
The Archive in the Witness: Documentation in Settings of Chronic Insecurity

Pilar Riaño-Alcalá* and Erin Baines†

Abstract¹

Through an exchange between members of community-based organizations that document human rights violations in northwest Colombia and northern Uganda, this article examines multiple strategies of memory making in which an individual or a collective creates a safe social space to give testimony and re-story past events of violence or resistance. In settings of chronic insecurity, such acts constitute a reservoir of living documents to preserve memories, give testimony, contest impunity and convey the meaning, or the ‘truthfulness,’ of survivors. The living archive disrupts conventional assumptions about what is documentation or witnessing in the field of transitional justice and introduces new interdisciplinary tools to the field with which to learn from and listen differently to survivors.

Introduction

In 2009, the authors prepared a research study of communities within and across the northwest of Colombia and northern Uganda, two sites of prolonged conflict and profound human rights abuses. The purpose of the research was to understand how community-based organizations and survivor groups adopt specific strategies to collect evidence and document victims’ memories of human rights abuses.² As part of the research methodology, the authors arranged for an

* Associate Professor, School of Social Work and Liu Institute for Global Issues, University of British Columbia, Canada. Email: pilar.riano@ubc.ca

† Assistant Professor, Liu Institute for Global Issues, University of British Columbia, Canada. Email: erin.baines@ubc.ca

¹ The authors are grateful to the participants and organizations involved in the exchange, the host communities, their research assistants during the research project and write-up – Ricardo Chaparro, Belky Mary Pulido Hernandez, Leyner Palacios, Delis Palacios, Lino Owor Ogora, Ketty Anyeko, Boniface Ojok, Nancy Apiyo, Evelyn Amony, Grace Acan and Lara Rosenoff – as well as the Martha Piper Research Fund and the International Development Research Centre for their funding support, the editors of *IJTJ* and three anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful reviews and suggestions.

² We make a distinction between civil society organizations, community-based organizations and survivor groups to account for broad differences in scale, scope, nature of the organization and focus of the documentation work. For the purposes of this article, civil society organizations are officially registered and recognized nongovernmental organizations located across multiple regions with a regional, national or global reach. Community-based organizations are registered or

exchange between members of community-based groups in Gulu, Uganda, and Chocó, Colombia, who document human rights violations and victims' memories of violence. This unique method proved to be an extremely useful means to consider the multiple ways community-based organizations and survivor groups document and remember.

In the scheduled meetings between survivor groups and civil society and community-based organizations, participants sang songs of loss, sorrow, resistance and reprieve. Poems and other varieties of oral verse were recited with great enthusiasm and cheer, and, at times, amid sorrowful silence. The participants performed dances, teaching one another the steps and their cultural significance. They led the way down overgrown paths to places where massacres were carried out. A ruin of a house, a water source, an unmarked grave, these were spaces survivors pointed out, asking exchange participants to witness landscapes that they remember. While these community-based groups place a great deal of emphasis on the need to provide evidence-based, written or visual records to push for and realize transitional justice goals, they also recognize the value of using these other forms of memory, art and ceremony to document the violence in nonconventional and safer ways. The exchange provided us with an observational and dialogic opportunity to examine ways in which memories of violence become living documents, communicated and shared through a myriad of performative and creative means. We call this emplaced witnessing – the plural, place-based imaginative strategies and embodied acts of transfer through which an individual or a collective creates a safer social space to give testimony and re-story past events of violence or resistance.

In the field of memory studies, Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer challenge conventional notions that the archive is but a series of evidentiary documents. They suggest that performative elements of testimony, including silences, pauses and emotional outbursts during trials, constitute the archive itself, for they communicate not only fact but also meaning.³ We broaden this argument to include spaces where survivors retain and transmit memories of violence in an ongoing and reiterative process of documentation in the everyday. The archive, then, is living. It is embedded in the day-to-day lives and surroundings of the survivor-witness and inscribed on the bodies of tellers and listeners. To illustrate the richness of these emplaced acts of witnessing, we limit ourselves here to three types of acts abundantly found in the regions under study: performative (poetry, song, drama and dance); embodied (scars and physical

unregistered groups composed of members of an affected community. While they may work on regional, national or international levels, they are largely concerned with issues based in the communities in which they originated. Survivor groups may be registered or unregistered and are composed of self-identified victims of grave human rights abuses. Their members and activities may or may not be based in a particular community, but their work is based on a shared identity. Members of the three groups may overlap.

³ Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, 'The Witness in the Archive: Holocaust Studies/Memory Studies,' *Memory Studies* 2(2) (2009): 151–170.

illness or injury and emotions) and memoryscapes (landscape and material markers of memory).

This living archive is one way to consider how, in the context of ongoing violence, survivor groups and community-based groups develop strategies to document truth and contest impunity in ways that are culturally specific and safe. We do not argue that global or national justice scenarios for witness testimony and formal documentation after conflict are not relevant or desired by war-affected persons, or that processes of emplaced witnessing are a substitute for or preferable to accountability or reparation. We also do not desire to present an uncomplicated understanding of how survivors and community-based groups remember and document. Like formal documentation or testifying at a trial, emplaced witnessing is political, partial and contested, and this, too, is crucial in understanding the heterogeneous and disputed nature of memories and testimonies at the communal level. We do, however, argue that acts of emplaced witnessing serve to preserve memory, acknowledge wrongs and contest past truths. They are therefore worthy of greater study in the field of transitional justice.

Transitional Justice, Emplaced Witnessing and the Living Archive

Until recently, transitional justice has been dominated by analyses of macro-level and formal institutional processes and mechanisms (such as trials and tribunals, truth commissions, vetting, reparations and security sector and legal reform) that attempt to redress past wrongs and promote just and peaceful polities.⁴ Concerned that such mechanisms lack resonance with the everyday lives of survivors, several scholars began to examine the ways in which communities redress wrongs and move on after violence. Many of these locally based processes contradict the more formal mechanisms. Rosalind Shaw, for instance, has illustrated the limitations of formal mechanisms in Sierra Leone, where communities pursue their own ways of remembering and then forgetting the violence. To reopen and speak ‘the truth,’ as the Sierra Leonean Truth and Reconciliation Commission requires of participants, is to provoke further violence.⁵ Tim Kelsall likewise illustrates how the creative adaptation of ritual at the end of formal truth-telling forums in Sierra Leone appeared to have a greater reconciliatory effect on participants than the imposition of the more official approaches.⁶

⁴ Oskar N. T. Thoms, James Ron and Roland Paris, ‘State-Level Effects of Transitional Justice: What Do We Know?’ *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 4(3) (2010): 329–354; Tricia D. Olsen, Leigh A. Payne, Andrew G. Reiter and Eric Wiebelhaus-Brahm, ‘When Truth Commissions Improve Human Rights,’ *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 4(3) (2010): 457–476.

