

Recognition as transitional justice ‘from below’: analysing victims’ grassroots activism in post-conflict Colombia

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Abstract

The framework of transitional justice ‘from below’ is often used to explore perspectives where victims are addressed as subjects with their own agency and organisational capability in temporal and normative aspects. Using qualitative research techniques to analyse victims’ organisations in Colombia, this article establishes the notion of recognition as crucial to comprehending ‘from below’ perspectives of transitional justice. It explores the cases of the *Never Again Museum* and the *Trails for Life and Reconciliation* in Eastern Antioquia. It examines victims’ efforts to create processes of ‘democratisation of pain’ (the transformation of personal experiences of loss into common public knowledge) as expressions of recognition. The article’s main contribution rests in the idea that by scrutinising victims’ initiatives as expressions of recognition, the normative idea of transitional justice ‘from below’ can be reinvigorated. It demonstrates that the concept of transitional justice ‘from below’ constitutes an abstract ideal that needs to be redefined by bringing into consideration the function and particularities of victims’ grassroots activism.

Keywords

Recognition, victims, transitional justice, truth, post-conflict Colombia

Introduction

In recent years, a critical turn in transitional justice studies has materialised, questioning the naturalness and effectiveness of conventional transitional justice theory and practice, envisioning a broader and more holistic project. This critical approach is interrogating what transitional justice ‘success’ looks like, examining how to reconcile the tension between problem-solving and policy-oriented perspectives, and exploring ways to overcome the crisis of legitimacy and effectiveness of transitional justice efforts¹. From a traditional approach, transitional justice represents discourses and practices that exist primarily to support victims of human rights violations. It gets its moral legitimacy by acknowledging victims’ needs. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that transitional justice is actually driven by the needs of the state². A further essential criticism relates to how normative transitional justice approaches have tended

¹Paul Gready and Simon Robins, *Transitional Justice and Theories of Change: Towards evaluation as understanding*, *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Volume 14, Issue 2, (July 2020): 280–299.

² Simon Robins, *Failing Victims? The Limits of Transitional Justice in Addressing the Needs of Victims of Violations*, *Human Rights and International Legal Discourse*, (2017): 41-58.

to view victims as ‘objects’ of transitional justice rather than ‘subjects’ with their own agency, organisational capability, and initiatives³.

Some outcomes of this institutionalisation of transitional justice processes are a dominant legalism, privileging state-led prosecutions over victims-based reparations, and socio-cultural and economic rights being usually ignored by transitional justice mechanisms⁴. Thus, traditionally, victims have had little influence or involvement in state-led transitional justice processes, participating as instruments of those processes rather than on their own terms⁵. It is argued that rather than being driven by victims, transitional justice is a consequence of global neoliberal governance, driven by complicated international bureaucracy and developing systems that themselves create many of the needs that victims articulate⁶. As a result, what developing a victim-centred transitional justice process actually means becomes ambiguous, despite the general commitment of international bodies involved to such a principle.

In this context, the framework of transitional justice ‘from below’ is often used to explore specific approaches to transitional justice where victims are addressed as subjects in both temporal and normative aspects. From a normative perspective, transitional justice ‘from below’ is heterogeneous, participatory, and comprises explicit goals including local truth-recovery, victim and ex-combatant support, or community reconciliation⁷. Nevertheless, this ‘from below’ perspective often fails to engage with robust sociological concepts which might help implement better processes and practices today and tomorrow. For this reason, the aim of this paper is to create links between the concept of recognition and the notion of transitional justice ‘from below’ in order to explore how this connection can contribute to the development of more critical transitional justice theories and practices, which have victims’ needs, initiatives, and expectations at the centre of the process.

The article contains five sections. The first revisits the relationship between the concept of recognition and the notion of transitional justice ‘from below’. I argue that a ‘from below’ transitional justice perspective needs to engage more robustly with sociological theory in order to centre civil society expectations, grassroots activism, and victim-led initiatives in transitional justice processes. The second section presents the methodological design of this research. The third section offers the characteristics of the former Colombian armed conflict, focusing on the region of Eastern Antioquia and its victims’ organisations initiatives. The fourth section explores the cases of the *Never Again Museum* and the *Trails for Life and Reconciliation*. It analyses how these two victims’ initiatives of recognition are expressions of transitional justice ‘from below’ in the ongoing process of transitional justice in Colombia. The final section concludes with some views on understanding the crucial role of victims’ initiatives of recognition to claim justice, truth, and reparation in post-conflict Colombia.

Understanding the connection between recognition and transitional justice ‘from below’

The concept of transitional justice⁸ ‘from below’ is frequently applied to the oppositional or mobilising character of the activities and initiatives of civil society actors, communities, or grassroots groups towards hegemonic political, social, or economic forces. It is a critique of the dominant form of

³ Michael Newman, *Transitional Justice* (Polity, Cambridge, UK, 2019).

⁴ Dustin Sharp, What Would Satisfy Us? Taking Stock of Critical Approaches to Transitional Justice, *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Volume 13, Issue 3, (November 2019): 570–589.

⁵ Simon Robins, Failing Victims? The Limits of Transitional Justice in Addressing the Needs of Victims of Violations, *Human Rights and International Legal Discourse*, (2017): 41–58.

⁶ Paul Gready and Simon Robins, From Transitional to Transformative Justice: A New Agenda for Practice, *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Volume 8, Issue 3, (November 2014):339–361.

⁷ Paul Gready and Simon Robins, Rethinking civil society and transitional justice: lessons from social movements and ‘new’ civil society, *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 21:7 (2017): 956–975.

⁸ Regarding the participation of victims in transitional justice processes, please consult the reports of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Guarantees of Non-recurrence

(<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/803412?ln=en>). In relation to national consultations to design transitional justice mechanisms, please consult:

https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/NationalConsultationsTJ_EN.pdf

transitional justice ‘from above’ and its expressions: truth and reconciliation commissions, peace tribunals, state-sanctioned truth, institutional reforms, and state-led programmes of reparations. This angle ‘from below’ scrutinizes the efforts made by civilians, victims, non-governmental organisations, social movements, and local communities to achieve their needs and rights for truth, justice, reparation, closure, guarantees of non-recurrence, accountability, healing, or pedagogy that state institutions, governmental bodies, and international mechanisms have failed to provide⁹.

According to Seul¹⁰ and Oduro and Nagy¹¹, understanding transitional justice ‘from below’ is to move beyond the restrictions of technical legal mechanisms, focusing instead on how to translate transitional justice processes into meaningful everyday change for common people. By questioning the normative parameters of transitional justice, this ‘from below’ approach encourages civil society groups to contest official discourses of transition. It is, in other words, about addressing transitional justice practices beyond the role of the state and the interests of international actors, catalysing peacebuilding ‘bottom-up’ strategies, including community reconciliation¹², citizen-led forensic databases as a tool for reparation¹³, local truth-recovery¹⁴, victim support¹⁵, and ex-combatant reintegration to civil life¹⁶. It developed organically in the cases of Argentina, Chile, Northern Ireland, Peru, Colombia, Canada, Kenya, or Guatemala¹⁷. Conversely, it can be an indirect consequence of state and international mechanisms to engage local communities with transitional justice programmes (for example, the cases of East Timor, Sierra Leone, and Morocco)¹⁸.

