

ENCOUNTERING THE COLOMBIAN STATE'S DUTY TO REMEMBER: THE
COLOMBIAN NATIONAL POLICE AND ITS WINDOW TO THE PAST

By

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation ethnographically explores the Colombian National Police's encounter with the state's duty to remember. In other words, this work studies the encounter between police agents rejecting the label of human rights abusers and official and unofficial collectivities seeking to hold state security institutions accountable for historic forms of abuse against civilians and activists. The exploration this dissertation provides is the product of 13 months of fieldwork in Colombia. In five of those months, I conducted participant observation in the Police Unit of Peacebuilding (UNIPPEP), a recently created subdivision in the police with a "peacebuilding" mandate. However, it also has a mandate to build a historical narrative of the police that could represent it as legitimate, victorious, and transparent. UNIPPEP's historical memory mandate has produced material and symbolic cultural expressions that illuminate the way the police encounter criticism from other institutions of the state and justice seekers. This dissertation analyzes the material and symbolic expressions of the police encounter with the state's duty to remember by focusing on three critical dimensions: its historical context, the content of the police's memory products, and the police's endogenous memory players' search for legitimacy.

This dissertation starts with an unshakable assumption: the police memorialization of the conflict is a socio-cultural development that cannot be adequately understood without accounting for the Colombian transitional period, marked by the profound influence of human rights culture in politics and the introduction of transitional justice institutions. Following the work of scholars like Winifred Tate, Juan Ricardo Aparicio, and Alejandro Castillejo, this dissertation traces the introduction of human rights grammar in Colombia, but with a focus on its role in the documentation and memorialization of violence. Closer to Steve Stern and Elizabeth Jelin's theoretical and methodological frameworks to make sense of collective memories and memory politics, this dissertation explores the chronology of memory and politics, establishing that the police memorialization of the conflict and its role in it is just one expression of a larger reaction to human rights memories and their institutionalization between 2005 and 2025. The larger reactionary politics that the police are making a part of, which is not characterized by strict denialism, demonstrate that reactionary movements in Colombia are appropriating human rights grammar to contest calls for accountability made by a significant number of victims of human rights violations. The contestation that the police are a part of is creating a new reactionary

framework of meaning that questions the plural approach taken by transitional justice institutions in their mandate to clarify the past and to serve justice.

This dissertation confirms the reactionary imprint of the police memorialization of the conflict by studying the memory products it has mobilized as the police's "contribution to historical memory." It includes the analysis of memory sites, books, and documentaries that the police incorporate as part of their "institutional historical memory," concentrating on the representation of police agents as heroes and victims of the conflict. The allusion to the police victimhood is interpreted as an update of the police collective identity, one that revises the meaning of heroism to include suffering and injustice as part of the everyday life experience of police agents at different hierarchical positions during the conflict. But, following the concerns police agents communicated during my fieldwork, victimhood is also interpreted as a problematic concept with multiple connotations that not every police agent is willing to accept. Overall, the exclusive concern for representing police agents as heroes and victims of the conflict cannot be separated from the chronology of memory and politics. The reactionary attitudes held by powerful elites invite police agents to interpret that, when it comes to memorializing the past, sidestepping institutional responsibilities for human rights violations is better than facing the complexity and bitterness of truth.

The dissertation finishes by discussing how the police's endogenous memory players sought legitimacy for their memory initiatives, focusing on the role that outside experts have had in the police's "institutional historical memory," and how the value-free ideal is mobilized by the police when publicizing their memory products. This discussion engages critically with the police's claims of "impartial memorialization." At the same time, it also demonstrates that the police's memorialization also comes from ahistorical but still human rights-informed perspectives that outside experts have. In other words, my discussion shows that the police's memorialization of the past is not only a strategic development or a systematic form of denial, but an outcome of a society where human rights culture is dominant, and where multiple actors embedded in it try to navigate the murky configuration of Colombian violence and its truth.

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I dedicate this dissertation to the Colombian movement of peacebuilders and justice seekers, comprised of activists, survivors, bureaucrats, and intellectuals, including sophisticated and talented police agents who must hide their criticism against institutional bad practices that create the conditions of possibility for abuse. I also dedicate my work to my wife, Leydi Rodriguez, and my mother, Angela Noguera. They are my biggest supporters, and without their love and sacrifices, I wouldn't have completed my journey to become a PhD in anthropology.

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PREFACE

During the last 35 years, a good number of Latin American societies have experienced the emergence of the “right to the truth” about the past. While this may sound strange to some readers, in countries like Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile, the truth became a political and administrative problem subjected to strong official regulation between the seventies and nineties, when dictatorships displaced democratic political orders and civil fundamental rights. The disappearance of individuals, torture of political opponents, and less politically charged but equally dehumanizing acts of abuse carried out by state authorities were concealed behind thick walls of silence, denial, and repression. It was no different for countries like Colombia, Peru, and Guatemala, where, despite the existence of formal democratic political systems, political violence, armed conflicts of various lengths, and authoritarian and repressive governments meant systematic forms of abuse with no accountability. In Colombia, the unholy alliance to terrorize rural communities and leftist political organizations between paramilitary groups, state security agencies, and conservative elites was a secret protected with violence and official neglect for decades. In Guatemala, the Police hid their involvement in the systematic persecution and forced disappearance of communists in urban areas, a secret that could have never been dismantled if it wasn’t for the discovery of secret archives the police abandoned in an old building.

However, much has changed since the 1990s. A global push against impunity in articulation with local social movements demanding accountability succeeded in critical ways, and the violent and unjust crimes that were expelled into the realm of silence started to emerge as a truth that nation-states had to acknowledge, protect, and memorialize for their citizens. The “right to the truth” was conquered in the countries I mentioned, and the state acquired a duty to remember human rights violations in a unique global context in which impunity for human rights violations would not be tolerated. Despite persistent and important criticism pointing at the limits of truth in post-dictatorship or post-conflict settings in the region, some of it suggesting it does little to question structural and persisting forms of violence against minorities, women, and the different expressions of organized working class, the “truth” became a progressive political force in Latin America backed by truth commissions, human rights museums, university programs, and energized victim-survivors' social movements.

But the truth does not exist outside its historical conditions of existence. A decree cannot appease battles over its meaning and shape, nor a congressional law, nor an apparent and momentary cultural consensus. The truth about the past is always contested in political disputes over the definition of the future. The advancement of a human rights-based collective consciousness of dictatorships, political violence, and internal armed conflicts has been met with stiff and increasing resistance by conservative political sectors in Latin America. It involves public statements of rejection of the truth of human rights activists, victims, and specialists, as well as more sustained efforts to challenge the “historical legitimacy” of their claims against silence and impunity. However, the scholarly exploration of the more sustained efforts to challenge human rights memory has not been a strong concern among collective memory scholars interested in Latin America. This lack of attention has left us with few tools to make sense of some of the most urgent socio-cultural and political issues in the region’s present. One of the most outstanding examples is the emergence of Javier Milei’s populist right-wing government in Argentina with a strong interest in building a “complete memory,” which in reality is a highly selective and deceitful narrative relativizing the harm made by the dictatorship’s officials over victims of state violence. Another example, and the one that I explore in this dissertation, is the set of more atomized efforts made by the Colombian security forces to “contribute to the national historical memory” focusing on highlighting their “victory” over insurgent movements, their “democratic transparency”, and their “unquestionable” legitimacy.

This dissertation provides an ethnographic examination of the Colombian National Police’s institutional historical memory, one of the four distinct memorialization initiatives the Colombian state’s security forces started in 2016 and continue to pursue in different ways. As such, this is a study of counter-counter memories, the name I give to the contextual reaction of conservative sectors to the successful spread and bureaucratic authorization of “human rights memories” in Colombia during the last 25 years. As an anthropological study, this dissertation uses the Colombian police memorialization case as an opportunity to discuss bigger issues associated with memory politics. Still, it situates the discussion in the lived experiences of real police agents and the webs of meaning they use to make sense of their identity, politics, history, and interactions with critics.

This dissertation is several things, but it is not a study of denialism, which is a usual way critics use to depict official impediments to truth in countries where human rights violations are systemic. While the Colombian police's memorialization of the past could be fairly described as an official effort to deny state crimes, especially by those who have suffered from the actions of the police, I have two reasons to avoid focusing my work on denialism. First, the Colombian state is far more complex than a dictatorship or a highly authoritarian regime in terms of the range of official positions that can exist on the same issue at a particular time. For instance, during the Uribe government, the most authoritarian government Colombia has experienced in the twenty-first century, the state, through its many institutions, denied and recognized at the same time the existence of state crimes like the “false positives.” Denialism is a valuable concept, but it renders certain political and socio-cultural particularities invisible in the murky waters of Colombian memory politics and struggles against impunity. Focusing on denialism when studying the police's memorialization of the past suggests that the Colombian state is committed to denial, and I don't believe that to be accurate or fair. But more important than that, I also think that denouncing the Colombian state as a denialist political structure undermines the achievements of the social movement for peace and accountability in the country, and there are no gains to be made from that.

The second reason for avoiding centering my work on denialism, which is the most important, is associated with my findings. The police's memorialization of the past does not deny any accusation of human rights violations against the police as an institution or against the state. The police's memorialization of the past is more complex than that and speaks of a mixture of elitist socio-political interests distributed among the police elites, and a more generally distributed set of grievances felt by many police agents against the media, human rights culture, and experts. The complexity of motivations informing the police's memorialization of the past is key to making sense of reactionary memorialization frameworks in general. Centering my work on denialism would complicate my ability to transmit the contradictory set of elements constituting the police memorialization a complex and historically unique cultural process.

