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## Forensic Tales : Embodied Peace and Violence in Colombian (Post) Armed Conflict

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# Forensic Tales: Embodied Peace and Violence in Colombian (Post) Armed Conflict

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## **Abstract**

In this audio-visual essay, I explore Colombian forensic experts' embodied knowledge of the armed conflict, specifically about how it is accounted for and produced from and by their work. I argue that forensic experts' embodied knowledge provides information not only on victim identification and the nuances of violence but also produces geographies of terror that materialize the overarching effect of protracted violence on a given territory and its people. I do so through their stories and their voices, and show that due to the magnitude of the armed conflict and the fact that it has spread all over the country, forensic experts have an extensive understanding of both the country's geography and the dynamics of violence. This experience produces a version of the relationship between the two, which is marked and informed by forensic experts' embodied experience of searching for and exhuming victims. However, from their experiences of dealing with the horrors of war, it also becomes evident that practices of reconciliation occur amidst the protracted violence and that they take place through, around, and with forensic practice.

I develop my argument in three steps: First, I focus on forensic experts' experiences and enactments of Colombia as a country marked by violence, and how geography and violence have melded and as a result have produced geography that cannot be separated from the violence that it has endured. Second, I address the effect forensic experts' work has on their bodies, which carry the inscriptions of the war in physical and emotional ways. Third, I focus on experiences, stories, and knowledge become sites of hope that make evident their role as actors.

Each step is accompanied by animated illustrations and sound-films. These contribute to and complement the narrative through the combination of forensic experts' voices and illustrations of their

main messages. The films are to be played and listened to where indicated in the text as they are counterparts to the stories and allow for silence and other voices (that are not mine) to be present simultaneously. In this sense, not all conclusions or statements are written. Instead, I open the space up to provide room for reflection, speculation, and imagination to be part of the experience of this piece. To do so, and to be able to attend to forensic experts' experiences, we (the readers and I) must engage with their stories, listen to them, and take them seriously.

**Key Words:** forensic knowledge, colombian armed conflict, body, landscape, reconciliation

## Introduction

1

**Day:** April 21, 2021

**Time:** 21:00

**Sensations:** Silence rings behind a waterfall of white noise. My mind is racing, and it does not seem to be able to stop. My hands are numb and shaky, and I feel an abyss in the pit of my stomach that is mixed with nausea and fear.

Today is the fifth consecutive day of interviews with forensic experts. During the past three weeks, I have talked to fifteen forensic experts from different backgrounds; fifteen people who work hands-on on this non-stop violence. Fifteen people who have either photographed, searched for, rescued, mapped, exhumed, or identified bodies of people who died due to the armed conflict. These experts talk about how they try to make sense of the marks that violence leaves on people and the landscape, although the violence is itself senseless, ruthless, pointless. They talk about how they have travelled the country, visited exuberant, generous, and beautiful places that have witnessed the most vicious horrors of war, and how this is a wounded and hurting country with rivers that become fluvial mass graves. They talk about how their own bodies ache, about broken bones, bleeding knees, herniated vertebrae, and the constant exposure to the danger of violent death while recovering bodies amidst active armed conflict. Moreover, they talk about the sadness of witnessing the apparent limitless reach of human suffering inflicted by fellow humans. I still cannot make sense of all this, of their voices breaking as they share their experiences, of the images and sounds that they so vividly describe. All this is still unraveled information, thoughts, and emotions. However, one thought persisted in these early fieldwork days: despite the pain, horrors, and wounds, these experts believe in peace and reconciliation. Additionally, they do what they do because they want to contribute to making this a better world.

- 2 For the past seven years, I have addressed forensic experts as being one of the main actors in the Colombian armed conflict. The above-mentioned ethnographic vignette is an excerpt from my fieldwork diary in which I focused on these experts' roles in implementing the 2016 peace agreement between the now-extinct Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army (FARC-EP) guerrilla group and the Colombian government. Such an agreement was a milestone for the Colombian armed conflict, as the FARC-EP was one of the oldest guerrilla groups on the continent (having been active for

