and lived through the formation of the guerrilla

groups and the subsequent entrance of the paramilitary in the larger region of Montes de María. She

emphasized that the paramilitary was the main source of violence and destruction in the region, and

on a personal level, Sara rightly blamed the paramilitary for her forced displacement, the death of

her partner, and subsequent threats against her life due to her public activism for numerous victim

communities.

On the day of our scheduled interview in May 2016, I arrived by moto-taxi to Sara's

neighborhood with two pieces of sweetbread. When I approached the house, there was coastal

vallenato music bellowing from the front door, but the white and gold metal fence was still locked

shut, sealing in her aqua blue house. When Sara emerged, she welcomed me and in the same breath

declared that our conversation would be interrupted by weekend duties: laundry and peeling

mangoes to make juice for her grandson. Her short-cut hair was tucked away under a loose knit hat,

but I could see that the grey-streaks had been recently dyed bright pink.

At one point during our conversation, Sara started talking about her relationship with José,

the Departmental Director of one of the regional government institutions for victims. Sara knew

José because she was a go-to source on the geography of the region, where multiple municipalities

have been peppered with decades of overlapping guerrilla and paramilitary violence. In areas where

municipality lines are unclear, Sara has often used natural landmarks to help government officials

like José draw the invisible borderlines that help determine cases of stolen land during the conflict.

During one encounter she had with him, José said to Sara in half-jest: "were you a guerrilla?" Sara

explained that he asked this because "I know." "I know all of *el monte* like the palm of my hand," she

asserted. Then she explained that since she was a child, she had traveled those paths with her father,

working on farms here and there. During her childhood, Sara remembered with some excitement

that the guerrillas came to give talks about agrarian reform and farmers' rights. But she was also

adamant that she had not participated in any way as a guerrilla fighter, and expressed frustration

about José's joke.

In order to emphasize the pain of his "playful" accusation, Sara told me more about her

displacement: "When the paramilitaries came to displace us from our house, they handed guns to my

children as a test. They told the children to arm and disarm the gun in order to see if they had been

trained by the guerrillas." After a pause, Sara shouted "They had never touched a gun in their lives,

Dani!" shaking her head at the thought. Then, as if to give *me* the final proof of her innocence, she

stuck out her thumbs: "look at these callouses!" On the top of her thumb joint, just below her nail,

the skin was slightly deformed and rough. I touched it lightly. "That is from milking cows" she said,

showing me the motion of her technique to explain the placement of her permanent marks. Just as

Miguel put out his hands for me and for his interrogation with the paramilitary leader, Sara showed

me her thumbs with defiance and a certain amount of pride, offering proof that her life in *el monte*

was dignified by hard labor, not guerrilla fighting.

In many ways, Sara's encounter with José is indicative again of the conflation between

campesino knowledge and guerrilla sentiments. The fact that this accusation, even if joking, came from

a regional director of an office working on conflict resolution, further demonstrates that these

categorical stereotypes have not diminished with the transition to peace politics. Rather, the same

signifiers used to criminalize the rural population during the peak of guerrilla and paramilitary

violence continue to inform the logic of peacebuilding. Despite the obvious parallels to the stories of Miguel, Victor, and Emilio, Sara's story is also rare in that such accusations were typically applied to men. Sara's commitment to activism, justice, and victims' rights is well-known, as is her fiery personality. These traits contribute to the formation of her contentious body as one that strains the limits of acceptable female victimhood. Sara continues to feel the threat of armed actors in the area who have made death threats against her and her family. It is because of these threats, Sara explained with exasperation, that her house is surrounded by a ten-foot tall metal gate. Yet, Sara's unwillingness to "shut up," as she puts it, has also led government officials to question her innocence.

CONCLUSION—THE DAY OF THE FARMER, DEATH THREATS, AND LEAVING *EL MONTE*

Several days after the deaths of the two farmers in María la Baja in June 2016, I traveled to a small farm just on the outskirts of María la Baja's municipal center. I arrived early for a meeting with ASOCAAFRO and found Gerardo, one of the leaders, seated under the palm thatch roof looking off into the plantain trees just beyond the patio. When I entered, Gerardo feigned a warm welcome, "Oye, Daniela!" But his beaming smile and dimples were overshadowed by sad, distant eyes that told a different story. "What are you thinking about?" I asked. He looked up at me and slowly expressed the pain he felt over the farmers' deaths. "*No se metían con nadie*, They never bothered anyone," Gerardo sighed heavily shaking his head. "It makes you feel so impotent; *me entiendes*, you get me? It's as if just going to *el monte* (the countryside) is a risk to your life." He paused and then repeated, "they never bothered anyone."

Though he did not say it in that moment, Gerardo's concern was also linked to his own safety as a leader of ASOCAAFRO, a group of farmers fighting a controversial land battle. As outlined in Chapter Four, this claim was steeped in histories of drug traffickers, paramilitary soldiers, and corrupt politicians. Their land case was highly sensitive; it had already provoked a kidnapping

and numerous death threats against his life as well as those of several group members. If the two assassinated farmers "never bothered anyone," then what could happen to someone like Gerardo who was accused of guerrilla tendencies and stirring up trouble for elite land owners? As he had done before, Gerardo decided with his family that he should lay low and avoid *el monte*. Indeed, a day later, he confided that he had received another death threat and was told that he "had the face of a guerrilla." He turned to me with a forced laugh, "what does that mean? They say it's my face, but what?" he asked, running his hand down the length of his forearm as a silent indication that perhaps it was the dark color of his skin (see Roland 2011). Regardless of the answer, he was looking into rooms to rent in the nearby port city of Cartagena, to distance himself from the dangers of *el monte* and being an *Afro-campesino*, at least for a while.

Life in a conflict zone is never black and white. It is messy and chaotic. From a distance, the conflict in Colombia can appear to be simply a conflict between leftist insurgents and conservative counter-insurgents. In small towns, however, these oversimplified divisions fracture into a jigsaw puzzle. The way things fit together is constantly shapeshifting and often appears to be contradictory. The reality is that *campesinos* often end up a casualty of the insurgent movement that claims to protect their livelihood. Alternatively, *campesino*s may end up fighting for the opposition, the counter-insurgents, taking orders from wealthy land owners and politicians. Or yet again, the farmer may try to walk the tightrope between these groups. Regardless, the reality is that the distinctions between left–right; insurgent–counter-insurgent; innocent–guilty; and victim–perpetrator are never clear. In a contact zone and a conflict zone, innocence is an ideal but it is rarely a reality. Even those who managed to avoid direct involvement in warfare could be enveloped in its grasp.

If it happened to these two men, then it could happen to anyone. This was the sentiment that hung in the air in every conversation in María la Baja over the weeks following the killings. There was no explanation for the two farmers' deaths, and there was little hope that justice or clarity

would ever come. Even without these details, this gruesome violence against two fellow *campesinos*, sent a shock wave through the community. The farmers' deaths represented more than just ever-present violence, it represented the constant threat against a way of life and the historic and systematic extermination of that lifestyle with no objection from the authorities supposedly there to protect them. These deaths, two of many assassinations without justice, put into focus the dangers for people who embrace life as farmers in rural Colombia. In particular, it highlights the life and death stakes of adequately displaying your innocence and victimhood, both during more intensive past violence and today featuring new actors using old tactics. While guilt and innocence are difficult to pinpoint in a war zone, they serve as the bedrock of conflict resolution. Citizens are filtered through the bureaucratic system as either a victim or a perpetrator, with little room for teasing out the complexity of living and surviving in a conflict zone.

At the height of violence in the early 2000s, there were no viable recourses available. During that time, people like Miguel were forced to use their bodies to assert their innocence in the face of accusations that they were guerrillas. Since 2011 new laws have provided legal frameworks to declare victimhood. Still, bodily enactments continue to define peoples' relationship to violence, as their legitimate claim to victimhood is often tied to perceptions of their bodies.