⁵ Rosalind Shaw, ‘Memory Frictions: Localizing Truth and Reconciliation in Sierra Leone,’ *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1(2) (2007): 183–207.

⁶ Tim Kelsall, ‘Truth, Lies, Ritual: Preliminary Reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Sierra Leone,’ *Human Rights Quarterly* 27(2) (2005): 361–391.

Communities also improvise to complement official mechanisms. In Guatemala, communities have organized ‘houses of memory’ to document and resist historical erasure of atrocities, providing important community-based supplements to national processes.⁷ Kimberly Theidon illustrates how communities in Ayacucho, Peru, have adapted truth-telling mechanisms and infused them with Christian reconciliatory principles in order to accept those returning from war with blood on their hands.⁸ In Mozambique, in the absence of any formal transitional justice mechanism, Victor Igreja studies how spirit possession forces communities to deal with past wrongs and advances protection for those harmed.⁹ Scholars in Indigenous Governance Studies explore goals of reconciliation from an Indigenous self-determination agenda and a storytelling, community-based approach to truth telling.¹⁰

Our interest in community documentation practices and strategies is in part a desire to advance community-based studies of transitional justice, joining other scholars who pay attention to a variety of community-based mechanisms (such as African or Indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms) and civil society initiatives as potential supplements or correctives to national processes.¹¹ While the growing body of literature cited above centres on practices of remembering, healing, forgetting and conciliation, we specifically focus on informal acts of transfer by which deeply embedded and painful memories of survivors are documented and communicated. Witnessing in its embodied sense is an act of transfer and reception. Phenomenologically, it is a ‘site of experience and meaning.’¹² In other words, while these acts of documenting the past in the living archive might not always contain ‘truth’ (empirical facts), they are representative of ‘truthfulness’ (meaning attached to facts and events). By focusing on informal acts of emplaced transfer, we aim to locate the work of witnessing in the historically situated lives of survivors, moving beyond current understandings of witness testimony as a

⁷ Laura Arriaza and Naomi Roht-Arriaza, ‘Social Reconstruction as a Local Process,’ *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 2(2) (2008): 152–172.

⁸ Kimberly Theidon, ‘Justice in Transition: The Micropolitics of Reconciliation in Postwar Peru,’ *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50(3) (2006): 433–457.

⁹ Victor Igreja, ‘Justice and Reconciliation in the Aftermath of the Civil War in Gorongosa, Mozambique Central,’ in *Building a Future on Peace and Justice: Studies on Transitional Justice, Peace and Development: The Nuremberg Declaration on Peace and Justice*, ed. Kai Ambos, Judith Large and Marieke Wierda (Berlin: Springer, 2009).

¹⁰ Jeff Corntassel, Chaw-win-is and T’lakwadzi, ‘Raven Smashes His Face into a Rock: Indigenous Storytelling, Truth-Telling, and Community Approaches to Reconciliation,’ *English Studies in Canada* 35(1) (2009): 137–159; Paulette Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010).

¹¹ Naomi Roht-Arriaza and Javier Mariezcurrena, eds., *Transitional Justice in the Twenty-First Century: Beyond Truth versus Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Luc Huyse and Marc Salter, eds., *Traditional Justice and Reconciliation after Violent Conflict: Learning from African Experiences* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2008).

¹² Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, *Emplaced Witnessing: Sites of Insight and Commemoration in Conflict Zones* (unpublished manuscript, July 2011).

strictly legal act, a traumatic memory or a historiographical judgement of empirical facts.¹³

In the ample literature on witnessing and memory studies of the Holocaust, a major analytical focus is on speechlessness and performance in survivor testimonies. Hirsch and Spitzer focus on witness testimony to foreground a critical shift towards ‘embodiment, affect and silence’ in the understanding of memory work and transmission.¹⁴ By placing the ‘witness in the archive,’ these authors challenge an excessive emphasis on trauma and the breakdown of speech in memory and trauma literature, arguing that it misses the knowledge and unique information survivor testimonies transmit. They suggest, furthermore, that this emphasis may result in a refusal to engage with survivors’ intentions to testify not to trauma or factuality but to the meaning of their experience. By shifting attention to meaning, to the expressive power of silences and to their embodiment, Hirsch and Spitzer conclude, an expanded notion of truth is encountered as to ‘what we might now think of as an embodied form of “truthfulness.”’¹⁵

By examining here the ‘archive in the witness,’ we bring this exploration further into the emplaced and situational characteristics of witnessing, and specifically into the process of inscription in which testimony tilts into archive.¹⁶ At the same time, we disrupt conventional assumptions about documentation as formal or written. Attention to emplaced practices and their inscription in memoryscapes and embodiment shifts the focus of documentarians from the written, quantitative and discursive strategies of documenting human rights violations and atrocity to performative and embodied forms.¹⁷ This shift, we argue, engages questions of voice, truth and dignity among survivors of mass atrocities and explores how these questions are addressed by survivors themselves. Documentation is not simply inanimate storage, nor is the act of documentation solely one of collecting facts and evidence from official (or even unofficial)¹⁸ sources. Rather, it is historically situated action in which survivor-witnesses, individually and/or collectively, become living sites for storing knowledge about the past through their bodies, storytelling, performance and movement.¹⁹ These are important sites of witnessing; in a sense they are the ‘front line’ of documentation, refusing erasure of wrongs through creative expression and imagination and

¹³ For a discussion on the various uses of witness testimony in these disciplines, see, Hirsch and Spitzer, *supra* n 3; Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

¹⁴ Hirsch and Spitzer, *supra* n 3 at 152.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹⁶ Ricoeur, *supra* n 13.

¹⁷ Diane Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

¹⁸ Louis Bickford, ‘Unofficial Truth Projects,’ *Human Rights Quarterly* 29(4) (2007): 994–1035.

¹⁹ Taylor, *supra* n 17; Allen Feldman, ‘Ethnographic States of Emergency,’ in *Fieldwork Under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival*, ed. Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonio C.G.M. Robben (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).

crafting a space for survivors and their communities to bear witness, restore dignity and communicate their pains and claims. We employ the concept of the living archive to indicate the inscription of testimony in place and body that results from these acts of memory creation and transfer. Similar to physical and written archives, living archives enact, codify and name the past in specific ways. In contrast to the categorical fragmentation of experience in official archives, the living archive is an adaptive and open-ended repository of memories, affect and meaning.