more than 50 years). The Colombian armed conflict is a still-ongoing war that started more than six decades ago (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición 2022a; Fajardo 2014). During these years, armed actors have included the state and the armed forces, political and narco-guerrilla groups, paramilitary groups, and organized crime groups led by drug traffickers. These actors have attacked civilian populations in rural and urban areas across the country (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2013; Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición 2022a), resulting in more than nine million victims, of which, more than 1,010,000 (taking sub-registry into account) are victims of fatalities and forced disappearances, making them the primary form of victimization (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición 2022b). These armed actors have performed several acts and forms of killing, torturing, and making people disappear. There have been attempts to achieve peace through peace agreements signed with individual illegal armed groups (Pares 2019). However, other armed actors have remained active, resulting in unending violence. Thus, as defined by the Colombian Truth Commission, “the armed conflict in Colombia is neither just the confrontation between armed apparatuses nor was it a solely ideological war ... The responsibilities for the tragedy that it represents go beyond those who took up arms, and that it extends as an ethical and political responsibility – and in some cases, a direct responsibility – of political sectors (of all ideologies), economic, criminal, social and cultural” (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición 2022a: 13)<sup>1</sup>.

- 3 Given this national story of violence and the number of varied post-conflict processes, forensic experts in Colombia have gained a paramount role. Since the foundation of the Attorney General’s Office in 1992, forensic experts of this institution have overseen the search, location, exhumation, and identification of victims (Olarte-Sierra and Castro Bermúdez 2019), together with forensic experts of the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences and the Directorate of Criminal Investigation and INTERPOL of the National Police. In the civil society, the local humanitarian forensic organization “Equitas” has played a crucial role in supporting the search for forcibly disappeared persons. However, as a result of the peace agreement, two new forensic teams were created to ensure the proper implementation of the accords. These groups are part of the Comprehensive System for Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-Repetition (hereafter SIJVRNR), which is composed of the Truth Commission, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), and the Unit for the Search of Disappeared Persons (UBPD). The new forensic teams belong to the JEP and the UBPD. Forensic experts working in these teams have had long careers, and are acquainted with the socio-political and cultural roots of the violence and armed actors. This allows the forensic experts working on the Colombian armed conflict — including those involved in the implementation of the peace agreement — to know and produce specific kinds of knowledge about the country, the characteristics of the violence, and the diverse geographical locations in which it takes place. In addition, forensic experts produce knowledge about the victims and the marks inflicted on them by different armed actors during the long-lasting violence (Olarte-Sierra and Castro Bermúdez 2019, 2021).
- 4 Elsewhere, I have shown that forensic experts’ knowledge produces the very violence they work on (Olarte-Sierra and Castro Bermúdez 2019, Olarte-Sierra and Castro Bermúdez 2021, Olarte-Sierra 2022). This is so because knowledge productions (scientific and other) are generative and performative; they

have ontological effects, that is, describing and studying the world help produce it (Jasanoff 2006; Law 2008). In this sense, knowledge productions are political, not innocent, and far from neutral (M'charek 2013; Olarte-Sierra 2022). Forensic experts and their knowledge practices produce victims, perpetrators, and acts of violence by analyzing the marks that violence leaves on people and landscapes. They differentiate and sort the kinds of wounds and harm done by specific actors, which provides insight into the dynamics and varied intensities of war happening in specific places and to particular people (Olarte-Sierra and Castro Bermúdez 2019, Olarte-Sierra and Castro Bermúdez 2021).

- 5 In this audiovisual essay, I want to push that argument further and add that forensic experts' embodied knowledge provides information not only on victim identification and the nuances of violence but also produces geographies of terror that materialize the overarching effect of protracted violence on a given territory and its people. Embodied knowledge is worth pursuing as affect and emotion are central in knowledge production for the body is a site and a means for knowledge practices to take place. As Ahmed (2004) and López (2014) remark, emotions and feelings are embodied thoughts and produce knowledge. By paying attention to forensic experts' (embodied) knowledge productions, one can also comprehend the possible ways in which experts and civil society alike find and establish ways to continue to live, even amidst or after a catastrophe (Das, Kleinman, Lock, Ramphela, and Reynolds 2001).
- 6 To address the above-mentioned argument, I explore Colombian forensic experts' knowledge of the armed conflict, specifically about how it is experienced and accounted for through their work. I use their stories and voices to show that due to the magnitude and nationwide spread of the armed conflict, forensic experts have an extensive understanding of the country's geography as well as the varied nuances and characteristics of the violence. This experience produces a specific understanding of the relationship between the two; an understanding marked and informed by forensic experts' embodied experience of wandering the country searching for and exhuming victims. Nonetheless, their recounted experiences of dealing with the most vicious horrors of war shows that forensic experts' work also serves as a means for contributing to repairing the social bond. That is, they are participating in peace-building and reconciliation practices in ways that resonate with Rosenblatt's words: "when these [forensic] teams enter the context of mass atrocity the meanings of their work evolve; they respond to new scales and types of violence with new forms of care and repair" (Rosenblatt 2015: 113).
- 7 I have developed the rest of the essay in three sections. I begin by focusing on forensic experts' experiences and enactments (see Mol 2002) of Colombia as a country marked by violence. Then, I address how geography and violence have melded and, thus, produced geography that cannot be separated from the violence that it has endured. Subsequently, I address the effect of working directly with such violence on forensic experts' bodies, which carry the inscriptions of war in physical and emotional ways, to highlight how the armed conflict also shapes the bodies of those who directly work on accounting for its victims and affected populations. Finally, I attend to how forensic experts' experiences, stories, and knowledge become sites of hope that make evident their role as actors.
- 8 The text of each of these steps has animated illustrations (Film 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7)<sup>2)</sup>. These contribute to