Nora's Visit

In December 2015, Nora visited me in María la Baja for the annual Bullerengue festival. During the five days of the festival, Bullerengue music groups of 10-20 people arrive from around the region to compete, take workshops, and party. The festival was the only time that I ever saw a handful of foreign tourists in María la Baja. In addition to regional visitors, small groups of journalists, students, and tourists from the capital and other large Colombian cities arrived to take in the spectacle. In this setting, Nora was just one more outsider in the crowd, and I thought that was an appropriate time for her to make the trip. Nora is Swiss-born, but her family and life has been firmly rooted in Colombia—mostly in Bogotá—for the past 35 years. Still, her white skin, blonde hair, and affiliation with me made her foreignness more pronounced in María la Baja. As we walked around the town and attended the festivities, María la Baja had an unusual atmosphere with music and drink taking over the town. In my mind, that she was visiting during this weekend would provide a distraction from day-to-day life in María la Baja so that I wouldn't have to explain "how things are" to a visitor. I had assumed the festival would be my cover. I was mistaken.

Within 24 hours of her arrival, Nora whispered to me with exasperation… "*está pesado*" – "it's heavy." By this, Nora meant that she felt a heaviness over the town and in her interactions with people. Over the next couple of days, Nora repeated her observations often. She pointed out the immense poverty, the lack of a sewage system with brackish waters running down the street, and the unidentifiable tension in the air. She framed her observations in relation to my research and asked me how I was coping with living in María la Baja. I felt dismayed and slightly shocked by her concern. Nothing Nora had observed was new to me. I had spent several months in María la Baja at that point. But with the mindset of staying in María la Baja for many months to come, I had absorbed some of the shock of the place; I leaned into the day-to-day, normalizing the rough edges

and calibrating my emotions. Nora's visit forced me to confront the edges I had been smoothing over. Why was she so uncomfortable? What did she see that I wasn't seeing? In the end, I don't think that we saw María la Baja differently, but that because Nora came for three days, she could let her emotions carry her. I came with the intention of staying for a longer period of time, and so I tempered my reactions to mimic that of the people around me. I constantly recalibrated to develop a different set of parameters for gauging danger, conflict, banter, and paranoia.

Nora not only felt the weight of María la Baja, she felt the heaviness of one of my main contacts. Within a day she concluded that he was keeping tabs on us everywhere we went, and she asked me if I felt safe with him. Rather than feeling protected, she felt like he wanted to control what image she would take away from his town. Some of this paranoia was too much for me, but I recognized an element of truth in Nora's feelings. I had learned about the complex political and paramilitary connections that still lurked behind the scenes. Still, I was upset by Nora's observations because they forced me to think about these issues in a way that I had been avoiding.

Since that visit, every time I saw Nora, usually once or twice a year, she wanted to talk about María la Baja. Her visit made a strong impact and she was eager to recall the sights and sounds, and the palpable tension that crawled under her skin. The intensity of María la Baja was also inspiring for Nora as an artist and activist. She has drawn maps of the layout of the town from memory and asks me to help her fix her errors—the name of the bread shop on the corner, the layout of the plaza, the location of the moto-taxis, the street with the gated homes. She recalled details, like the bicycle carriage taxi that was decorated with old CDs for reflectors. I engaged, grateful to talk with someone who cares so much about my place of research. At the same time, these interactions pluck at a deep-set anxiety around how to represent María la Baja. Surely it is more than heaviness, corruption, and poverty. Yet, without Nora's perspective, I might have taken my narrative in the other direction— romanticizing a town full of people working hard and trying to make a better life. Would I write out

the conflict and paranoia that lurks? Would I smooth edges to the point of removing complex truths?

Looking back at my fieldnotes from Nora's visit, I was surprised that I have almost no record of these feelings. I wrote long passages about *feeling* my whiteness and foreignness in a more pronounced way while she was with me. But the only record of her perceptions and how they unsettled me is in a short list, jotted down like raw poetry in pencil so light it was as if I hoped to eventually erase it from my notebook and my memory.

> *Talk with Nora*
> *First impressions*
> *Tense*
> *Being watched*
> *Uncomfortable*
> *Very nice…but [she] couldn't do it…*

CONCLUSION
Writing Visibility and Invisibility

When I initiated my research in Colombia in 2012, I thought that my project would be about art created by people affected by the conflict. Instead, what I found was that art was just one element of a larger phenomenon—the persistent need to "make oneself visible" or "*visibilizarse*" in the context of victimhood and reparations. Across my early research in Bogotá—with the National Center for Historical Memory—and later in María la Baja with numerous communities and organizations, I followed the twists and turns of visibility. I tracked the promise of visibility and the creative ways communities tried to make their histories visible in order to access their legal rights to reparations. I also registered the dangers of visibility, as it can result in violence against the individuals who fight for their rights or whose bodies are visible in the wrong ways. Additionally, my research traced the fatigue communities and individuals endured as they managed their visibility and the message it carried to observers within and outside of their reach.

Implicit in this layered analysis of visibility is its opposite: invisibility. Over the past decade, politicians, academics, and NGOs celebrate the fact that the current political environment has generated a platform for victims to tell their stories to a national public. Victims' stories, faces, and art are widely circulated in museums, galleries, on national stages, and in popular and academic publications. Still, for all of the dedication to make victimhood visible, this process has generated new silences in the narratives of conflict and peace. During my research, I tried to capture these invisible moments—the processes that would likely never make it into a newspaper article or on the stage of a national event. I tracked the promises and pitfalls of visibility across the bureaucracy of declaring victimhood and claiming reparations (Chapter Two); the aesthetic process to create and circulate visual registers of victimhood (Chapter Three); the role of collective memories and narratives of violence (Chapter Four); and the danger confronted by Afro-*campesinos* due to their

contentious bodies (Chapter Five). Throughout each of these topics, I provided numerous stories in order to show the diversity of experiences and inequalities that exist within the region of María la Baja. Nevertheless, my work has its own "bundle of silences" (Trouillot 1995, 27), as I have struggled to determine which stories to tell and how to tell them. The ethnographic and writing process is a constant game of framing and cropping that creates order out of complex layers and chaos. By way of conclusion, I offers some reflections about the visibility and invisibility in the research and writing process—the pieces that remain invisible or obscured in the portrait I have constructed.

ONE EVENT—THREE STORIES

On a typical hot and humid day in June 2016 in the displaced town of Mampuján, María la Baja, I joined a group of women and one man for the beginning of a three-day workshop on community-based therapy. The workshop was led by Juana Alicia Ruiz Hernández and the group, *Mujeres Tejedoras de Mampuján* (Women Weavers of Mampuján), who were awarded the Colombian National Peace Prize of 2015 just seven months earlier for their community building and healing through quilted tapestries. In this particular workshop, leaders of the quilting practice sought to teach regional community leaders the method as a means of therapy so that they could replicate the technique in their own communities. Just as the workshop was about to begin, four local police officers from Mampuján arrived and asked to take photos with the group for a National Police publication (Figure 1). The officers cited their long-standing relationship with the community, and the women's group in particular in order to justify their request.

Figure 1: National Police stationed in Mampuján with the group of Women Weavers of Mampuján and their *tapices*.

This event, though seemingly insignificant, features layered stories. Similar to Margery Wolf's *A Thrice-Told Tale*: *Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility* (1992), I am interested in deconstructing the multiple interpretations that a single event can provoke for all involved, including the ethnographer. In order to explore both the complexity of this particular moment and the limits of ethnographic knowledge production, I offer three versions of what happened during this event.

