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# Beyond the illusion of peace in Colombia: Articulation of local voices against narrative violence

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## Abstract

**Introduction.** The degradation of the Colombian armed conflict has resulted in a war against society in which the different actors who drive it have acquired military capabilities to the same extent that they have distanced themselves from political and social ideals. **Approach.** The ending of the armed conflict and the attainment of stable peace has remained, for decades, an unrealised dream for the Colombian people, contributing to a simplification and closure of the conflict narrative. **Results.** The political and social debate around the plebiscite regarding the process of peace between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia showed that the representatives accepted and reproduced only the narratives reinforcing their own approaches. **Discussion and conclusions.** The narrative from communities that have been direct victims of the armed conflict serve to document their experience in regard to suffering and the ways in which they have faced the effects of violence. Narrating on behalf of themselves and others represents an act that allows them to become political subjects who claim their right to be seen and heard.

## Keywords

Conflict Narratives–Narrative Violence–Narratives of Peace–Peace Process–Colombia

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But no one has so far succeeded in singing an epic of peace.  
What is it about peace that makes its inspiration so hard to endure?  
What is about peace that makes its story so hard to tell?  
(Homer, the aged poet, in *Wings of Desire*, by Wim Wenders)

## 1. Introduction

A character from one of Borges' plays claims that to be Colombian is an act of faith. Perhaps in no other scenario can this be better verified than in aspirations to achieve sustainable peace in Colombia. After more than 200 years of history as a republic, this continues to be an illusion present in heated social and political debates, feeding electoral campaigns and being simplified because of the media's influence. It has also been the subject of several academic analyses—all in all, a grand illusion that has failed to become a reality. A dozen civil wars in the nineteenth century; a strong bipartisan violence in the mid-twentieth century and an armed conflict lasting for more than 50 years have made the *leitmotif* of peace-seeking (although it is understood in negative terms, that is, as the absence of a constant state of war) to be viewed more and more as an act of faith.

The Colombian armed conflict has evolved from a confrontation between rural self-defence guerrilla groups and State forces to the systematic deployment of violence, exerted in many ways, by different actors, fuelled by drug trafficking as well. This is a kind of violence in which it is no longer clear who the opposing parties are: every so often a new group appears, defending its way of acting in social or political terms, and, other times, strategic alliances between armed actors who are—in theory—on opposite sides of the political spectrum arise.

Currently, the armed conflict is maintained by a myriad of perpetrators, who spread an increasing level of violence and degradation. Similarly, the deployment of cruelty against defenceless people had also been carried out during bipartisan violence (Uribe, 2004); however, the political goals of the confrontation have gradually dissolved at present and, therefore, have disappeared in practice. This is largely due to drug trafficking, which surpassed its role as a source for funding to become an objective in itself. Moreover, this is due to the fact that the guerrilla groups, which rose up in arms and started their fight for political and social reasons, have become warlords with weapons and resources, but as pointed out by Gonzalo Sánchez (2016), with lesser or no societal commitment. Degradation has also taken place because extreme-right militia armies, which were created under the pretext of defending life and private property alleging the State's lack of protection, developed a scorched earth strategy with cruelty as their trademark.

Degradation can also be seen in the increasing use of the 'dirty war' by the State's Armed Forces. This situation is particularly evident in the poorly disguised alliance with far-right paramilitaries. Further, it was manifested in the systematic execution of young people from poor neighbourhoods, who were later presented as combatants of illegal armed groups who died in combat, thus building 'fictional battle fields' (Rojas and Benavides, 2018). In 2018, the Colombian General Prosecutor's Office investigated more than 3,000 such cases, which increased considerably (about 150%) during the years

of the ‘democratic security policy’, applied during the administration of Álvaro Uribe Vélez (Cárdenas and Villa, 2013).

Thus, the country has been marked by a progressively degrading armed conflict. According to Daniel Pécaut (2001), what has happened in Colombia is a war against society rather than a civil war or an internal armed conflict. It is a society that has kept hopes alive for at least three decades (or that has abused faith, in order to continue the image from the beginning) regarding the possibility of a definite negotiated resolution of the armed conflict. But the Colombian reality is tough and stubborn: every hope was followed by its corresponding disappointment.