In the same vein, Newman¹⁹ argues that transitional justice ‘from below’ opens fundamental theoretical questions regarding transitional justice as an arena of practice and normative inquiry, criticising the field as being too conceptually narrow, legalistic, and intrinsically contradictory. As McCoy, Subotic, and Carlin established, empirical gaps between ‘from above’ norm acceptance/implementation ideas, and ‘from below’ commitment/compliance assumptions, induce us to reassess core transitional justice factors, including sociocultural regime types, state capacity, domestic mobilisation, centralisation of rule implementation, material capability, and social vulnerability, in order to better comprehend the application and effectiveness of transitional justice processes in contested societies²⁰.

From a political philosophy perspective, ‘from below’ connotes modern forms of civil society's direct participation in the public sphere and new ways to address radical democracy in contemporary times.

⁹ Pádraig McAuliffe, Kieran McEvoy and Lorna McGregor, ‘Transitional Justice from Below: Grassroots Activism and the Struggle for Change’, *Human Rights Law Review*, Volume 10, Issue 1, (March 2010): 199–203; Jorge Luis Fabra-Zamora, Andrés Molina-Ochoa and Nancy C. Doubleday (eds), *The Colombian Peace Agreement A Multidisciplinary Assessment* (Routledge, London, 2021).

¹⁰ Jeffrey R. Seul, Coordinating Transitional Justice, *Negotiation Journal*, Volume 35, Issue 1, (January 2019): 9-30;

¹¹ Franklin Oduro and Rosemary Nagy, ‘What’s in an Idea? Truth Commission Policy Transfer in Ghana and Canada’, *Journal of Human Rights*, Volume 13, No. 1 (2014): 85-102.

¹² Juma Kasadha, ‘Digitizing Community Building and Reconciliation in Post-Conflict Communities: A Case of #Let’sTalkUganda in Northern Uganda’ *Social Media + Society*, (April 2020).

¹³ Ernesto Schwartz-Marin and Arely Cruz-Santiago. ‘Pure corpses, dangerous citizens: transgressing the boundaries between mourners and experts in the search for the disappeared in Mexico’, *Social Research: An International Quarterly*. Volume 83, Issue 2 (Summer 2016): 483-510.

¹⁴ Nusta Carranza Ko, *Truth, Justice, and Reparations in Peru, Uruguay, and South Korea: The Clash of Advocacy and Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

¹⁵ Karin Dyrstad and Helga Malmin Binningsbø, ‘Between Punishment and Impunity: Public Support for Reactions against Perpetrators in Guatemala, Nepal and Northern Ireland’, *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Volume 13, Issue 1, (March 2019): 155–184.

¹⁶ Gavin Hart and Camilo Tamayo Gómez, ‘Is recognition the answer? Exploring the barriers for successful reintegration of ex-combatants into civil society in Northern Ireland and Colombia’, *Peacebuilding*, (April 2022): 1-18.

¹⁷ Leigh Payne, Gabriel Pereira and Laura Bernal. Truth-Telling from Below. In *Transitional Justice and Corporate Accountability from Below: Deploying Archimedes’ Lever*. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2020), 165,-213.

¹⁸ Naomi Roht-Arriaza and Javier Mariezcurrena, *Transitional Justice in the Twenty-First Century Beyond Truth versus Justice*, (Cambridge, UK, 2012).

¹⁹ Michael Newman, *Transitional Justice* (Polity, Cambridge, UK, 2019).

²⁰ Jennifer McCoy, Jelena Subotic, and Ryan Carlin, ‘Transforming transitional justice from below: Colombia’s pioneering peace proposal’, in *The Colombian Peace Agreement A Multidisciplinary Assessment*, eds. Jorge Luis Fabra-Zamora, Andrés Molina-Ochoa and Nancy C. Doubleday, (Routledge, London, 2021), 93-109.

Inspired by the language, narratives, and practices of non-hierarchical and decentralized horizontalism, assemblies, forums, and other forms of non-capitalist prefigurative politics, grassroots activism ‘from below’ aims to develop a vision for building a type of society that could promote equality, freedom, and solidarity, in particular, to the survivors of human rights atrocities. New agendas for practice, including ‘from transitional to transformative justice²¹’, ‘from state-based processes to everyday injustices, grievances and priorities for change²²’, or novel transitional justice processes concerned with the life quality of ordinary people, especially those who have borne the brunt of violence²³, can be seen as valid attempts to connect new forms of open and radical democracy, solidarity, with a ‘from below’ transitional justice perspective.

In this context, and as a result of six years of fieldwork in Colombia, I argue that a ‘from below’ transitional justice perspective would benefit from engaging more extensively with concepts from the field of sociology in order to have civil society expectations, grassroots activism, and victims’-led initiatives at the centre of transitional justice processes. In other words, I state that there is a need to frame practices of transitional justice ‘from below’ using insights from the field of sociology to understand better the place of victims’ experiences within broader socio-political and historical contexts. Using sociological concepts helps to comprehend the lives of victims and survivors and how practices of transitional justice ‘from below’ can make holistic connections between processes, expectations, and outcomes. As a result, it can produce knowledge that is useful for victims’ processes and helps the development of epistemic communities of peacebuilding²⁴, underpinning current debates regarding positionality, justice from below, marginalisation, and the politics of knowledge during transitional justice interventions.

After conducting participatory research in Colombia, and qualitative research for the cases of Kenya, South Africa, Syria, and the Central African Republic²⁵ from a guarantee of non-recurrence perspective, one particular theme was reiterated and highlighted by victims, activists, grassroots organisations, human rights defenders, academics, practitioners, and civil society actors: the notion of recognition. Following Axel Honneth’s ideas²⁶, this notion can be defined in this context as the struggle for recognition between *subaltern counter-publics* (e.g., victims or community grassroots groups) and *dominant actors* (e.g., state institutions or governmental bodies) in transitional justice contexts. The idea of struggles for recognition characterises various forms of the politics of identity and difference. It establishes that every socio-political action which is not exclusively economic or redistributive in character, and which involves issues of identity and difference however indirectly, is considered to be a struggle for recognition. As Honneth argues²⁷, there is a relationship between the experience of hurt and a sense of injustice. Therefore, it is important to take into account that emotions and subjectivities are central in establishing dynamic socio-political identities in order to obtain recognition in transitional justice scenarios.

²¹ Paul Gready and Simon Robins, From Transitional to Transformative Justice: A New Agenda for Practice, *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Volume 8, Issue 3, (November 2014):339–361.

²² Eric T Hoddy, Transformative Justice in Practice: Reflections on the Pastoral Land Commission During Brazil’s Political Transition, *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, Volume 13, Issue 2, (July 2021): 339–356.

²³ Cynthia Cohen, Reimagining Transitional Justice, *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Volume 14, Issue 1, (March 2020): 1–13.

²⁴ Jones, Briony, The Performance and Persistence of Transitional Justice and Its Ways of Knowing Atrocity, *Cooperation and Conflict*, Volume 56, Issue 2 (June 2021): 163–80.

²⁵ I gratefully acknowledge the support provided by The International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) and the participants of the ‘Intensive Course on Prevention and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence: The Role of Transitional Justice’ at The Barcelona International Peace Centre (BIPC) in 2019 to understand these four cases of transitional justice.