Story One

The final photos of the police officers surrounding the women quilters displays the promise

of peace and reconciliation (Figure 2). After decades of tense or non-existent relationships between

the most rural communities and the Colombian state, the photos demonstrate the new human face

of the state and the possibilities of reestablishing trust, even in a community terrorized by years of

armed violence. Mampuján, and these women in particular, not only represent Colombia's 2015

National Peace Prize in this photo, but also a community that is known for their decision to forgive

the paramilitary leaders that orchestrated their displacement, based on the community's strong

Evangelical faith (see Chapter Four).
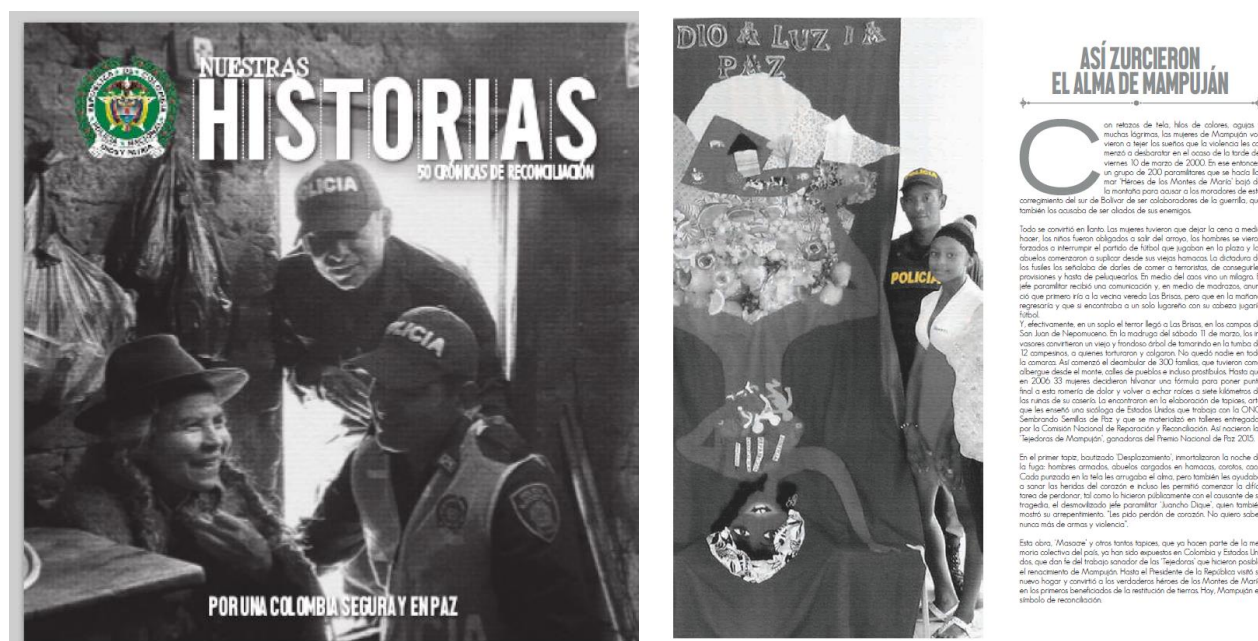
Figure 2: National Police publication. **Left**—Front cover of the National Police book "Our Histories: 50 Chronicles of Reconciliation." **Right—**Page 43 of "Our Histories" includes a cropped version of the photo taken at the workshop in June 2016 with the women in Mampuján. The short article that accompanies the photo is titled: "This is how they Patched the Soul of Mampuján." The final line of the article reads: "Today, Mampuján is a symbol of reparation." Source: (Policía Nacional de Colombia 2016).

Story Two

The night before the workshop, people from Mampuján protested and blocked the main

highway next to the town due to months of power outages in the community. After several hours of

protest, the Colombian Anti-Riot Police (*Escuadrones Moviles Anti-Disturbios*—ESMAD) descended on

the mostly sleeping community at midnight, and began throwing tear gas into the neighborhood and beating people indiscriminately. As the tear gas filled people's homes, young men quickly transported children and elderly people away from Mampuján on overloaded motorcycles. The next day, when local police officers approached the group of National Peace Prize winners to take photographs for the National Police publication, it added insult to injury. Later that afternoon at a community-called meeting with police and human rights defenders, leaders in Mampuján expressed their dismay at the police and anti-riot team reaction, calling it a repetition of violence and trauma in a community that supposedly is guaranteed by law "*la no repetición*" (no repetition).

Story Three

The three-day workshop consisted of about 14 women and one man, all from rural areas within the broader region of Los Montes de María. For almost a decade, several women from the Women Weavers of Mampuján have traveled around Colombia conducting therapy workshops with communities affected by the conflict. Realizing the power this work had for their own healing, the women developed workshops incorporating massage, sewing, testimony, water therapy, and cooking to address individual and communal trauma. During the three-day workshop participants shared traumatic experiences and we grieved collectively. We also learned to quilt and make blackberry sauce, we ate ice cream as it melted all over our hands in the hot sun, we played games in the nearby lake, and we exchanged arm, leg, and back massages in the shallow warm water (Figures 3, 4, and 5). The women-centered space set a particular tone for discussing sexual and domestic abuse, the changing labor of women after displacement, and the joy of having a break from domestic and other duties to play in the water. The workshop did not fit a narrative of only past trauma, or healing, or reconciliation. It settled uncomfortably in a space where overlapping experiences of trauma—some from childhood and other's ongoing—were neither labeled as solved nor as unsurpassable.

Figure 3: Learning how to make blackberry jam.

Figure 4: Workshop participant working on her quilting project.

Figure 5: Playing in the water and exchanging massages.

Stories and Silences

Narratives are necessarily limited in their ability to capture social complexity. While the first story rightfully recognizes the accomplishments of these women as peace-builders, it fails to show the tension behind the photo and terse looks that preceded and replaced the smiles caught on camera. The second story of police violence and intervention correctly highlights the ongoing, though shapeshifting, forms of violence that rural communities experience. Still, this story also flattens years of community rebuilding into a story of re-victimization.

But perhaps there is more that can seep out from the cracks of the first two stories—where the photo meets the aftermath of police violence. In that moment, the women chose a different path. The women, with their eyes down and pursed lips, conveyed "we'll let you take the picture, but we're going to talk later about what happened." This decision, agreeing to the publicity stunt, was not naïve. Rather, it was a choice that many victims repeatedly make when they weigh the benefit of participating in peace-building propaganda against the fatigue from being "used" by the government and NGOs as a face of successful reconciliation.

The story that is almost overlooked entirely is the point of the workshop in the first place—a community-led workshop that sought to disseminate healing practices to regional leaders. While the quilting and therapy work was formed due to the traumas inflicted by the armed conflict, the workshop opened the space to broad discussions of childhood abuse, neglect, family conflict and loss. The story of the workshop reveals how communities combat multiple forms of violence and generate peace at the community level. The workshop did not seek to fit the participants' stories within the framework of the armed conflict. Rather—like their own quilting projects—it approached memory and pain as fluid, as sentiments that do not start and stop according to the dates dictated by laws and institutions.

The therapeutic techniques were also linked to local and ethnic sensibilities. Women related the sewing project to the patchwork sheets that their mothers and grandmothers made, something they pointed to as a defining object in Black communities. The water therapy and massage brought the women to swim in a nearby body of water, the symbolism of which was not lost on participants who saw it as a return to the land, to "*el monte*"—a space previously stigmatized by the paramilitary groups as guerrilla territory. It was also a return to water, a source of local pride and part of a territorial legacy for Afro-Colombian communities that recognize waterways as escape routes from enslavement and the water-rich land as a testament to the genius of their African ancestors who settled in these territories.[74]

The events of June 2016 are just a few examples of workshops, meetings and cycles of violence that communities manage. Nevertheless, these events represent the complex landscape of reconciliation that includes past and present violence. Each of the stories offers a slice of "truth," and one can imagine the role of each story in a national narrative. One is the history of successful

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[74] While the African palm oil has made much of the water in María la Baja toxic for drinking and bathing, on this particular day we enjoyed the fresh water without much thought about these potential hazards.

reconciliation between the state and communities, one speaks to the fragility of peace given the infrastructural instability and state violence that continue to affect civilian populations, and the last portrays a vision of grassroots healing and reconstruction. Together, the three stories highlight the complex process of generating peace in communities that continue to face new forms of violence.