and complement the narrative through the combination of forensic experts' voices and illustrations of their main messages. They are to be played and listened to where indicated in the text. This is because the films are counterparts to the stories in ways that allow for silence and other voices (that are not mine) to be present simultaneously. The animated illustrations (Film 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7) are part of the argument. Therefore, not all conclusions and statements are written. Instead, I open up the space for reflection, speculation, and imagination to be part of the experience of this piece. Forensic experts' voices <sup>3)</sup> come from recorded remote interviews held between March and May 2021<sup>4)</sup>. Both the audios that are part of the films and the written quotations that appear in the text come from forensic experts — men and women — who have 8 to 25 years of experience. They cover the areas of forensic anthropology, dentistry, photography, topography, entomology, and medicine. All of them, except for Ana — who has only worked in a local humanitarian NGO — have worked either in the Attorney General's Office, the Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences, or the Directorate of Criminal Investigation and INTERPOL of the National Police. These experts have worked on victim recovery and identification throughout their professional lives. The written quotations from forensic anthropologist Jaime Castro, who has been a forensic expert for 25 years, are part of my extended research on forensic experts' work as actors in the Colombian armed conflict. He was my co-researcher for four years, and we continue exchanging knowledge and collaborating.

## **Of Beauty and Horror**

- 9 One day in October 2018, as I was returning home after having spent the better part of the afternoon talking to Jaime Castro in the Attorney General's Office Human Identification Laboratory in Bogota, I kept thinking about how Jaime (a seasoned forensic anthropologist and a dear friend) always placed exhumations geographically when referring to them during our conversations. The story of each case and exhumation was situated in time and place, with geographical precision and detail. When he explained a case, the exhumations and investigations were not located within general areas or regions; they happened in towns and specific parts of those towns, the cemeteries, or backyards. Moreover, the year and, sometimes, the month in which the exhumation took place were part of the stories. Thus, geography and time were made relevant in his accounts. They mattered. Violence did not (and does not) happen in a vacuum.
- 10 As I spoke to more forensic experts who have worked for years, and even decades, amidst the Colombian armed conflict, these characteristics of the violence situated concretely in geographical and temporal spaces became a constant. Not one verbal account of exhumations or recoveries of bodies excluded geography or time from the story. Thus, I started to wonder how forensic experts experienced Colombia's geography as a result of their work. Hence, I asked them directly about how, if at all, they would geographically describe Colombia.
- 11 To my surprise, a map that placed specific actors and forms of violence tied to a territory did not surface from their narratives. Instead, what became evident was a sense and making of the country and the violence as an entangled whole, as a complex and convoluted experience. When specific actors did



appear, they did so as signals of time frames and forms of violence. It was not that they could not place armed actors and victims in specific areas of the country. No, they certainly could and can. However, what was made relevant in their accounts was an embodiment of the armed conflict that intertwined geography, violence, and place, spanning the territory through time. That is, the landscape and geography that emerged in their narratives account for the decades of violence that have hurt and are hurting the bounded territory named Colombia. These experts talk about — and by talking, they produce — how the armed conflict has generated a country that they experience as contradictory and how this contradictory nature is the result of years of protracted violence (Film 1).



