

After the War: Displaced Women, Ordinary Ethics, and Grassroots Reconstruction in Colombia

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Abstract

This article examines internally displaced women's narratives of rebuilding their life after displacement, focusing on questions of moral agency and community governance. The data come from a 3-year research project (2010–2013) with internally displaced women in Colombia, during the emergence of a new transitional justice regime. The article finds in internally displaced women's narratives of the injuries of war, of their own resistance and overcoming, and of their aspirations for the future, concerns that go beyond poverty alleviation and redistribution in peace-building efforts. Internally displaced women's narratives also engage with questions of ordinary ethics and community governance, describing the loss of moral agency in civil war and its painstaking recovery. This article questions the limitations of transitional justice regimes and peace-building efforts that ignore concerns with the loss of moral agency and community during civil war as well as the role of ordinary ethics in peace building at the grassroots.

Keywords

Colombia, community governance, internal displacement, internally displaced women, moral agency, ordinary ethics, peace building, transitional justice

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Introduction

Decades of civil war in Colombia have also meant decades of grassroots reconstruction. While reconstruction has sometimes been led by government efforts, notably after the peace agreements that ended the civil war of the 1950s, for the most part, the physical and social reorganization of communities affected by war has come from the over 6 million peasants who, in the extended low-intensity conflict spanning from the 1980s to today, fled to large and midsized cities and rebuilt their lives in the slums.¹ Reconstruction has been for them a lonely and labor-intensive task, involving their insertion in urban cash economies, the physical construction of self-help housing in informal settlements, and for some, community action, bringing schools, health centers, parks, and public utilities to the slums that harbored them. Through this process, and through its many failures and frustrations, forcibly displaced peasants have built new identities and communities: this is grassroots reconstruction.

The experience of grassroots reconstruction is interwoven with that of rapid urbanization and the poverty it generates. Since the 1950s people fleeing the war were indistinct from economic migrants: for public policy the problem was poverty, and development the solution. When forced displacement rapidly increased in the 1990s, public policy shifted toward a humanitarian response, but it never stopped considering displacement as a problem of poverty, calling for redistribution. Government action initially focused on humanitarian aid and poverty relief, but since 2004, the Constitutional Court, through massive structural litigation, prodded successive governments to respond, using socioeconomic rights enjoyment as indicators of success.² By 2011, following the adoption of a national victims' law (Law 1448 of 2011), an expanded national bureaucracy and institutions adopted the international norms of transitional justice, but still focused on redistribution, providing not only humanitarian aid but also poverty relief and monetary reparations to internally displaced people (IDP).³ This redistributive aspiration undergirds the multiple policies and institutions still being created, and peace with the FARC guerrilla remains unimaginable without redistribution.⁴

This emphasis on redistribution echoes current concerns in the literature. The normative commitments of transitional justice are a shifting ground, often tied to specific locations and moments in time (Arthur, 2009; Elster, 2004; Teitl, 2003), but in the last decade transnational norm-making efforts as well as the scholarly study of transitions have increasingly advocated redistributive justice. Attention to poverty relief and a growing interest in local forms of transitional justice are central to what Sharp (2013), following Teitl's genealogies, calls the fourth generation of transitional justice, focusing not on past violations but rather on laying the foundation for a lasting peace, and redistributive justice has become central to this lasting peace (i.e. García-Godós, 2013; Lambourne, 2009; Laplante, 2008; Miller, 2008; Waldorf, 2012).

Redistribution is sometimes balanced with other concerns, particularly recognition of women's gender-specific vulnerabilities in war and the transition to peace. Feminism has an increasingly important role in contemporary or fourth generation transitional justice, advocating for a balance between recognition and redistribution (Franke, 2006; Ni Anolain, 2012; Rubio-Marín, 2006). This proposal has gained traction within

international feminism not just as the redistribution of shame (away from women and victims) but also as the redistribution of material resources to benefit women. Feminist scholars hope the mechanisms of transitional justice, especially reparations, will have the capacity to positively transform women's lives by securing material gains (Bell and O'Rourke, 2007), addressing the destitution resulting from war (Rubio-Marín, 2012; Theidon, 2007), subverting the preexisting structural gender inequalities (Rubio-Marín, 2006; 2012), and even fostering gender-equitable development (Meertens and Zambrano, 2010.)

But do displaced people engaged in grassroots reconstruction share the same normative commitments? In spite of the call in the literature for more attention to the local (i.e. Sharp, 2013) there is little research on local understandings of justice. Attention concentrates on institutional experimentation in retributive justice (see, i.e. McEvoy and McGregor, 2008) rather than on the underlying norms. Growing victim's participation, especially in trials and truth commissions and in the quest for reparations, seems to confirm that victims and states share the values of the transitional justice apparatus. This assumption, however, is unsettled on the ground, where grassroots reconstruction calls for increased attention to the distinct ethical dimension of local cultures and forms of community governance. This call does not preclude issues of survival; redistribution remains central to transitions from war to peace. But it does ground concerns over redistributive justice in transitions on a thicker understanding of the injuries of civil war, an understanding that includes importance of moral agency and moral community. María Zabala's story further illustrates this point.