As I have emphasized throughout this dissertation, Mampuján is an exception in the region of María la Baja for its recognition at national and international levels. Despite Mampuján's fame and community activism, they still have yet to receive the full benefits promised by their reparations sentence. On the other hand, there are many other communities and organizations that I have discussed that have little to no contact with the state. While Mampuján struggles to manage institutional propaganda, other communities are fighting just to find a way to be seen and heard. Still others are negotiating the dangers of their contentious bodies that provoke doubt about their role as perpetrators or victims of conflict.

These three stories also highlight the fact that the ethnographic process is never linear or free from blinders. When I re-read my fieldnotes about the days around the workshop, I witnessed the way my own vision of the workshop was eclipsed by the scandal of the police brutality and the publicity photo. While I wrote at length about the implications of cyclical state violence and public relations campaigns, my notes offered little analytical thought or reflection about the workshop itself. Here, I have presented multiple versions of the event in order to resist the tendency to search for clean narratives. The police violence does not remove the importance and power of the workshop, and the workshop cannot erase the reality of ongoing violence. The uncomfortable coexistence of these dichotomous events is a defining feature of partial peace in Colombia; yet, it is a reality that is rarely publicized. In what follows, I reflect further on the narrative tropes that have influenced my research.

VICTIMHOOD BEYOND THE VICTIMS' LAW, REPAIR BEYOND REPARATIONS

In 2013, Joel Robbins proposed that anthropology's gaze had settled on the "suffering slot," a new formation of "Other" that he argues replaced Trouillot's "savage slot" (1991). While Robbins references a trend that goes back to the 1990s, a focus on suffering and marginalization continues to define much current ethnographic research. My research, in many ways, fits this trend. Yet, in Colombia, anthropologists do not have a monopoly on the margins, as national institutions are looking to collect victims' narratives for national display. A decade ago in Colombia, it was still rather novel to hear a more extensive testimony from a victim of the conflict, and it was groundbreaking when in 2006 a Colombian government institution set out to reconstruct the histories of so-called emblematic cases of violence, such as high-profile massacres. In that moment, raw, Taussig-esque stories of state terror and violence were revelatory in and of themselves. At present, victims' stories of violence have become central to empathetic and affective projects that aim to achieve peace in a divided country exhausted by a seemingly endless war.

My research in Colombia occurred during a moment of heightened state institutional involvement in María la Baja. Encounters with state representatives, workshops, office visits, and bureaucratic forms were a normalized part of victimhood experiences. Due to this context, the focus of my research was drawn into the uneven and haphazard connections that exist between victim communities and the legal frameworks that aim to recognize victims and provide reparations. In particular, I have focused on the impacts of the 2011 Victims' Law and the process of individual and collective reparations. While these processes and frameworks were at the forefront of my conversations and interactions with communities, I also recognized that the relatively recent influence of the Victims' Law obscures deeper histories of resistance and communal reparations and reconciliation that long pre-date the arrival of such legal frameworks. Unlike governmental programs that often view peace as the opposite of war, community organizers tend to consider peace and

violence as two sides of the same coin. As such, communities developed strategies to confront and minimize violence that has long been a defining element of their communities. Peace may still be the end goal, but these efforts—in contrast with governmental programs—strive to combat long-term violence in its acute and systematic forms.

In this context, producing ethnographic knowledge demands reflection not only about the implications it may have for individuals who shared their story, but also in terms of the broader narrative strokes that are being co-produced from and about the margins.

Community Leaders, Faith, and Invisible Labor

The Door that is Never Closed

Sometimes there are people that, despite all of their impact, remain under-recognized. Cecilia's laugh will always be one of the first things that I think of when I recall my time in María la Baja. I spent more time in her house than in almost any other single location in María la Baja. Her house was a trusted space for people looking for advice and support, as Cecilia was known as a long-time source of guidance, dating back to her work with the Catholic Church in the 1990s and 2000s. During this time, it was the grassroots work of local activists under María la Baja's Father Salvador that was first on the scene to help communities coping with violence and displacement. Cecilia's work is no longer linked explicitly to the church, but she continues to dedicate her life and energy to improving the lives of Maríalabajenses struggling to reclaim land or to better their lives. She works with women, farmers, displaced communities, youth, religious organizations and with the local Advisory Council for Black Communities (*Consejo Comunitario*).

Cecilia's role in the community is akin to Sister Elizabeth, a school teacher and community mediator in the Kingston neighborhood where Faye Harrison (1991) conducted her early field research. Harrison describes Sister Elizabeth's many hats in the community and the school where she worked as "a sanctuary in what was otherwise a war zone or a 'no man's land'" (1991, 93). Similar to Harrison, my affiliation with Cecilia helped signal to communities across María la Baja that

my interests were grounded in the community and that I was trustworthy. More importantly, she has been a role model for me, showing me how to conduct ethnographic fieldwork with a mind toward political change from the ground up. I often sat in awe as she held informal "office hours" where people passed by to seek her insights—high school kids would arrive to interview Cecilia about her life of service, women entrepreneurs sought her out as a source of support and guidance, people struggling to understand letters from the Victims' Unit would bring their documents for her to review, and others would simply stop by to chat and catch up on the latest gossip. As a trusted space for people in the community, I also borrowed the first floor of her two-story house to conduct interviews in front of a fan at a plastic table. On some occasions Cecilia and I would work late into the evening on legal cases and testimonies. Other nights, the electricity would cut and we would talk for hours—mixing news from yesterday with histories from her childhood and peaks of violence that took place twenty years earlier. Cecilia's house was a reminder of the longevity of community-based work that preceded the government interventions and bureaucracy that were at the forefront of contemporary issues around victimhood.

In this dissertation, I am aware of the narratives I constructed in order to communicate particular stories about victimhood and conflict in Colombia. Specifically, I focused on the contact between communities and the institutions that are supposed to serve them. These relationships—while very present in my everyday experiences and conversations in María la Baja—cannot replace the fact that other forms of reconciliation, peace-making, and re-building have preceded and will most likely replace the intensity of state interventions that I witnessed during my research. The spaces where the state does not reach or where the stories are not circulated are not lost in a vacuum; they are folded into these informal structures of guidance and grassroots work.

The plastic table and chairs behind Cecilia's open door is the office that is never closed. When people have traveled an hour by motorcycle to go to the Office for Victims' Attention only to

find the door locked shut for whatever reason, they seek out people like Cecilia. She may not have

the institutional power to resolve their problems, but she had a pitcher of cold water and a thermos

of sweetened coffee ready to serve anyone who walked through her door. Her open door offered

visitors a moment to rest their feet and refresh themselves—physically and mentally—before they

headed out to face the hot sun and the next errand.

Si Dios Quiere

Religious faith is palpable across life in María la Baja. Whether the simple turn of phrase "*si*

Dios quiere" – God willing, the religious processions following a death, or the weekly Catholic Mass

and Evangelical services, religion permeates social relations and divisions. The Catholic church in

María la Baja was the primary source of humanitarian aid during the peak of violence in the zone at a

time when the Colombian state had limited official presence.[75] Italian priest, Father Salvador Muro,

led efforts to re-locate and support displaced communities with new plots of land along the sides of

the highway and around the urban center of María la Baja. The Evangelical church has also played

an important role in defining how communities contemplate their pasts and futures. For example,

Mampuján—known for their predominant Evangelical faith—understands their displacement and

salvation through their faith in God. Additionally, *Sembrando Paz,* a regional organization out of

Sincelejo, Sucre—has worked extensively with Mampuján with a shared faith in Evangelical and

Mennonite religious teachings.