## 2. Approach

This reality has been marked by a political context ‘in which peace has been negotiated as much as war has intensified’ (Bonilla, 2014:71). The media, however, has not only reported this reality but has also helped to build and extend it to the extent that it became another party in the situation rather than working for peace (Chaves, 2018). The media has a role in the transformation of the collective imaginary, but the Colombian media has favoured maintaining the climate of confrontation, which arises as a barrier when non-violent means to settle social and political conflicts are sought.

There have been important moments when it seemed that the collective imaginary was about change. White doves painted on the streets—the symbols of impending peace because of the negotiations between Belisario Betancur’s administration (1982–1986) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)—were a frequent image during the first half of the 80s. The literal violent extermination of the Patriotic Union (a legal political party that was created as an outcome of the negotiation between the guerrilla group and the government) removed all signs of such white doves and hopes of negotiating peace with the subversive groups. The far-right paramilitaries’ appearance at that time, protected by sectors of the military forces and political and economic elites (Romero, 2003; GMH, 2013), would be construed as a clear indicator that the soft appearance of new collective imaginaries regarding peace did not go hand in hand with the social and political reality of the country.

At the beginning of the 90s, the Colombian people witnessed the enactment of the new Constitution of Colombia as a result of an organised student movement and a peace agreement between the Virgilio Barco administration (1986–1990) and the M-19 guerrilla group. The murder of Carlos Pizarro Leongómez, who was the highest leader and presidential candidate of the political party formed by the M-19 after its demobilisation, took place barely one-and-a-half months after the peace agreement was signed. This incident was a clear message: peace is difficult to be achieved simply by formally signing an agreement. In spite of Pizarro’s murder, the peace process remained intact. In fact, the replacement of Pizarro within the political movement was part of the symbolic act that appeared to announce the closure of the cycle of violence and the establishment of a new pact on socio-political coexistence. On July 4, 1991, a historic leader of the Conservative Party, a prominent person in the Liberal Party, and the new leader of the demobilised guerrilla group read, together in a single voice, the preamble of the new Constitution. A symbol of reconciliation appeared [1].

But the decade that began with the hope of ending the armed conflict with the demobilisation of an important guerrilla group and the enactment of the new Constitution ended with the highest peak of massacres committed against civilians (mainly by far-right paramilitary organisations) and with the overwhelming spread of guerrilla groups. The latter infringed upon the national infrastructure and civilians, especially through kidnappings, which became a regular practice, achieving true collective panic by transforming Colombian roads into traps for random kidnappings, spearheaded by the FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN). In 1999 alone, more than 200 massacres were committed by

armed groups according to official figures from the National Centre for Historical Memory (GMH, 2013:36). In addition, throughout the 90s, more than 16,000 kidnappings were recorded, only counting those executed by guerrilla groups (GMH, 2013:65).

In addition to the abovementioned, forced disappearances increased exponentially after 1993 (GMH, 2013:59) and forced displacements, the rate of which was consistently rising at that time, particularly after 1996, made Colombia the country with the highest number of domestically-displaced people in the world by the end of the twentieth century. Keeping all this in mind, we can understand why the final years of the twentieth century have been highlighted as years of humanitarian tragedy in the country (GMH, 2013:156). The symbolic gesture of the three voices reading the preamble of the Constitution in unison was a new act of faith, which was contradicted by the reality.

A new decade, a new millennium, a new hope going away: in 2002, the Colombian people witnessed how discussions between the Andrés Pastrana's administration (1998–2002) and the FARC ceased after more than three years of negotiations, which the guerrilla groups used to militarily strengthen themselves rather than to pursue an actual agreement. The government also used this period of negotiations with the subversive group to strengthen the Armed Forces. Pastrana entered into an agreement with the Clinton administration, which later came to be known as the Colombia Plan, involving a huge financial aid and military assistance package. The plan deeply mixed the anti-subversion fight with that against drugs.