The Enchanted Valley

María Zabala is a displaced woman and community leader in a peasant cooperative in the state of Córdoba, in the north of Colombia. Córdoba was also the site of paramilitary experiments with direct governance in the early 2000s. The story of María Zabala's resistance to paramilitary governance after her displacement has been widely recorded by the media and the Centre for Historic Memory (CMH) and María Zabala's daughter, Esther Polo, wrote a book chapter on her mother titled *The Legendary María Zabala* (Polo, 2012).⁵

In the late 1980s, the emerging paramilitary armies murdered thousands of peasants, including María Zabala's husband, his uncle, his nephew, and her husband's son from a previous marriage. After their murder, she buried the bodies with the help of her neighbors, and fled to the slums of Montería, the provincial capital, with her surviving children, and 2 months pregnant with her youngest daughter, Esther. The following years María Zabala worked hard to feed her children, washing other people's clothes, and cooking and selling food in the street, eventually moving to her own precarious slum dwelling. She also often received newly displaced people in her home and organized community women to demand social services, water, and electricity, in the community action tradition of Colombian slums.⁶

Like María Zabala, millions of peasants have fled from violence and rebuilt their lives in urban slums through the physical construction of self-help housing and public amenities. Since the peace agreements housing and public amenities. Since the peace agreements that ended the civil war in 1959, Colombia responded to rapid urbanization by

linking self-help groups in slums with local government through community action boards (*Juntas de Acción Comunal*). Today, even when the boards themselves don't always provide reliable leadership (e.g. due to corruption and politics), the vocabulary and forms of community leadership learnt through the boards still carry traction among the poor, including the displaced multitudes.

María Zabala became one of these community leaders in Montería after her displacement, and eventually organized a group of 27 displaced women to relocate in a cooperative farm, under a government land reform program. The group moved to the isolated farm and set up a series of shelters, working sometimes together, sometimes in family groups, to grow food and build houses. They called it *Valle Encantado* or Enchanted Valley. It was not only the site of reconstruction but a site of resistance.

Interviewed on the benefits of being organized, María Zabala and her daughter Esther Polo spoke at length about organization as a form of resistance.⁷ They explained that even after displacement, armed actors control communities and want to govern: "they rule over people's life and destiny," said Esther. Like rebels in civil wars generally, the paramilitary in Córdoba developed structures and practices to regulate social and political life (Arjona and Mampilly, 2015) and attempted to rule over Valle Encantado.

Polo (2012) described paramilitary rule in Córdoba: no one could have leftist thoughts or express them, adulterous women were whipped in the central plaza, and their husbands could not forgive them under penalty of being whipped as well. Thieves and murderers were dragged off and then disappeared, presumably murdered. Fighting was forbidden, and people found fighting were ordered to clear a field of bush with a dull machete, an almost impossible task. Men could not have long hair or a strange hairdo or wear colorful clothes. People had to go to bed at 8 p.m. and after that no one could walk the roads. According to Esther:

They decided to replace all State institutions. They solved themselves fights among couples, they decided on the custody of children, they established alimony, they authorized community meetings and demanded respect for their organization. No one could oppose them, and the worst part was that the people fed the power of the armed señores; they loved to raise complaints, to accuse a neighbor, just to see (the paramilitary) in action. (Polo, 2012: 36)

Esther continued to explain how the paramilitary established their rule in the region: "First they come to the people bringing groceries, clothes, food, linen, everything. And then they think they have the power of life and death." But when the paramilitary brought groceries, the Valle Encantado women, who were starving, who did not have, in María Zabala's words, a fistful of salt refused them: "such was the harm that the war had brought to these women" she said, "they said no." In our interview, María Zabala described the exchange the women and the paramilitary, making women's voices speak clearly, in a reasonable tone, while imitating the paramilitary's voices as shrill and disorderly, denoting their lack of real authority:

There's something else: they wanted, they came to us and said:
(Paramilitary) we're going to organize you so you get organized in your own organization so we can give you loans, cash, chickens, what not.
(Women) No señor, we are already organized. Look: this is our paperwork.

(Paramilitary) (We'll help you) organize the handling of trash, and drinking water.
(Women)No señor, we know how to do that, we are already doing that, here's how.
(Paramilitary) Clean the roads, the plots.
(women)No señor. We know that. We have our front yards clean, we don't need you to call us to do that.
We tell them thank you but no. Subtly, to be sure. Thank you but no.

This dialogue presents an idealized narrative, even if it happened exactly as María Zabala describes it: it is a story deeply charged with moral meaning, and it reflects on the ethical ground of governance as provided by the paramilitary in Cordoba but also as understood by peasant women. These things offered by the paramilitary to desperately poor women are the things legitimate power should provide, based both on a peasant culture of mutual aid as well as on participatory practices of poverty alleviation through community action boards (*Juntas de Acción Comunal*) and other forms of community action. Governance through community action involves the provision of food in times of hunger, organization of shared work for the common good, facilitation of sanitation, and effective dispute resolution. However, these things are not enough: the story demonstrates that governance also has a moral dimension, and that even when aid is accepted out of desperation, or even when they collaborate with armed actors they despise, peasant women still recognize the values that predate the war and their own potential for acting on them. The story of *Valle Encantado* refusing help is also about the importance of regaining this moral agency, defined as ordinary people's capacity to act in relation to their perceptions of right and wrong.

Do women like María Zabala understand themselves primarily as vulnerable populations, requiring preferential treatment? They certainly require aid and are generally desperately poor. But displaced women's narratives of the injuries of war, of their own resistance and overcoming, and of their dreams of reconstruction, reflect concerns that go beyond poverty alleviation and redistribution. Their narratives also engage with questions of humanity, virtue, and community governance, describing the loss of moral agency in war and its painstaking recovery.