While the force of these religious institutions is less evident with the introduction of the

institutional and legal infrastructure around victimhood, the foundation of community-based

movements is still firmly grounded in such religious sensibilities. For example, ASOCAAFRO

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[75] The Catholic church has played various roles across Colombia. As mentioned in Chapter One, in some regions, the influence of liberation theology made the church and priests a source of revolutionary rhetoric that sometimes transformed into armed revolution. In María la Baja, I was told that a former Catholic priest was exiled from the community for his sermons that sympathized with the plight of farmers and therefore aligned with guerrilla ideologies. In other communities, the Catholic church has served as a space of hope or a sanctuary, though not always successfully (GMH 2010a).

meetings often began and ended with a short reading from the bible and a prayer. Commemorations of massacres and displacements were also typically accompanied by a religious service in which the priest would weave together narratives that honored the dead and spoke of constructing peace. In this way, religiosity has also played an important role in national discourses about intersecting themes in conflict resolution and biblical teachings, including redemption, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

That these religious institutions do not feature prominently in the chapters of this dissertation is a product of multiple factors. First, the institutional presence of the Colombian government in recent years has partially replaced the role of the church as the first line of humanitarian response. During my research, I did not witness the direct interventions of religious institutions. Rather, religious sentiments were folded into the institutional processes of reconciliation and reparations; that is, they were part of the broader cultural landscape. Second, there is a growing division in María la Baja between Catholics and Evangelicals. Like most of Latin America, the Catholic Church has been the principal religious institution in Colombia since colonization. In recent decades, however, the introduction of Evangelical churches across Latin America has challenged the former's predominance. In the context of María la Baja, the introduction of Evangelical churches has also generated some tensions around local religious practices. For example, mourning and burial practices that unite Catholic and African traditions are not supported by the Evangelical church. Such divisions made religion a more sensitive topic, and so I did not actively pursue conversations about religion. Finally, my own limited religious background undoubtedly hindered my attention to this element of life. During my research, I attended Catholic mass and Evangelical sermons, and I participated in group prayers. Nevertheless, I recognize that my sensitivity to these practices was muted in comparison to my focus on non-religious institutional meetings and interventions.

Fighting for a Future in el Campo

For all of the focus on victimhood and reparations, Maríalabajenses are fighting many battles that, though related, stretch beyond the contours of war-time violence. One of the most prominent is the struggle for a future in *el campo*—the rural countryside.

Given the lack of land and viable markets for small farmers, the life of a *campesino* is not considered a desirable future by many. Those who continue to fight for land and a right to this lifestyle are often met with barriers that range from disrespect from lending agencies to violent threats from large land owners. Despite the love of farming expressed by many adult *campesinos*, many actively warn their children to steer away from life in the countryside. Men and women I spoke with considered their hard labor as a means to save money and send their children to universities in Cartagena where they could become professionals and escape *el campo*. At the same time, communities in María la Baja expressed concern that the rural countryside was becoming depopulated and that giving up rural livelihoods would also mean giving up their values and traditions (see Fischer 2018).

These contradictory desires—to escape and recover a future in *el campo*—undergirded many conversations I had or observed with communities in María la Baja. One day, I was visiting Sara— the woman known for her revolutionary spunk—and she was weaving together stories of loss, reparations, and generational changes to express her concern for the future of *el campo*. On the one hand, she explained that younger generations do not want anything to do with the life of *campesinos*. They have watched their parents struggle all their life to pay the bills, endure violence, and still end up with nothing. On the other hand, Sara considered that there was something else about being a *campesino* that was in people's blood. She pointed down the street to a small house on the corner. It was made out of wood boards painted bright blue, unlike the more durable cement block structures of the neighboring houses. She explained that the man who lived there had been displaced from Las Brisas, located south of Mampuján and several hours away by motorcycle from his current home.

"Every day," Sara explained in her raspy whisper, "he leaves at four or five in the morning to travel by mule to his little parcel of land in Las Brisas, and then he comes back to María la Baja at four in the afternoon. What does he do? Nothing. By the time he gets there he has to leave." She let this image sink in before explaining with a slight crack and hoarseness in her throat, "It's love for the countryside … *amor del campo.*"

SHIFTING LANDSCAPES—UPDATES SINCE FIELDWORK

Since the completion of my primary dissertation research (2015-2016), the landscape in Colombia has changed rapidly. Two months after I returned from a year of fieldwork, the signed peace accords between the guerrilla FARC-EP and the Colombian government went up for a public referendum vote. On October 5, 2016—to the shock of the international community—the "No vote" won by a slim margin. Over the following several months, the Colombian government, under President Juan Manuel Santos, scrambled to make concessions to the political opposition in order to save the accords. President Santos was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in the meantime, generating strong international pressure to close the deal that would end over 50 years of war with the FARC. On November 27th, 2016, Congress ratified the edited peace accords, bypassing the need for another popular vote.

Since then, the implementation of the accords has had a rocky start. Members of the FARC leadership have been accused of violating the terms of their transitional justice, opposition leaders have continued to challenge the validity of the accords, and the disarmament and demobilization process was delayed and poorly organized. Such disorganization and poor conditions in the zones of disarmament severely hurt the confidence of soldiers who were asked to place their lives in the hands of a government that promised to help them transition into civilian life. Similarly, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace has had judicial and legislative false starts, preventing it from fulfilling its mandate to offer truth and justice for victims of the conflict.

As outlined in Chapter One, the peace accords are not the Colombian government's first attempt at transitional justice, victim reparations, truth initiatives, or reconciliation. These processes have been underway since the first demobilization efforts in the early 1980s. Nevertheless, some of the same concerns and predicaments continue to destabilize the success of such processes. In particular—as has been the focus of my dissertation—defining victimhood and determining who will receive access to the rule of law, when, and under what circumstances, continue to loom large over the process.

For example, how do institutions ensure that victims who are not organized, not part of a collective, and/or in situations of extreme vulnerability gain the same access to their rights as individuals who are collectively organized and less vulnerable? To the contrary, how do victim-serving government institutions ensure that privileged sectors of society are not excluded from victims' rights because of their economic or social privilege? Both of these questions are deeply connected to perceptions about what it means to be a victim in Colombia and how one's personal and victimization profile hinder or facilitate access to truth, justice, and reparations.

While the execution of the peace accords is still unfolding, the Victims' Law—that was a central focus of this dissertation—is waning. The declaration process for victims closed in June of 2015, and the law is set to expire in June 2021. While many government employees express their presumptions that the government will have to extend the law due to the amount of cases left unfinished, this remains to be seen.

Prospects for the future of the Victims' Law and for the implementation of the peace accords are especially uncertain due to the recent presidential elections. On June 17, 2018, Ivan Duque was elected Colombia's newest president. Duque, the candidate for *Centro Democrático* (Democratic Center), represents the conservative vote in Colombia and has been widely seen as a puppet president controlled by former president Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), who is currently a

senator. Uribe is a divisive figure in Colombia. For many of his supporters, Uribe represents a strong

military presence that is responsible for weakening the guerrillas and making Colombia a safer place.

For his critics, Uribe's strong-arm policies used paramilitary and military force to eliminate guerrilla

fighters at the cost of civilian lives. Indiscriminate displacement and massacres in the countryside are

further seen not just as military tactics to rid the country of guerrilla insurgents, but also to rid the

countryside of small-scale farmers. Following paramilitary violence, large-scale land owners bought

or occupied the "empty" land and developed agro-industrial plantations that have benefited Uribe

and his political partners.

Ivan Duque, Colombia's new president, ran on a platform that was critical of the peace

accords, but it remains to be seen how his campaign promises will transform into policies.

Independent of his election, following the peace accord signing, Colombia's *Defensoria del Pueblo*

estimates that 311 community leaders and human rights defenders have been assassinated in

Colombia between January 1, 2016 and July 30, 2018 (*El Tiempo* 2018; Rincón Ortega 2018). This

means that roughly every two to three days a leader is killed. Many of the individuals assassinated are

from Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities and hail from rural areas of the country. The

suspected perpetrators of this violence vary by region from new paramilitary formations, dissident

guerrillas, military, and private assassins. In many cases the killers and their motives are unknown.

Regardless, these assassinations are sending a clear message to long-victimized communities across

Colombia that their efforts to rebuild and reclaim land are not welcome.