The Álvaro Uribe Vélez administration (2002–2010) unveiled a period that was particularly heavy-handed against the guerrilla groups by means of a policy of militarising daily life—the democratic security policy. With this policy, the military potential acquired through the Colombia Plan was developed, and the Public Forces took a determined offensive against the guerrilla groups. Thanks to military action against subversive groups, Uribe was rated high on popularity indices and continues to be a prominent figure in the Colombian political space. However, this safety policy resulted in numerous human rights violations by the Public Forces. The aforementioned systematic execution of civilians presented as illegal combatant casualties or the use of the State's intelligence agency to pursue and even murder the administration's opponents (Martínez, 2016; McFarland, 2018) were among these violations.

The violence exerted against society by State forces never weakened the image of the president, who constantly denied or minimised it. If the indices supporting this political figure have been upheld, it is because, as stated by Ernesto Laclau (2005), a specific policy is judged by the ability to generate order, and that is exactly what the public opinion noticed: a strong discourse on order and safety that seemed to prevail. The idea, strongly and constantly spread by the administration, that the guerrilla groups were cornered and almost defeated, together with the official demobilisation of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), an alliance gathering different extreme-right paramilitary structures and fronts, again brought hope for the end of the confrontation at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

But soon, this demobilisation and submission to justice would be revealed as an 'illusion of justice and peace' (Colombian Commission of Jurists, 2008) since new armed groups, 'paramilitaries' heirs' (HRW, 2010), would continue to dominate the territory held by the AUC. The truth was not entirely disclosed, and the deep paramilitary connections with the Colombian institutional structure was not fully revealed, especially after the extradition of the main AUC leaders to the United States, where they were only held responsible for drug trafficking crimes.

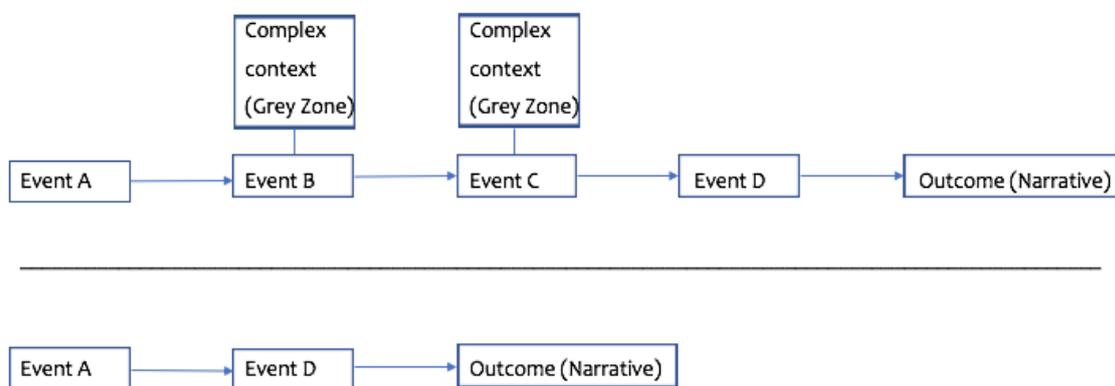
### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Conflict narratives

The most recent update on the Colombian act of faith regarding peace is the agreement between the national government and the FARC, which was signed at Colón Theatre on November 24, 2016. But something had changed since the 1980s: each announcement regarding some degree of understanding at some point in the negotiation generated polarisation and argument in Colombian society, rather than enthusiasm. The negotiation process and the agreement reached have been objects of confrontation beyond the negotiation table. The plebiscite that should have supported the agreement became the perfect scenario to make post-truth a reality in the country, the most recent term for lying for political purposes. Instead of engaging in serious debates on political and social possibilities granted by the agreement and its limitations and defects, a propaganda campaign was launched in which heaven or hell were the only two options offered. According to Iván Orozco (2009), citing what has been stated by Primo Levi (2014), analysing and confronting the grey areas of violence is what enables a society to progress towards moving on from its violent past. Instead, a bipolar, black-and-white speech appeared on the public stage during debates regarding the agreement.

A few years ago, a national branding campaign in Colombia repeated a chorus on the radio and television daily: *Los buenos somos más* (The good people are more in number). Perhaps the plebiscite revealed the catch in this chorus, a catch that in part explains the cyclical violence in Colombia that refuses to leave: the Manichaeian simplification of the conflict narrative. Sara Cobb (2016) states that in such a context narrators have no doubt that their narrative represents the reality. This is why a long-term conflict produces a type of narrative that reinforces the social capital of affiliation, that is, the link with those who share the same political approaches, and reduces the chances of the social capital of connection, which is understood as coming together with those who have political positions contrary to our own.