While the informal, nonverbal and embodied ways in which memory is enacted and preserved are an important facet of historical memory work and resistance to violence and silencing, they are not formally recorded or analysed in the field of transitional justice.²⁰ Yet, such efforts are often the only recourse for people living under duress and threat. Emplaced practices communicate and denounce harm in culturally safe, appropriate and relevant ways. This is not to say that such practices are the only way survivors document,²¹ or that those with the reprieve of time or distance from violence are somehow 'displaced' witnesses, but rather to emphasize the context of insecurity that circumscribes an individual's choice of documentation strategy. In a setting of ongoing violence, written documents can be life-threatening. They are often the first to be destroyed; medical records, registries of births and deaths and written accounts of human rights violations often disappear. In the same way, documentarians of human rights violations and custodians of written archives are primary targets of violence. However, living archives are not only relevant and often safe ways to document, they are also unique repositories, rich in meaning, which present generous phenomenological insights into survivor 'truthfulness' that cannot be gleaned from formal evidentiary archives.

Methods of Exchange

After meeting for the first time in 2009, the authors wanted to learn more about each other's research in Colombia and Uganda, where we have worked as documentarians, scholars and activists for a number of years. We developed a research project to map the ways community-based groups document in settings of prolonged and ongoing violence. As part of the research methodology, we arranged for an exchange of members from such groups in Gulu and Chocó. These groups conduct first-hand documentation with victims of displacement, disappearance, rape, torture and murder. The two regions have been critical sites of the war in

²⁰ There are some exceptions, such as Catherine Cole, 'Performance, Transitional Justice, and the Law: South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission,' *Theatre Journal* 59(2) (2007): 167–187; Fiona C. Ross, *Bearing Witness: Women and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 2003); Cynthia E. Milton, 'Images of Truth: Art as a Medium for Recounting Peru's Internal War,' *A Contracorriente* 6(2) (2009): 63–102; Cynthia E. Milton, 'At the Edge of the Peruvian Truth Commission: Alternative Paths to Recounting the Past,' *Radical History Review* 98 (2007): 3–33.

²¹ We do not suggest that survivors keep no written record, for this is clearly not the case.

each country. Although the forms of victimization and terror strategies applied by the armed groups in each region differed, the civilian populations underwent similar processes of massive displacement and, during certain periods, lived under continuous threat and siege. Both regions are the ancestral land of indigenous groups, the Acholi in northern Uganda and the Afro-Colombian and Aboriginal Embera and Wounnan peoples in northwest Colombia.

The goal of the exchange was to provide a contextualized understanding of how community-based organizations narrate and reflect on the process of human rights documentation, drawing from ethnographic observations of community and group interaction. The focus was not on examining the content of the documentation *per se*, but on the process that leads different groups and individuals to decide to document abuses, the methods they use to do so and what they do with the information once it is collected. This involved observing groups in any part of the process, including data collection, transcription, storage, networking, communicating and distribution. How the members of the groups presented their work to each other, the informal and formal exchanges that occurred during the various field visits organized for the exchange and the conversations and presentations that took place at the various meetings were key observational points in the authors' documentation of the exchange.²²

The method of community exchanges – a guided visit by a community group to another community context that involves knowledge and experience sharing – has been used in international settings to facilitate greater understanding of approaches applied by communities to problem identification and solution. It has been characterized as a method that cultivates knowledge creation and circulation of local knowledge among community participants while providing a critical distance about their own work. A relevant element of this sharing is that it facilitates new understandings of personal and group experiences as participants 'repeat what they know in a different environment. As they look at themselves through the eyes of others, their knowledge increases.'²³

At the outset of the exchange, the authors observed that the sharing of experiences between the Ugandan and Colombian groups crafted a memoryscape with which the participants recalled the past and their personal and group stories of survival and resistance. The moments of storytelling and sharing lessons from the past created a dialogical situation, with participants alternatively giving and receiving testimony, giving and taking historical references, facts and stories and sharing silent moments of pause and reflection. In these moments, the credit and trust granted by each other's words opened the space for interrogation and enquiry. 'We appreciate your visit,' the survivors of the Atiak massacre in northern Uganda told the Colombian delegates, but they asked, 'Since you are

²² When Luo, the language spoken by Acholi, was used, it was translated into English by an Acholi interpreter and then into Spanish and vice versa.

²³ Sheela Patel and Diana Mitlin, 'Sharing Experiences and Changing Lives,' *Community Development Journal* 37(2) (2002): 131.

survivors, do you have encouraging words for our group? Do you have any ideas to make us grow . . . and improve our group?' Emplaced witnessing in these moments was grounded in the encounter and even frictions found in the development of a shared realm of knowledge about the past and in participants' experiences. It was in these settings that stories, songs, dances, places, personal archives and artefacts of memory came to life and communicated the richness of a living archive. The exchange provided us with an opportunity to examine the interrelationships between civil society organizations, community-based groups and survivors and the multiple ways in which the memory of violence becomes a living document, created and communicated through myriad performative, embodied and creative means. Those reflections inspire and inform this article.

The Exchange Participants

Two members each of the Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) of northern Uganda and the Main Community Council of the Integral Peasant Association of the Atrato River (*Consejo Comunitario Mayor de la Asociación Campesina Integral del Atrato*, or COCOMACIA) of Chocó agreed to take part in the exchange and research study and assisted in the organization of meetings with other local organizations and affected communities. JRP is a nongovernmental organization founded by a group of young, dynamic Acholi men and women in 2005 that engages in written documentation of massacres committed by armed groups in the region. It works with survivors in affected communities to link them with wider advocacy networks and insert their voices into national debates on transitional justice, employing various techniques such as research notes, statements, radio programmes, newspaper articles, meetings and workshops for training community and policy leaders. As a young team both providing support to communities and undertaking activities at the national level, JRP agreed to be part of the exchange and to coordinate meetings in Gulu for its Colombian counterparts.