Since my last visit to María la Baja in August 2017, my contact with people has been limited

to phone calls, WhatsApp, and Facebook messages. Through these mediums, I have gained a sense

of peoples' mixed emotions. Leaders have expressed their deep concern over the anonymous and

targeted threats that are circulating. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the paramilitary would "paper" a

town with a list of names or categories of people that they were targeting in their *limpiezas* (cleansing

campaigns). María la Baja would wake up covered in white sheets of paper that gave those targeted the chance to escape a violent fate. Now, similar messages circulate among WhatsApp groups and spread like a digital wildfire across the networks of community leaders and human rights defenders. Where the threats come from, or if they are legitimate, is often unclear. Regardless, it is evident that the goal is to divide communities and eliminate the threat of charismatic leaders that are advocating for their communities' rights to land and a life free of violence. In spite of this, many groups continue to organize and fight for their rights. When I asked one leader over messages how she was feeling, she responded: "Well, in truth, a little worried. But in any case I'm continuing with my work. There's no stopping. It would give them [those circulating threats] pleasure. We must trust in God's mercy."

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History of the Colombian Armed Conflict

BACKGROUND TO VIOLENCE—BIPARTISAN CONFLICT, LAND, AND LABOR

Narrating past and present politics in Colombia requires a delicate balance between recognizing patterns of political and social conflict while not assuming continuity between various periods of violence (Bushnell 1992). While bipartisan conflicts between Liberal and Conservative parties have largely shaped the trajectory of Colombian politics and war, the country's armed conflict also resists such simplistic explanations, as issues of class, economic policies, land reform, narcotrafficking, and interests in natural resources have complicated the motivations of combatants and politicians alike.

The first decades of Colombia's independence from Spain were marked by a series of national and state-level violent rebellions, including several that resulted in coups d'état. Throughout analyses of Colombian politics and conflict, scholars cite the bipartisan tensions between Liberal and Conservative parties.[76] While bipartisan conflict was evident in a number of countries in Latin America during this time, Bushnell (1993) argues "modern Colombia is unique in that the Liberal-Conservative dichotomy survived from the mid-nineteenth century to almost the end of the twentieth" (ibid:117). During this time, loyalties to each party became strong divisive elements in national politics, fueling regional revolts and several civil wars.[77] Though linked to bipartisan conflict, the civil wars were also fueled by economic and agricultural issues that increased divisions between rural and urban dwellers and debates over land and labor.[78] Catherine LeGrand notes that

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[76] Historian David Bushnell (1992) notes that these divisions are evident in the early post-colonial stages; however, official divisions between the two parties are often marked around 1850 (Bergquist et al. 1992).

[77] See Bushnell (1992, 11-29; 1993) for more detail on the nature and extent of political violence post-independence to the turn of the twentieth century. Also, see Safford and Palacios (2002) regarding how Colombia's geography contributed to divisions in Colombian society and politics.

[78] The War of a Thousand Days (1899-1902) marks Colombia's most impactful civil war prior to the mid-20th century in terms of estimated number of deaths and national scope (Bushnell 1992). Charles Bergquist (1992)

in order to meet growing demands in agricultural exports during the turn of the 20th century, the

Colombian government privatized public lands. *Campesino*s—who previously inhabited these fertile

lands—were co-opted into the hacienda system to work as wage laborers (1986, 1992).[79]

The loss of land to wealthy elite and the creation of forced wage labor, provoked the peasant

class in Colombia to develop trade unions and to organize revolts in the 1920s and 1930s (Bergquist,

Peñaranda, and Sánchez 1992; LeGrand 1986), events which are often seen as precursors to the

development of Marxist guerrilla groups in the 1960s. Rebellions took place in numerous agricultural

centers to protest low wages and poor labor conditions. These rebellions were met with hostilities

from land owners and even the Colombian military that sought to protect national interest in

agricultural production and global trade. The banana workers' strike in 1928 provides one of the

most extreme examples of the clash between farmers and elite economic interests. The banana

workers' strike demanded that the U.S. owned United Fruit Company (now Chiquita Banana)

provide basic rights to its workers, including six-day work weeks, eight hours per day, and payment

in money rather than in credit at the company's supply stores. With pressure from the company's

owners and the U.S. military to end the strike, the Colombian military intervened on December 6,

1928, killing protestors in the town of Ciénaga.[80] While the disregard for workers' rights and the

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and Safford and Palacios (2002), for example, frame uprisings during this time around the production of coffee and its drop in market value. Paralleling these analyses, Catherine LeGrand (1986) addresses the shifts in land ownership that occurred after the colonial period, from 1830-1936.

[79] In *Frontier Expansion and Peasant Protest in Colombia, 1830-1936* (1986), LeGrand provides an in-depth account of the way that agricultural developments contributed to Colombia's economic developments post-independence and also established a particularly strong and nationally valued peasant class prior to the privatization of land. This, she claims is distinct from other countries in Latin America, such as Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, where large European immigrant populations were valued over the native peasant class which was "considered lazy, backwards, and constitutionally inferior" (1986, 17).

[80] Official records claim that thirteen protestors were killed. Still, David Bushnell's historic account declares that it may be worth taking seriously novelist Gabriel García Márquez' reference to thousands of strikers killed in the confrontation (Bushnell 1993).

poor working conditions for wage laborers was not news, the "banana massacre" elicited a strong response around the country from the labor classes.

Deep class-based divisions have a long history in Colombia, which is particularly evident in land privatization policies and the elite-run political system. Yet, for the abundance of literature about the "peasant classes" or *campesinos*, there is inadequate attention to race and ethnicity in analyses of Colombian politics and systems of inequality since colonization. Similar to discourses in Brazil (Goldstein 2003), Venezuela (Wright 1990), and Cuba (Roland 2011), Colombia has proclaimed the status of a racial democracy (Wade 1993). This declaration emphasizes a mestizo identity that combines Indigenous, Spanish, and African heritages. While the government recognizes the four "ethnic" groups,[81] racial democracy ideologies tend to mute discussions of racism and inequality.

Indigenous groups in Colombia were terrorized by Spanish colonization and slave labor, which was especially horrific during the rubber boom in the early 1900s in the Putumayo region along the Colombia–Peru border (Taussig 1984). Nevertheless, Colombia's colonial development did not rely solely on large Indigenous populations. Spanish colonizers sought labor from Africans forcefully displaced and sold as slaves through the Caribbean port of Cartagena. Cartagena's prominence as a port during the height of chattel slavery led Colombia to have the second largest Afro-descendent population in Latin America after Brazil (Wade 2012). Slavery was abolished in 1851; however, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations continue to fight social and economic neglect by the state. As anthropologist Peter Wade (2012) notes, the geographical divisions in Colombia are also marked racially, with the Caribbean and Pacific coastal regions coded as Black in

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[81] According to the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), the four ethnic groups legally recognized in Colombia include: Indigenous, Afro-Colombian (including Afro-descendent, Black, mulato, and palenqueros from San Basilio), Raizales from San Andrés Island, and Rom or Gypsy.

the national imaginary. Similar to structural and systematized forms of racism throughout the Americas, Wade argues that "racial inequality becomes entwined with overall processes of national development [...] This masks the fact these mechanisms continue to marginalize not just certain regions, but certain categories of people" (2012, 136–37). Such inequalities are further exacerbated by violence in Colombia that disproportionally affects regions of the country with the largest Indigenous and Black populations (Arocha and Maya 2008; Escobar 2008; Jimeno 2014; Jimeno, Varela, and Castillo 2015; Oslender 2016; Rappaport 2003; Restrepo 2004).