**Figure 1.** Simplification of conflict narratives



Authors' design

The continuation of the Colombian armed conflict over time has contributed to and even promoted the construction of a narrative that, in Kantian terms (Kant, 2009), shapes a determinant judgement: a narrative that is resistant to change because it reproduces certainty and leaves no room for questions regarding our stance and role in the conflict. The narrative structures tend to become simpler, strengthening the representation of *types* instead of people and complex situations (Emcke, 2017). That

is to say, instead of exploring the grey areas of violence (the places where the correlations of meaning that feed it are found), an effort to stabilise the narrative, that is, simplifying it and seeking ways to make it immune to change, has been carried out.

Figure 1 shows how conflict narratives can be simplified, that is, decomplexified. The part above the horizontal dividing line corresponds to a complex narrative, which includes situations or events with a complexity inherent to the grey areas of violence—that is to say, events in which roles are not perfectly differentiated in a Manichaean manner. This narrative is unstable since it considers questions regarding everyone's role in the continuation of the conflict. The part below the line represents the narrative process of decomplexification or simplification. Here, the grey areas of violence in the conflict narrative are excluded, thereby keeping the main plot stable (Cobb, 2016), in which there is a narrative resistance to the transformation of roles and changes within the plot.

The political and social debate, even within groups of friends or family, regarding the approval of the peace agreement in Colombia has shown exactly this in all of its aspects: the interlocutors agreed and only reproduced the narrative that strengthened our own approaches, while anyone who attempted to show the opposing stance or enable any understanding of it was cast aside. Additionally, this was reinforced by the fact that the national government failed to make the plebiscite a State concern and even contributed to transforming it into a dispute between opposing political parties, a classic confrontation between two blocs. In the end, phrases such as 'the yes people' and 'the no people' became popular in the country, referring to people who supported the popular approval of the peace agreement and the people who did not. Each of these groups seemed to have a different idea regarding the country and its armed conflict.

Instead of being an element of social cohesion, the historical agreement reached between the Colombian State and the FARC deepened—or perhaps just showed—important political differences. In Lyotard's terms (1983), what has been made evident is that the Colombians have a differend regarding the armed conflict. According to the analysis conducted by Lyotard, resolution is not possible within the context of a differend since the parties fail to listen to each other and even if they do, each party uses different terms to argue, which flow in a parallel fashion. This is a conflict that 'cannot be settled' because the parties at issue fail to share the same language. In the case of Colombia, on the one hand, some people refer to a social and political conflict regarding the distribution and use of land when they talk about the armed conflict. On the other hand, others referring to the same conflict talk about a State that fights a terrorist threat. According to the latter stance, the existence of the armed conflict itself 'cannot become an official truth', as expressed by the new director of the National Centre of Historical Memory (CNMH, for its acronym in Spanish) appointed under President Iván Duque's administration [2].

Although the negotiation between the State and the FARC seemed to be held according to the first interpretation of the armed conflict, the application of what has been agreed upon seems to be carried out in accordance with the second one. Despite the announcement of the final agreement being made on August 24, 2016, and its formal and public signing being made on September 26, its non-approval, according to the plebiscite made on October 2 of that same year, showed that the final agreement was not so. First, some aspects had to be renegotiated, which resulted in the signing of a new final agreement on November 24. This new agreement was approved by the Congress of the Republic in the following weeks but with some amendments. Perhaps the main one was the elimination of 16 special seats in Congress, created on the basis of the agreement for representatives of territories affected by the armed conflict. Since its approval, it has become evident that the final agreement was

not final at all. Since then, the Colombian people have attended political and media debates over the weeks regarding new amendments that have been introduced to this peace agreement.

Public events regarding past violence may be useful in showing that the troubled past has been discussed and that solutions to address its problematic effects have been found, even though no changes are expected to be assumed (Nytagodien and Neal, 2004). The Colombian establishment was diligent in ensuring the logistics that were needed for the FARC to hand in their weapons (while not so much to take over the territories controlled by the guerrilla). Undoubtedly, ensuring the weapons hand-in was necessary because breaking up a powerful group with the ability to exert violence against the infrastructure of the State and against civilians was a national priority.