Methods, Context, and Data

This article examines women's narratives about community organizing after displacement, focusing on questions of moral agency and community governance. The data come from a 3-year research project (2010–2013) that initially examined their uses of law and legal actions both through an intensive review of news stories, judicial decisions, and human rights reports and through extensive fieldwork. Fieldwork, carried out with a group of graduate students, included a convenience sample of six case studies of community organizing and legal mobilization, two of which included collaborative household surveys and 15–18 months of observation and collaboration. The project also included 103 semi-structured interviews of displaced women leaders, public officials, nongovernmental organization (NGO) workers, and international field officers for various aid agencies as well as observations of workshops and seminars with IDP organized by different NGO and government offices.⁸

During the period of study, Colombia experienced a growth of government programs, especially poverty alleviation programs, directed to victims of armed conflict. Today victims of armed conflict are entitled, pursuant the Victims' Law (Law 1448 of 2011) to a wide range of rights that include concrete material benefits, spanning both humanitarian aid and justiciable socioeconomic rights. They have preferential access to the programs that define Colombia's three-pronged approach to poverty alleviation: conditional cash transfers,⁹ free basic education, and free mandatory health insurance¹⁰ as well as to other supplementary schemes in some cities, such as free breakfasts for children and day care centers, micro-credits and savings programs, and housing subsidies. As victims, they are eligible for additional sums of money through administrative reparations and in certain extraordinary cases to significant reparations through courts. The National Victim's Unit, operating out of a vast network of local offices, provides humanitarian assistance as well as administrative reparations and also a space for victims to gather and make demands of the government.

During the interviews, displaced women sometimes also volunteered information on their past lives, unsolicited information that sparked a deeper reflection on the work of community organizations in reconstruction. Between 2014 and 2015, while on sabbatical, I recoded interviews and field journals with a conceptual focus on the ethical and a methodological focus on narratives as the site of ethical reflection.¹¹ The conceptual focus on the ethical was informed by the recent turn in anthropology to the centrality of ethical practice in the study of societies, not as way to avoid the study of structure, power, and interests, but acknowledging these do not exhaust the ways people make sense of their actions (see, i.e. Das, 2007; 2010; 2012; Fassin, 2012; Lambek, 2010). In the aftermath of violence and terror, everyday life, or what Das (2007) also calls the descent to the ordinary, is central to the creation of a new normality or a world that needs to be remade through words, gestures, and modes of living that express respect and recognition for each other. Building on Das, I focus on idealized narratives instead on habits and practices, following Paul Ricoeur's (1992) understanding that narratives have ethical dimensions. Most narratives I analyzed idealized the conditions they described; instead of unpacking this idealization in the mode of suspicion, I chose to identify the virtues they exemplified. My conclusion was that these narratives show how grassroots reconstruction includes both material well-being and the reconstitution of the moral agency and the capacity for moral community, both deeply injured by war.

Loss of Moral Agency as an Injury of War

A schoolteacher for many years, Lilia's life was shattered by her husband's murder in southern Putumayo. He was killed before her eyes, begging her to help, and she was silent. Pregnant at the time, she fainted. His death and what she felt was her failure to protect him unraveled her life. She gave her daughters away to be raised by her brother and his wife and found a precarious refuge in Ecuador, selling wares in the street to survive with her new baby and facing daily discrimination and police harassment. This is Lilia's description of the murder and its consequences:

I lost my home, all of it. I lost my children, lost my husband. My husband was killed. I lost my children. I gave them to my family to save their lives so I lost them as well. Not literally because they are alive. But they call my sister in law their mother. They are not mine. (pause). I could never bury my husband. They threw him to the river, and could never find him again. And that, that pain is perhaps the thing in my life that will never end (pause.) I saw how they killed him. I saw how they threw him in the river. Every time I remember, I remember how he asked me to help. And I felt so impotent. I lost consciousness. I was pregnant. I was young. I didn't have the courage to confront the person who was killing him.

Narratives of war such as Lilia's evoke distinct images of horrific events in war, where civilians bear the brunt of human powers of annihilation. Imagined as a series of distinct events, wars are represented as moments of concentrated destruction and as the massive production of human pain through deliberate acts of violence. These events are bound in time and place: the murder of a loved one, a massacre of civilians, a bloody battle between armies, bombs raining down from the sky, a body subjected to torture under interrogation, gang rape of women and children, families in the act of fleeing the war, and clutching children and belongings. As the transitional justice apparatus in Colombia excavates the injury of single events, framing violations of rights, it faces the task of surgically removing these events from ordinary life. Reports, like the stories depicted above, carefully represent these events taken outside of their context, as stand-alone instants of horror, or in a few cases as a string of horrific events succeeding each other as in a nightmare.

However, the disarray of everyday life in civil war extends beyond those single, gangrenous instances of horror. Unlike conventional warfare, the low-intensity warfare of a cold-war conflict such as Colombia's civil war only rarely destroys civilian homes, towns, crops, and livelihoods. Instead it dramatically impacts everyday life, eroding moral agency and community.¹² This erosion follows armed actors' deliberate attempt to control a territory and population, which means, as in Esther's description, that they want to "rule over peoples' lives and destinies."

Why did soldiers kill Lilia's husband, or María Zabala's? Selective murders of enemy collaborators and dissenters are part of a wider effort to govern, first by the identification and elimination of enemy collaborators, and then by imposing a particular order based on violent social control but extending to multiple state functions such as the provision of security, conflict resolution, and tax collection, all of which require a degree of local collaboration.¹³ Identification of enemy collaborators is central to the process of securing an area, and the main source of information on enemy collaborators is the community itself; this is part of the fratricidal dimension of civil war. Selective murders do not simply cement an armies' control; as neighbors and family members use malicious denunciation against each other, they link local enmities and disputes to the larger dynamics of the war. (Kalyvas, 2006: 332, 226).

Horror shapes memory, and memory in turn impacts representation of war as single violent events. But the harm of war includes the circumstances that led to the murder and the relationships between rebel armies and local civilians. The fabric of everyday life in a conflict zone goes a long way into explaining horrific events, including everyday forms of collaboration with armed actors. It is not only the actions of soldiers that evoke the

diffuse forms of fear and mistrust theorized by Green (1999) as “living in state of fear” and by Taussig (1984) as living within “a culture of terror,” they are also linked to the actions of civilians as they betray each other and collaborate with armed actors, breaking down relationships and trust. Rumors and gossip relentlessly explore the breakdown of community as members point to each other as collaborators, or try to justify or explain selective murder.