COCOMACIA, a Black peasant organization of the Atrato river, was created in 1982 with the aim of defending the rights of Black communities on the river, developing strategies for natural resource use and countering the interests of the state and national and international businesses in extracting the rich natural resources on their land.²⁴ COCOMACIA is the largest self-government organization in the region and represents 120 Black communities from the middle Atrato river. The first author is associated with the Commission of Historical Memory of Colombia.²⁵ As part of the Commission's documentation work, she and other

²⁴ Arturo Escobar, *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

²⁵ The Commission of Historical Memory is an interdisciplinary body of scholars responsible for the development, with the 'wide participation of society,' of a public report on the emergence and evolution of armed groups in Colombia. It is part of the National Commission on Reconciliation and Reparation but enjoys intellectual and functional autonomy from the larger body and from

researchers have been collaborating with COCOMACIA and other regional community-based organizations in documenting a massacre that is emblematic of the many incidents of violence in the region.²⁶ The author presented the exchange project to these organizations and they recommended that COCOMACIA participate, given its trajectory in formal and informal methods of documentation of human rights violations. COCOMACIA accepted the invitation and selected one member of its coordinating team and one member of the Association of Internally Displaced Peoples (*Asociación de Desplazados del 2 de Mayo*, or ADOM) to represent it in the exchange.

Since its founding, COCOMACIA has worked to defend the territorial rights of Afro-Colombians on issues of self-government and to realize a collective land titling process.²⁷ In the late 1990s, it shifted its focus to attending to the humanitarian crisis in the region and to documenting human rights violations against Afro-Colombians. Working with internally displaced Afro-Colombians, survivors and peasant populations, COCOMACIA strives to help preserve their memories and ensure that their claims to justice and land restitution are brought into the public arena.

Exchange Countries

Uganda

The civilian population of northern Uganda has endured more than 20 years of violent conflict between the Ugandan government and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebel group. Between 80 and 90 percent of the population lived in internal displacement camps at the height of the war in 2004–2005, although a tentative peace has since settled over the region and most people have returned home.²⁸ The rebels and the government have been accused of committing gross atrocities against the civilian population, including the abduction and forced recruitment of over 60,000 children and youths into the rebel army, massacres, mutilation, torture, rape and forced labour.²⁹ In 2005, the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court issued indictments of the top five rebel leaders, a move hotly contested by Ugandan community leaders as undermining efforts to lure rebels out of the bush by extending an unconditional

the state. For a detailed description of its work, researchers, research and publications, see, <http://www.memoriahistorica-cnrr.org.co/s-home/> (accessed 31 August 2011).

²⁶ See, Commission of Historical Memory, *Bojayá: La guerra sin límites* (Bogota: Taurus, 2010).

²⁷ Escobar, supra n 24.

²⁸ Chris Dolan, *Social Torture: The Case of Northern Uganda, 1986–2006* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010).

²⁹ Jeannie Annan, Christopher Blattman, Karl Carlson and Dyan Mazurana, *Making Reintegration Work for Youth in Northern Uganda* (Gulu: Survey of War Affected Youth, 2007); Human Rights Focus, *Between Two Fires: The Plight of IDPs in Northern Uganda* (2003); Human Rights Watch, *Stolen Children: Abduction and Recruitment in Northern Uganda* (2003).

amnesty.³⁰ The Juba Peace Talks (2006–2008) ushered in an uneasy peace,³¹ which included an agreement on transitional justice that, although the agreement was never signed, committed the government to implementing key recommendations.

Colombia

In the 1990s, the Atrato river region became critical in the national armed dispute between the paramilitary groups of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, or AUC) and the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, or FARC) and the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, or ELN) guerrilla groups, while registering an increase in human rights violations by the Colombian army. The Atrato river provides access to the Pacific Ocean and is a strategic point for the control of drug- and gun-trafficking routes in and out of the country. It also offers a wealth of natural resources and unexploited land. Between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s, the region suffered continuous armed confrontations, bombings and strict control over the circulation of food and medication (described by the government as an attempt to flush out the enemy). In this context, massacres, selective killings and massive displacement of the Afro-Colombian and Aboriginal populations became widespread.³²

Since 2005, the region has experienced a ‘tense calm’ following the demobilization of the paramilitary groups that operated there.³³ After more than four decades of armed conflict in the country, the Colombian government created the National Commission on Reparation and Reconciliation. This was done within the context of the controversial 2005 Justice and Peace Law, which was enacted for the demobilization process and requires that ex-combatants confess their crimes and that their victims be ensured the right to truth and participation in public audiences.³⁴ This weak justice and reparation agenda is advanced amid (1) lack of condemnation of paramilitary commanders or middle-rank officers for the mass atrocities and crimes they committed, (2) failed negotiations and a continued

³⁰ Tim Allen, *Trial Justice: The International Criminal Court and the Lord’s Resistance Army* (London: Zed Books, 2005).

³¹ The talks eventually failed and the LRA moved into the Democratic Republic of the Congo and other countries in the region, resuming its violent operations against civilians.

³² See, Martha Nubia Bello, Elena Martín Cardinal, Constanza Millán Echeverría, Belky Pulido Hernández and Raquel Rojas Isaza, *Bojayá memoria y río: Violencia política, daño y reparación* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2005); Constanza Millán Echeverría, ‘Ya no llega el limbo porque la gente bailando está: Prácticas de memoria en Bojayá-Chocó’ (MA thesis, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2009).

³³ Commission of Historical Memory, *supra* n 26 at 9.

³⁴ *Ibid.* Kimberly Theidon, ‘Transitional Subjects: The Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of Former Combatants in Colombia,’ *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1(1) (2007): 66–90.

armed conflict with the guerrillas and (3) the development of new forms of paramilitary and state violence and human rights violations.³⁵

The Exchange

The exchange began in Uganda in late July 2010 with the arrival of the Colombian participants in Gulu, the largest town in northern Uganda. During the war, the town's population swelled with people displaced from their villages. During the worst part of the conflict, from 2003 to 2005, the population grew each night by 40,000 children and youth who sought temporary shelter from rebel abduction.³⁶ Gulu town is now calm, following the withdrawal of the rebels into the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Economic growth is evident in the construction of new buildings and the boom in market trade, and people have begun to return to their home villages and replant crops. This has taken place in a complicated political context. President Yoweri Museveni is now in his 26th year in office. Having changed the Ugandan constitution and interfered with electoral processes to remain in power, he has increasingly consolidated power in the hands of a minority group, alienating the majority of the population.³⁷ Political opposition is crushed through violence, arrest and detention. Amid the many challenges of rebuilding the infrastructure of the north is the return of over a million people to their villages, which has resulted in many land grabs and disputes. Although the LRA is now in the DRC, people fear its return. Thousands of former combatants live among the same population they victimized, with an inadequate reintegration strategy.