²⁶ Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Polity Press, Cambridge (UK), 1996); Axel Honneth, *Das Recht der Freiheit. Grundriß einer demokratischen Sittlichkeit* (Suhrkamp, Berlin, 2011).

²⁷ Axel Honneth, ‘Redistribution as Recognition. A Response to Nancy Fraser’, in *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political Philosophical Exchange*, ed. Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth (New York: Verso, 2003): 110–197.

For Honneth²⁸ and Fraser²⁹ recognition also plays a crucial role in the configuration of individual and collective identities and in accepting theories of social justice in fragile social contexts. Both scholars argue that recognition is essential to self-realisation, an individual's emotional development, and establishing a positive relationship with self. Following this argument, suggest that by using this notion of recognition we can better understand the initiatives and actions of victims and grassroots organisations from an intersubjective and less normative perspective. In other words, if the categories of dignity, justice, and respect have been identified as central dimensions of recognition³⁰, by connecting recognition with processes of transitional justice 'from below', we can rightly configure a bond between the implementation of autonomous agency on the part of counter-public social actors (in our case, victims), and the expression of this autonomous agency in victims' initiatives and grassroots activism.

The notion of recognition similarly underpins the idea that, in order to achieve individual and collective self-realization, there must be a system of rights in place that guarantees the principles of parity of participation, legal recognition, and justice³¹. Therefore, implementing a system of rights in transitional justice processes that can promote a 'from below' perspective could be crucial for creating a link between modes of respect, grassroots activism, and guarantees of human rights where victims' recognition can be expressed. There are three factors that undermine the notion of recognition in transitional justice contexts: humiliation, injustice, and discrimination. The normative expectation of being treated with respect becomes most obvious when we observe extreme forms of humiliation, injustice, or discrimination, in which particular groups (in our case victims) are symbolically and materially excluded from humanity. Also, this perspective can lead to the idealization of civil society.

One of the main consequences of long-term armed conflicts, including the case of Colombia, is that in different moments during the confrontation civilians are dehumanised in order to justify military actions against them. These actions of dehumanisation deny people their 'humanness', and furthermore, being faced with extreme humiliation, or experiencing drastic forms of injustice and discrimination, can undermine basic notions of respect (and self-respect), trust, recognition, and morality. Consequently, I argue that linking the notion of recognition and processes of transitional justice 'from below' is key to bringing into the open questions regarding social justice, truth, reparation, reconciliation, and guarantees of non-recurrence, with the autonomous agency of individuals at the centre of the transitional process.

Furthermore, an important insight into the relationship between recognition and transitional justice 'from below' concerns the ways in which victims want to be recognised as political actors based on their socio-political identities. As the cases of Colombia, Kenya, South Africa, the United States, Scotland, West Papua, and the Central African Republic show³², victims do not want to be recognised only as rational actors who represent singular socio-political identities in the public sphere. They also want to claim a more robust set of rights in order to exercise other dimensions of their citizenship during

²⁸ Axel Honneth, *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

²⁹ Nancy Fraser, 'Distorted Beyond All Recognition. A Rejoinder to Axel Honneth.' in *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, ed. Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth (New York: Verso, 2003): 198–236.

³⁰ Axel Honneth, 'Recognition as Ideology', in *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory*, ed. Bert Van den Brink and David Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 323–347.

³¹ Axel Honneth, *The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition* (London, Polity, 2012).

³² Eduardo González Cueva, Jill Williams, and Félix Reátegui Carrillo, *Civil Society-Led Truth-Seeking Initiatives Expanding Opportunities for Acknowledgment and Redress* (International Center for Transitional Justice, New York, 2022).

transitional justice processes. Examples here include of gender justice³³, indigenous rights³⁴, ecological memory³⁵, intersections of sexuality and identity³⁶, and racial justice³⁷.

To summarise this first section, the notion of recognition and processes of transitional justice ‘from below’ are imbricated with one another. On the one hand, contexts of transitional justice ‘from below’ determine the content and nature of recognition, and without transition, victims’ recognition is non-specifiable. On the other hand, recognition is a necessary condition of transitional justice ‘from below’. Without suitable victims’ recognition, truth, justice, reparation, closure, guarantees of non-recurrence, or accountability are impossible. In short, the relationship between transitional justice ‘from below’ and recognition is a mutual one. Also, this relationship envisions democratic social justice as circular: democracy determines social justice, and, at the same time, social justice is a necessary condition for new structures of democracy in transitional justice scenarios.

Methodological design

From 2015 to 2021, I used participatory research techniques to reconstruct, compare, and explore the experiences of members of victims’ groups from Eastern Antioquia, during and after the Colombian armed conflict. I worked with four victims’ organisations from different sub-regions of Eastern Antioquia (Altiplano, Embalses, Bosques, and Paramos) to document members’ roles, relationships, responsibilities, interests, and struggles for recognition, visibility, and inclusion. The project focused on analysing the victims’ groups of the *Association of Victims of Granada Town* (ASOVIDA), the *Provincial Association of Victims to Citizens* (APROVIACI), the *Association of Organized Women of Eastern Antioquia* (AMOR) and the *Centre to Approach Reconciliation and Reparation* (CARE).

The county of Antioquia is the Colombian department with the highest number of victims of the conflict (1.5 million). The region with the highest percentage of massacres in the last twenty years in Colombia is Eastern Antioquia³⁸. According to the Regional Programme for Development and Peace of Eastern Antioquia (PRODEPAZ) and UNDP, from 1993 to 2018, four in ten Colombian civilian victims were women, most likely victims of a massacre, and coming from Eastern Antioquia³⁹. The case of Eastern Antioquia is a good example to understand the characteristics of the armed conflict in Colombia. First, on-going fighting between different illegal and legal armed groups for control over the territory and its resources. Second, the co-optation of local governments and institutions by illegal forces in order to affect democracy and control economic assets. Third, the establishment of illegal economies around drug trafficking, illegal mining, kidnapping, and extortion that strongly affected regional economies and communities. Fourth, a patriarchal culture where women were seen as *war booty*, becoming value targets for legal and illegal armies to debilitate local communities and damage their family structures⁴⁰. Fifth, the characteristic of targeting civilians as a method of war. This strategy was used by both illegal and legal armed groups, becoming the main objective of military operations. By killing civilians, they demonstrated power, superiority, and ownership of territories over rivals. The rationale behind this

³³ Jelke Boesten and Helen Scanlon, *Gender, Transitional Justice and Memorial Arts Global Perspectives on Commemoration and Mobilization*, (Routledge, London, 2021).

³⁴ Colin Luoma, ‘Closing the Cultural Rights Gap in Transitional Justice: Developments from Canada’s National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.’ *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*, Volume 39, Issue 1, (March 2021): 30–52.

³⁵ Janine Natalya Clark. ‘Re-Thinking Memory and Transitional Justice: A Novel Application of Ecological Memory.’ *Memory Studies*, Volume 14, Issue 4 (August 2021): 695–712.

³⁶ Katherine Fobear and Erin Baines, ‘Pushing the conversation forward: the intersections of sexuality and gender identity in transitional justice’, *The International Journal of Human Rights*, Volume 24, Issue 4, (2020): 307-312.