Collaboration is not the only phenomenon that erodes moral agency. In women’s narratives of displacement, I also heard an erosion of moral agency through the crumbling of their ability to mother in a context of war. Stories of community organizing are laced with regret over maternal failures, failures that persist through different forms of violence. Luz Stella Romero, lawyer for a group of peasant women who resisted land loss, described the women’s pain over having had to leave their young children unattended in order to work the land (“locked alone in houses, or in the care of other children, or in the care of neighbors that did not look out for them.”) When speaking of reparations for land loss, the women had said they wanted reparations for the unattended children.

This example relates to the cultural reality of women’s multiple responsibilities as mothers and the way these responsibilities are confirmed by deeply held beliefs and moral values, grounding a sense of self. Their roles in the community neatly dovetail cultural responsibilities of women, which I define as the stewardship of life: feeding families, caring for the ill and the infirm, and keeping homes clean and safe, keeping children off the street, keeping boys out of gangs, and keeping girls out of pregnancy, leading them into secure adulthoods with respectable roles in their community. War can destroy a woman’s sense of being competent enough to this: In Lilia’s story, for example, she gives her daughters away “to save their lives” because she could no longer trust herself to mother.

In a series of 2012 interviews with two feminist NGO workers in Mocoa, our conversation gravitated toward the breakdown of mothering during war, extending to the formidable task of rearing children in these circumstances. The NGO works especially with teenagers and with the many difficulties faced by parents who are ambivalent about the roles they expect their children to assume, since a little-mentioned fact of war is that these same displaced women are often the mothers of the soldiers killing for different armies. Some see enrolling in an army as the only avenue out of poverty, or at least a reasonable choice for boys, while others despair at these choices. The NGO workers told me of taking into their home a former schoolteacher from the war-ridden region of southern Putumayo. The teacher was in a deep depression, unable to get out from bed or perform her daily routines, because she, who had resisted her students’ forced conscription, was unable to keep her oldest son from enlisting in the Army. One of the NGO workers described the mother’s illness as caused by a son who “se regaló al ejército” gifted himself to the Army.

The breakdown of mothering echoes a complicated breakdown of moral agency, defined as the capacity to act according to right and wrong. For peasant women, moral agency involved being able to provide the stewardship of life that was ingrained in their traditional role: this begins with taking care of themselves (as in being presentable, healthy, in good humor, and generally well) as much as being able to take care of their home (as in a rural home, including general sanitation as well as the production of food both through cooking and through gardening and tending to farm animals, especially

poultry and pigs) and being able to take care of their family (providing cooked meals and care in times of illness or infirmity). The inability to fulfill these roles is uneasily woven in narratives of displacement with collaboration with armed men, with generalized fear, and with living through moments of intense horror. In this context, fleeing becomes the first step toward recovering moral agency, but it also led to situations of structural violence where it was difficult to recover from the war.

Structural Violence and the Harms of War

Loss of moral agency is not restricted to the rural, war-torn regions: as they fled the remote areas of the country where they lived the war, peasant women arrived to the slums only to discover that the violence that awaited them was devastating in unexpected ways. What they found was hunger, destitution, and the familiar control by non-state armed actors, no longer just guerrillas or paramilitary proper, but drug gangs in the slums. Displaced women in our interviews consistently described being unable to feed their children, or to shelter them from cold, and witnessing their children's suffering as a radical harm caused by the war. After arrival, the most pressing concern was the search for a home, not only for shelter but also for the lost homemaking utensils they had accumulated over a lifetime: beds, chairs, tables, blenders, sheets, and towels. Now the poorest of the poor, they had nothing; "una mano adelante y otra atrás" was the way one woman described it, alluding to the feeling of arriving naked covering genitals with their bare hands.

Cash is scarce in the slums and mostly found through selling merchandise, often food, in the streets and in buses, grueling work that involves their children's help and facing police violence. In the cash economy of the slums, there is a direct link between hunger and the lack of income. But formal jobs paid in cash are not to be had. In addition, a general dearth of formal employment in Colombia, displaced people are generally perceived as unemployable: the urban wage market has little if any use for adult and middle-aged peasants, not to mention the high rate of dependents that need in-house care. Government aid is insufficient and even those lucky or persistent enough to benefit from savings and micro-credit programs rarely achieve self-sustainability above the line of poverty (Gaviria and Berry, 2013; Ibáñez and Moya, 2010; Lemaitre and Sandvik, forthcoming 2016, Lemaitre and Vargas, 2014; Petesch and Gray, 2009).

Hunger and deprivation are the naturalized materialization of structural violence in Colombia as in slums around the world (Farmer, 2004; Galtung, 1969; Schepper-Hughes, 1992). Displaced women we interviewed remember, as an extension of the injuries wrought by war, having little or no money to pay for rent, considering rent to be wasted money, better used for food. Hunger haunts narratives of displacement, coupled with the memory of a past where food was plenty. Some women described with relish the food they used to eat before displacement, remember the piles of rice, shape them in the air with their hands, smack their lips remembering the fried fish, the stewed chicken. Others listed their crops, described planting and harvesting with detailed recollections of the types of crops and times of harvest. These stories end with losing that land of plenty and ensuing hunger.