Our first stop was a rehabilitation and training centre for women survivors of gross violations, such as forced marriage after rebel abduction. Arriving in the middle of a rainstorm, we were warmly welcomed by the director and the singing of the 40 women enrolled in the centre. We then enjoyed formal presentations, including a speech, more songs and finally a dance. Afterwards, we met four of the women for an informal discussion, which was made difficult by the noise of the heavy rain. We asked, 'Why is it important to remember what happened in the past? What are the challenges of remembering?' The women were silent for a long while, until, finally, a JRP volunteer and survivor of LRA abduction began to speak:

Only I know, only I suffered, and I know what really happened. So it is better I am the one who tells of my abduction, of the forced sex and child that was born. I am ready to share.

³⁵ Riaño Alcalá, *supra* n 12.

³⁶ Human Rights Watch, *Abducted and Abused: Renewed War in Northern Uganda* (2003).

³⁷ Stefan Lindemann, 'Just Another Change of Guard? Broad-Based Politics and Civil War in Museveni's Uganda,' *African Affairs* 110(440) (2011): 387–416.

At this, one of the women at the centre started to talk about the pain of memory:

To narrate my story can open wounds in my heart. It hurts me, it is painful. As a mother without means, it is so challenging to narrate my story. I have to be strong, to carry on in the absence of men and work very hard . . . I still panic. I must be strong to hold on to what I have.

‘It’s so hard to tell my story,’ another woman agreed.³⁸

As we left the centre, we considered to what extent survivors have the space to remember and document what happened to them, particularly when recalling the narrative can be emotionally difficult, when survivors live in fear and economic need and are socially stigmatized by the harm done to them. While the women we met said very little, their bodies, their expressions of fear, their attentive listening to the words of the JRP volunteer and hesitancy to speak bore witness to their troubled pasts and present pain, actively forming an archive of memory.

The next evening, we attended the formal launch of JRP’s offices, arriving to find it decorated and official guests already beginning to assemble and ready to cut the ribbon at the entrance. A dramatic moment in the evening was a play performed by a group of women who survived abduction. It opened vividly with a scene of soldiers abducting a young girl. The women acting as soldiers entered the space imitating the men’s movements with shocking ease, their acting informed by years of bearing witness to the rigid movements and harsh instructions of LRA commanders. The audience hushed. As the play continued, the women re-enacted the multiple violations the young girl endures when forced to become the ‘wife’ of a commander. His gross power was communicated through ‘his’ demeanour, facial expressions and manners of speech – nuances difficult to communicate in any way other than through performance. The play closed with the escape of the woman, who returns a mother with children, and portrayed the difficulties former abductees face. Her own family no longer trusts her or accepts her children, something that only adds salt to the wound, reminding her of her painful past. The evening ended with a speech by some of the survivors regarding their demands for justice to the government of Uganda. In contrast to the silence we witnessed the previous day, these women reinhabited silence through performance. In performing memory and bearing witness through theatrical practices and later speech, they voiced a collective story and gave evidence of their own ability to document the past and approach to it.

The following day, we met with the performers, sitting close to one another on mats under a large mango tree. We translated from Spanish to English to Luo and back again in a long exchange between the Colombians and the former abductees. When a Colombian participant wrapped up a talk on the work of her organization and the human rights violations committed against Black and Aboriginal people in her region, one of the survivors asked, ‘Why are you a victim?’ To answer, the Colombian participant shifted into testimony. She remembered how she and her

³⁸ Group discussion, Lukodi, Uganda, 23 July 2010.

family took refuge in the church in her town, Bojayá, during a battle between the guerrillas and the paramilitary. The confrontation ended with the massacre of 78 civilians, 46 of them children. The participant received serious injuries to her legs, hips, arms and hands when a gas cylinder full of explosives landed inside the church. As she evoked the loss of 28 members of her extended family, she paused timidly to show several parts of her body where the traces of the wounds remain. The memory of the massacre is engraved on her body as a permanent trace. The women surrounding her, whose bodies also bear the scars of war, looked on with interest.

The scars covering the arms, backs and legs of the women have different stories to tell. On her legs, one former abductee bears the evidence of being forced to walk hundreds of miles, carrying the goods of the LRA, to the point of exhaustion. This evidence is forever etched on her skin, a visible reminder to her and others of the war. For others, bullets remain lodged inside their bodies, sometimes paralyzing them with pain after physical labour. Another woman does not hear well on occasion, her ears having been slapped by a commander's co-wife. She noted, 'When my ears pain, I remember.' Bodies entered the conversation as they looked at each other's scars. In this encounter, women's bodies and scars made their way into the testimonial present to attest to the past; their bodies gave evidence to pain and survival. As Suvendrini Perera describes, with these acts of 're-memory, recovery and reconstruction, the bodies are returned to the present, where they signify in relation to other bodies, living and dead.'³⁹

The Ugandan women asked their Colombian visitors questions about how they survived and coped. One Colombian participant, the only man at this meeting, shared a story of how women from the surviving community sewed a quilt with the names of those who perished in the massacre, and said that on one occasion when he felt close to despair because of the devastation of the war and the fear pervading his community, he wrapped the quilt around himself to find courage. The chairperson of the Ugandan group sat up and spoke eloquently of the pain she feels when she thinks of those they left behind:

We have loved ones who disappeared in the bush, we will never be able to bury their bodies. Sometimes your baby was shot while you were carrying him on your back, and you had to just untie the baby and leave them there, without burying them. We feel so bad about those remaining in captivity, and those who have returned with injuries.

The Colombians asked the group about the significance of the play and the poem they read at the public event. One woman answered,

The drama was a way to highlight our struggle and demands. Our challenge is to communicate to government leaders. Most of us didn't go to school, we don't speak English [the official language of the government of Uganda]. We weren't here for more

³⁹ Suvendrini Perera, "'They Give Evidence': Bodies, Borders and the Disappeared,' *Social Identities* 12(6) (2006): 650.

than 10 years [but in captivity] . . . We feel we are of a lower status and unable to meet the president of this country . . . So, with drama, we could communicate all this.⁴⁰

As the meeting drew to a close, participants sang and danced, with some clearly excited by the discovery of common African dance movements and rhythms while also eager to relieve the tension they felt.

The chairperson graciously agreed to take us to her village in nearby Atiak. We travelled a few days later. As it was the wet season, the countryside was thick with green grass. Mango trees heavy with fruit dotted the skyline. 'Wherever you see a mango tree, that is where a homestead once was,' is a common fact Acholi like to tell their guests on a journey. During one of our unplanned stops along the way, we took a walk to stretch our legs and serendipitously wandered into a reconstructed village, surrounded by newly planted fields. The village contrasted with our passage through three of the camps formed during the war, which were now slowly being dismantled. The largest camp, Pabbo, had more than 60,000 inhabitants for nearly a decade. The huts were cramped and walkways congested. The only farm life was located on the perimeter of the camp, after which lay fallow land. These landscapes – of emptying internally displaced persons' camps and mango trees, of fields and villages – are vivid markers of memories of forced displacement and the suffering displacement brings: hunger, illness, loss of family networks and one's identity, so often tied to place. Our host told us how her father moved to Pabbo camp with her siblings when life in Atiak became intolerable, after she and her sisters were abducted.