The police's memorialization of the past, rather than strict denial, is one of the unexpected outcomes of the success of the human rights culture in Colombia. It is informed by the work of scholars and young professionals who believe in human rights and their ability to contribute to peace and justice. For them, narrating the history of the conflict from the perspective of

“victimized” police agents who faced the dire consequences of enforcing the law in a violent country like Colombia is a necessary step towards “peace.” This dissertation is not a critique of the police or the Colombian state, but a study of a complex “memorialization community” in the broader context of the Colombian memory politics, as well as in the larger context of profound cultural changes the Colombian national community has experienced after the successful introduction of human rights as an unavoidable grammar for policy making, governance, and historical memorialization. It provides a contextualized interpretation of the encounter between the Colombian national police as an institutionalized group of stakeholders and the Colombian state’s duty to remember, pointing at how members of state security institutions conceptualize human rights criticism against them and how they navigate it. This dissertation explores cultural and political conflicts within the confines of the state, disputes that are not precisely visible to most citizens.

Since this dissertation provides a “contextualized” interpretation of the Colombian state’s duty to remember and its socio-cultural effects, I would like to clarify what I mean by context. Context is a socio-cultural and historical background that cannot be separated from phenomena under study. More than a background, it is an environment. The Colombian National Police encounter with the Colombian state’s duty to remember, while similar to the encounter that other police institutions have with human rights-informed criticism of their actions and patterns of behavior, is unique in the sense that it relies on the uniqueness of Colombian history, society, and culture to exist. This dissertation invests significant efforts in connecting some of the best scholarship exploring human rights history in Colombia with scholarly reflections on the emergence of “historical memory” between 2005 and 2025. The result is an argument about the crucial role that human rights grammar acquired in Colombia to authorize depictions of the past since 2005, a role that groups and institutions usually distrustful of the human rights community can’t ignore. Human rights’ grammar became so vital that even reactionary groups of stakeholders formed their own “memory entrepreneurs”, taking an interest in historical memory and framing their collective experiences in a way that denounces injustices that, until recently, were only uttered by leftist organizations. My dissertation traces the emergence of what I call reactionary memories as a memorialization framework used by groups of stakeholders that have been deemed by collectives of victims, the state, and international institutions as perpetrators of human rights violations. It also points to how the police’s memorialization of the past relies on and contributes to reactionary memories.

However, my dissertation is not all about historical correlations between the police and Colombia's larger chronology of politics and memory. It is also about the webs of meaning that unassuming and highly politicized agents involved with the police's memorialization of the past share. As an anthropological piece of research, this dissertation also invests significant efforts in exploring the police memorialization from the perspective of its crafters, supporters, and critics. I do that by concentrating on two main areas: patterns in the police memory products and in the strategies to authorize them. In both areas, ethnographic methods were applied to identify a plural pool of research participants, relevant memory objects and sites, shared concerns held by research participants, motivations, and conceptualizations. The ethnographic depiction of the police's "memory labors" provides an empirical account of the implicit conflicts that exist when a complex organization like the Colombian police memorializes its past. It also explains its current shape, while also pointing out the small chances of building something different, something that could facilitate a cultural transformation that allows the police to be better. According to the Colombian Truth Commission, the ultimate function of memorializing wrongdoings and injustices is to build a better democracy. I believe in that objective, and my dissertation is a contribution to that end.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CEV:	Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición (Truth Commission for Truth-clarification, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition).
CNMH:	Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (National Center of Historical Memory)
CNRR:	Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación (National Commission of Reparation and Reconciliation)
FEDEGAN:	Federación Colombiana de Ganaderos (Colombian Federation of Cattle Ranchers)
GIZ:	German Development Agency
GMH:	Grupo de Memoria Histórica (Historical Memory Group)
JEP:	Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz (Special Jurisdiction for Peace)
UNDP:	United Nations Development Programme
UNIPEP:	Unidad Policial para la Edificación de la Paz (Police Unit for Peacebuilding)
USIP:	United States Institute of Peace
UBPD:	Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas dadas por Desaparecidas (Special Unit for the Search of Persons Deemed Missing)

INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago, in 2015, Roberta Villalón claimed a resurgence of collective memory, truth, and justice mobilizations in Latin America. According to her, the turn of the century came with a reinvigoration of the collective processes of dealing with the still unresolved human rights abuses under authoritarian regimes and civil wars (Villalón 2015). She was not mistaken. The turn of the century in Latin America came with a significant political shift in the region that, in substantial ways, was built over the backs of collectives of victims and survivors of official political violence targeted against dissenting citizens, most of them belonging to or historically aligned with the fate of leftist politics. There is an important amount of scholarship exploring the complex dimensions of this resurgence, both as a celebration and testimony of the complex struggles against impunity, and as a critical depiction of truth-telling and human rights memorialization for achieving justice (Francesca Lessa 2022; Ghilarducci 2018; Hayner 2011; Aguilar-Forero 2017; Castillejo 2014; Wills 2022; J. P. Feldman 2021). However, the resurgence of collective memory, truth, and justice mobilizations in the region was not alone, as it was closely followed by powerful but not so culturally influential depictions of resistance by perpetrators of human rights abuses, but especially by their ideological supporters.

This fact is not a mystery for any Latin American memory politics expert. Much of the collective memories scholarship in the region is built as an academically informed political intervention aiming at “talking back to power,” and more fundamentally, achieving justice for pervasive and consistent forms of direct and structural violence against specific populations. The “deniers,” or *negacionistas*, are an essential aspect of the literature on Latin American collective memories. Over the empirically informed presumption of their existence, the field of collective memories gains political relevance. But despite the critical importance *negacionistas* have for collective memories studies in the region, we don’t know much about them. In many ways, the concept of *negacionistas* has been fetishized in popular culture and even specialized literature, and there are not many scholars who can provide nuanced depictions of the nature of this group or its history. While there are some exceptions to the rule, not many scholars have paid attention to the intellectual work that “reactionary memory entrepreneurs,” who are not always strict *negacionistas*, have been consolidating in the last decade (Salvi y Messina 2024; Palmisciano 2021; Wills 2022).

This dissertation explores one of the institutional expressions of reactionary memories in Colombia, a memory framework that challenges the influential place human rights memories have achieved in Latin America since the turn of the century. The expression this dissertation explores belongs to the Colombian National Police, an institution that created a peacebuilding unit in 2016 with a mandate to “contribute” to the Colombian national historical memory. According to official documents and conversations with police agents and other implicated actors over 14 months of fieldwork in Colombia, this contribution seeks to remind Colombians and transitional justice institutions of the sacrifices that police agents have made for the country and its citizens in the face of a terrorist menace. It also seeks to demonstrate how police agents have also been victims of abuse and crimes against humanity. This dissertation explores in an ethnographic way the sudden institutional interest in historical memory the police started to exhibit, the objectives of the institutional historical memory against its memory products, the views of the police institutional historical memory crafters, and the unavoidable distances between action, thought, and the representation of the self that I found as an ethnographer of the police group of institutional historical memory.

Encountering the state’s duty to remember focuses on achieving three different objectives: contextualizing the interest of the police in historical memory, exploring the content of the police memory products to make sense of their general political direction, and describing the legitimation of the police memorialization of the internal armed conflict. This introduction provides the theoretical and methodological principles informing the pursuit of those objectives. Still, it also provides an initial contextualization of the police interest in historical memory, which is better explored in chapter 1. The introduction then turns to a depiction of the Latin American field of collective memory studies, focusing on how Colombian memory politics have been discussed, and introducing *reactionary memories* as an urgent research topic. Finally, the introduction provides an overview of the chapters that make up the dissertation, focusing on presenting their conceptual baggage and the methods that inform them.

- Human rights memories and the police

During the last 20 years, the Colombian state has committed to a duty to remember human rights violations. This duty includes creating and supporting official clarification commissions, recovering evidence, archiving it, and making it publicly available. As I show in chapter one, the

legal definition of this duty can be found in the 1448 law, approved in 2011. While the state created and supported three independent historical clarification commissions with a national mandate between 2005 and 2025, those commissions never took a singular interest in the police as an independent historical actor. This does not mean historical clarification commissions have ignored the police's implication during the conflict. They haven't. However, the police are represented as "state agents", a big category that members of historical clarification commissions have used to denounce and discuss state violence against civilians. In other words, the police, just as the rest of the state security forces, are usually depicted as armed actors during the internal armed conflict with responsibility over human rights violations, but there is not a particular focus on the police complicated role during the conflict, at least not in terms of the analysis that historical clarification commissions have offered to the country and the globe.

The police have been represented by historical clarification commissions in the country as one of the legs of the state security forces. As such, the police are implicitly portrayed as representatives of the democratic issues the Colombian state must address for justice, reparation, and national reconciliation. The police are in no way treated as a special case, and as police agents I talked to during my fieldwork reject, they are equated to the army, the air force, and the navy in terms of their involvement in historical forms of abuse, injustice, and violence. As state agents, they have been presented as responsible for 12% of homicides against victims, 8% of forced disappearances, and 1% of forced displacements (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición, s. f.). They are also presented as strategic allies of the paramilitaries, the most brutal and violent set of armed actors during the Colombian conflict.