The inability to mother reveals itself to be the cause of many regrets of life in the slums. For example, Ana Luz described her worry over her daughter's teenage

pregnancy, linking it to the place and circumstances of her displacement to the city, and to her own inability to “listen” to her daughter, and her tone and demeanor echo her pain at failing to mother according to their own sense of what is right:

My oldest daughter, in that anguish, we lived in a shack, two families in a shack, she had no experience, she came to the city And then she left school because we were so poor and she was desperate to help and said I am leaving (home) to help my mother, and then she got pregnant, and the man left her. That was terrible, terrible, it was all truncated for her. Now she is a grown woman, she is 22 and says Mami I want to go back to school. And I (pause) I say (pause) daughter forgive me because I wasn't listening to you (then). I was so desperate. I didn't want to see you like that. These things happen, but maybe if we had been somewhere else it would not have happened.

In the slums, displaced people sometimes endure not only hunger and deprivation but also urban violence. Slums with little state presence are the territory of non-state armed actors, usually drug gangs with links to corrupt police officers and sometimes to the guerrillas or the paramilitaries as well. As elsewhere in Latin America, gangs directly control only specific sectors of the slum (generally where drugs are sold) but their influence extends more widely through their beneficiaries as well as through their alliances with corrupt police forces, service providers, and politicians (see, i.e. Arias, 2006; Arias and Goldstein, 2010; Civico, 2012). Like rebel rulers, urban gangs can also adopt multiple state functions, especially the provision of security, conflict resolution, and tax collection. Gangs can also exercise social control, which can be ideological, reproducing patriarchal and authoritarian ideals of social ordering, or political, claiming sides in the war, giving rise to militia-style urban warfare (i.e. CMH, 2011). As in civil war, there are struggles for territorial control: gangs clash with each other and with state actors. The police often acts like an occupation force enforcing order on an unruly population: their violence echoes army training of urban police in the recent decades, with militarized units passing through with body armor, shooting to kill, and sometimes also operating out of uniform as death squads.

Armed struggles for territorial control between rival gangs and between gangs and the state means collaboration and betrayal are also part of daily life, extending the effects of war on social relations. The stigma of collaboration with enemies creates a risk in the slums, and it is unclear whether this risk comes from state armed forces as they attempt to maintain control over city slums, or from armed gangs or, as some rumors have it, from displaced people carrying deep resentment and hatred against each other. The fact remains that displaced people are at risk after displacement. Most insecurity is undetected, but the insecurity of displaced leaders is recorded as threats to human rights defenders, widely reported in the last decade (see, i.e. CIDH, 2011; Amnesty International 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2014; Constitutional Court Auto 098 of 2013).¹⁴ It seems that war is people, and it goes where they go.

The harrowing circumstances of life in the slums and the persistent echoes of the past often precipitated periods of undiagnosed and untreated mental illness as well as strong feelings of sadness, guilt, regret, and hopelessness. Fears over safety, regrets, and failure to fulfill traditional roles are experienced in tandem with numerous other,

self-eroding losses. Eugenia described it bitterly as being “somebody” before displacement and being “nobody” afterwards. “Being somebody” included a respectable domestic life, where the minimum needs were provided for and her children were never hungry and had the clothes and school supplies they needed and where Eugenia was always busy, tending to her home as well as working hard as the President of the Association of Rural Community Development Boards (*Juntas de Acción Comunal Veredal*). All this was lost in the war, and its loss overwhelmed her in the first years in Mocoa, when, according to her own account during the first years, she was scared to leave their rented shack, “scared of her own shadow.” Aida, a former police inspector,¹⁵ and María Zabala also described periods of intense grief after displacement. When a friend who had returned to their hometown was brutally killed, Aida “cried for a year” unable to get up from bed. María Zabala’s daughter described her mother’s incessant crying after giving birth to her as the need to “relieve that pain embedded in her, that pain she had had to hide not to scare her children, so they would see her strong and not afraid to face life in spite of all that had happened to them.” The next section examines the strength María Zabala wanted to portray, and its implications for transitional justice.

Strength After the War

Aida has worked all her life and led others ever since she can remember. She was police inspector when the war arrived, and in the darkest hours of violence, it was her job to identify the dead, write up death certificates, and bury them sometimes without being able to give notice to any other state authority. Under death threats she fled to Cali, where she and her family continued to receive threats until they hid in a slum so vile young men did drugs in the streets, and where criminals in her description “killed and buried people right there.” In the slums, Aida started a small pillow-making factory with some economic success, employing other displaced women and receiving some support from an NGO. Her dream was to grow enough to provide employment for more women, women she described as otherwise leaving their children alone in their houses in order to find food in the streets. When describing her dreams for the future, Aida also described herself as capable of providing not only for her family but for her new community, as woman who was “useful for every area (of work).” This strength was rooted in her past:

That is for me ... it’s like a challenge! If I am here now. If I am here coming from el campo.¹⁶ And in el campo I was useful for every area, because I was the woman that when violence came and they massacred whole families, we would go and identify the bodies. And we would bury them. Often without bringing it to light ... because we weren’t allowed. We would go down to the river where the dead floated by, decomposing, and we would go down to the river and on the shore bury them, bury them in the sand by the shore of the river. If I am a woman that, nothing has been too big for me to tackle, and now I am in a city, where there are so many needs ...

In this narrative of her past, and implicitly of her transition to life after the war, Aida underlines her gendered strength as the permanent feature of her identity. She was a

woman before, and she is a woman now. But that anchoring is not enough: she is and has been a strong woman, “una mujer de superación”, a woman who can overcome. In her idealized narrative of herself, her capabilities and strength reside in her potential to respond to the needs of others, and the example she gives is that of performing a function that in times of war corresponds to women: to give proper burial to the dead.