Arriving in Atiak in the late afternoon, we left the road for an overgrown pathway, tall grass enveloping the vehicle. Our host told us that such grass transports her back to the years she spent walking as a porter in the bush, of how the tough grass cut her feet and legs, or hid her from pursuing soldiers. We arrived at a serene village, with a spacious compound in the centre surrounded by huts used for different purposes – the kitchen, the rest area, sleeping quarters, the bathing room and so on – also a contrast to the camps we saw. Our host's daughters organized a walk around the area, showing us neighbouring fields, the well, their favourite tree to climb. In the meantime, the women set about slaughtering a goat and preparing dinner, while the men built the fire pit, readying it for the *wang-o* to follow. That evening, stories about life before the war, of memories of school days before abduction, were told. *Ododo*, folktales that recount human and animal adventures, kept the Colombians up late into the night. Elder women and men 'passed the word' through an indication by the last narrator of another's turn to tell. Each tale ended with an explanation of the moral lesson it conveyed, and elders made sure this was properly interpreted for the visitors. In the morning, our host showed us important spatial marks of memory to her, including the grave of her prematurely deceased mother. The landscape in which she

⁴⁰ Group discussion, Olyilong, Uganda, 24 July 2010.

grew up is a reminder of both childhood and the many losses she suffered during the war.

In the afternoon, after enjoying more conversation, we went to the nearby trading centre. In 1996, one of Atiak's own, a 'son of the soil,' led a group of LRA rebels into the centre, where they swiftly overcame the small military detach and forcibly rounded up over 250 men, women and children. The villagers were marched into the bush until the Ugandan military no longer pursued them and, after separating out the women, the rebels proceeded to kill all the men and boys. The precise number of deaths is as yet unknown and the site of the massacre remains unexcavated. JRP documented the massacre, and we met with the survivor group that helped with this documentation. Much as on the day before, the groups exchanged stories of survival. These villagers, too, lived with the bullets and scars left by the massacre and asked the Colombians what made them victims. At the end of the exchange, the group's chairperson produced the JRP report on the massacre and told us that while it was a truthful report, it was also a painful reminder of the past and of present injustices, as no official reparations have been made. Her reflections spoke to her truth, her pain in the absence of acknowledgement. Before we left, we walked over to a memorial stone and prayed together.

Three months later, the two Ugandan exchange participants, the two authors, our Colombian research assistant and an interpreter arrived in Chocó's capital, Quibdo, and were escorted through the narrow streets to the COCOMACIA restaurant for an elaborate lunch. Within an hour, we headed down the Atrato river on a four-hour journey through the jungle. Our destination was Bojayá. Chocó is a region rich in biodiversity, consisting mostly of a humid, tropical jungle that borders Panama and the Caribbean and Pacific Oceans. The river is one of the main sources of livelihood and the chief transportation route for the hundreds of communities along it. The river also holds some of the most dramatic vestiges of the destruction that war brought to the region. During the trip, the Colombian participants pointed to such traces: improvised shelters for peasants who were systematically and massively displaced during the late 1990s and early 2000s, destroyed and abandoned homes, towns with many unemployed young people sitting by the river. They indicated the many sites where the guerrillas, the paramilitary or the army set up civilian checkpoints and where people would learn of death sentences or have their staple foods taken away. As the boat that would take us across the river needed repair, we stopped in a nearby community and learned of their difficult return home after years of internal displacement and their struggle to survive, to be recognized as victims with rights and to protect their leaders from ongoing death threats.

We arrived at dusk in the old town of Bojayá. Three Catholic nuns who live in one of the few houses left standing in the once vibrant river community rushed to greet us. After we had a meal together, the nuns told us of their efforts to keep the military from taking over their house. To them, the house is 'a faithful witness of this reality . . . The house keeps the signs of bullets, where someone died.' One of the Colombian participants added that the house carries a powerful symbolic

meaning: 'When we speak of memory, this house stores it. Our organization [COCOMACIA] was born with these sisters who live here. They accompanied us.' Although the community was relocated down the river as part of a government reparation programme following the massacre, the nuns objected to the relocation plan and refused to leave a house that had been a sanctuary for those seeking safety. Immediately after the massacre, the house had been used as an improvised hospital where survivors received life-saving care. 'We have seen the pain but we construct resistance together,' one of the nuns concluded that night.⁴¹

The next day, we walked through the remains of homes and other material traces of the town before finally entering the original site of the massacre, the church. In April 2002, after 12 days of fighting with the AUC for control of the middle Atrato region, FARC guerrillas seized Bojayá. As the battle intensified, over 300 residents hid in the church, another 100 hid in the nuns' home and 100 more hid in the priest's home. These were the only brick and cement constructions in the town and so could offer protection from bullets. Also, because of their religious status, the residents felt they would be places of refuge. As we walked through the empty church, one survivor and a nun remembered their collective efforts to keep calm during the fighting by praying, singing and huddling together. Showing us the place where the gas cylinder fell, they evoked the sound of the explosion, the cries of pain that followed it and, then, the eerie silence of death.

As we moved about the church, they showed us symbolically rich fragments: the remains of the crucifix that stood on the altar and was blown to pieces, the window they had crouched under and the photos hung to commemorate and dignify the memory of those who perished that day. They spoke of their request to the civic council and other institutions to turn the church and surrounding areas into a sanctuary of memory as a crucial measure of symbolic reparation. Being at a place that is simultaneously a vestige of destruction and death, a memorial landmark and a symbol of reconstruction placed the tellers and listeners at a different sensory threshold. Although the Colombian participants had recounted the events of the massacre several times in Uganda, listening to them in the place where the events occurred demanded a deeper affective listening and consciousness.⁴² This was emplaced witnessing that broadened our understanding of the shared labour needed between teller and listener to bear witness to terror and the relations of accountability, witness and response-ability that emerge through this affective location.⁴³

⁴¹ Group discussion, Bojayá, Colombia, 24 October 2010.

⁴² Hirsch and Spitzer, *supra* n 3; Oliver, *supra* n 13; Dori Laub, 'Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening,' in *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, ed. Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman (New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁴³ Perera, *supra* n 39; Oliver, *supra* n 13.