THE FORMATION OF THE CONTEMPORARY ARMED CONFLICT

Representatives from both Conservative and Liberal parties were generally members of the elite class. The elite control of politics has made Colombia's democracy appear oligarchical (Bushnell 1993, 182). Following the massacre of banana workers in 1928, Liberal Jorge Eliécer Gaitán became one of the few politicians that spoke publically against the injustice of the deep-set inequality in the country. Over the next several decades he became a popular politician who spoke to the issues of rural, poor Colombians and denounced the nation's "oligarchy." Gaitán's lower-class and darker complexioned mestizo background challenged the elite and whitened profile of politicians, gaining him favor as a politician who more accurately represented the majority of Colombian citizens. The popular fervor around his politics, known as Gaitanismo, and his claim to represent the "pueblo" shared parallels to popular movements in the Southern Cone inspired by Argentine president, Juan Perón during his first term and Chilean democratically elected socialist president, Salvador Allende. While Gaitán was not initially accepted by Liberal or Conservative political parties, his popularity was undeniable, and he became the Liberal party leader in 1947 and favored presidential candidate for the forthcoming 1950 election. With heightened tensions between conservative presidential candidate Laureano Gómez and Gaitán, debates became steeped in Cold War rhetoric, which sought to negatively associate Gaitán's politics with communism (Sánchez 1992).

Guerrilla Insurgents

The 18-year period known as *La Violencia* began in 1946; however, the political violence

fomenting at this time came to a head on April 9, 1948 with Gaitán's assassination. Violence broke

out in the streets of the capital city, Bogotá, and quickly spread to other parts of the country where

tense relations between Conservative and Liberal parties were building (Bushnell 1993; Guzmán

Campos, Fals Borda, and Umaña Luna 1962). This violence continued during the presidency of

Conservative, Laureano Gómez (1950–1953), including the formation of assassin groups, known as

"*pájaros*" and "*chulavitas*." These groups were sponsored by elite conservatives to rid the country of

liberal sympathizers. According to Michael Taussig (2003), the *pájaros*, or the assassins during the

period of *La Violencia,* can be seen as precursors to the paramilitary groups that formed in the 1980s

and 1990s.

Following the short-lived dictatorship of General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (1953–1957), the

two party system regained control and initiated an agreement known as the National Front (1958–

1974), which mandated that presidential leadership alternate between the Conservative and Liberal

parties each term. While this approach was meant to assuage conflict between the two parties, it only

flared dissenting third party groups, whose voice was once again omitted from national politics (Tate

2007, 38–39).

Between the 1960s and 1970s, numerous leftist guerrilla groups emerged from different

corners of Colombia seeking to have their interests represented at the national level. The primary

four guerrilla groups included: (1) Rural peasants with ties to resistance groups from the 1920s and

1930s—Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC) [1964-2016]; (2)

University students influenced by the Cuban revolution and liberation theology from the Colombian

Catholic Church—National Liberation Army (ELN) [1964-present]); (3) Middle class intellectuals—

Movement of the 19th of April (M-19) [1972-1989]; and (4) Members of the Communist Youth

influenced by Marxist-Leninist Communism—Popular Liberation Army (PCML/EPL) [1967-1990] (Pizarro 1992; Tate 2007).[82] The mission of each group was distinct; however, each called for socialist changes to the country's politics, employing a range of violent and symbolic acts against the state to publicize their cause.[83] Many of these groups gave up their arms in the late 1980s to early 1990s, and have since been pardoned by the state and allowed to create political parties outside of the long-standing bipartisan system. Nevertheless, in practice it was clear that the socialist ideologies of these groups were far from accepted in national politics. For example, in 1985 non-combatant and demobilized FARC supporters initiated a political party called the Patriotic Union (Unión Patriótica—UP). By 1990, activists estimated that the paramilitaries assassinated 3,000 UP party members, including three presidential candidates, sending a clear threat to those interested in bringing guerrilla politics into the legal realm of government (Romero Ospina 2012).

Paramilitary Counter-insurgents

The landscape of violence became more complex with the formation of paramilitary groups that had complicated ties to the Colombian government and state military (see Table 1). As anthropologist Winifred Tate explains, "Colombian paramilitary forces, like similar groups throughout Latin America, worked covertly with military forces in counter-insurgency operations characterized by death squad operations that targeted activists and opposition political parties" (2007, 50). The Colombian government recognized that the state military did not have the capacity or resources to engage in widespread, counter-insurgent combat.[84] In 1968, the government

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[82] It is difficult to assign exact dates for the duration of each group. The dates above are based on academic accounts of when the group dissolved or gave up arms; however, in several cases, smaller factions of these groups remain a threat in certain areas or have potentially joined other guerrilla forces (Pizarro 1992; Tate 2007).

[83] For a more detailed review of the motivations, actions, and peace negotiations associated with each group, see Pizarro (1992) and Pécaut (1987, 1992).

[84] The Colombian government had limited military resources to combat the rise of guerrilla rebel groups in the 1960s and 1970s. The relative military weakness stood in contrast to other Latin American countries, especially in the Southern Cone where military-led coups defined the political landscape. Additionally,

addressed this deficiency through Law 48, which legalized paramilitary groups as a legitimate extension of the government's counter-insurgent battles against guerrilla rebels.

Victoria Sanford (2003) argues that the connection between state and proxy forces must be contextualized in the politics of the Cold War, which legitimized paramilitary counter-insurgency forces that sought to rid the country of communist threats. However, in Colombia, paramilitary groups soon operated on independent agendas. Similar to the *pájaros* of *La Violencia* period, paramilitary groups were financed by elite conservatives to protect their interests as wealthy land owners against the leftist guerrilla groups that called for agrarian reform, among other socialist changes to the country.

Massacres, disappearances, and the use of torture became common tactics used by the paramilitary groups as they sought to eliminate, especially in rural areas, leftist guerrillas and their (presumed) sympathizers (Sanford 2003; Tate 2009a). In the early 2000s it was estimated that paramilitary forces were responsible for 80% of all civilian killings (Sanford 2003). Paramilitary groups also began social cleansing campaigns, known as *limpiezas* (Hristov 2009). Under the guise of ridding society of "undesirables," paramilitary members killed thousands of individuals, including drug dealers, prostitutes, homeless people, petty thieves, delinquents, and homosexuals (Taussig 2003).[85] In 1989, the Colombian government declared that paramilitary forces were illegal armed groups. Nevertheless, in the 1990s they gained renewed momentum, joining together under the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, AUC). The official denial

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whereas the military in Argentina was associated with middle-class mobility, professionalization, and had a long reputation for intervening in politics (O'Donnell 2002), the Colombian military was not a source of national pride and it remained relatively neutral during *La Violencia* period from 1946-1964 (Tate 2007).

[85] Michael Taussig, in his book *Law in a Lawless Land: Diary of a Limpieza in Colombia* (2003) offers a palpable sense of the mixed sentiments that surround the practice of *limpieza*. On the one hand, fear of paramilitaries prevented the general population from resisting these social cleansing practices that were viewed as a form of terror. On the other hand, inhabitants of affected areas may acknowledge that crime rates dropped after *limpiezas,* offering a justification for these heinous crimes.

of paramilitary legality did not eliminate close ties between the Colombian Armed Forces, the AUC, and politicians with economic interests that were ensured through paramilitary proxy efforts.

Colombian State Military and Foreign Interventions

The emergence of paramilitary forces and the articulation of their purpose must be understood in context with events occurring throughout Latin America, especially in relation to the United States' intervention in military operations. In her ethnography, *The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas* (2004), Leslie Gill outlines the history of the School of the Americas (SOA) and its role during the Cold War in shaping U.S. relations with Latin American countries. She argues that "over the course of the twentieth century, [the U.S.] transformed these entities [Latin American security forces] into extensions of its own power in Latin America and internationalized state-sponsored violence in the Americas" (2004, 7). While the involvement in particular politics varies country by country, Gill's book effectively demonstrates the trail of human rights abuses that follow military personnel who were trained by the SOA.