**Film 1** "To search": a forensic expert entering a forest in search of a victim.  
Forensic anthropologist Ana is talking (©Gina Urazan Razzini, David Garcés,  
Sergio Rodríguez Vitta. Soundscape:©Glory Sunz 2022a)

- 12 Thus, their accounts of the country *vis à vis* the armed conflict in terms of geographies and territories is all-encompassing, as is not limited to regions or moments in history. Instead, the geography produced by forensic experts' accounts and embodied knowledge is a countrywide scale that materializes the effect of the violence on people and land over more than six decades of armed conflict (Film 2).



**Film 2** "The river": Forensic experts recovering human remains in a river. Forensic entomologist Camila is talking (©Gina Urazan Razzini, David Garcés, Sergio Rodríguez Vitta 2022b)

- 13 Perhaps, trekking the country in search of victims of enforced disappearance, assassination, and other crimes leaves a mark that makes it impossible to think of or locate years of protracted violence in singular places. Thus, forensic experts' experience is a wide and full range. It is an extended geography of horror, pain, and exuberance, as referred to by forensic anthropologist Ana in Film 1.

## A Wound That Never Heals

- 14 These stories about a country that is simultaneously generous and cruel — a country that these experts have produced through their daily job — led me to a question: Has the armed conflict also taken place in forensic experts' bodies? In those bodies that trek up and down the country in search of victims' bodies. Therefore, I asked them how their job has shaped their bodies. The first reactions to this question varied: some sighed, some smiled, some frowned, and most of them fell silent for a while — some staring back at me and some looking away from the screen or looking down or at some other point in their surroundings — all to find words to express the feelings that my question had raised. This is certainly not a question often asked of them, but asking it opened a space to reflect on how their work made them feel. It soon became clear that this job hurt their body. How can it not? I heard stories of physical pain; real, permanent, pressing, impossible-to-ignore-pain. Pía<sup>5)</sup>, a forensic anthropologist, explained in full detail how her body ached after long walks carrying the needed equipment for doing an exhumation, how her knees hurt and bled when exhumations were long and remains were difficult to recover. Margarita, Jaime, Daniel, and Arturo (all of them forensic anthropologists) explained that their vertebrae were injured and their shoulders wore out and ached after hours of kneeling while exhuming a body — a task that is so delicate, so precise, so careful that it cannot be rushed. Camila and Tatiana (two forensic anthropologists) recalled moments in which their skin burnt under the blazing sun, and Pía remembered how she once got rashes all over her body when she had to work underwater



to recover three bodies.

- 15 Yes, their bodies ache. As Jaime says:

All this walking, shovelling, and opening holes is very heavy for the body. I've been doing that for 25 years, and the body feels it, we even joke about needing a senior exhumation kit for us –the older ones because our bodies are tired (Conversation with Jaime. March 2020).

- 16 Yes, forensic experts' bodies hurt, from spending hours in the laboratory to sitting for long periods in all possible means of transportation to reach places to perform exhumations. Their bodies ache from injuries that take place while exhumations occur, which can range from small cuts to bones that break when falling while trekking or when trying to get into a helicopter that cannot land due to the difficult geography, As Pía vividly expressed:

The helicopter left us, nobody wanted to give us lodging, so we slept in some tactical hammocks in the corridors of the town, but the town was a soccer field, a bunch of houses around it and nothing more. I recovered the bodies that day and we went to bed, and then the army arrived at midnight and asked us to pick up everything ... They had intercepted a call saying that [illegal armed actors] had mined all the graves. So, they withdrew us from the site, and they took us to where the helicopter was going to pick us up. The site was in Bolivar, which has very broken geography, full of mountains and the helicopter couldn't land ... A colleague got on and offered me a hand up. I managed to take his hand and put a foot up on the platform, but the pilot didn't see that I was still hanging and moved the helicopter, my feet came off and I hit the helicopter's platform with my ribcage, it broke, and I had a terrible hematoma (and pain) for weeks (Conversation with Pía. May 2021).

- 17 Forensic experts' bodies hurt, and their lives are endangered when doing their jobs in an active armed conflict, when they are at risk of being caught in the crossfire, or when the bodies they are meant to recover and their surroundings are wired with explosives to prevent their recovery, as Pía explained. This job demands the exposure and involvement of their whole bodies: skin, flesh, and bone.
- 18 However, it goes deeper than that. As Sonia (a forensic dentist) said after a long pause and with a cracking voice, "This job makes the soul ache". It demands and consumes their emotional selves in ways that mark them deeply and shape them profoundly (Film 3).