³⁷ Hugo van der Merwe and M Brinton Lykes, Racism and Transitional Justice, *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Volume 14, Issue 3, (November 2020): 415–422.

³⁸ Human Rights Watch, *World Report*, (New York, HRW, 2022); INDEPAZ, *Observatorio de derechos humanos y conflictividades* (Bogotá, INDEPAZ, 2022).

³⁹ PRODEPAZ, *Balance social PRODEPAZ 2009–2010* (Rionegro, PRODEPAZ, 2009); United Nations Development Programme, *Oriente Antioqueño: Análisis de la conflictividad* (Bogotá, UNDP, 2020).

⁴⁰ The National Centre of Historical Memory of Colombia, *Enough Already: Memories of War and Dignity* (Bogotá, Colombian National Press, 2013); The National Centre of Historical Memory of Colombia, *Sujetos victimizados y daños causados: Balance de la contribución del CNMH al esclarecimiento histórico* (Bogotá, Colombian National Press, 2018).

action was to undermine the social base of support for the opposing armed group, constructing ‘regimes of terror’ to use cruelty and dehumanise adversaries⁴¹.

The research strategy comprised two strands. In the first strand, I conducted forty-five semi-structured interviews and developed eight collaborative timelines (two per organisation) to analyse primary experiences of members of all four victims’ organisations. The main aim was to reconstruct motivations, reasons, interests, and understandings behind their particular roles inside these victims’ groups. In the second strand, I documented secondary experiences by collecting members’ narratives to trigger open discussion regarding individual and collective roles inside these organisations of victims. The sample of interviews comprised twenty-five women (55% of the sample) and twenty men (45% of the sample). The length of the interviews was between forty minutes to two hours. In order to categorise the information, a conceptual clustering analysis⁴² was developed. This method was used to classify interviews as clusters of information, following a conceptual description to group narratives together by similarity into classes and to generate a classification structure. This approach allowed the creation of three diverse clusters of information to manipulate the qualitative data by combining a dialectical inductive/deductive reasoning process and a hypothesis-generating method.

For the second stage, I used diverse qualitative techniques including mnemonic mapping⁴³, visual biographies⁴⁴, and oral histories⁴⁵. Using these techniques, I identified and located moments, places, relationships, interests, objects, collective actions, initiatives, and symbols that have a special meaning for each group of victims. During this second step, I collaborated with the victims to create maps, social biographies, and common histories to reconstruct individual and collective memories, emotions, and facts using personal diaries, journals, scrapbooks, photographs, and visual resources.

From 2018 to 2021, I carried out complementary research into transnational organisations’ approaches in other countries. I conducted sixteen semi-structured interviews with representatives working from the Open Society Justice Initiative, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the European Commission, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR), and the Center for World Religions, Diplomacy, and Conflict Resolution (CRDC) in order to understand the cases of Kenya, South Africa, Syria, and the Central African Republic. The ethics and research committees at EAFIT University, in Colombia, provided the ethical approval to conduct this research.

Revisiting the characteristics of the former Colombian armed conflict

On September 26th, 2016, the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) signed a peace agreement, concluding more than 60 years of armed confrontations. After 50.2% of the electorate initially rejected the peace agreement in a polarised referendum process, and following new negotiations, the Colombian Congress approved a revised peace agreement on November 29th, 2016. This date officially established the end of the Colombian armed conflict, initiating a process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of FARC ex-combatants back into Colombian society. The peace agreement created three state-led mechanisms to deliver a transitional justice process for the country: the Special Peace Jurisdiction (JEP), the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CEV), and the Search Unit for Disappeared People (UBPD).

⁴¹ Clara García and Clara Aramburo, *Geografías de la guerra, el poder y la resistencia. Oriente y Urabá antioqueños 1990–2008*, (Bogotá, ODECOFI, 2011).

⁴² Luis Talavera and Javier Béjar, ‘Generality-Based Conceptual Clustering with Probabilistic Concepts’, *IEEE Transactions on Pattern Analysis and Machine Intelligence*, Vol 23, no. 2 (2001): 196–206.

⁴³ Mnemonic mapping is a data gathering technique to trigger discussions about collective experiences to identify moments, places, and relationships that have a special meaning for the group.

⁴⁴ Visual biographies are a qualitative technique developed by psychologists and anthropologists to reconstruct individual or collective memories, emotions, and facts using visual resources.

⁴⁵ Oral histories are qualitative tools to collect information about individuals, groups, important events or everyday life issues in order to preserve the knowledge and understanding of people from an eyewitness point of view.

The armed conflict in Colombia was one of the longest-lasting that the world has ever seen. After six decades of conflict, it is estimated that almost 20% of the population is a direct victim of the war⁴⁶. Almost nine million internally displaced people, 200,000 enforced disappearances, up to 40,000 kidnappings, more than 17,000 child soldiers, nearly 9,321 landmine incidents, and 16,324 acts of sexual violence, are some of the outcomes of this war⁴⁷. The National Centre of Historical Memory of Colombia has established that there were more than 1,982 massacres of civilians between 1980 and 2012, and the Special Peace Jurisdiction has confirmed 6,402 extrajudicial executions perpetrated by the Colombian Army between 2002 and 2008⁴⁸.

Victims' organisations from Eastern Antioquia

Eastern Antioquia was one of the first places where guerrilla groups used landmines to prevent territorial control by the Colombian army. It was also the territory where methodical perpetration of massacres against civilians was used as a war strategy by paramilitary groups to spread fear and terror in the country, and where civilians experienced continuous suffering⁴⁹. The citizens of Eastern Antioquia faced all possible consequences of the armed conflict: stigmatizations, enforced displacements, massacres, persecutions, marginalisation, extrajudicial executions, and torture. They were victims of all forms of violation and human rights abuses during the Colombian armed conflict.

In 2003, two Colombian non-governmental organisations, Conciudadania and the Centre for Research and Popular Education (CINEP), started a programme in Eastern Antioquia called *Emotional First Aid*. This initiative aimed to train victims on how to help each other to overcome the pain caused by the armed conflict, offering practical workshops that addressed the psychological impact it had on them. One of the outcomes of this project was the formation of the victims' group *The Life and Mental Health Promoters* (PROVISAME), also known locally as *Las Abrazadas* (The Embraced). In 2006, forty-five members of this support group, victims of internal forced displacement, decided to go beyond the group's initial aim and founded *The Association of Victims of Granada Town* (ASOVIDA) in Granada Town, Eastern Antioquia, with the purpose of advocating for the respect of their rights.

With ASOVIDA as the main reference, in 2006, a group of women from the town of San Carlos adopted the same methodology used by *Las Abrazadas* to provide psychological assistance to the victims of this town. After initial support from Conciudadania and CINEP, this collective of women founded the victims' group *The Centre to Approach Reconciliation and Reparation* (CARE) with the main purpose of supporting local victims in all aspects of emotional, mental, and psychological recovery. After three years of intensive work with victims, in 2009, CARE started to focus on other related issues. It added three more aims to its original project. First, the creation of community strategies to bring social reparation and public recognition to the victims of San Carlos. Second, the development of processes of reconciliation and recognition between victims and perpetrators to rebuild social cohesion in the town, and, finally, the compilation of victims' and perpetrators' narratives as a mechanism to establish the truth about what happened during the years of the armed conflict in the region.