However, human rights memories are not only made of the work of official clarification commissions. While experts' commissions play a significant role in the authorization of human rights memories and their massification, those memories come to exist thanks to the collective work of communities, and sometimes individuals. The police in Colombia, just as in many countries around the world, are usually questioned for their handling of political protests, especially when they question long-standing political and economic structures. Human rights collectives in Colombia and abroad denounce the Colombian National Police as an institution where systematic forms of abuse happen and are covered up (Temblores, s. f.). These types of

denunciations come in the form of numbers, which are compelling in their own way, but some others come as testimonies of terrifying forms of abuse.

Jinneth Bedoya, a Colombian female reporter, has led a political and judicial fight for 25 years in the search for justice for her case. In May of the year 2000, Bedoya was kidnapped at the entrance of the Modelo prison in Bogota, one of the biggest prisons in the country. She was researching for a national newspaper about the killing and disappearance of prisoners, crimes that were associated with “a war” that was taking place between paramilitaries and other groups inside the walls of the Modelo prison (Gutierrez 2025). When she left the prison, she was kidnapped by a group of unidentified men who belonged to the paramilitaries. For ten hours, they tortured and raped her. The message they gave her was clear: she needed to shut up and stop investigating. She didn’t. Instead of that, she began a long fight against injustice that brought rewards in 2021 with the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruling the Colombian state responsible for her case («CASO BEDOYA LIMA Y OTRA VS. COLOMBIA SENTENCIA DE 26 DE AGOSTO DE 2021» 2021). According to the court, the Colombian state has international responsibility in this case for various reasons, including the plausible participation of active police agents (officers and sub-officers) in the planning and execution of the kidnapping. The court used the testimonies of Bedoya and paramilitary members, including one of the kidnappers, to argue for that plausibility.

The close relationship between paramilitaries and the police in particular periods of Colombian history is not only vox populi in regions of strong paramilitary presence, but it is also a historical fact that international and national human rights courts' rulings are mobilizing while they explore state violence (INTER-AMERICAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS 2010; Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos 2022). The police, either by action or omission, have been found responsible for human rights violations in many cases that involve the critique of the Colombian state or its political and economic system.

- The National Police Unit of Peacebuilding and the grievances of state agents against human rights advocacy

This dissertation is not about the crimes of the police as an institution or as one of the most relevant groups of state agents. This dissertation discusses how the police navigate the state’s duty to remember those crimes, a navigation that I found profoundly and committedly obstinate. Anxieties usually inform collective memories in contexts of war and its legacies, but obstinance also does. I

want to clarify that I don't talk about the obstinacy of the National Police memorialization from an outsider's perspective. I talk about it from the perspective of an ethnographer who tried to understand the Police "Institutional Historical Memory" in terms of their proponents, a tiny group of legally prohibited-to-be-advocates, or bureaucrats, that belong to a recently created police unit: the National Police Unit of Peacebuilding (UNIPPEP).

No amount of epistemological sophistication helps avoid the controversial nature of collective memories, their politically charged outlook, and their upsetting relativism. No amount of social science can spare you from needing an adjective when examining how different social groups and individuals relate to the past to affirm themselves as culturally, socially, and politically situated personhoods. Collective memories are not a matter of historical truth. Studying collective memories is not the study of the truth about the past. The study of collective memories is the study of differently designed filters that retain and value specific experiences while enabling others to escape and disappear in the void of irrelevancy or "fabrication." It is also the study of the political, social, and cultural trajectories that make some discourses hegemonic at particular periods. My work should be interpreted as an exploration of a filter I and most Latin American collective memory scholars find upsetting, but one we have to better understand, recognize, and include in our conversations, as it will not disappear by wishing it didn't exist. It should also be interpreted as the study of a non-hegemonic filter with an almost insignificant social life that is paradoxically pushed by one of the most powerful state institutions. The filter I study is an interesting empirical reality that questions automatic associations between the state, power, and influence.

Powerful economic sectors of landowners and ranchers began the reactionary movement against human rights-driven historical examination of the Colombian conflict in 2009¹. Conservative political elites and security forces followed in a way that was both old and new in the context of the Latin American struggles to remember injustice and human rights violations. What is old about the Colombian reaction is the majoritarian opposition among conservative circles and security forces elites against accountability (Weld 2014; Hayner 2011; Villalón 2015). Even the representation of security forces agents as victims of left-wing terrorism is somewhat old in the region (J. P. Feldman 2021; Salvi 2015; Salvi y Messina 2024; Palmisciano 2021). What is new is the attempt to institutionalize the *reactionary memory framework* as a contribution to national

¹ More about this in Chapter 1.

historical memory and the use of peacebuilding, expertise, and what I call *sectorial human rights activism* as alternative vehicles to deny institutional responsibility for human rights abuses and sidestep its imagined consequences². I explore the reactionary memory framework at length in chapter one. For now, it suffices to say that it is an emblematic memory that reflects Colombia's past as the *authentic* victims' struggle to survive left-wing terrorism³. It is also a framework that emphasizes the virtues of economic elites and their historical contributions to the nation while adopting a victimizing approach to their decreasing influence and sociocultural standing.

The Colombian security forces, consisting of the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and the Police, became interested in "historical memory" soon after the Colombian state affirmed its duty to remember. The state's duty to remember is the legal obligation that binds ruling political powers to support a somewhat critical examination and memorialization of the past in which respect for human rights functions as a measure of the changes needed to achieve a meaningful democratic polity. The Colombian state has ruled the state's duty to remember twice during the last twenty years: in 2005 with the Peace and Justice Law and in 2011 with the Victims' Law. Both rulings implied utterly different understandings of the "national violence" Colombians remember as one of the most significant features of national history. Those rulings did not recognize the state's role in creating and reproducing many forms of political violence equally. However, the independence of the Colombian historical clarification bureaucracy concerning the national government challenged silences that were actively sought with the first iteration of the state's duty to remember in 2005. The rebel attitude of historical clarification bureaucracy and the conceptual changes made to the state's duty to remember in its second iteration (2011) caused stress and anxiety for political and economic elites and the elites of the security forces. This is understandable. For the first time in recorded history, they were not officially depicted as contributors to Colombia's salvable attributes but as a critical part of Colombia's unspeakable dirty truths. Therefore, representatives of the state security forces encountered criticism and calls for accountability, which they had not expected.

Since then, the state security forces' elites, in association with conservative political elites, began organizing efforts to tell an alternative memory of the conflict soon after official historical

² To the best of my knowledge, they range from fear of imprisonment of cherished leaders to the advent of a communist revolution, whatever that means nowadays.

³ More about the concept of emblematic memories later in this chapter.

clarification commissions published reports critical of their behavior. The main objective was to build a space where the "security forces" could be portrayed as victorious and legitimate concerning the long history of internal armed conflict (Ministerio de Defensa 2016). Some intellectuals and scholars wrongfully interpreted these efforts as the state's promotion of official memories (or official truth) (Wills 2022; Guglielmucci y Rozo 2021). This is an incomplete assessment for two reasons: first, it reduces the state to its security forces or political sectors close to them, a conceptual move that obscures how the Colombian human rights-driven memorialization of the conflict that triggered the response of the security forces is also official, and happily so. Second, it implies no meaningful differences between authoritarian and democratic political regimes, a conceptual issue that misrepresents the political possibilities and positive transformations that democratic political regimes enable, especially the increasing hardships that democratic governments, as they become more democratic, encounter when trying to enforce "official memories" on the population. In the Colombian case, this particular way of conceptualizing the struggles over memory fails to depict how most representatives of the security forces' memorialization efforts, along with some other reactionary sectors, feel they are located on the weakest end of a cultural conflict over the meaning of the past, one that forces them to interpret their memorialization as a fight for bare inclusion and recognition⁴. This particularity became clear to me after spending five months in the National Police office tasked with the duty to build the "institutional historical memory."

The Colombian National Police, just like the rest of the state security forces, is prohibited from participating in politics. Article 219 of the Colombian Constitution establishes that security forces are non-deliberate, meaning that their agents cannot be elected in any political position while in service or participate in the activities or debates that political parties and political movements have. Regardless of how realistic that provision is in absolute terms, it is rigorously enforced through various rites separating police agents from the realm of politics. Having the Police and other branches of the security forces participating in Colombian memory politics with an institutional program is an open contradiction to that principle, as it is clear collective memories are political (Brigittine M. French 2012; Stern 2004; M.-R. Trouillot 1995; J. S. Rubin 2018; J. Feldman 2021).

⁴ This is not always the case. It is feasible most ideologically driven reactionaries are fighting for more than bare inclusion and recognition. They probably want unrestricted control over the meaning of the past. But in democratic regimes, as long as they keep democratic, unrestricted control over the meaning of the past is a quimera.

However, three reasons made the National Police intervention in Colombian memory politics possible: the content of the victim's law, which I cover in Chapters 1 and 2; the de-politicization of victimhood in human rights culture, which I cover in Chapters 2 and 3, and the value-free ideal popularly associated with expert knowledge production, covered in Chapter 3.