**Film 3** “Inside”: The emotional burden of forensic work. Forensic photographer Antonio is talking (©Gina Urazan Razzini, David Garcés, Sergio Rodríguez Vitta 2022c)

- 19 However, emotional pain is harder to speak about than physical pain. In this regard, Rosenblatt has highlighted that emotional detachment is part of what is expected from forensic experts, not only as strategies to deal with undoubtedly painful work, but also as ways of “caring for your teammates, respecting the boundaries that others around you need to continue with their work” (Rosenblatt 2015: 195). However, the pauses, silences, looking away from the screen, and occasional tears spoke eloquently enough of the burden that this job creates for forensic experts.
- 20 In my attempt to make sense of those moments and the stories that some of them shared, I wrote the following in my field notes:

Their job is to search, to search, to search, and keep on searching.  
 It seems that they would never stop searching.  
 To search, even if the search is not acknowledged by others.  
 To search, although there is often nothing to find.  
 To search.  
 To search and find only fragments.  
 To search and find the horrors of war.

To search and see eye to eye the atrocities humans are capable of.  
To search and know that the limits of violence can always be pushed further,  
and further and further.  
Until where, until when? (June 23, 2021).

## **Working on Death, Caring for Life**

- 21 However, it would still be unfair and untrue to consider forensic work as only an experience of suffering. Unfair and untrue because there are moments of true fulfilment and hope as Rosenblatt has vividly shown (2015). In addition, as Jaime once told me:

When a case is closed, when we are finally able to return the remains to the family members (no matter how many years have passed), to be able to see a relative –a mother– in the eye, and tell her, ‘here is your son’, and to receive her gratitude, her tears of finally been able to stop searching (as painful as the confirmation of death might be), that is a moment of joy. Bittersweet, no doubt, but joy. That is the reason why we do all that we do (Conversation with Jaime. February 2020).

- 22 Then, this job of constant searching and locating and exhuming is also about finding. It is also about hope; the hope that they can find someone makes forensic experts’ work doable. It helps set the pain (physical and otherwise) in the background and makes sense of what they do and why they do it, as poignantly stated above by forensic photographer Antonio in Film 3. Putting the pain on hold and hoping for a better future can be understood as a way of reconfiguring the world during and after an incident of mass violence occurs, which, according to Das et al. (2001), creates the possibility of remaking the world after experiencing and suffering acts of extreme violence (Film 4).



**Film 4** “The encounter”: Forensic experts and civil society at an exhumation site. Forensic anthropologist Pía is talking (©Gina Urazan Razzini, David Garcés, Sergio Rodríguez Vitta 2022d)

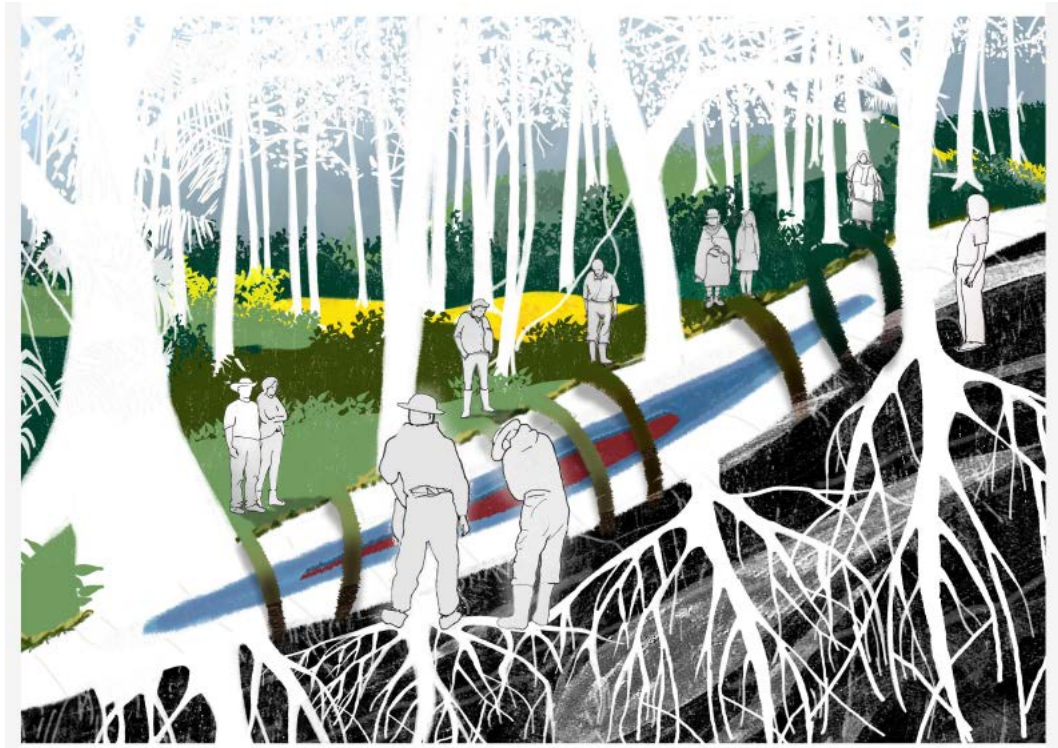
23 One day, after going through my notes and the audio recordings, I remembered the above-mentioned conversation with Jaime. The data were confusing and painful to look at for long periods (and still are). However, seeing Jaime’s words written in one of my fieldwork diaries prompted me to continue pondering “searching as a means” to consider what that entails and, also to think with forensic experts’ stories. As part of my effort to incorporate that sense of purpose and hope within the uncertainty of forensic work and the fragility involved in it, I wrote the following:

To search and sometimes find.  
 To search and sometimes be able to identify.  
 To bring pieces to tell someone’s story  
 albeit a partial and fractured one.  
 To help someone return to their family,  
 even if it is only their memory.  
 To search and connect with others who are also searching.  
 To recognize that one is not alone in the search for those who have been disappeared.  
 To search to find oneself while finding others.



To hope that, eventually, the search will be over.  
(September 18, 2021).

- 24 My conversations with forensic experts, of which I present here fragments as quotations or in films throughout the document, showed that seeing forensic work as just painful minimizes the power of the concept that to search is also to find, not only the remains of those who died a terrible death, but also to find others to work with; the work of searching and finding is also work to defend life (Film 5).



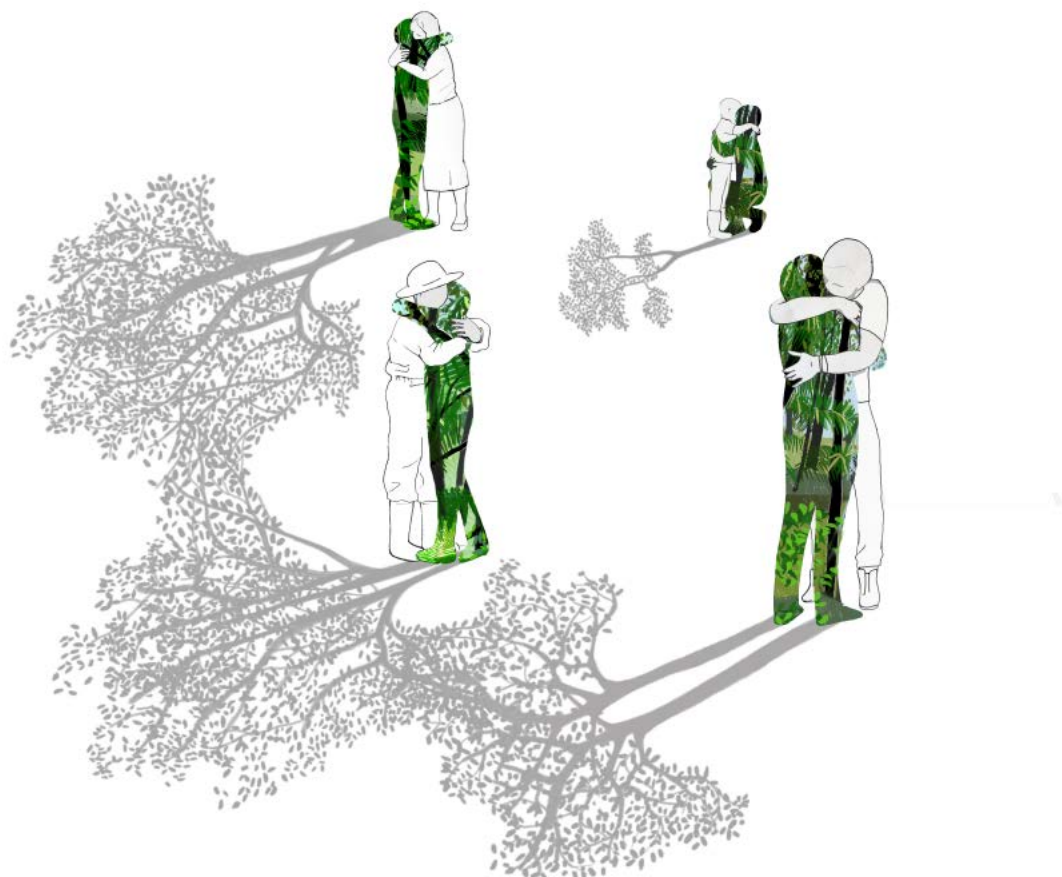
**Films 5** "The wound": Forensic experts and civil society searching for forcibly disappeared persons in a territory wounded by protracted violence. Forensic entomologist Camila is talking (©Gina Urazan Razzini, David Garcés, Sergio Rodríguez Vitta 2022e)