Aida’s narrative opens up reflection on the ethical dimension of transitioning to peace after the war, as expressed in her description of her gendered strength, her value as a person and her generosity – that is, in her description of herself as a moral agent. Gendered strength appears in the idealized narratives about community action as a woman’s capacity to provide stewardship for life in extended concentric circles. At the center is her capacity to take care of herself; it extends to her capacity to take care of her home and family members, and in cases of extraordinary strength such as that of María Zabala and Aida and many of the other women we worked with, it extends to the capacity to take care of an extended network of friends, relatives, and neighbors. Gendered strength is at the root of moral agency, because it expresses both the knowledge of what is right and enacts the capacity to act in relation to that knowledge.

Stories such as Aida’s illustrate the way the ideal of gendered strength bridges life before and after displacement, and the importance of having a sense of being valuable (often defined as *amor propio*, self-love). Clearly much of the vocabulary used to describe self-love (i.e. empowerment, equality, and dignity) resonated with the diffusion of equality discourses, rooted in the importance of self-respect for liberal constitutionalism. It is ubiquitous in television and radio and media and in numerous government and NGO workshops. It also evokes cultural ideas of honor, where for example a person is reproached for not having honor because they have no *amor propio*, or when a culturally appropriate reproach to injury is show *amor propio* and demand respect. Strength is a much-valued component of *amor propio*, and this is what Aida is talking about when she describes herself in glowing terms as a woman who can overcome.

Grassroots reconstruction for many of the women we interviewed was the location of their *amor propio*, because it was the expression of their gendered strength, of the extension of their capacity to provide stewardship of life. As Luz Mila, an afrocolombian grassroots leader in the city of Buenaventura, proudly put it “no one has ever given us anything”, meaning specifically her current success as an IDP organization in the city was the result of her hard work and that of her friends. While they were nationally recognized for their reconstruction work and had received support from local NGO and the government, she insisted nothing they had was a gift: “Women’s value, since men don’t recognize it, we have to give it to each other/ to ourselves (dárnolos nosotras). Because no one has ever given us anything- all we have, we have fought for.”

Generosity is understood in this context not only as virtuous but also as an expression of this same strength, strength that includes the capacity to help one’s self and others. Rossa Romaña, winner of the National Peace Award, described her initial work as a community leader after displacement as the discovery of a source of comfort. She arrived to a mid-sized town (Riosucio) where she encountered a poverty she had not experienced earlier in her life in the country. There were feces in the streets and gutters overflowing in the rainy season, and children running around barefoot over unstable planks that crossed the open air gutters. As an example of the “type of things she would do” that

gave her comfort (*alivio* or relief) was asking a child who is running barefoot for his shoe size: “maybe I don’t have money to buy shoes for him” she said “but maybe I know someone who does. Or maybe I can talk a shoe shop owner . . . into donating this pair of shoes. So maybe I can help.” She also described the relief of helping others, a relief from her own dwelling in her own pain and losses, in order to focus on others, others who like barefoot street children were even worse off. There is an intrinsic value to generosity, but part of the satisfaction of helping others comes from the pleasure of affirming one’s own worth as a generous person, a mutual affirmation of worth.

Displaced women’s narratives of generosity in their stewardship of life clashes with the representation of caring or care work as primarily, although not exclusive, nurturing relationships and responding to others, as in an ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006; Noddings, 1984). Caretaking in displaced women’s narratives is not primarily a form of self-sacrifice or a preoccupation with the welfare of others, but instead it is an expression of strength and resourcefulness, a source of pride and pleasure in agency similar to political agency (Wood, 2003.) Strength gendered in the feminine is demonstrated by caretaking: the stronger the woman, the wider she casts the net of her caretaking to include in an expanding, concentric circle, beginning with herself and extending to her family, neighbors, and community. Gendered strength, expressed in stewardship of life, is at the core of displaced women’s recovery of moral agency; its extension through generosity and collective action to the community is at the heart of grassroots reconstruction.

In idealized narratives of grassroots reconstruction, the strength at the core of moral agency grounds a moral community where all are responsible before each other for their actions. Community organizing is imagined as producing such a community; certainly *Valle Encantado* is imagined as such a place, but it also appeared in other narratives. For example, cooperative farming was repeatedly presented as an ideal in many of the interviews and the moral compass of a lost land of plenty. Luz Dary, a Black community leader in the war-torn city of Buenaventura, first described cooperative farming, for example, as the ideal of a good life:

You always long for your river, your land your ocean. You know why? Because the land is our pantry, as is the river, and the ocean. Collectivity is more than survival. It’s where you give me the plantain and I give you the rice, you give me the fish I give you the bread. It’s the *minga* of the good life that we lost.

The *minga* of the good life is not only a description of actual practices or its idealized representation: it is a mode of thinking through the aftermath of war in ethical terms, highlighting the recovery of moral agency and community. I want to reflect more on the word *minga*, and its weight in displaced women’s narratives of idealized ordinary life after the war. *Minga* is a word of quechua origin, used originally in the southern region of the Colombian Andes to denote collective work done either for the community or for others in the community. When done for others, *minga* has a reciprocal nature, requiring the beneficiary to work for others in the future. *Minga*, for example, is the traditional way of collecting crops in places where hired labor is not a reliable form of farming, either because of the scarcity of workers or because of the scarcity of cash or perhaps because of existing family ties that make payment for work socially awkward. *Minga* then

implies an eventual reciprocity, but beneficiaries are also expected to provide food for the day of collective work, and sometimes alcohol. Its use is originally rural but has spread to urban settings, especially for collective work in the slums where self-help housing construction uses minga for labor-intensive stages, such as pouring the concrete slab for a second floor.

As used by Luz Dary, as a *minga de la buena vida*, the minga of a good life, the word minga signals the collective nature of a good life. She highlights the moral dimension of this good life, insisting that thinking as a community means concern with others, especially with their basic subsistence: in her words, “when we think of another person’s hunger, we are thinking as a community.” The reference to food is very important: food is central to community action among poor people, and as Luz Dary aptly phrases, thinking as a community is thinking of the other person’s hunger.