⁴⁶ The National Centre of Historical Memory of Colombia, *Sujetos victimizados y daños causados: Balance de la contribución del CNMH al esclarecimiento histórico*, (Bogotá, Colombian National Press, 2018); CINEP-CERAC, *Décimo informe de verificación de la implementación del Acuerdo Final de Paz en Colombia*, (Bogotá, CINEP, 2021).

⁴⁷ The National Committee of Reparation and Reconciliation, *Memorias en Tiempos de Guerra. Repertorios de Iniciativas* (Bogotá, CNRR Press, 2009); The National Centre of Historical Memory of Colombia, *Enough Already: Memories of War and Dignity* (Bogotá, Colombian National Press, 2013); The National Centre of Historical Memory of Colombia, *Sujetos victimizados y daños causados: Balance de la contribución del CNMH al esclarecimiento histórico* (Bogotá, Colombian National Press, 2018); Human Rights Watch, *World Report*, (New York, HRW, 2022).

⁴⁸ The National Centre of Historical Memory of Colombia, *Enough Already: Memories of War and Dignity* (Bogotá, Colombian National Press, 2013); Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz, *La JEP hace pública la estrategia de priorización dentro del Caso 03, conocido como el de falsos positivos*, (Bogotá, JEP, 2021).

⁴⁹ The National Centre of Historical Memory of Colombia, *Sujetos victimizados y daños causados: Balance de la contribución del CNMH al esclarecimiento histórico*, (Bogotá, Colombian National Press, 2018).

Meanwhile, in the main town of Eastern Antioquia, Rionegro, *the Association of Organised Women of Eastern Antioquia* (AMOR) and *the Provincial Association of Victims to Citizens* (APROVIACI) were created in 1994 and 2007 respectively. These two organisations represent victims from all the twenty-three towns of the region. In 2022, both groups portrayed the voices of almost 32,000 victims, working on political, economic, and socio-cultural projects. AMOR and APROVIACI reconfigured the traditional conception of women's identity for this region, balancing the construction of a strong collective citizenship (political and economic participation in the region) and an active social identity (socio-cultural changes in local communities) in a patriarchal public sphere⁵⁰.

During the last three decades, these four victims' organisations have developed collaborative human rights projects, provided emotional and psychological recovery to victims, and have brought assistance to local communities across all of Eastern Antioquia. Since 2017, these organisations have supported local efforts to implement transitional justice mechanisms in the region. Specifically, these victims' groups have been crucial for the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the Search Unit for Disappeared People, particularly in the development of victim-led truth-seeking initiatives.

The case of the *Never Again Museum*

The *Never Again Museum* is a victims' initiative launched by ASOVIDA. It is housed in a building in Granada town's main square where victims and their families have collected more than three hundred pictures of their murdered and forcibly disappeared relatives as an instrument to claim recognition, justice, and truth. It is a place to make public a victims' narrative about what happened in Eastern Antioquia. It describes the horrors and violence of the armed conflict and also supports the official transitional justice process in the region. One of the aims of this museum is to be a place to mourn and openly express feelings of grief. In Eastern Antioquia, during the time of the armed conflict, it was forbidden to show emotions of pain or sadness in public for someone's violent death⁵¹. Over a period of decades, guerrilla and paramilitary groups deployed in the region a war tactic named 'the imposition of silence' to ensure the symbolic control of the population by illegal groups, and to inflict fear and terror in local communities⁵². The museum aims to be a place for collective mourning and contesting the former imposition of silence. However, the collective trauma is still present in local communities, as a victim from Eastern Antioquia recalls:

When I saw how a paramilitary group killed all of my family in front of me, I began to cry and scream loudly... when I started crying, one of the paramilitaries looked at me and said: 'Ok... cry... come on... cry... cry and I will kill you'... what could I do? I had to keep my mouth shut as if nothing had happened... and after that, I started crying without tears, just in silence (Victim from Eastern Antioquia, Eastern Antioquia, personal interview).

The museum also makes visible the absence of the community members who were taken by the armed conflict. It is an effort to recognise the emptiness generated by the killings and enforced disappearances, bringing the victims back into the public consciousness and social life of local communities. Enforced disappearances inflicted extreme human suffering. Feelings of uncertainty and the incapacity of families to find closure and come to terms with the disappearance of their loved ones are further negative outcomes. Boss and Dahl⁵³ established that this emotional incapacity can produce collective and individual processes of 'ambiguous loss', that it is the process of unresolved grief and the inability to move forward that can occur when there is no verification of a missing person's status as alive or dead. Without knowing if the missing person will come back, the grief process is 'frozen' and so is the

⁵⁰ Camilo Tamayo Gómez, 'Victims' Collective Memory and Transitional Justice in Post-Conflict Colombia: The Case of the March of Light.' *Memory Studies*, Volume 15, Issue No 2 (April 2022): 376–89.

⁵¹ Clara García and Clara Aramburo, *Geografías de la guerra, el poder y la resistencia. Oriente y Urabá antioqueños 1990–2008*, (Bogotá, ODECOFI, 2011).

⁵² Juan David Villa, *Nombrar lo Innombrable. Reconciliación desde la perspectiva de las víctimas*, (Bogotá, CINEP, 2007)

⁵³ Pauline Boss and Carla Dahl, 'Family Therapy for the Unresolved Grief of Ambiguous Loss', in *Bereavement Care for Families*, eds. David Kissane and Francine Parnes (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp 171–82.

mourning process. The uncertainty can last for years or decades, leaving victims' families in a kind of limbo, hoping against hope, and unable to say goodbye.

Through the exhibition of pictures, timelines, diaries, murals, books, poems, and objects, this museum provides a scenario where the absent live on, generating an open dialogue with victims' memories in order to rebuild life and remember the past. The museum is the place of an important victims' social recognition mechanism: the *bitácoras* (logbooks). The *bitácoras* are small notebooks with the picture and brief biography of each victim, exhibited in such a way that they are accessible to visitors, who can read and write in them. This is one of the main devices in the museum to recognise, commemorate, remember, and address the past from a victims' perspective. Every description written in the *bitácoras* is constructing a social narrative of recognition about the life of the missing or killed in the region, restoring the dignity and reputation of some victims who had been wrongly accused of being part of an illegal army group. As one of the victims expressed:

We are demanding truth and justice as a group of victims because knowing the truth can help us to conduct juridical and political actions against perpetrators in transitional justice tribunals, write another kind of history about Eastern Antioquia, and obtain collective reparation. Every member of our victims' group is doing a huge individual effort using the *bitácoras* to say to the community: hey! this person that you think of as a *guerrillero* or *paramilitary* was my brother, my father, my son, and was not a bad human being... and when the people can fully understand and believe that this relative was not a bad person, I think this member of our victims' group is going to get some symbolic reparation (Victim from Eastern Antioquia, Eastern Antioquia, personal interview).