- 25 Or in the words of Carlos, a forensic examiner:

All these stories of violence that one has worked on ... and I see my job as something that can be done to help compensate the damage to the victims ... or to avoid that the damage continues ... for me, as a doctor who does not formulate medications, I can help with my forensic work, to aid for well-being and for the health of those who have suffered violence. I have this opportunity to work and help contribute to reduce the pain, in this case the suffering of victims, and also to contribute to peace-building (our main goal is the peace). It is the reward, and it is the reason for doing the work (Conversation with Carlos. May 2021).

- 26 To find some sort of sense amidst violence when one's job is seen as contributing to repairing a wound — which can have been inflicted on the territory, the land, the bodies, or the communities that have

suffered violence — is central to engaging in and persisting with a heart- and bone-breaking job, such as that of forensic experts. Even if this wound may never heal — as some things cannot be fully repaired (Sánchez-Aldana 2022) — it can be cared for (Film 6).



**Film 6** “The hug”: Forensic experts and civil society reconciling with the territory after finding disappeared persons. Forensic anthropologist Ana is talking (©Gina Urazan Razzini, David Garcés, Sergio Rodríguez Vitta 2022f)

## Final Comments

- 27 I want to close this piece by saying that, as we can see from the forensic experts’ quotes, they do not search alone. During the process of searching, exhuming, and identifying, they become part of communities of searchers across the country and participate in spaces where people—sometimes together, sometimes in tension with one another, sometimes in the closed circles of their work—help each other in the path toward some sort of collective care and the possibility of reconciliation in this peace-building attempt. This is because searching is an action; it is movement (Robledo-Silvestre 2019). Searching provides the possibility of igniting something with someone—other searchers; in this case, forensic experts and other members of civil society. Hence, forensic experts are actors, not mere witnesses, who participate in varied and evident ways of repairing the social fabric, where enforced disappearance and other forms of violence have torn it apart. They participate in a repair that is possible through their actions—combined with the actions of others—regardless of how imperfect, partial, and incomplete



that repair might be (Film 7).



**Film 7** "Walking together": Forensic experts and civil society walking together towards a future of hope and reconciliation. (©Gina Urazan Razzini, David Garcés, Sergio Rodríguez Vitta. Music: ©Sergio Rodríguez Vitta 2022g)

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## Notes

- 1) Translated into English by María Fernanda Olarte-Sierra.
- 2) Gina Urazan Razzini: Illustrations [gur\_illus <https://www.behance.net/GINAURAZANR> (accessed August 2, 2022).  
David Garcés: Animations and general post-production.  
Sergio Rodríguez Vitta: Music, sound, and audiovisual creative consultancy | [www.yeyodrummer.com](http://www.yeyodrummer.com) (accessed August 2, 2022).

Alejandro Veloza: Audio interview fragments' final sonic editing, normalization, and mastering at 4cuartosgrabacion.  
Glory Sunz: Rainforest Ambience (Public Domain)| www.soundbible.com (accessed August 2, 2022).

- 3) All forensic experts gave their permission to use their own voices.
- 4) I interviewed forensic experts from government and state institutional teams, the SIVJRNR, and from the civil society
- 5) All names, except that of Jaime, are pseudonyms.

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