The de-politicization of victimhood is a well-known problem for scholars of humanitarianism (Fassin y Rechtman 2009; Hartog 2012; Castillejo 2014). Usually referred to as the process of framing experiences of suffering and injustice in ways that detach them from broader political, historical, and socio-structural contexts. The de-politicization of victimhood reduces victims of violence and injustice to subjects of compassion. According to critics, framing suffering in that way leaves the social, cultural, and economic conditions of possibility for violence and injustice intact (Castillejo 2013). It also denies the social, political, and cultural background of victims, merging their specificity in a universe of suffering bodies whose most critical needs are recognition and forms of symbolic reparation. My research demonstrates additional political and sociocultural consequences of de-politicizing victimhood. Institutions can effectively sidestep their historical and political responsibility for crimes against humanity through their claims of victimhood. Furthermore, this research reveals how specific institutional uses of victimhood as a political subjectivity deliberately reduce its conceptual scope of applicability, facilitating a new form of denial that works at two levels: first, it limits the universe of grievable lives; second, it enables sidestepping as an available answer to public calls for accountability.

In 2016, the Colombian National Police launched a systematic initiative to document victims who were either members of the police force or had familial connections to the institution with the creation of the UNIPPEP, the National Police Unit of Peacebuilding. According to UNIPPEP's institutional promoters, it is the National Police's answer to the security challenges of the post-peace-agreement Colombia. One of those challenges was to ensure the safety of FARC ex-combatants once they handed their weapons to the government and started their reincorporation process. This task devoted most of UNIPPEP's resources and efforts, and it is the task for what it is better known for by human rights professionals, state officials, and peacebuilding scholars. UNIPPEP has also led efforts to reform the Police in a way that aligns with a more democratic society. For instance, it promoted a more humane treatment of street protesters by creating a special unit of dialogue to assist in de-escalating violence before the harsh intervention of riot police was

needed. But behind the crucial task of ensuring the safety of ex-combatants and exploring ways to "humanize" law enforcement, there was a less visible agenda associated with the anxieties of high-ranking officers and conservative political circles: countering the historical representation of the Police made by human rights advocates and official historical clarification commissions, those that suggest state agents and official security institutions are responsible for patterns of human rights violations⁵.

UNIPPEP agents established a dedicated division for victims and historical memory, aiming to restore dignity to police officers victimized during the conflict and their families. This initiative marked a significant departure from previous institutional practice, as the Colombian Police had not systematically documented victimhood within its ranks before UNIPPEP's creation⁶. This shift represented a strategic effort to counter established official historical memory narratives by introducing the Police's own institutional perspective on its role during the conflict. The Police branded this perspective as "Institutional Historical Memory," a term that deliberately appropriated the conceptual framework developed by human rights bureaucrats who had sought to distance their historical clarification work from notions of collective memory or traditional historiography. These bureaucrats had previously adopted this terminology due to their discomfort with the political and methodological implications of terms like "collective memory" or "history." (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2012a; Wills 2022). Police agents borrowed the concept of historical memory after participating in training sessions that Colombian human rights bureaucrats provided due to the Colombian state security forces' interest.

⁵ The specific responsibility of the Colombian Police for human rights violations during the conflict remains obscured by historical clarification commissions' practice of grouping all violations under the broad category of 'state agents,' a classification that fails to distinguish between different branches of Colombia's security forces (GMH 2013; Comisión de la Verdad 2022c). Despite this institutional ambiguity, itself likely a product of systematically unaccountable state institutions, particularly within the security forces, there is clear evidence of the Colombian Police's distinct pattern of misconduct (Temblores, s. f.). This pattern includes documented collaboration with paramilitary groups and the systematic persecution and harassment of political opponents. The historical continuity of these abusive practices is demonstrated by the Police's recent excessive use of force during street protests (2019-2022) and their persistent refusal to address demands for accountability and institutional reform.

⁶ While UNIPPEP officials' claims about previous documentation practices remain unverified through direct archival research, there is clear evidence of a quantitative shift after 2016, when the number of documented police victims began to increase significantly. This shift became visible through both institutional human rights reports and public memorialization initiatives (Acevedo 2021; Ardila et al. 2022). I also found cultural conflicts in the Police that denoted the novelty of the Police documentary practices. More about this in Chapter 2.

UNICEP has produced and published on its own various memorialization initiatives that portray police agents as heroic victims of the conflict and has pushed for increasing the number of victimized police agents acknowledged by the state's transitional justice institutions⁷. It has also collaborated with transitional justice and regular institutions to create memorialization initiatives when they respect UNICEP's line of inquiry, meaning that the Police has worked chiefly with institutions headed by right-wing politicians or bureaucrats, who are happy to participate in that kind of memorialization initiatives without asking anything in return⁸. The two more relevant examples of that collaboration are the historical memory volume that the Ministry of Defense launched in 2022 (Ardila et al. 2022), called *Contributions about the Origin of the Colombian Conflict, its Persistence, and its Impacts*, and a digital initiative the Police co-created with the National Center of Historical Memory (CNMH) and all remaining branches of the state's security forces between 2019 and 2021, called *Our Memory Counts* (Acevedo 2021).

These initiatives reveal a calculated dual performance by the Police and other state agents. On one side, they present themselves as institutional actors committed to the national project of historical clarification, positioning the security forces as willing contributors to understanding Colombia's conflict. On the other side, they simultaneously advance a collective grievance narrative, claiming their "institutional memory" has been excluded from national accounts of victimhood. This dual positioning allows them to appear as cooperative participants in truth-seeking while simultaneously challenging the completeness and legitimacy of existing historical narratives.

Drawing from my ethnographic research of Colombia's official historical clarification institutions, I observed a significant conceptual limitation in how human rights bureaucrats approached the security forces' role in the conflict. While these bureaucrats, in historical clarification institutions and tribunals, primarily focused on documenting institutional misconduct and establishing responsibility for human rights violations, this narrow focus created a significant blind spot that was especially visible for state agents concerned with their historical representation. It effectively rendered invisible the personal trauma and experiences of loss suffered by individual members of

⁷ One of the preferred avenues to do this is to organize certification campaigns with the Unidad para las Víctimas, or Victims' Unit. The Victim's Unit is the state institution responsible for legally certifying victims of the conflict. Without proper certification, the state cannot read victims, and no focused reparative measures are possible.

⁸ Working with "conventional" human rights bureaucrats has been challenging for the Police, as the request for recognition of institutional responsibility is most of the time looming as an unavoidable condition to cooperate.

the Colombian security forces. This institutional prioritization of accountability over comprehensive documentation inadvertently reinforced a binary between perpetrator and victim, leaving little room to examine how state agents could simultaneously occupy both positions. Another problem that every armed party, legal and illegal, has with official historical clarification institutions is the exclusion of political narratives that could justify the use of violence. Without the ability to justify the use of violence, armed actors cannot be portrayed in a way they understand as fair or dignified⁹.

While state security forces correctly identify biases in human rights bureaucrats' approach to memorialization, their memory initiatives extend far beyond mere empirical corrections of epistemological oversights. Instead, these initiatives represent a calculated political strategy, jointly orchestrated by conservative political elites and security institution leadership, to counter human rights-based interpretations of the past. Both groups accurately perceive human rights frameworks as threatening to their interests and power. Thus, although the human rights bureaucrats' blind spots warrant critique, the reactionary memory framework examined in this dissertation represents a more fundamentally problematic development that protects institutional power rather than advancing historical understanding of Colombia's violent past, democratic culture, and justice.

While the security forces' institutional memorialization efforts ostensibly respond to the exclusion of victimized police officers, soldiers, marines, and air force pilots from the narratives of official historical clarification commissions, these initiatives ultimately reinforce rather than remedy patterns of exclusion. This perpetuation of exclusion serves both calculated political interests and reflects deeper cultural habits. This dissertation examines the deliberate construction of politically advantageous historical narratives and the cultural inertia that shapes them. However, it also explores how the Police's memorialization practices do not exist in isolation. This dissertation

⁹ I can't say that I find this problematic. Dignifying violence is not my thing, and I don't believe historical reconstruction after inner armed conflicts should focus on the dignification of violent actors. However, guerrillas and the state security forces in Colombia share the profound frustration of finding themselves unable to communicate the rationale of their acts. Their life stories become an unspeakable set of experiences to hide and reject. That cannot be easy for anybody.

shows that the Police memorialization initiatives are embedded in and shaped by a broader cultural framework that gives them meaning and defines their possibilities and discursive mobility¹⁰.

- Memories for Democracy and Memories for War

Studying Colombian politics of memory demands confronting two capital historical problems: war and democracy. The Colombian contradiction between war and democracy has marked the development of some essential aspects of Colombia's political history. It has also been one of the state's most technically explored social issues under liberal-leaning governments. From 1957 to 2024, there have been between four and five top-level expert commissions investigating Colombian national violence, its causes, its legacies, and its history. They also carried the duty of diagnosing potential solutions for Colombia's violent conflicts, which have always been directed towards the modernization and democratization of the country. Besides the top-level expert commissions, there have been many with geographically smaller but thematically similar mandates (Jaramillo 2014). Mandates and political conjunctures shaping experts' historical clarification commissions vary greatly, but not the overall interest in discovering the source of Colombian political violence, building modernizing policy, and establishing an account of the responsibilities, the effects, and the victims.

As those commissions have become more public and selectively plural in their composition, as well as more connected to the international peace architecture¹¹, they've endorsed the human rights memory framework over others that competed with it¹². Memories for Democracy, also called Memories for Peace, is the label that human rights bureaucrats, a set of actors I will start calling

¹⁰ I borrow the concept of structured mobility from Lawrence Grossberg's analysis of the interaction between culture, power, and agency (Grossberg 2010). Grossberg argues that cultural backgrounds constitute constrained spaces where agency is possible, though power imposes limits on that agency. Examining the contours of structured mobility enhances our understanding of the conflicts that shape cultural expressions of collective life.