What claim can María Zabala and Luz Dary’s stories make on the hegemony of redistributive justice in the transition from war to peace? I would argue there are at least two takeaways from their stories. First, that in transitional justice, redistributive reparations addressing extreme poverty also have to address the ethical dimension of transitioning to peace after the war, as expressed in the ordinary life of grassroots reconstruction. The second takeaway is that reparations, especially transformative reparations, attempt to change the conditions that led to the war in the first place, need to rethink local authority. It is not enough to demand compliance with the constitution and its democratic design: reparations need to reconsider the forms and symbolism of governance as grounded in the recovery of moral agency and community.

Community Governance and Grassroots Reconstruction

Esther Polo’s stories of *Valle Encantado* describe several moments that illuminate María Zabala’s authority and modes of governance through examples of her moral agency creating moral community. The first is Esther’s description, from a child’s point of view of the multitude of strangers that found shelter in their house in the Montería slum:

Their faces revealed their sadness and now the memories rush back as I remember my mother’s gesture of sharing what little she had. I was too young to understand much, but it was hard to sleep with my sisters and bear my mother’s absence at night. She would stay at our neighbor’s to share her bed with the women and children that now lived with us. (Polo, 2012: 27)

The people who María Zabala helped were also the people who followed her leadership, even though life with others was not easy, and internal disputes were common both in the slum and in *Valle Encantado*. Esther also remembers people silencing their disagreements when María Zabala walked by, calling her “the high priestess” (*la suma sacerdotisa*) in both gentle mockery and recognition of her power. People’s respect, Esther’s narrative reminds listeners, is not won through force, but neither is it won through what community organizers so often deride as mere assistance, the many charitable programs that hand out cash, food, or clothes or other necessities for poor people.

Mere assistance does not engage the moral agency and strength of the so-called vulnerable populations; handing out mere assistance makes the government like the paramilitary, trying to win allegiance by profiting from people's desperation. Likewise, transitional justice institutions that dole out much needed aid sometimes require women like María Zabala, like Aida, and like Luz Dary to act vulnerable. Transitional justice defines them as displaced women and victims of armed conflict; these and other categories hinge on the experience of injury and disadvantage, in a sense of a lesser citizenship (Brown, 1995; Bumiller, 1988; McEvoy and Connachie, 2013).

María Zabala tells another story that further explains her leadership as well as the cooperative's resistance to paramilitary power. This story is also a parable of the type of governance that comes from the experience of grassroots reconstruction. It is a parable that transitional justice institutions would do well to reflect on, and this and similar stories are sometimes told by, and puzzled over by, public officials on the ground.

One day the paramilitary, still attempting to seduce the cooperative into its fold, brought *Valle Encantado* a sanitation campaign or a cleanup campaign "campana de sanidad." These campaigns engage young men in activities like cleaning ditches and burning trash. Coincidentally that same day the women had a cooperative meeting:

They came with their weapons and their sanitation campaign and one of the muchachos,¹⁷ he had long hair, and one of them (the paramilitary) said right away he was going to cut the muchacho's hair with a rula¹⁸ they were going to cut his hair with that rula.

And I was there and I know these are muchachos that come from the war, and I know that muchacho also had his weapon there, his rula, and I saw his face disfigure like he is thinking you try to cut my hair and I cut your head off.

Then, because I was there, I came out, and told the man look what are you going to do? And he no, that muchacho can't have long hair like that and I said, what's wrong with you? Do you think that's the way (to do things)? If one day you want to have a base, if you want to have proposals to take to the state, do you really think this is the way to handle this?

Then came the other one (implied in tone of voice: the commander) and said, what's going on? And I said, that this is his way of doing things, he wants to cut the muchacho's hair with a rula.

And then the other one (the commander) said, "No Profe¹⁹ how could we do that? Hey you, stop messing with them." So I told the other one, "This is not the way to do things. How come you all come here with your violence generating more violence? So where are your ideals? If tomorrow you want to take the legal, the constitutional way, then why do you do this?" And the other one said, "No señora, you are right excuse us."

And I said, "We have a meeting going on here. We are women who know, and we know our rights. And we are hurting no one. Don't you think he has a right to decide if he cuts his hair or not?"

No señora, you are right.

Then they left and never again came back to bother us. So that worked.

Her narrative expresses an ordinary ethics that aspires to transform actual ordinary life into the idealized or eventual ordinary, after Cavell as read by Das (2007, 2010, 2012). María Zabala, through words, discourages violence and establishes a commonality of values with the paramilitary, recognized when they call her *Profe* or say she is right. She

calls on these shared values to protect the *muchacho* who “comes from the war” and who is about to shed blood, establishing her prerogative to rule over the cooperative by standing up for him, and grounds her moral appeal on the expectation of an aftermath to war, when the armed actor will “seek the legal way, the constitutional way.”

What is the legal way, the constitutional way? The reference can be interpreted at many levels. The more obvious level is it makes a reference to the literal constitution (rights, elections, and the transitional justice institutions.) At a deeper level, it makes a reference to the foundation of governance, and its need for legitimacy, or consent, and the link between this consent and shared values. María Zabala represents the legitimate authority that is willing to take risks to care for others, and who understands young men at the verge of violence need caring for, and are not beasts, or animals, or the dogs of war. Her authority stages a scene where the radical other (the paramilitary commander) can be engaged as a moral agent, as capable of acting morally. Her *legend* extends beyond state allocation of lump sums and poverty alleviation measures and even beyond the symbolic events meant to dignify the dead.