The *Never Again Museum* opened in 2009. The initial aims were to fight against the foundations of violence in Granada town, keep sight of its negative social effects, and preserve the living memory of those who were taken away by it. The main purpose was to create a social space of recognition where the local community could confront the absence of many of its former members. As a result of the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC, the museum added three more objectives. First, to be the main setting in the region where victims' social recognition can be constructed, addressed, and established. Second, to help the implementation of transitional justice mechanisms in Eastern Antioquia supporting the victims; and finally, to catalyse local processes of transitional justice in the region. Through new objectives, the museum allows for the resumption of a social dialogue that was interrupted by the violence. It allows the transformation of personal experiences of loss into common public knowledge for reconstructing local ties in transitional justice times. A member of ASOVIDA explains where this idea of democratisation of pain came from:

ASOVIDA's members realised that symbolic actions helped them to overcome the pain and suffering. They understood that remembering their loved ones helped them to lessen the pain. They said: 'why don't we take photographs of our dead relatives and hang them in a public space? Why don't we begin to pray for our victims, to remember them, to believe and recognise that they are here with us? Why don't we involve all the victims in our town to alleviate the pain collectively and remember what happened in our town so we don't forget and keep going?' (Member of ASOVIDA, Eastern Antioquia, personal interview)

This notion of democratisation of pain (the transformation of personal experiences of loss into common public knowledge) is a methodology addressed by the museum to help victims to express and recognise individual emotions of sorrow and suffering in public. The objective is to generate individual mental health recovery and inspire collective discussions about the violent events that happened in the region and why they occurred. It encourages civil society to address and recognise the past. In monthly workshops, the *Never Again Museum* provides a platform where victims can express their traumatic experiences through cryptograms, role-playing games, paintings, speeches, rituals, symbolic activities, and other performative actions including dance and theatre. Some of the outcomes of those workshops shape the foundation for future exhibitions in the museum and the activities developed are used to

generate processes of social recognition between victims. In these events, one of the main aims is to help survivors to recognise and vocalise their emotions through modes of expression, creating individual and collective conditions to represent, remember, and name traumatic experiences. Addressing her experience in one of these workshops, one victim expressed:

I always remember the *bonfire activity* in my first workshop. Speaking with another victim, my therapist really, of the unspeakable pain that I used to have in my heart after the loss of my father, my husband, my five children and an uncle in a paramilitary massacre in 2001; she told me to write all these negative feelings on a piece of paper. After that, we went with all the people in the workshop to the place where the massacre happened. We made a hand circle, and we started a small bonfire there. The leader of the activity said to me: 'Take your paper to the bonfire and let the pain go; take all these negative thoughts to the fire and let them go'; and she started talking about the importance of solidarity, recognition, and love; to keep going with our lives as victims but, more importantly, as a part of our families and communities. You know what? That day my new life started, surely that day my soul started healing" (Victim from Eastern Antioquia, Eastern Antioquia, personal interview).

Regarding the importance of expressing traumatic experiences through symbols and acts of recognition, a victim remarked:

How can you express something that is unnameable and unspeakable? The horror and sadism that I saw in the massacre of *La Placita* (rural area of Cocorná town) is something that I can't describe. I couldn't speak for three weeks after witnessing a paramilitary member playing football with the head of one of his victims. When I went to my third workshop, I finally realised that just through making rituals and creating symbols, you can express your feelings of sadness and gloom after seeing all this madness... In that workshop, one participant suggested to me to do a symbolic ritual to honour the victims using candles and creating collective poems regarding the massacre of *La Placita*. During that ritual, I started to think that silence, gestures, imagination, and recognition can heal the pain and can be the best method to express something that is unspeakable (Victim from Eastern Antioquia, Eastern Antioquia, personal interview).

During those workshops victims give an important place to symbolic and non-expressive elements, recognising victims' solidarity as the first step to exchange and share their fears and traumatic experiences (in private first and in public after) for the first time. Thus, it is possible to identify two different types of private and public rituals according to the victims' differing emotional dispositions. First, a private healing ritual to generate hope, confidence, and faith in the victims and their family. Second, a public symbolic restorative ritual where remembering the pain suffered in a particularly traumatic moment is a path to heal and recognise individual sadness. I argue that these two rituals form the base of symbolic reparations to the victims in transitional justice processes 'from below' in Eastern Antioquia. As a result, this method of individual and collective healing using symbolic actions helps to restore the individual and public voice to the victims, building social cohesion, and generating open practices of collective mourning, public commemoration, recognition, and civic solidarity.

The construction of processes of victims' recognition through the public exhibition of pictures, objects, mourning narratives, and other collaborative actions, including memorial installations and timelines in the museum, embodies ASOVIDA's strategy of allowing victims' voices to be heard and recognised as the best way to counter perpetrators' stories. It also confronts governmental versions regarding what happened in Granada town during the decades of war. For ASOVIDA, this museum is a contribution to overcoming the effects of the armed conflict in the region, sending a simple but powerful message: they are never going to forget their victims and they will fight against impunity. In the words of a former secretary of this victims' organisation:

The museum is to not forget our victims, to create another memory about what happened here and against the lack of sympathy, simple... but nobody, nobody, can take away our individual suffering as a consequence of this war, this pointless conflict... pictures contribute to reconstructing our town, our life, our *beliefs*... and all these memories have to be together, in one public space of recognition... if not, collective amnesia is the best way to encourage impunity and oblivion (Member of ASOVIDA, Eastern Antioquia, personal interview)

After analysing the narrative of the interviewees, I examined the relationship between recognition and the notions of transitional justice ‘from below’ in more depth to establish three main outcomes that the museum seeks as a crucial catalyst for local processes of transitional justice in Eastern Antioquia. First, the museum pursues recognition, justice, truth and reparation as an expression of victims’ dignity, showing that the victims from Eastern Antioquia have names, faces, and families, and they are not just ‘cold numbers’ or some other vague data in the statistics of post-conflict Colombia. Second, this initiative demands the public recognition of victims’ needs from Granada, stressing that they are part of the collective history of this town, and it is the responsibility of transitional justice mechanisms ‘from below’ to preserve the social bond between victims and local communities. Finally, the museum is an expression of civil resistance against legal and illegal armed groups from the region, and it is a space to exercise symbolic reparations through actions of recognition. As a member of ASOVIDA expressed it:

One aim of our museum is to say to the whole society, to the whole world: we don’t want to repeat these horrible things ever, ever, ever again... It is our historical responsibility against indifference... against amnesia... this space is for our loved ones to express that they are not just numbers of this war, they were human beings that are part of our history (Member of ASOVIDA, Eastern Antioquia, personal interview)

I argue that this museum expresses how victims’ recognition could be crucial for building up the road to sustainable peace in Colombia in the future. This initiative is affecting everyday life in the town of Granada through symbolic acts that are transforming personal experiences of loss into common knowledge and public recognition, serving the reconciliation of local social bonds ‘from below’. It is also confronting the apathy that used to facilitate the expansion of terror during the conflict in the country, presenting victims’ narratives as a social mechanism to break with years of silencing, producing collective recognition of victims’ suffering. This production of victims’ narratives shows the importance of constructing different modes of recognition ‘from below’ in transitional justice processes, building the most reliable ways of reconstructing the past and having civil society at the centre of this dynamic. This focus on how victims’ recognition is constructed scrutinizes the double role of public spaces as a communicative externalization of memory and the traces of the past, emphasising recognition and collective mourning as a practice of transitional justice ‘from below’.