By noon, we set off for the new town to visit Guayacán, a women's organization formed in 1997 at the height of the armed confrontation in the region. A large group of women, members of a youth group, the priest and a school teacher greeted us in the community centre. The walls of the centre were decorated with memory quilts sewn by the women, depicting their struggle and memories of loss. Created at the peak of the violence to allow residents to talk secretly about the widespread disappearances and killings in the town, the quilting group used embroidery work as a measure of protection, disguise and stress relief. After the massacre and as they struggled with displacement, loss and pain, the surviving women worked for months at sewing the quilt described earlier by the Colombian exchange participant to the group of women in Gulu. Five metres long and four metres wide, the quilt holds the embroidered names of all who died in the massacre and symbols that evoked each person as well as the Atrato region – fish, flowers, boats. This quilt is an accurate and immense record, a woven archive, of those who died and a powerfully crafted artefact of commemoration to their lives. We spoke at length to the group of quilters. Much like with the survivor women's groups we had met in Gulu, songs were sung and stories of displacement and survival in the new town were told through the oral poetics of *versos*, rhyming verses that can be improvised or written to share thoughts and communicate messages.

Before nightfall, we headed down the river to Pogue, the hometown of the exchange participants and the place where most of the victims of the massacre were born. Over a hundred members of the community rushed to welcome the Ugandan visitors, dancing and singing a welcoming chant. The local council had organized a community celebration during which songs, *versos* and oral poetry were performed by the fire pit, followed by a night of dancing. Through *versos*, local authorities called to and elicited responses from the Ugandan visitors on their common roots:

Buenas noches para todos / Good evening to all of us
Nos queremos presentar / We want to introduce ourselves
Somos la gente del Concejo Municipal / We are the people of the Municipal Council
Amigos Africanos yo les vengo a preguntar / African friends I come to ask you
Si somos negros efectivos / If we effectively are all black
Cantemonos todos juntos / Let all sing together

As night fell, the *cantadoras*, a group of about 20 older women who sing a cappella-style hymns known as *alabados* (from *alabar*, meaning 'praise'), stood up to sing. This genre of sound memory is rooted in a mixing of African and religious song and oral traditions in which the women chant to facilitate the transit of the soul of a dead person to the afterlife by temporarily residing in the body of the singer. The sorrow conveyed through their lyrics and voice was a testament to the loss of life in the region and, as they told us the following day, to their anguish at their inability to carry out rituals and sing for the dead during the war.

By daylight, we walked through the settlement as our hosts pointed out key landmarks: the local school with guerrilla graffiti ('Respect our Motherland, Yankies get out, FARC-EP'), government-sponsored reconstructed houses, the community centre and the homes of respected elders and leaders. In our final exchange meeting with representatives from various community organizations from Pogue, the Colombian participants who went to Uganda described the purpose of the exchange:

To share how we document and conserve memory that in the case of rural communities like Pogue, it has a very particular way, [it is] oral, it is a way to preserve the culture and do not forget.

During the meeting, council members spoke of the importance of having a regional organization that demanded recognition as a Black ethnic group, because 'here in Colombia, Blacks are treated as garbage.'⁴⁴ They also described their governance structure as self-government and their local justice practices. As we prepared to leave in the boat, hundreds of community members accompanied us and wished us a safe journey while the *cantadoras* and children sang the astute verses of a *gualí*.⁴⁵

Discussion

Memory is not always spoken, and silence is not necessarily forgetting. Sometimes silence is a way survivors protect themselves from harm, particularly when their memories contradict metanarratives of victimhood or when they are stigmatized.⁴⁶ Their truths are highly contested, as in the context of ongoing war and the competing truths of those responsible for violence. Within the space of the rehabilitation centre for female survivors in Gulu, where women seek temporary shelter to learn income-generating skills and do not have the means to think about their future, remembering is still too painful. Yet, silence can speak. As the young mother at the centre told us, 'As a mother without means, it is so challenging to narrate my story.'⁴⁷ We learned that two of her children are presently in an orphanage and another was separated from her when she was still in the bush. As a mother, she cannot narrate the painful past, but in her silence about abduction or forced pregnancy, she speaks of a present injustice, of the structures of violence that continue to deny her the capacity to mother. And so, as Fiona Ross argues,

⁴⁴ Group discussion, Pogue, Colombia, 25 October 2010.

⁴⁵ *Gualís* are funerary songs for dead children. In contrast to the sad and serious tone of *alabados*, *gualís* are happy melodies that, according to the *cantadoras* of Pogue, are sung to distract the child in his or her transit to the afterlife.

⁴⁶ On the gendered nature of silence, see, Kimberly Theidon, 'Gender in Transition: Common Sense, Women, and War,' *Journal of Human Rights* 6(4) (2007): 453–478.

⁴⁷ Group discussion, Lukodi, Uganda, 23 July 2010.

Silence calls for empathic engagement and an assessment of the subtleties of the unspoken in everyday life . . . What appears to be silence or absence may actually indicate a failure of recognition and of empathy, an institutional incapacity to attend to suffering.⁴⁸

When survivors do speak in public, their testimony is often doubted.⁴⁹ ‘Were those really your own words?’ the Ugandan women were asked by an official from a local civil society organization after they performed the play. In the spaces that survivors choose, memories are made and remade and a map to make sense of the violence is sketched out. The moments of the exchange described here further elaborate the importance of listening to and looking at the varied performances and practices that witnessing survivors may choose in the context of threat, denial or memory disputes.

In contexts of prolonged armed conflict such as northern Uganda and Colombia, documentation is a critical strategy for making public what Winfred Tate refers to as ‘what was known but cannot be said, transforming the public secret into the public transcript.’⁵⁰ The organizations doing this work in both regions have developed a host of methods to collect data and information that saves lives and protects the work of community-based groups and survivors. They disseminate this information to the outside world and store evidence, sometimes for use in various human rights and transitional justice processes. As we engaged in the exchange in both regions and saw how survivors shared stories, dance, song and walks through their land, we learned of other plural and deeper meanings and tactical uses of ‘documenting’ in contexts and times of war or transition. In contrast to the goals of human rights organizations, which focus on documentation in order to transfer public secrets to the public transcript, one of the functions of these embodied practices of documentation is to preserve threatened memories in a hidden transcript, a ‘backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken in the face of power.’⁵¹ Practices of emplaced witnessing such as those described here aim to maintain a living archive of memories of what is to be told and transmitted to children and community members and, when appropriate, to the broader society.

⁴⁸ Fiona C. Ross, ‘An Acknowledged Failure: Women, Voice, Violence, and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission,’ in *Localizing Traditional Justice: Interventions and Priorities after Mass Violence*, ed. Rosalind Shaw and Lars Waldorf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 90.