Conclusion

Grassroots reconstruction opens the door to a transition grounded on the experience of community leadership in peasant and poor communities. This calls in practical terms for more attention to ordinary ethics, to the descent to the ordinary, and, from the point of view of policy makers, to increased attention to the ethical dimension of local cultures and forms of community governance. This does not preclude issues of survival flagged as socioeconomic rights, redistribution or economic justice; neither does it pretend to bracket their urgency with an appeal to culture. Instead it grounds concerns over survival and economic justice on a thick understanding of the injuries of war to include among its injuries the devastating experience of the loss of moral agency, and the importance of its reconstitution in everyday life.

Advocacy for attention to grassroots reconstruction comes with several caveats. First, as with any work of interpretation, there is concern with the projection of the author’s wishes and constructs into the text, romanticizing its subject and ignoring subaltern complicity with domination and hierarchy among subalterns. The intention however is not to ignore the numerous challenges of community action, its failures and betrayals, its forms of reproduction of domination the frequent infighting and dissolution of bonds. I am acutely aware of these, as I am of the instrumental relationships that so often develop between community leaders and outsiders such as myself. In this article, I however choose to focus on the way narratives of community organizing reveal an underlying ethics: their ideals, if not always their practices. A second caveat is that the focus on women might sideline men’s different ideas of virtue or perhaps the similarity between men and women’s experience. This is a fair concern, and one to which I concede: it is a bias due to the practical limitation of fieldwork as a woman and due to the bias created by my own preexisting social networks as an entry point. A final caveat is that both the data and its interpretation look away from the state and do not speak to the full possibilities of ambitious policies for radical social transformation. This is clearly a limitation of this article, but addressing it fully would make for a different text.

In spite of these caveats, grassroots reconstruction does remind the state, even one inclined to make large expenditures in addressing the needs of victims and survivors of war, that the task at hand is ethical as much as it is economic and political. Grassroots reconstruction at its best can show the state to respond sensitively to the injuries of war, to temper its own powers for creating vulnerable subjectivities through law, and to recognize and foster strength and moral leadership among grassroots leaders. Grassroots reconstruction can also model and support forms of governance where power is not that of the sovereign who can decide over life and death within a given territory but the power that comes from the stewardship of life.²⁰ At the very least, grassroots reconstruction illustrates the fact that community organizing is not a mere instrumental activity, replaceable by state services or by a bountiful market; it is also a deeply ethical activity, felt and lived as such, and a productive road to reconstruction.

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Notes

1. About 6,039,515 victims are internally displaced – taken from the official registry webpage at: <http://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/>, last visited February 2015.
2. For details on this litigation see Rodríguez and Rodríguez (2010), Lemaitre and Sandvik (forthcoming), and Lemaitre and Vargas (2014.)
3. There is a growing literature in English on the Colombian experiment. See for instance Vidal (2012) and Summers (2012).
4. FARC: Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces. Negotiations started in 2012 and at the time of writing of this article are still ongoing. They include significant redistribution to benefit rural development and victims of war.
5. Given this coverage, I will use their real names and refer to both the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica's coverage as well as to my own data. My other sources, unless they are public figures, are identified by first name only.
6. In the wake of the peace agreements of Colombia's 1950s civil war (La Violencia) and in an international Cold War context where the United States promoted community development, Colombia adopted an early community action law (dated 1959) that allowed slums to elect community development boards (Juntas de Acción Comunal) to plan and execute programs such as school building, parks, sanitation, and public utilities. These boards coexisted with the

- growth of self-help housing and also fostered by the state as a solution for the rapid urbanization begat by the civil war as well as by regional economic trends.
7. Unless otherwise noted, the references to María Zabala and Esther Polo are from our interview in Bogotá in 2011.
 8. Interviews followed general sampling guidance for qualitative research (Merriam, 2009; Taylor et al., 2016) and lasted between 30 min and 2 h during which we discussed community organizing. Trust was gained through the case studies as well as through informal networks of grassroots leaders and nongovernmental organization (NGO) workers, and many interviews took place during larger meetings organized by NGO, the government and in one case by the displaced women's network.
 9. Conditional cash transfers are meant to supplement basic income: the program offers about 40 dollars a month for each child under seven regularly taken to health-care checkups, and about 20 dollars a month for each child over seven kept in school.
 10. For current conditions, see the official government website: http://www.dps.gov.co/Ingreso_Social/FamiliasenAccion.aspx (accessed March 12, 2015)
 11. Initially I coded for representations of injury and reparations. Soon I realized identity, both legal identity and self-representation mediated between injury and reparation and coded for these categories as well.
 12. For a moving account of this erosion and its aftermath in Peru, see Theidon (2013).
 13. Non-state armed actors even have *códigos de convivencia* or statutes of coexistence (see i.e. Aguilera, 2014; CMH, 2011). This seems to be a widespread phenomenon (Arjona and Mampilly, 2015).
 14. Lemaitre and Sandvik (2014) show the gendered dimension of this insecurity that extends to contexts of reception, where social control by armed actors is also built around traditional gender roles that demand that women stay confined in domestic spaces and not make political claims.
 15. A police inspector is a civil public servant charged with the resolution of community conflicts and misdemeanors, and in distant localities can be the only state representative.
 16. Literally *el campo* means the countryside, but without the genteel implications of the word in English, rather with the connotation of a place for and of peasants, requiring farmwork.
 17. *Muchachos* (young men) can connote soldiers, especially guerrillas.
 18. A long knife used for clearing the fields, similar to a machete but shorter.
 19. *Profe*, short for teacher, denotes respect and affection.
 20. The distinction is deeply gendered in popular culture where paternal authority is often expressed as territorial sovereignty (as long as you live under my roof you will obey) while maternal authority is expressed as a moral claim: because I have cared for you, you in return must obey.

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