The case of the *Trails for Life and Reconciliation*

This victims’ initiative started in 2003 when more than 120 members of APROVIACI of the towns of Granada, Marinilla, and El Santuario decided to go together to *Alto del Palmar* (a place where paramilitary groups perpetrated five massacres against civilians between 2000 to 2002) to demand truth and recognition regarding what had happened in this rural area. With this collective action, this group of victims tried to gain recognition for and restore the dignity and reputation of their relatives, wrongly accused of being part of guerrilla groups. Specifically, this act meant embarking on the same journey that their relatives did before they were massacred, carrying pictures of the victims, banners, and flowers. During the journey, the participants stopped in particular places to pray for their relatives, recite poems, sing songs, and read public declarations against the former armed conflict in the region. Another aim was to recover the public meaning of places that were stigmatized or labelled as places of horror and sadness. Addressing the importance of this initiative, a member of APROVIACI said:

We wanted to break the silence, the fear, be recognised as active citizens and honour our victims... How? Well, this is the story. After the massacres at ‘*Alto del Palmar*’,

where my husband and two sons were killed, I started to think that the victims need to do something to show to others the horror of what happened here and clear the names of people that were wrongly accused of supporting paramilitary squads or guerrilla groups... After various meetings with other victims, we decided to do the same journey that our relatives did as a recreation of the *Stations of the Cross*, because we strongly believe that our victims are martyrs, like Jesus... During the first version of this *Trail for Life* we constantly repeated during the journey things like *Never again!*, *My husband was a good father, not a guerrillero*, *My son was a peasant, not a soldier*, *No more victims, we want peace!*... and the echo of these words spread all across the region; giving us dignity, giving us recognition, giving us hope to claim for the truth... after all, why did they kill my husband and my two kids? I want to know why... (Member of APROVIACI, Eastern Antioquia, personal interview)

A massacre is defined by the United Nations as an intentional killing of four or more defenceless people in the same circumstances of manner, time, and place; and can be distinguished by the use of cruel violence displayed by perpetrators. It is also executed in the presence of others, or made visible to others, as an open exhibition of horror and brutality⁵⁴. Massacres have been used strategically for decades in Colombia as a means to spread fear and terror⁵⁵. As I expressed before, massacres were the most common modality of violence deployed by legal and illegal groups in Eastern Antioquia during the Colombian armed conflict. The National Centre of Historical Memory of Colombia established that from 1997 to 2012, in Eastern Antioquia 71 massacres took place, with a peak in the year 2001 of 26 massacres across the region. In total, approximately 573 people (97% of them civilians) were massacred in Eastern Antioquia in the last twenty-three years⁵⁶. One of the aims of the massacres was to control local populations and exercise power in key territories of Eastern Antioquia. In addition, this type of violence is an effective mechanism to destroy social cohesion inside communities. As a member of AMOR expressed:

Before the massacre, in my town we had community groups, youth groups and local committees... but after that day, we decided to stop all of that... I said to them: "Nooo! No way! I would prefer to waste my time than allow these people to know what I'm doing in my own free time!" But the truth is, to be honest, that I cannot trust the people of my town anymore... How can I know that they are not gossiping about me and saying that I'm a paramilitary supporter? How do I know that they didn't support the massacre? (Member of AMOR, Eastern Antioquia, personal interview)

Furthermore, massacres are a useful display of violence to send powerful messages of humiliation and work to dehumanise the opponents of the perpetrators, also deterring civilians from supporting any other armed group. From a paramilitary group perspective, massacres were an important tactic to reinforce their power in contested territories and threaten populations under dispute with other illegal groups in Eastern Antioquia. According to García and Aramburo⁵⁷, one of the main characteristics during the time of war in Eastern Antioquia was the particular way in which paramilitary groups performed and executed massacres. Those groups used this act of violence "to teach" local communities about the high cost of supporting guerrilla groups. One preferred method was to conduct acts of public humiliation of the victims during the massacre as a method to remove any sense of recognition or human respect for them. As a former member of AMOR, witness, and survivor of a paramilitary massacre in Eastern Antioquia, recalls:

⁵⁴ United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, *Crimes Against Humanity*, (New York, UN Press, 2021).

⁵⁵ Camilo Tamayo Gómez, Colombia's fragile peace deal threatened by the return of mass killings, *The Conversation*, (February 15, 2021). Available at <https://theconversation.com/colombias-fragile-peace-deal-threatened-by-the-return-of-mass-killings-154315>

⁵⁶ INDEPAZ, *Observatorio de derechos humanos y conflictividades* (Bogotá, INDEPAZ, 2022); The National Centre of Historical Memory of Colombia, *Sujetos victimizados y daños causados: Balance de la contribución del CNMH al esclarecimiento histórico* (Bogotá, Colombian National Press, 2018).

⁵⁷ Clara García and Clara Aramburo, *Geografías de la guerra, el poder y la resistencia. Oriente y Urabá antioqueños 1990–2008*, (Bogotá, ODECOFI, 2011).

It was the 22nd of November of 2002 in El Chocó (rural area of San Carlos Town) when a paramilitary squad killed my father and some of my friends in front of me... I couldn't recognize some of them after the massacre because they used axes and machetes to disfigure their faces and bodies... They killed them in public, in front of everybody, after taking them out of their houses... During the massacre, they laughed, shouted and said to us: 'and now what; dogs! Go and call the guerrilla; dogs! Go and call your communist friends! Bastard dogs, who will protect all of you now?' The abuse and insults were so nasty that I felt so humiliated... And I couldn't stop crying during the massacre and I couldn't defend my friends and my father either... the humiliation was devastating... (Former member of AMOR, Eastern Antioquia, personal interview)

The relationship between the act of violence and the intention of the perpetrator to humiliate in public the victim can be seen as an action of misrecognition and dishonour. Also, when the offender chooses a place with important symbolic meaning for the community to commit the killings, it introduces an extra element of cruelty. Regarding this relationship between humiliation and cruelty, a member of APROVIACI stated:

The school used to be the heart of our community... We used to celebrate parties, community reunions, weddings, sports' activities, and religious celebrations; and it used to be my workplace... On the day of the massacre, the paramilitary squad started to read a list in front of the people of the town with the names of those that they decided to kill because, according to them, they were guerrilla supporters... Suddenly one of them shouted: "We know that the school is the place where these fucking *guerrilleros* make parties! Well, now it is time for our own party!"... We began to well up... They took 13 people into the school and they were shot in the head, one by one, in front of us... the place of peace and happiness became suddenly the place of horror, death and destruction... (Former member of APROVIACI, Eastern Antioquia, personal interview)

According to Blair⁵⁸, one of the main consequences of massacres in long-term armed conflicts is to contribute to a culture of the theatricalisation of violence. Dismemberments, disfigurements, or mutilations of human bodies send symbolic and material messages of cruelty, humiliation, and disrespect. They target the cultural and social significance of the body as a place of respect and self-recognition. In Colombia, the massacred bodies of human rights defenders and social leaders are often used as trophies by the groups that have rejected the peace agreement⁵⁹. As a result, massacres can be considered a violent method against recognition. They are cruel actions against people or individuals that cannot defend themselves or resist. In a massacre, the body is the symbol and the recognition of the horror and the humiliation, where actions of dehumanization take place. To help understand this relationship between humiliation and the theatricalisation of violence, this narrative of a member of AMOR, and survivor of a massacre perpetrated on 29 January 2005, in El Vergel (rural area of San Carlos town in Eastern Antioquia), is useful:

It was raining that night... and there were soldiers of the paramilitary squad 'Heroes of Granada' who killed eleven people that night... Luz Adriana was pregnant and Griselda was just 13... They killed two babies, one of 10 months and another of 15 months... They took some of the bodies and with a knife, they wrote in their arms and legs the letters AUC (United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia)... After that, the paramilitary squad ordered us not to move the dead bodies and one of them said: "Leave all the bodies on the floor; we want the guerrilla to see what happened to their lovely friends!" and suddenly, one of them just cut three fingers off Luz Adriana and

⁵⁸ Elsa Blair, *Muertes violentas: la teatralización del exceso*, (Medellin, Universidad de Antioquia, 2004).