However, since then, it has been clear that the power established in the country has no interest whatsoever in addressing other issues stated in the agreement, some of which are necessary even without it. Besides being written in the text, these are unresolved issues in a country with profound inequities that has attempted to enter into modern times maintaining a socio-economic structure more closely related to a feudal system in some places.

The implementation of what was negotiated on the agricultural issue serves as an example. There essentially is an academic consensus regarding the fact that the problem of land distribution and its use gave rise to the origin and persistence of the armed conflict (GMH, 2013; Reyes, 2009; Sánchez and Peñaranda, 1987). A peace agreement that failed to address this issue would have been unable to undertake transformations to ensure what has been vaguely mentioned in political discourse as a long-lasting peace. The rural inequality gap is huge in the country; according to the National Agricultural Census carried out by the State Department of Statistics in 2015, 0.4% of owners of productive land in Colombia had 46% of the productive rural territory consisting of more than 500 hectares. This means that almost half the largest portions of productive land belongs to only 0.4% of the people who own large rural properties. The agrarian question is the central issue that has the ability to transform the Colombian socio-economic structure.

Two years after the peace agreement was signed, the *Verdad Abierta* investigative journalism portal (24 November, 2018), which has documented the Colombian armed conflict, carried out an analysis regarding its implementation. The data pertaining to the proposed agricultural reforms leaves no room for illusions. Almost all the political decisions and proposals that have been made in this regard have slowed down any progress instead of driving it. The creation of a land fund of 3 million hectares to be distributed among those who have no land is the focal point of the agreement—a key aspect. In order to do so, the proposal consisted of identifying and distributing the country's uncultivated land that was unlawfully taken or occupied by private parties. However, the government that entered into the agreement (the Juan Manuel Santos administration, 2010–2018), itself enacted laws and reforms that provided legal tools to businesspeople and landowners occupying such land so that they would be able to keep it (*Verdad Abierta*, 21 February 2018).

In order to be implemented, a peace agreement entails more than just a signed and ratified document. Political will is also needed. How can the lack of will be explained by the government that signed the agreement and by the Congress members who ratified it? In his theory of the State in society, Joel Migdal (2011) defines the State using two elements: image and practice. In short, the State's image refers to what the State claims to be from the discursive point of view and the idea that it can be constructed from regulations and laws that the State itself enacts or decrees. Practice, however, refers

to the daily performance of the State's institutions and officials. Therefore, practice is what the State actually does. Such a practice may reinforce or contradict the State image.

This approach is interesting because it allows us to explain the differences in the persistence and strength (bravery, even) with which the Colombian government, as a lawful representative of the State, negotiated the peace agreement and the weakness and lack of interest shown in carrying it out. This is the 'fetishism of the law', which according to anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff (2009), is typical of post-colonial states. It refers to the idea that when the State faces a problem or lack of something, it is assumed that the solution lies in the enactment of new laws to deal with it. Through this means, the image of the State may be continuously transformed even without an actual change in its practice.

The explanation above corresponds with the current situation of the peace agreement: it entailed a transformation of the State's image which led to some constitutional reforms—and even to the Nobel Peace Prize being awarded to the president who negotiated and signed it—without actually renewing political practices, which define the daily performance of State actors and institutions and can encourage social reform and build peace.

### **3.2. Local narratives of peace**

The peace agreement was not destroyed, as was expected by the most radical section of the political party that led the current president to office, at least not entirely. The current government (supported by the Congress) has continued to implement the agreement but has further weakened the possibility for it to be used as a tool to transform the political and economic structure of the country (Vélez, 2018). As mentioned in Section 3.1, the new government continues to reinforce the image of a State that respects the agreement but encourages practices that fail to support this image or that even openly contradict it. The scope of the sentences to be faced by former combatants and whether the terms of justice that have been agreed upon should be applied to members of the Public Force is currently debated in Colombia. However, debates regarding reforms that should be encouraged to address the social, political and economic bases on which the Colombian armed conflict has continued are emphasised far less.