¹¹ I refer to the a global set of formal and informal frameworks that help to prevent war and building democratic political systems, which include civilian peace advocacy organizations, diplomacy, international law, and networks like the United Nations, the European Union, the Organization of American States, among others (Richmond 2023).

¹² The composition of violence and historical clarification commissions have become much more plural since 1957, when it was made of representatives of the two major political parties, the militaries, and the church. Today they are very different, but they are not that plural, at least not in ideological terms. Conservatives have not had a half of the representation that liberals and leftists have had in those commissions. It is also truth that conservatives like closed memory boxes, and that the few that have made it into violence and historical clarification commissions in Colombia have been more interested in sabotage than in the collective construction of the meaning of the past.

memory players from now on, gave to it¹³ (Wills 2022; Sánchez 2020). Human rights grammar governs those memories' form, content, and political imprint. In Colombia, alternative memory frameworks have been employed to interpret the violent trajectories that shape “the Colombian experience.” One example is the revolutionary discourse of guerrilla groups such as the FARC and ELN. This perspective frames Colombian democracy as an ideological facade masking a violent class struggle that has persisted since the early nineteenth-century independence movement between landowners and peasants, urban business elites, and an underdeveloped proletariat. According to the narratives of insurgent intellectuals, class struggle has been violent because of the moral depravity of Colombian elites and their sustained treasons to “the people” and peace agreements with its authentic representatives, which happen to be themselves (J. C. Garzón et al. 2021).

More nuanced and sophisticated versions of the insurgent conceptualization of the past can be found in the academic work of intellectuals like Javier Giraldo, Jario Estrada, and Renán Vega, who were invited, among other influential national thinkers, to one of the most atypical, divided, and divisive historical clarification commission in Colombia's history: the Historical Commission of the Conflict and its Victims. The more nuanced version I am referring to uses capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism as explanatory variables of Colombian violence during the last century and presents the elites as violent accumulators of wealth and political capital at the expense of subaltern majorities (Estrada 2015; Giraldo 2015; Vega 2015; Garzón Vallejo y Agudelo 2019; Benavides T. 2018). This more intellectually driven and urban memory framework is typical among radical left-wing activists committed to a democratic path to socialism.

Anthropologist Ana Forero (2017), in her study of Colombian military culture, shows that military elites built a framework to make sense of Colombian history and its violence, much similar to the salvation memories Steve Stern discusses in his work about Chile (2004) but with meaningful differences in terms of the temporal, physical and human sites they allude to. Military elites interpret Colombian history as a long and interrupted walk toward progress that the military has

¹³ In the methods section of this chapter I explain this concept. While we get there, I want to clarify this concept replaces in my work concepts such as memory entrepreneur or justice seeker in the context of official historical clarification initiatives informed by a human rights framework.

led since independence with their sacrifice. The long-lasting political violence in Colombia¹⁴ is interpreted as the result of three national issues: a racially inferior race prone to deviance, a corrupt and incompetent political class, and the emergence of communists, interpreted as swindlers who take advantage of the poor judgment of the Colombian masses. The military elites depict themselves as a group of heroes who managed to avoid complete national failure, an outcome that is presented almost as a genetically unavoidable doom in Colombia. Following that logic, the sacrifices militaries made to prevent national disaster made them Colombia's saviors. In some ways, the military historical discourse connects very well to conservative depictions of Colombia's problems, where the masses are not the best judges of their interests, and a sort of "democratic tutelage" is better than a complete democratic opening.

The conservative and radical left interpretations of Colombian violence and conflict have been called out by memory players at historical clarification institutions of the last twenty years as "memories for war" because they usually interpret armed confrontation as the unavoidable exit to Colombia's most concerning issues, disregarding the effects of violence over victims and democracy. However, critique has not been "equally distributed." Memory players at those institutions have been much more critical of conservative interpretations of the Colombian conflict. While ideological closeness to the left is a tempting explanation, one that conservative and right-wing advocates have mobilized to discredit human rights memorialization (Semana 2022), it fails to assess Colombia's historical and cultural context. The memory players that led the most influential historical clarification institutions of the last 20 years did not have to speak to a society and a political elite that believed in the "sacrifices the revolution had to make for liberation and justice." Colombian revolutionary attempts failed militarily and culturally, so memory players from transitional justice institutions did not have to convince anybody of the insurgents' excesses. Memory players at historical clarification institutions had to speak to an urban society and a political establishment that reduced the Colombian experience of violence to a war between the righteous and the terrorists. Memory players had to struggle against narratives that silenced all that

¹⁴ The temporality of Colombia's conflict is a contested topic among professional historians, law makers, social movements and every social actor interested in the conflict's history. Some interpretations of the Colombian violence take them back to colonial times, while some others take it back to the assassination of Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, the first urban mass politician. The most popular beginning date is the foundation of the FARC guerrilla in 1964, as it was the most important contender the state had since the end of the the Thousand Days' War, in 1902.

took place in the middle of the confrontation, particularly when “the righteous,” or the state security forces and the elites, appeared as just another villain.

The human rights register to remember the Colombian violence has been profoundly successful despite the country's conservative outlook, unflexible political elites, and the daunting reality of pervasive and continuous human rights violations against vulnerable populations (Amnesty International 2024). Human rights became a publicly understandable and widely used language to formulate grievances and communicate the status of Colombian democracy. A measure of its success is its assimilation by stakeholders who found human rights activism dangerous. Conservatives, militaries, police agents, and even ex-paramilitary figures became self-styled human rights advocates. The most striking example of this transformation is probably within the state's security forces, which went from open distrust towards human rights advocacy (Forero 2017; Tate 2007) to promoting human rights culture with units like UNIPEP or the Strategic Joint Command for Transition¹⁵. A quick look at the social media accounts of the Police or the Army makes the point, as it does any public report of "the use of force," which almost always comes with a "respect for human rights" sentence fragment somewhere.

The cultural success of human rights memorialization in Colombia should not be underestimated. As a volunteer of a Truth Commission's joint public outreach initiative, I witnessed the massive numbers of school teachers from all across the country reflecting upon the Truth Commission's depiction of the Colombian past to better transmit it to their students. Since the creation of historical clarification institutions driven by human rights principles in the early 2000s, there has been an increasing explosion of training modules on "historical memory," diplomas, and even graduate programs that civilians and state security forces officers take¹⁶. "Historical memory," a concept primarily unheard of before 2008, became synonymous with history and emerged as the dominant framework for understanding and discussing the Colombian conflict. Human rights are now an unavoidable discussion in schools, universities, the media, and even the Catholic church.

¹⁵ The Comando Conjunto Estratégico de Transición is a military institution concerned with historical memory, the military legitimacy, and its legal certainty.

¹⁶ During my ethnography police officers asked me for advice in choosing master programs they could take. All of them were related to “historical memory,” which became a small industry for departments of social sciences and the humanities in Colombia.

In Colombia, historical memory has been strongly associated with "plural memories," indicating the official memory players' interest in building a comprehensive and democratic account of the Colombian conflict (Wills 2022). However, the plurality of those memories does not mean no epistemological priorities are defined by law. According to law 1448, which I explore more deeply in Chapter 1, the priority of state-led memorialization is to explore and publicize the experience of all the victims of direct violence, who, more times than not, are also victims of structural violence. The victim became a sort of unavoidable part of the historically driven depiction of Colombian society, but the plurality of experiences victims have endured invited memory players to search for fragmented narratives with the ability to transmit in a better way the historical trajectories of injustice and violence. For instance, the National Center of Historical Memory (CNMH) has more than a hundred volumes exploring the experiences of very different communities with violence. While the plurality of Colombia's historical memory is positive, it has also encouraged a "balkanization" of collective remembrance that complicates the political principles of human rights-driven memorialization, like recognition of misbehavior.

Under the flag of victims' experiences, economic and political elites have built human rights-driven programs for the memorialization of themselves, reclaiming a recognition they say has been denied to them. They also coopted the CNMH in 2019 during the conservative government of Ivan Duque. The Police, the Army, the Marines, and the Air Force developed their sectorial historical memory programs, but they are not alone in their memorialization quest. Respected and incoming scholars have joined the cause of displaying the unexplored victimhood of those sectors with goodwill. However, goodwill alone does not prevent scholars from engaging in problematic political projects. Human rights memorialization is politically complicated.

- The state, human rights memorialization, and the emergence of reactionary human rights activists.

Studies of justice-seeking and memorialization of harm, violence, and injustice in the Global South, which span multiple disciplines, have typically converged on the analysis of transitional justice institutions and their initiatives, the social movements that fight along or against them, and the cultural institutions and objects that serve as contentious icons of a profound historical discontinuity (Salvi 2015; Crenzel 2015; Castillejo 2014; Theidon y Laplante 2007; Doughty 2014; Drexler 2023; J. P. Feldman 2021; Francesca Lessa 2022). This study is similar in that it

examines a political and cultural development that would have been impossible without three key factors: the relative global success of human rights culture, the consolidation of local and international networks of grassroots solidarity and justice-seeking organizations, and the international peace architecture that promotes and regulates in precarious ways the support for political and cultural change in favor of peace and democratization. However, I want to clarify its unique features by establishing its contributions to three intellectual conversations: the state's role in memorializing the past, human rights as a framework to make sense of the past, and the plural and contentious agents of memorialization in Latin America.