⁴⁹ Victoria Sanford, ‘Evacuations of the Heart: Reflections on Truth, Memory and Structures of Understanding,’ in *Engaged Observer: Anthropology, Advocacy, and Activism*, ed. Victoria Sanford and Asale Angel-Ajani (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009).

⁵⁰ Tate explains this transformation from a public secret into a public transcript with the help of Michael Taussig’s work on the ‘labour of the negative,’ concerning the type of knowledge that everyone ‘knows’ but no one states, which operates as a public secret. Winifred Tate, *Counting the Dead: The Culture and Politics of Human Rights Activism in Colombia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 292. Also see, Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

⁵¹ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), xii.

These acts of performative and embodied telling create living archives in the moment of bodily inscription, when memories are re-stored in the body of the teller/performer and received and accepted by the listener/audience. This also underlines the very distinct nature of verbal and embodied forms of witnessing and telling. These oral forms are, according to Alessandro Portelli, acts, not (static) documents: 'Oral sources are not to be thought of in terms of nouns and objects but in terms of verbs and processes; not the memory and the tale but the remembering and the telling.'⁵²

In each moment recalled here, survivors performed songs, plays, dances and ceremonies to communicate their memories of harm and resistance to armed control over their lives. At the meeting in Pogue, the *cantadoras* explained how their singing tradition and the hymns they compose illustrate their very own documentation and communication strategy. As keepers of a deep-rooted tradition, they are often called on to perform when government officials and 'internationals' arrive in the area. They see this invitation to perform 'traditional folk songs' as an opportunity to subvert the formal, public scenario by composing a sound narrative of the 'pain we feel.' This transgressive strategy extends from content to performing and the transmission of a collective voice. At the community meeting, the lead *cantadora* told us that the group

hasten[s] to write some songs that are *duritas* [tough], that the president will listen, that 'the laws' will listen, exactly through the songs we make a complaint to see if the government *se conduele* [grieves with us].⁵³

Then, one *cantadora* sang in baritone the verses the group composed and performed for the Colombian president and government and army officials who attended the 2009 commemoration of the massacre in Bojayá. All of the *cantadoras* joined her in the last three lines:

El señor Uribe Vélez / Mr. Uribe Vélez
Presidente de Colombia / President of Colombia
Le pedimos a mi Dios / I ask my God
Que le cambie la memoria / To transform your memory
Que lee cambiee la memoria (choir)
Que leee cambieee la memoriaaa
Que leeee cambieeee la memoriaaaa

Through sound memory strategies such as repetition and the emotive rise and fall of the choir's voices, these women make tactical use of a safe cultural mode of communication for the purpose of giving testimony and transmitting through their bodies and voices key defiant messages and group claims.

The women are keenly aware of the power of their performative testimony on a public stage. Picture over 20 elderly women, all dressed in black, singing powerful

⁵² Alessandro Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 14.

⁵³ Group discussion, Pogue, Colombia, 25 October 2010.

vocals that transmit pain and loss. This strategy was also employed by women survivors in Gulu when they performed the play in front of government officials, internationals, other community members and the Colombian exchange participants. The performance was a public act of breaking the silence and giving testimony to their struggle, the unequal treatment they face and the challenges of their return. In both cases, women were aware of the subjective power of their presence and voice on a public stage, the disguised space that a play or a song offered them to document their experiences or state their views and the emotional impact of performance on the audience and themselves. Both in Bojayá and in Gulu, the women were aware of the risks of open resistance and denunciations of human rights violations, so they used performance, oral poetry and sound memory to craft a safer space from which to bring their voices and claims into the public realm.

Survivors also asked us to visit physical spaces where memories are evoked, specific locations that remind them of events in the past or scars that serve as constant markers of what happened. These embodied practices as a form of documentation revealed for us the manner in which survivor groups document their evidence and record their histories by resorting to the archival and memory power of places. Places stimulate physical, social and sensory realms, evoking memory and imagination. People locate themselves meaningfully in their environments, and places are transformed by experience and the act of evoking that experience into archives of memory and identification of who we are in relation to the world

by remembering and reconstructing what happened . . . by drawing out specific kinds of knowledge about life in the [place identified], by apprehending their physical uniqueness, by naming or renaming places, by establishing landmarks and . . . by acknowledging the ways in which places and events have 'marked' them.⁵⁴

Our host in Atiak pointed to different places in her village where soldiers were and told stories of where loved ones lay buried unceremoniously in the bush. She spoke of how the tall grass reminded her of being forced to walk and carry goods for years after her abduction. These are the ways she documents her experiences, preserving their memory and transmitting it to her children and others. The Colombian survivor, walking around the church and using its walls, artefacts and shadows to tell the story of the Bojayá massacre, demonstrated the ways in which memory is emplaced and retained, with the exchange participants called to witness. The church, the demolished buildings and the house the nuns refuse to leave are containers of memory, material documents of a complex history. Travelling along the Atrato river in the unflagging downpour of the rainforest or along the road of empty camps and fallow fields to Atiak, our community guides pointed to the vestiges of war, revealing a mental cartography of armed

⁵⁴ Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, *Dwellers of Memory: Youth and Violence in Medellín* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2006), 67.

control over communities. The place-based experience of travelling down the Atrato and the sight of trees, hills, banks and towns triggered for the guides not just memories but also a mapping exercise that communicated the knowledge stored in memory landmarks, just as it had in Gulu six months before.

Conclusions

Acts of emplaced witnessing constitute a living archive and a resource for understanding the truthfulness of survivor testimonies. This is not scientific evidence that contests denial or proves atrocity, and we do not suggest that such massively important evidence should be replaced or overlooked. Rather, we suggest that memory acts within the living archive powerfully transmit to the listener meanings that empirical facts cannot, moving the empathetic listener to an emotive space of engagement in the dialogic process of witnessing. As such, the archive calls not only for the listener to read silences, embodied acts and performances in formal settings of justice and truth seeking (courtrooms or truth commissions), but also to journey to the everyday spaces where the archive is animated, breathing and alive.

This movement towards the everyday holds the potential to advance an understanding of transitional justice ‘from below’ and communities’ approaches to reconciliation and truth telling. In settings of chronic insecurity, acts of emplaced witnessing record and refuse to let people forget not only what happened but also the magnitude of what was lost. Memory studies, we suggest, opens the field of transitional justice in new disciplinary directions, presenting an opportunity to listen to survivors differently and to engage creatively in nonconventional forms of documentation.