Gonzalo Sánchez (2016), General Director of the CNMH until 2018, states that the Colombian armed violence has extended for decades because the political and economic elites of the country have wanted to stop at zero cost, among other reasons. They have been undermining or negating the social and political conflicts that have fuelled the armed conflict. Even fuelling it has represented an economic asset that moves capital. Sánchez also points out that the Colombian war has continued over time because a large percentage of the population (especially those located in privileged urban areas) has learned to live with its existence, maintaining relative peace in their daily lives. For the inhabitants of these areas, the impact of the armed conflict has been of low intensity and has not interfered with their daily routine.

The war may seem, to a certain extent, faraway for some Colombians because it has been a daily presence in media narratives for years (for many people, through their entire lives), but it has not considerably affected them in a vital manner. In addition, narratives have been predominantly constructed by the media, which is more concerned with winning over people's opinion and disseminating stories according to the dictates of the political hegemony. The voices of those who have directly suffered from the armed conflict are neglected because they mean nothing to the rulers and

the reporters. In the current context, media and its professionals are shaped by the concentration of media, threats and attacks on the freedom of information, being subject to legal issues, and even being victims of tapping and surveillance (Chaves, 2018).

Because of this distance from which the armed conflict has been perceived, its resolution has also been imagined as the result of decisions made by distant actors. This is why the illusion of achieving resolution comes from the act of faith on some people who are expected to perform this task. In some ways, ‘trivialising violence’ has been learned (Pécaut, 1997), that is, incorporating it in our daily lives without even trying to understand its origin, its dynamics, or its profound impacts. We talk about it every day without even realising what we are talking about. If this scenario has been made possible, it is due to the existence of the distance, not only geographically speaking, between the country that has suffered the cruelties of war and the social and political centres from where Colombian democracy and war are formally upheld.

For the population that has suffered the burden of violence, mostly rural or living in poor urban suburbs because of forced displacement, the armed conflict has not represented a vision of a distant national reality but has been incorporated into its usual social structure instead. Therefore, this has not only restricted their potential to be socially incorporated in national dynamics but has also threatened their own survival and limited or voided their fundamental rights. Furthermore, their close experience in the development of the confrontation and witnessing its constant transformations have taught them that peace cannot only be vertically achieved by means of signing agreements but rather should be constructed horizontally based on regular negotiations with those who share the social space. For these people, war and peace are necessarily related issues, rather than products of media narratives, academic discussions or agreements between elite parties.

This is why local communities risk their own survival and quality of life for peace-building. When Judith Butler (2017) picks up Adorno’s question (2013) regarding the potential for a good life in the middle of a bad life, she makes clear that a liveable life must address the needs that allow a body to persist (and not just survive). Resisting the forms of scarcity imposed on them is the main political task for the communities that have suffered from the dynamics of the armed conflict and the structural violence fuelling it. Resistance can also be carried out by building opposing narratives contributing to cause instability for any conflict narrative that is expected to be predominant.

Thus, the voices and sounds that constitute local narratives of peace may be understood as performative actions that seek to resist the existence of peace only as an illusion. We talk about voices and sounds when referring to narratives that are not always a coherent whole that shapes a finished argument. These are not necessarily narratives that shape the plot of the meaning of violence or its comparative experience but rather testimonies of experiences that are equal to testimonies of existence. When a man like Rafael Moreno, displaced by a far-right paramilitary massacre in the Colombian Caribbean, sang his ten-line stanza for his family, friends and neighbours or at different events where he used to participate, this reflected the existence of people, brought together by the difficult experience of displacement:

I’m going to sing my song for my beloved people  
A traditional fisherman who today is cast into oblivion  
Therefore, I ask my God to send his redemption  
The fishermen’s town that sings happily  
That in the candour of night and day we suffer a thousand troubles

It is the land of my love that causes me melancholy [3].