The state's role in memorializing the past has not been a pressing concern for anthropologists, as the study of the state usually takes anthropologists to other issues. The lack of attention on the state's role in memorializing the past can be attributed to the methodological challenges of studying the state and anthropology's more established tradition of examining specific sociocultural groups and their conflicts rather than very specific bureaucratic communities. Nevertheless, contemporary anthropologists and critical social theorists approach the state not as a simple empirical reality but as an outcome of social interactions and power struggles between different social groups (Mitchell 1991; 2006; Abrams 2006; Aretxaga 2003). In practice, this has meant that studying the state is more about examining its everyday formation as a site of collective but unequal decision-making (M. Trouillot 2001; Taussig 1993; Barrera 2018; Fuchs 2020; Gupta y Sharma 2006; Babül 2017; Bozçali 2020). Examining its role in memorializing some forms of the past does not come as a prominent or pressing research agenda. In sociocultural anthropology and other humanistic-driven disciplines, the study of the collective definition of the past primarily focuses on how power silences unspeakable pasts for the sake of order and social stability, and in the exploration of the collective mobilization against silencing, or the emergence of countermemories (M.-R. Trouillot 1995; B. C. Rubin y Cervinkova 2020; Schneider 2011; J. S. Rubin 2018; Jelin 2003).

Since the 1990s, the state's increasingly complex role in memorializing the past has drawn growing attention from anthropologists and other social analysts, who have mainly focused on museums as symbolic and emblematic spaces of globalized state institutions. Anthropologist Joseph P. Feldman studied the complicated official memorialization of Peru's armed conflict by concentrating on the Place of Memory, Tolerance, and Social Inclusion's (LUM) role in translating collective memories

about pain, trauma, and injustice into a narrative of collective reconciliation (J. Feldman 2021; J. P. Feldman 2021). Amy Sodaro and Paul Williams, each one in a much more comparative vein, studied the global and transcultural characteristics of museums' memorialization of violence and social trauma after World War II and the holocaust (William 2007; Sodaro 2018a). Those works suggest that a global humanitarian discourse is domesticating the past into a globally recognizable genre. My work contributes to this line of inquiry. Still, it focuses on the conflicts that emerge inside the state when the past gets to be represented under the human rights memorialization framework. More concretely, my dissertation explores the Colombian state security forces' somewhat "illiberal"¹⁷ memorialization reaction to the "liberal" and more globalized official memorialization effort conducted by historical clarification institutions like the National Center of Historical Memory (CNMH) and the Truth Commission (CEV).

While this research engages with the cultural and social dimensions of human rights memorialization, it requires a crucial distinction. Two significant perspectives characterize the debate on human rights memorialization: one view celebrates it as a constructive, pragmatic, and urgently needed social value (Hayner 2011; Baets 2024), whereas the other critiques its limited capacity to address the historical and structural roots of violence and injustice (Castillejo 2015; Gready y Robinsy 2014; Miller 2021). I take the critique of human rights memorialization very seriously. There are structural, historical, and slow forms of violence that human rights memorialization has not always taken into account. However, my work takes a middle ground between the two conflicting views I mentioned above. My dissertation shows that human rights memorialization is a framework of meaning without guarantees, which is continually evolving in productive ways and in some others that can be ethically and politically questionable. Human rights memory can explore historical and structural sources of violence and injustice, as the progressive expansion of human rights memorialization in Latin America and Africa demonstrates¹⁸(Hayner 2011; Wills 2022; Bosire y Lynch 2014). The problem of human rights memory is not its essential inability to denounce structural and historical forms of injustice but the

¹⁷ The succesful rise of right wing populism experienced around the world has provoked interest in the "illiberal" memorialization of the past (Hepworth 2023). I would not say there is an illiberal/fascist memorialization of the past in Colombia yet. The conservative reaction against the Colombian variant of human rights memorialization is liberal in its cultural and political reliance on human rights. It is instrumental in its improper selectivity and the obvious silences it pushes for.

¹⁸ I cover this development in my first chapter, where I discuss the Colombian human rights memory framework.

political contexts in which particular versions of human rights memorialization get to be produced. Historian Kristin Foringer makes a great case in that direction by exploring the political debates that led to the official definition of victimhood in Colombia (Foringer 2023). Politics and its chronology are critical for public memorialization, an observation that Steve Stern made when exploring the Chilean public controversies regarding Pinochet's dictatorship (Stern 2004) and one that I strongly support.

The rhythm of politics affects the shape of memorialization, and just as there are progressive expansions of human rights memorialization, there are also conservative contractions. Human rights memory can and has been easily turned into its head by shortening the scope of grievable lives, to use Judith Butler's expression (Butler 2016). My research shows that stakeholders, in a complex intersection of elite interests, popular grievances, and political confusion, can use human rights memorialization against it, a move that is difficult to interpret in a singular direction, as there is a multiplicity of actors behind it. I will get to a more nuanced depiction of this problem in the body of this dissertation (particularly in chapter 3). Still, I want to be clear in suggesting that human rights memorialization is a memory framework without guarantees, meaning that its ability to be more or less encompassing and more or less progressive is tied to political conflicts and their chronological rhythm, not to the essential qualities of human rights as a memory framework.

The politics of human rights memorialization takes me to another set of discussions relevant to this work: the agents of memorialization in Latin America. For something close to twenty years, collective memory studies in the region, or about the area, have mainly concentrated on three types of memorialization agents: victims of state crimes and the victims' movement, the descendants of those victims (or new generations in post-conflict and post-dictatorship settings), and more recently historically underrepresented and vulnerable social groups (Lazzara y Blanco 2022; Aguilar-Forero 2017; F. Lessa y Levey 2015; Villalón 2015; Garrard-Burnett 2015; Theidon y Laplante 2007; Ghilarducci 2018). Those critical examinations build much of the regional critique of human rights as a memory framework. They also make the basis of contemporary counter-memories, both institutional and non-institutional. However, there is a problematic void concerning reactionary memory activists, who are becoming more public with the electoral success of right-wing populist governments in the region.

Some scholars have started to study conservative and reactionary memorialization efforts during the last ten years. For instance, Valentina Salvi and other Argentinian scholars have followed the Argentinian movement *Memoria Completa* (Complete Memory), focusing on the rhetorical strategies conservatives use to fight human rights culture and memorialization (Salvi 2015; Salvi y Messina 2024; Palmisciano 2021). Some scholars have explored the Peruvian Police museumification of *Sendero Luminoso* (Ulfe, Ríos, y Breña 2016; J. P. Feldman 2021), which, in some ways, is also an exploration of the museumification of the Peruvian Police “heroism.” I consider my work to be a contribution to this line of inquiry. I am providing an ethnographic depiction of the Colombian National Police's memorialization of the Colombian conflict and its emergence as another public memory player in the contentious Colombian memory politics.

- Dissertation overview

This dissertation presents findings from a qualitative, ethnographic study exploring how the Colombian National Police has memorialized both the conflict and the police role within it, which is presented as an “institutional historical memory.” Because the Police intellectual effort I’m referring to starts as a response to the Colombian state’s institutional attempt to build peace with transitional justice practices, which include the assessment of the state’s responsibility in the commission of human rights abuses, I label the police process of memorialization as a historically grounded encounter between police agents and humanitarian bureaucrats. They are two sets of bureaucrats with different interests, values, and cultural backgrounds. The police institutional memorialization of the conflict cannot be adequately assessed without considering how it is a collective response that starts and unfolds as a problematic encounter with bureaucrats that conservative and security forces members do not generally deem legitimate, honest, or capable.

Lieba Faier and Lisa Rofel suggest that while ethnographies of encounter attempt to understand how the cultural is made and remade in everyday life, like any other ethnography, ethnographies of encounter distinguish themselves by considering how culture-making occurs through encounters among members of two or more groups with different backgrounds, unequal resources, and different stakes (Faier y Rofel 2014). For them, ethnographies of encounter are a decolonizing ethnographical practice. While I would be glad to have my work interpreted as a decolonizing practice, my interest in ethnographies of encounter lies elsewhere. Ethnographies of encounter enable a more vivid depiction of culture as an unfolding process in which human connection

produces change. Change is not always significant for everyone, as this dissertation shows. However, as Ann Tsing suggests in her exploration of encounters, friction between cultural agents produces movement and effect (A. L. Tsing 2005; A. Tsing 2015). I am interested in giving an account of that friction, and I am also interested in betting on the progressive values I found in the cracks of the Police memorialization.

This dissertation is a study about the Police encounter with the state's duty to remember, one that produces multiple reflections in everyday life. Some are uplifting for pragmatic peacebuilders, who interpret the police memorialization initiative as a positive step towards a more democratic and peaceful Colombia. Some reflections are disappointing, mainly when the Police memorialization is evaluated in a larger sociocultural and political context. There are also nerve-racking reflections, like those showing that elites usually interpret social and political reality as a chessboard, and the memorialization of profoundly delicate and relevant issues as just another pawn they can use at will for "winning." The reflections this dissertation provides show that, to date, most collective memory scholars have underestimated the complexity of state-led memorialization initiatives, often interpreting them through false dichotomies of denial versus truth or the state versus society. My work suggests that state-led memorialization of the past can be multiple and contradictory because the state is also an expression of society, one that becomes richer as a function of its democratic qualities. It also suggests that alarm signs should start ringing when that multiplicity becomes less evident. The Colombian Police memorialization initiative makes a great case in that direction.