⁵⁹ Camilo Tamayo Gómez, Colombia's fragile peace deal threatened by the return of mass killings, *The Conversation*, (February 15, 2021). Available at <https://theconversation.com/colombias-fragile-peace-deal-threatened-by-the-return-of-mass-killings-154315>

put it on Griselda's mouth... that was the moment where I fainted...(Member of AMOR, Eastern Antioquia, personal interview)

From 2004 until today, different groups of victims from Eastern Antioquia have been performing *Trails for Life and Reconciliation* across the region, hosting a main event during the *Peace Week*. Since 1993, the Catholic Church in Colombia has organised an annual *Peace Week*, where civil society groups, local NGOs, international cooperation projects, and local religious groups deliver peacebuilding workshops, organise public demonstrations against the war, and promote academic reflexions regarding how to achieve peace for the country from a civil perspective. After the peace agreement between FARC and the Colombian government in 2016, the focus of this event has changed to promote reconciliation and transitional justice processes 'from below', including supporting the work of Colombia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Eastern Antioquia is a bastion of Catholicism in Colombia, with 90% of inhabitants declaring a Catholic faith⁶⁰. The religious connotations of the *Trails for Life and Reconciliation* for the people of the region are extremely significant. For local communities, the initiative is mainly a symbolic and spiritual act to remember and recognise their massacred relatives through adapting Catholic notions of forgiveness, absolution, suffering, and peace. According to Estrada⁶¹, the principal meaning of this collective action is the symbolic impact of recognising victims, calling for truth, justice, reparation, and non-repetition in public spaces that are associated with massacres, reconfiguring, as a result, the meaning and uses of those places for local communities.

In 2017, after a regional *Trail for Life and Reconciliation*, AMOR made public a manifesto calling for governmental support to help the victims of massacres in the region to gain access to transitional justice processes. The aim was to achieve justice through transitional justice mechanisms to prosecute perpetrators of these crimes, receive symbolic and material reparation, and secure guarantees of the non-repetition of massacres in the region. This public declaration was crucial. It is an example of how groups of victims in Colombia are demanding the protection and guarantee of their rights in transitional justice times 'from below' juxtaposing acts of social recognition (*Trails for Life and Reconciliation*) with direct political actions (the manifesto).

Recognition as respect stresses the duty of the state to protect and respect human rights and guarantee the principles of justice and state impartially for all citizens. During the official transitional justice process in Colombia, it becomes clear that victims' groups are developing their own initiatives to claim recognition (social, public, symbolic), demanding to the state guarantee of their rights as victims to achieve political goals. Regarding this relationship between acts of recognition and political actions, a member of AMOR stated:

I think that the *Trails for Life and Reconciliation* are the perfect place to mix feelings and recognition with political actions, emotions with public demands; do you know what I mean? We wanted to bring to life places that previously represented death and injustice... some people from the region said to us that we should leave dead people alone, but we strongly believe that our victims are not going to be in peace after we cleared their names... Our victims will have peace on the day that we can achieve justice; this is the best way to dignify our relatives... What do we really want? Well, we want to express our feelings and demands to the Colombian government in the places where our victims were killed as a way to dignify them; we want to create solidarities between the victims to demand protection from the government; we want to be equals for the government, not just 'simply victims'... we want to be recognised and respected, because we have political rights; and I'm convinced that to know the truth is an important step for reconciliation; and to achieve all of that we need to

⁶⁰ Observatorio de la democracia, Universidad de Los Andes, *Características y actitudes de los colombianos según su religión*. (Bogotá, Universidad de Los Andes, 2017).

⁶¹ Angela Estrada, 'Del dolor a la propuesta. Voces del panel de víctimas', *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, No. 36 (2010): 114–25.

communicate our political demands. (Member of AMOR, Eastern Antioquia, Personal interview)

The framework of recognition as respect highlights also the idea that rights are the only means through which recognition can be expressed, with human dignity as a central dimension for recognition. One of the accomplishments of the *Trails for Life and Reconciliation* is that it sends a powerful message to the Colombian state in transitional justice times: victims want to be properly treated as bearers of rights, and the state should guarantee the protection of their rights during this time of transition.

Conclusion

This article began by re-examining the relationship between the concept of recognition and the notion of transitional justice ‘from below’. It went on to establish that a ‘from below’ transitional justice perspective needs to engage more theoretically with robust sociological notions to address the promise of having civil society expectations, grassroots activism, and victims-led initiatives at the centre of transitional justice processes. It has reviewed the characteristics of the Colombian armed conflict, focusing on the region of Eastern Antioquia and its victims’ organisations’ initiatives. It has analysed the cases of the *Never Again Museum* and the *Trails for Life and Reconciliation*, arguing that these two victims’ initiatives of recognition are expressions of transitional justice ‘from below’ in the ongoing process of transitional justice in Colombia. Significantly, the article stresses the relevance of victims’ efforts to create processes of ‘democratisation of pain’ (the transformation of personal experiences of loss into common public knowledge) as expressions of recognition.

This article has also emphasised that, by scrutinising victims’ initiatives as expressions of recognition, the idea of transitional justice ‘from below’ can be reinvigorated. Countries overcoming long-term armed conflicts, in this case, Colombia, can see in the operationalisation of the struggles for recognition innovative ways to implement mechanisms of transitional justice ‘from below’. In other words, if one of the main aims of the struggles for recognition is to support processes of social transformation, mechanisms of transitional justice ‘from below’ can be revitalised by addressing models of victims’ inclusiveness and plurality.

Sustainable peace is possible only when all different groups in the community feel that they have a stake in the future, and building peace requires processes where all points of view and interests are represented and recognised. Nevertheless, the contexts of transitional justice ‘from below’ determine the content and nature of recognition, and without transition, victims’ recognition is non-specifiable. To conclude, recognition is a necessary condition of transitional justice ‘from below’. Without the suitable recognition of victims, truth, justice, reparation, closure, guarantees of non-recurrence, or accountability are impossible. Transitional justice ‘from below’ and recognition are mutually dependent, with individual and collective decisions on transitional justice matters having significant impacts on victims’ lives, configuring grassroots dynamics to fight against injustice, discrimination, and misrecognition during transitional justice times.