This is a performative act because narratives of this sort (as well as the others analysed in this special issue) produce a ‘space of appearance’ (Arendt, 2003; Butler, 2017), that is, a physical and symbolic space that gives voice to people or social groups that have been pushed by war into a state of scarcity (or their condition of scarcity has been intensified by war). Through such acts, people project their own perspective and avoid being subjected to one of the most serious citizen exclusions—the ‘deprivation of the right to be seen and heard, which is equal to social existence/significance, both individually and collectively, among the majorities and minorities’ (Martín Barbero, 2018:22). By means of these voices and sounds, the local communities that have withstood the violence have made themselves heard; they matter and are taken into account, and they exist upon occupying the space of appearance in which they are represented.

It is true that there is something unspeakable about the experience of violence and that pain, as stated by Elaine Scarry (1985), escapes words. This is why building narratives that are able to give global meaning to this violence requires effort for the communities affected directly by the armed violence. They are more similar to short stories regarding the specific victimisation suffered, which tend to focus on the description of the weapon and the wound (Scarry, 1985), that is, in the specific description of the assault and its immediate consequences.

Therefore, the production or reproduction of a more global narrative of violence is a task that should be done by ‘concerned others’, as defined by Iván Orozco (2009), that is, the members of a society who have not been direct victims of armed violence but have the duty to face its effects. With Elsa Blair (2008), we can say that those concerned others have the obligation as citizens to become ‘representative witnesses’, that is, to undertake the task of constructing complex narratives, to become witnesses who account, if necessary, even on behalf of those who cannot speak because of the direct impact of violence (Agamben, 2000).

But if violence has an unspeakable characteristic it is because its agents, producers and reproducers have sought to deny the ‘moral agency’ (Nelson, 2001) to people who have been subjected by means of weapons or intimidation. Moral agency is, thus, understood as the ability of people to narrate about themselves. Sara Cobb has defined this attempt to deprive some people, or social groups, of the opportunity to narrate their own experience regarding suffering and to narrate about themselves as political subjects who recover the agency of their lives as ‘narrative violence.’ She states, ‘once separated from the narrative, people have no access to meaningful production and, therefore, neither protest nor politics are possible’ (Cobb, 2016: 52).

In principle, the local narratives of peace are built against narrative violence. Using Lyotard’s terms (1983) again, the differend regarding the armed conflict may be transformed into litigation through the exercise of local narratives. Litigation concerning the armed conflict should be understood, this way, as a deliberative space in which the narrative can be opened to build the social capital of connection that we cited in Section 3.1. This is not about eliminating disagreements within the nation but rather ensuring that peace ceases to be meaningless such that a complex narrative is built on the armed conflict. This narrative would probably be difficult to understand and even more so to absorb, but it may lead to understanding that real ‘stable and long-lasting’ peace is not reached at zero cost.

When it comes to opposing narrative violence, the media has, in turn, a decisive role. Its most important task is to disseminate stories about peace, reducing the privilege granted to ‘war events’ for being

‘events related to news value that favour drama, tragedy, novelty, splendour, antagonism and heroism’, and increasing the importance of ‘peace events’, which tend to be ‘in the darkness, since these are no longer related to what is unusual, dramatic or stunning’ (Bonilla, 2015: 72). What has been kept in the darkness should reclaim visibility in order to contribute to creating content with the meaning of peace.

The narrative that is proposed and projected from the perspective of people who have survived the war—and continue to struggle to survive—is ‘a strategy of building subjectivity and community, producing knowledge and memory’ (Franco, Nieto, Rincón, 2010: 5). It is about stories, other stories that they want to narrate, ‘stories that provide them dignity and hope to keep on resisting/living’ (Franco, Nieto, Rincón, 2010: 5) to the extent they find ears that listen and seek to understand. In this sense, Ricoeur (2013) claims that memories not only need to be narrated but also certified.

Hope represents a basic strength so as not to sink in despair. But to consider it as the only support in building peace implies leaving this task to be done by others. For its part, narratives of peace bring us closer to the voices necessary to transform the collective imaginary regarding the armed conflict. Therefore, it is about voices that are used to ‘clear the way to wider and inclusive points of view where they do not collapse into Manichaeism or Messianism’ (Tamayo, 2008: 175).

Such wide points of view are resistances against war because they comprise a commitment to a collective project, from their local creation and reproduction. The resistance is established through a wide variety of lyrics, music, voices and sounds typical of a multicultural and multi-ethnic country. This is why its narrative richness is immense. For the local communities, the difficulty does not lie in the ability to narrate, for they have a vast repertoire of idiosyncratic artistic elements that enable them to do it. The challenge falls on our side as concerned others, that is, those who have not been directly affected by the war and have the obligation as citizens to listen to those voices and transmit their meaning to the model of society we are in.