As an ethnographic study, my research can be misleading in several ways that I want to cover. While my ethnography took place at an institution, it is not an institutional ethnography, at least not in the way Dorothy E. Smith initially proposed it (Smith 2005). My research does not explore the way how social interactions become institutionalized. It studies one of the expressions of institutionalized collective memories in Colombia, its themes, and their agents. My research is not a Police ethnography or an expression of the anthropology of policing (Martin 2018). While my study discusses the experiences of police agents and the cultural models they are using or avoiding to make sense of their collective past, I am not interested in describing and discussing the Police as a unique institution or in exploring policing as an institutional practice. My ethnographic work is not a historical exploration of the truth, if that is even possible, or an analysis of the historical

accuracy of the Police memorialization of the role police agents and the institution played during the conflict. My ethnography explores the Colombian politics of memory from the perspective of an understudied and complex stakeholder: the collective of Colombian police agents.

In the context of this dissertation, the collective of police agents is an unequal imagined community of public servants with multiple specialties and a singular hierarchical structure that helps to make sense of what the Colombian Police institution is. The Colombian Police is divided into two career paths that, according to my observations in the field, are strongly associated with the socio-economic standing of each police agent: the officers' career and the subofficer's career. Officers are educated in the administration of subofficers, public relations, and politics, and subofficers are educated in "Colombian law enforcement," which encompasses a broad set of activities, from patrolling the city streets to fighting rebels in the jungle. The Police institution is better depicted as a set of formal and informal traditions guiding the police agents' decision-making. Those decisions feed the formal and informal traditions in ways that can transform or reproduce them.

My ethnography of institutional memorialization implies a double commitment regarding anthropological traditions: the concern for studying up and collective memory research. My research joins the scholarly tradition of "studying up" because it creates an ethnographic record of an elusive group with an important degree of privilege and power (Nader 1972; Gusterson 1997; Souleles 2018; Ho 2009). My study is probably one of the first ethnographic accounts of Latin American security forces' efforts to memorialize their role in contentious historical periods. As such, it is a valuable source of new insights into the Latin American politics of memory, the state's contradictory participation in memorializing the past, and human rights memorialization in the region.

My research dwells on the experience of "encounter" between the Police "memory players" and the Colombian state's "duty to remember." The state's duty to remember is better characterized by the institutionalization and popularization of a human rights memory framework that was possible due to the international peace architecture's power and the sustained mobilization of the most influential sector of the Colombian victims' movement¹⁹. Because the encounter between the

¹⁹ My research is also not a geography of Colombia's victims' movement, which my findings suggest is far richer and more plural than most Colombians typically recognize. What I can say with certainty is that the most influential sector of Colombia's victims' movement is led by victims of state crimes. Their influence stems from nearly forty years of sustained commitment to the cause of justice. The movement began to diversify with the cultural success of

state's duty to remember and the Police is entirely related to the representation of the Police and its agents in human rights memory, my ethnography also contributes to the literature on collective memories. I study the Police memorialization political context and how the Police communicates the traumatic experiences of police agents, how it depicts the history of the Colombian conflict, and the courses of action memory players took to make its sectorial "contribution to national historical memory" believable and compelling for a broad audience.

Outside anthropology as a discipline with particular concerns, my research also talks to the scholarship on transitional justice and humanitarianism. Transitional justice institutions, their bureaucrats, and practices sparked a chain of sectorial reactions that configure intellectual and practical problems. I explore how the language of human rights memorialization is being sectorialized in Colombia, and how the sectorial balkanization of harm and trauma challenges basic principles of political transitions like justice, reparation, and non-repetition. Most scholarly analyses of human rights memorialization and transitional justice focus on the limits of human rights to transform society in a way that does not reproduce violence or its limits to secure justice. My research touches on those themes in some ways but has a different focus. My research examines the sectorial translation of human rights memorialization, a process that subtly challenges the universality of human rights in deeply problematic ways.

- Dissertation's conceptual baggage

Conceptually, my work owes a great deal to Steve Stern's method of exploring politically charged collective memories, particularly his distinction between emblematic memories as public frameworks of meaning and the memory knots on the social body as sites interrupting the normal flow of reflex and habit. An emblematic memory is a framework that "organizes meaning, selectivity, and countermemory" (Stern 2004, 105). I add that it also organizes counter-countermemory, a reactionary memorialization movement of pragmatic alliances between elite and subaltern groups sharing certain qualities. Stern did not consider counter-countermemories in his conceptualization of emblematic memories. Still, it is critical to include it in a present marked by widespread reactions against justice-seeking initiatives and movements that commentators

human rights, and as victims of terrorism started to demand greater attention and influence in the human rights scene. My ethnography captures only a fraction of that story. More about it in Chapter 1.

worldwide have grouped together in terms like “woke culture,” “globalism,” and “leftism,” among others.

As a sociocultural discourse, emblematic memories provide a broad interpretative framework and selection criteria for personal memories, which are always a complex concoction of private experiences and lore. Emblematic memories make private recollections meaningful, contrary to loose memories, which are remembrances that stay on the margin of sociality and public discourse. Real experiences inform loose memories but are not easily translatable into public discourse. Emblematic memories are not a given; they are all human creations, which is not the same as to say they are inventions or manipulations. According to Stern, emblematic memories reveal essential truths about the collective experience in society, even when they are selective and politically grounded.

In my research, I employ the concept of emblematic memories to discuss the frameworks of meaning that social and political organizations, both formal and informal, use to organize the past into a meaningful discourse. As human creations, emblematic memories are cultural products that change in time according to complex collective processes where communities navigate matters like identity and the meaning of collective experiences through time. However, emblematic memories are also a heuristic effort made by analysts like me to organize and describe an unfolding sociocultural process that may not have names or labels. For instance, what I call human rights memory in this dissertation when describing the frameworks that organize meaning and selectivity for human rights activists and the Colombian movement of victims of state crimes may not be acknowledged as a meaningful label by those groups. For them, human rights memories may not be human rights memories; they are just their memories or the truth. Providing names to emblematic memories is only helpful to make sense of historically grounded politics of memory, which requires a certain degree of comparative distance, but not as much to describe everyday experiences as communities or stake holders would.

Emblematic memories compete with others in the public sphere for attention and recognition, and some factors make them more credible and influential. Steve Stern came up with six: Historicity, or a sense of historical rupture that is decisive and foundational of a critical collective issue; Authenticity, or the capacity of a narrative to account for “real experiences”; Capaciousness, or the ability of a narrative to accommodate a large and plural number of experiences; Projection into

public or semi-public spaces, or the capability of a narrative to build bridges between loose and emblematic memories; Embodiment in a convincing social referent, like an emblematic number of victims or a political program; and effective carriers and spokespersons. I consider those qualities when analyzing the Police memorialization of the conflict and its role in it, as those qualities help present memorialization as an unfolding process and not as a definitive position police agents, or any other social group, naturally share.

In terms of memory knots on the social body, Steve Stern treats them as interruptions of the everyday life of the *homo habitus*, sites that disrupt collective understandings of the self and the community. In that way, memory knots on the social body are very different from memory sites, as conceptualized by Pierre Nora (Nora 1989). While Nora's memory sites are symbols of collective identity, Stern's memory knots on the social body are sites that scream and question old certainties. Stern's conceptual model is perfect for studying societies experiencing rapid change and political turmoil, while Nora's is better for societies where change is not as pronounced, urgent, or threatening. Stern's concept helps me to describe the Police mobilization of sites that allow it to redirect the public's attention in the direction that its elites consider proper and just in a period of collective confusion and polarization.

My work also owes to Elizabeth Jelin's analysis of memory politics, particularly her characterization of counter-memory agents, which she calls memory entrepreneurs. Jelin defines them as those "who seek social recognition and political legitimacy of *one* (their own) interpretation or narrative of the past" (Jelin 2003, 33-34). Elizabeth Jelin borrowed Howard Becker's concept of a moral entrepreneur to tie social movements to the counter-memorial Southern Cone movement. Jelin proposes memory entrepreneurs as active members of a social movement motivated by a moral commitment to a particular idea of justice. Francesca Lessa prefers to talk about justice-seekers instead of memory entrepreneurs because she believes it makes more justice to their politics and their unique compromise to fight against impunity (Francesca Lessa 2022). In both cases, authors study human collectives that are not part of the state but that fight for its recognition.

While I find both concepts profoundly useful in analyzing memory politics, I found problems articulating them in my work. My concentration on a human group that embodies the state is the first reason to explain this. Memory entrepreneurs, justice seekers, or memory activists look for

recognition from the state (J. S. Rubin 2018), but they are not an integral part of it. The communities memory entrepreneurs represent in their mobilization of contentious symbols that take us to unaccounted and unrecognized pasts build their identity as members of a civil society's group, not as members of the state. The second reason to explain this is the contradictory ethos of my informants. While they cannot be wholly discounted as an uncommon activist group inside the state, I never could recognize them as such in absolute terms. Police agents would also reject any qualification suggesting they were something different than public servants! Additionally, the memory labors of every police agent I met started and ended with an order. Memory was relevant for some of them in a meaningful way, but they were not activists in the sense Elizabeth Jelin and other collective memory scholars refer to. Some police agents were very committed and inspired bureaucrats who found in the memorialization of the Police and their imagined-professional community the most important and fulfilling professional career experience they ever had²⁰.