As of 2004, Colombia has received the largest number of SOA trainees (Gill 2004). While many Colombians were trained toward the end or after the Cold War, the general sentiment of SOA politics resonated with the country's ongoing internal armed conflict. Namely, the SOA focus on the internal enemy as possible communist subversives or more broadly as those who stand in the way of neoliberal progress, echoed sentiments expressed by conservative elite and the paramilitary forces engaging in *limpieza* tactics. Although paramilitary personnel were not trained directly by the SOA, the connection between the paramilitary and SOA is well-documented. In some cases, state military personnel trained with the SOA and later worked covertly alongside paramilitaries. Alternatively, former SOA trainees left the military in order to join the paramilitary (Gill 2004, 158–59; Tate 2009a). Additional connections between the paramilitary and Colombian Armed Forces include transfer of paramilitary funds from narcotrafficking to the state military, co-executed massacres, and

cooperation in killing innocent civilians whom they dressed in guerrilla fatigues in order to reach

military quotas (Cubides C. 2001; Gill 2004; Sanford 2003; Tate 2009).

Fighting the insurgent guerrilla enemy in Colombia parallels with the SOA's approach in

other Latin America countries, such as Chile, El Salvador, Argentina, and Nicaragua. However, SOA

training of Colombian officers followed post-Cold War trends that focused on the United States'

new concern with the War on Drugs. According to Gill, under the guise of the War on Drugs,

"between 1997 and 2000, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia accounted for over 60 percent of

the students at the SOA" (2004, 158). While the focus of this training was on stopping the

cultivation of coca leaves and the manufacture and trafficking of cocaine, the war on drugs mapped

onto the preexisting conflict in Colombia and highlighted the persistence of inequality in the

country, especially in terms of rural peasant farmers. In order to fully understand how SOA training

intertwines with the armed conflict and the illicit drug trade, it is necessary to consider the

contemporaneous development of the $1.3 billion U.S. aid package in 2000 known as Plan

Colombia.

Plan Colombia was created under the U.S. Clinton Administration and Colombian Pastrana

Administration originally as a development package that, prior to implementation, was transformed

into a primarily anti-narcotics package that focused on curbing the rising rates of coca production in

Colombia.[86] Of the original $1.3 billion, 80% of the aid package was allocated to support the

Colombian Armed Forces. This aid package was approved despite the fact that the Colombian

Armed Forces had known connections to human rights violations committed alongside or via

paramilitary groups (Gill 2004; Tate 2009b). Nevertheless, Plan Colombia was instituted and justified

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[86] Research shows that the "success" of War on Drugs efforts to reduce coca production in Bolivia and Peru in the 1980s was simply replaced by increased production in Colombia into the 1990s, thus resulting in an overall constant rate of coca production (Bagely 2005).

based on issues of national security. The modifications to the Plan indicated that anti-narcotics were directly related to counter-insurgent issues. As Álvaro Camacho Guizado (2005) summarizes, "the new strategy has two dimensions: on the one hand, it is a question of preventing the FARC from protecting illicit crops or from supposedly defending their own crops; and on the other, it is an attempt to reduce [the FARC] organization's source of funding" (ibid, 85). The connection between paramilitary profits and the drug trade are also well-documented. Still, Camacho Guizado argues that executors of Plan Colombia have been slow to incorporate this knowledge into their actions, as illicit crop eradication remained focused on FARC, rather than paramilitary, controlled regions of the country.

After the September 11th attacks on the United States, the use of Plan Colombia to fund counter-guerrilla efforts was made explicit. Under the guise of counter-terrorism, policy analyst Adam Isacson comments, "the Bush administration managed to remove long-standing legal curbs that had kept the war on drugs officially separate from counterinsurgency [sic]" (2003, 13). In addition to new flexibility afforded by the "war on terror," under Colombia's 2002 elected "strong-arm" president, Álvaro Uribe, military funding was increased through a war tax on the rich and the use of "state of emergency decree [which] has limited civil liberties and increased the security forces' power to monitor civilians and perform 'preventative arrests'" (Isacson 2013, 14). Uribe's presidency began just after failed peace talks with the FARC in 2002 under President Pastrana, thus creating a setting in which politicians and civilians alike were fed-up with the guerrilla movement and eager to usher in a president with a strong military platform and a vengeance against the FARC.[87]

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[87] In fact, Uribe's father, a wealthy land owner, was killed by the FARC in 1983. Additionally, as governor of Antioquía (1995-1998), Uribe supported the formation of rural defense forces known as "Convivir," which were considered legal although they were also accused of carrying out human rights abuses similar to other paramilitary groups with similar goals to fight against insurgents (Isacson 2003; Tate 2009a).

Plan Colombia has been met with overwhelming criticism, as it has shown little success in hindering coca cultivation through excessive and dangerous fumigation practices. Additionally, little financial or social attention has been paid to the *campesinos* who have no viable economic alternative to producing coca or to the numerous actors involved in the supply chain including paramilitary and guerrilla groups (Brohy and Ungeman 2003). Scholars and journalists also claim that Plan Colombia carries underlying agendas to protect foreign interests in natural resources such as petroleum (Leech 2004). Further, in the film *Plan Colombia: Cashing in on the Drug War Failure* (Brohy and Ungeman 2003), interviews with Representative Jim McGovern reveal how debates over Plan Colombia in Washington often focused on what private weapons business would get contracts rather than the human rights issues behind the very nature of the funding.

Since 2009, the United States has provided over $9 billion in aid under Plan Colombia (Isacson 2013). While the Leahy Law (1997) was established to place human rights concerns in direct conversation with foreign aid policies, Tate (2011) details the many ways in which these regulations are skirted by both U.S. and Colombian officials, including the creation of new military units with clean records. The decline in military human rights abuses at this time was met with an increase in paramilitary killings and human rights abuses, once again indicating connections between the operations of these two groups (Isacson 2013). Despite the strong evidence demonstrating the military's connection to human rights abuses, Plan Colombia has become an economic aid package that complements SOA training. Namely, both aim to eliminate insurgent combatants while selectively allowing the paramilitary AUC to carry out the military's dirty work so long as it supports the interests of national and international elite.

Since the 1980s, the Colombian state military, leftist guerrilla groups (FARC and ELN), and right-wing paramilitary groups (AUC) have dominated the conflict. The boom in the illegal drug trade at this time, with the height of Pablo Escobar and the Medellín Drug Cartel in the 1980s, also

contributed to the confusing landscape of perpetrators and victims as drug money financed both the FARC and the AUC. Although the groups involved in armed conflict have changed names and political motivations since the 1960s, mass violence against and displacement of civilians remains a constant result of the war. Nevertheless, just as the contours of these groups have changed over time, so have popular opinions about the purpose and legitimacy of each group.

Tate's work with human rights activists suggest that "for many activists who traced their political awakening to the political persecution of the 1940s and 1950s, the guerrillas were simply the expansion of the armed peasant resistance that emerged during that period" (2007, 96). The ideology and even the violent actions of the guerrillas were initially justified as necessary for the revolutionary cause and supported by the first human rights groups in Colombia. However, the escalation of violence and criminal actions, have resulted in general disillusionment with the FARC and the ELN. While each group involved in the conflict evolved with distinct ideologies, the current actions of the leftist FARC and ELN, right-wing AUC and Colombian military—if distinct in methods of war— are not always easily distinguishable in terms of the destruction they have wrought on the lives of innocent citizens caught in the cross-fire (Tate 2007, 53).[88]

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[88] Human rights activists have documented the atrocities committed by each group in order to show their particular patterns of violence. Whereas FARC is held accountable for the majority of kidnappings for extortion (90%), the AUC is reportedly responsible for 70-80% of civilian killings and massacres. FARC, ELN, and paramilitary groups are accused of coercing under-aged boys and girls to join their ranks either by force or by virtue of offering the only viable economic option. The Colombian military has been linked to AUC operations in a number of instances, such as the Trujillo massacre in the late 1980s. Additionally, they are charged with carrying out "false positives," in which innocent civilians were killed and dressed in guerrilla fatigues in order to fill quotas for combatant kills (Isacson 2013; GMH 2013; Sanford 2003; Tate 2007).