Then, our duty is of a hermeneutic nature in the sense that we are in charge of reshaping the narrative because we receive not only the meaning of the story ‘but also, by means of it, its reference: the experience it brings to the language and, lastly, the world and its temporary nature unfolded before it’ (Ricoeur, 2004: 150). Thus, the narratives are ‘drafts’ (Ricoeur, 2004: 146) provided to the audience so they may complete these stories by including the experiences they share to the language of social and political discussions regarding the armed conflict and peace-making.

Ultimately, these stories tell what has not been told and say what has not been listened to or that we have not wanted to listen to. Therefore, they need our involvement as citizens to expand the space of appearance created by them. These stories join voices that narrate the unspeakable and work to achieve an unreachable hope because it is in this logical difficulty that the possibility of true peace-building is defined.

#### **4. Discussion and conclusions**

According to Joan Didion (1979: 11), we tell ourselves stories to keep on living. This is what is done by communities seeking to narrate for themselves their experiences of suffering and confrontation regarding the effects of violence. Further, their narrations are in a manner such that they rebuild the plot with regard to the meaning of their lives. In comparison to the simplified narratives reproduced by those who join the national debate regarding peace at crucial moments (like that of a peace

agreement), the local voices and sounds represent vivid narratives that are themselves certified and lawful due to being the result of direct experience.

But such local narratives have a fiduciary nature because they need the attention that the rest of society can provide. Their typical performative characteristic works from the local level to account for an existence claiming its right to be considered. This communicative claim and narrative question is addressed to those in charge of transforming into representative witnesses. Assuming this role becomes a citizen's responsibility at times when a country seeks negotiated alternatives to overcome old social and political conflicts that have been expected to be settled for decades through the use of arms. And this responsibility should be undertaken by the media as well by changing the focus of its journalistic point of view 'from the interest in testimonies and communication by the armed subjects (murderers) to survival stories and strategies' (Bonilla, 2015: 73). Within this context, the media is required to work towards 'changing the language to change the speech and take a chance with dialogue', which requires 'finding stories from the resistance' and being part of a journalism that contributes to its narratives to 'heal the social tissue' (Chaves, 2018: 126).

For peace in Colombia to cease to be simply an illusion and begin to socially materialise, value must be granted to the local voices that are the ones that can actually reveal the damage that the war has caused and share the ways in which they have sought to rebuild meaning in daily life. Several community initiatives and spaces such as the Truth Commission can represent, in this sense, scenarios to publish and understand these narratives. From this point of view, reflexive opinions that open the national narrative regarding war and peace-building may arise. This necessary opening depends on the involvement of representatives in discussion (who could potentially be all individuals and groups that are part of the society), seeking to create and/or strengthen the social capital of connection.

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## 5. Notes

[1] The solemnity of the moment can be appreciated in the video of the event's official transmission: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vy-cBQSNpQs> (Accessed on February 25, 2019).

[2] The statements of Darío Acevedo, director of the NCHM appointed by President Iván Duque in 2019, were made during the interview with the journal *El Colombiano* on February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Available at: <https://www.elcolombiano.com/colombia/paz-y-derechos-humanos/dario-acevedo-nuevo-director-del-centro-nacional-de-memoria-historica-EG10252897> (Accessed on May 2, 2019).

[3] Rafael Moreno was an inhabitant of Bocas de Aracataca, a lake-dwelling village located in Ciénaga Grande de Santa Marta, northern Colombia. In this village, a far-right armed group from the AUC massacred eight fishermen in 2000, which led to the displacement of the rest of the population. Currently, this village is a semi-abandoned town where only a few families live. Rafael, like most inhabitants in this village, was forced to move to a town adjacent to the Ciénaga Grande de Santa Marta. There, until his death, he continued to write verses in ten-line stanzas, a traditional oral art of

the region. This transcribed fragment is a piece of a ten-line stanza he authored that he read to us during a personal interview on May 26, 2011.

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