The contradictory cultural and political reality I found in the field invited me to develop a different concept to transmit better the kind of memorialization I witnessed. In the context of this dissertation, the police agents working at the Institutional Historical Memory initiative are memory players. Memory players are sociocultural agents participating in memory politics due to an assignment or a task. They may be committed to a particular memorialization framework, but their activism does not define their individual or group identity. Police agents are not the only memory players in Colombia. Bureaucrats at historical clarification commissions and special jurisdictions are also memory players. Professionals at non-profits may also be memory players. These players do not build social movements, even when they can be part of a social movement's ecosystem. Memory players are critical agents in memory politics, as they are usually figures of authority belonging to the state or with privileged access to it. However, they are not moral entrepreneurs. Their commitment to memory politics will probably not last much longer than their assignments.

- Data collection and data analysis

This dissertation draws from twelve months of fieldwork, including five months of participant observation in UNIPEP's historical memory unit, from August to December 2022. This immersive

²⁰ Anderson's concept of imagined community illuminates the National Police's memorialization efforts, as these emerge from bonds of solidarity among individuals who, despite not knowing each other personally, share a profound sense of institutional belonging (Anderson 2016).

experience provided deep insight into the Police's memory practices and how endogenous and exogenous memory players conceptualized their work²¹. The analysis addresses two central concerns: understanding Police memorialization as a distinct cultural development while simultaneously situating it within broader national historical processes. These dual analytical frameworks demanded different approaches to data collection and analysis. I consider my first concern to be the most distinctly anthropological, as it examines how a specific social group develops unique cultural models, or webs of meaning, to interpret and navigate their historical reality (Geertz y Darnton 2017; Dengah et al. 2021; Restrepo 2016). My first concern seeks to analyze the Police memorialization initiative as a meaningful sociocultural construction, a pursuit that represents both the hallmark of anthropological inquiry and its most significant challenge. My second concern is more historical, at least if we understand history as the intellectual endeavor to comprehend the present by examining the chain of events that enables its conditions of possibility. I do not claim to present a history of the police memorialization of the conflict. Still, I find it difficult to name my intellectual interest in exploring past events that helped configure the cultural realities I witnessed in my ethnographic research as something different than a “historical concern.”

Circling back to data collection, I took field notes of my interactions with police agents at UNIPEP's headquarters, where I conducted participant observation for five months. I was interested in how they talked about collective memory controversies, but I did not find many conversations going in that direction. In fact, I did not find many discussions, as UNIPEP agents' everyday life in their offices were busy. I was assigned to a desk where I was supposed to write a chapter about the Colombian social explosion between 2019 and 2021, and my interactions with police agents were limited. My presence in UNIPEP was strange for some, as I was regularly the only person without a uniform. Still, I could share with the police agents assigned to the Historical Memory area, especially in public events to which I was invited. The kind of conversations I was interested in were the least frequent ones, as police agents I met in UNIPEP were not as invested as I thought they would be in disputes over the interpretations of the past. While my initial research focus diverged from these themes, the conversations consistently gravitated toward several

²¹ Chapter three elaborates the distinction between endogenous and exogenous memory players. For now, it is important to note that Police memory players fall into two categories: those who are members of the Police institution (endogenous) and those who, while not belonging to the institution, collaborate with it (exogenous).

recurring topics: the diminishing social status of law enforcement, police officers' experiences of decreased public respect during their daily duties, and discussions about the significant institutional changes introduced by the newly established progressive national government. In particular, I found a lot of excitement among mid-level officers when Gustavo Petro, Colombia's president, removed more than twenty generals from the institution, a move that some media outlets presented as terrible for the moral of regular troopers. I did not find that. My conversations and notes were critical for my interpretation of the multilayered meaning that the police memorialization of the past has for memory players in UNIPPEP.

My time in UNIPPEP also helped me to look for appropriate informants following the snowball sampling method (Lavrakas 2008). Once in UNIPPEP, I convinced many of its members to introduce me to key institution figures who were no longer there. I was looking for the intellectual architects of the Institutional Historical Memory, and I was able to interview most of them. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 individuals, sometimes more than once. Interviews were conducted with people who participated in the Institutional Historical Memory initiatives, which included police subofficers and officers, scholars, and family members of victimized police agents. In my interviews, when appropriate, I asked why informants joined the Police and UNIPPEP. I also asked about the experience of building memory from the Police or for the Police. Finally, I asked about respondents' opinions of the bureaucrats from official historical clarification institutions like the National Center of Historical Memory and the Truth Commission, as well as the one they had of their clarificatory work.

I also visited twelve memory sites across the center and north of Colombia to better understand the Police memorialization landscapes. My visits were planned and organized with Police agents at UNIPPEP, as most places were inaccessible without proper authorization. Police agents guided me everywhere I visited, but I did not conduct interviews with them. I focused on annotating the interactions I found in the places I visited and the stories local police agents told about those places when they could. One of the big surprises I had with my visit is that the Colombian police agents are rarely locals, meaning that most have virtually no meaningful relations with their workplaces. Most of my guides visited the places I wanted to visit for the first time, and once, they took me to the wrong spot. While I initially expected a more meaningful connection between police agents and the Police memory sites, the disconnection I found was very informative.

My direct interaction with the Police memory players and people who collaborated with the Police memorialization for different purposes informed my understanding of the Police Institutional Historical Memory as a distinct cultural development that makes sense under the complex emotional, sociocultural, and political landscapes that police agents across different hierarchies experience in their everyday lives. I took note of the passion some police agents had for memorialization and the vindication of the Police as an institution of peacebuilders, as well as of the conflicts some agents had with the Police memory framework and its enforced silences. The passion and the conflicts I registered are windows of opportunity for peacebuilding enthusiasts who believe in institutional reform and the role that inclusion and recognition have for meaningful democratic transformations. The passion can help us understand the unique cultural worlds police agents inhabit and the need to understand them better. Conflicts are good reminders of the possibilities for change.

But my research also included the revision of documents for two different purposes: the first one I want to discuss is the exploration of the Police memorialization content. The Police had more than 20 memory products available to the public. Those memory products are the best testimony we have of the nature of the Police Institutional Historical Memory. The second one is tracing politics and chronology, another of the principles I found inspiring in Steve Stern's method for studying emblematic memories. The memorialization of the past in post-conflict settings, just like in post-dictatorship settings, depends on the rhythms of global and local politics. Those rhythms connect distinct cultural developments to general socio-political processes that no sociocultural anthropologist should ignore, as those processes contribute to the configuration and re-configuration of meaning and collective identities.

Studying the police institutional historical memory led by UNIPPEP is challenging on many fronts. One of those challenges is the plurality of memorialization formats and the many genres those initiatives entail. The Police have produced or sponsored digital initiatives with private and public collaborators, like *The Window of Historical Memory*²², *An Inventory of Absences*²³, and *Our Memory Matters*²⁴. It has also produced documentaries like *Jungle Commando – Honor and Glory*

²² All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted. The original initiative's name is Ventana de la Memoria Histórica

²³ The original initiative's name is Un Inventario de Ausencias

²⁴ The original initiative's name is Nuestra Memoria Cuenta

*Forever*²⁵, *Granada: an Account About Forgiveness*²⁶, and a series of animated videos called *A Pain Saved in the Heart*²⁷. Besides multimedia memory products, UNIPEP commissioned the construction of a monument that has been reproduced and placed in big cities across the country: the *Peacebuilders*²⁸ Monument. UNIPEP has also published a collection of testimonial, historical, and legal-theory books presented as culminated academic research products. In addition to the work that UNIPEP has led, the Police also participated in a book that the Minister of Defense launched a few months before the Truth Commission's scheduled release of its final report. In that case, the Police were primarily lending its seal and some introductory words, as the Ministry of Defense was responsible for contacting and paying the researchers who wrote the book. The plurality of formats, genres, products, and players I mention demands clarity regarding the materials informing my analysis.

I want to start by clarifying that four empirical sources inform my exploration of the Police memory products: the Police "memory corpus," ethnographic notes, interviews, and news fragments to provide a better context of Colombian society, historical relevant events, and the stakes behind the Police memorialization of the past²⁹. The Police memory corpus I mention is a selection of UNIPEP's memory products that better encapsulate the argument the institution is interested in making: police agents were victims and heroes during the conflict, and they stand as peacebuilders whose life stories and courageous actions are being silenced. Therefore, the sampling method I used to organize the memory corpus I was interested in was profoundly purposive, which, it is crucial to acknowledge, is not usually considered the best sampling choice because it's prone to bias (Dressler y Oths 2014; Dengah et al. 2021). Still, purposive sampling methods make sense in the context of ethnographic and exploratory research designs, as direct

²⁵ The original initiative's name is Comando Jungla – Honor y Gloria Por Siempre

²⁶ The original initiative's name is Granada, Relato de un Perdón

²⁷ The original initiative's name is Un Dolor Guardado en el Corazón

²⁸ The original initiative's name is Edificadores de Paz

²⁹ I initially named the memory corpus as "commemorative corpus." I called it like that because when I evaluate the police institutional historical memory as a totality, I feel it is a celebration of the Police, a direct reaction against critical voices. However, to do it implies denying the stories that victims have shared with the Police as an effort to make publicly visible a pain that has not found public acknowledgment. This pain is difficult to share with those not part of the Police. In the end, memory corpus is much more appropriate than commemorative corpus, as the concept transmits the effort to preserve what victims shared with the Police memory players when invited to collaborate with the Institutional Historical Memory.

access to the cultural phenomena under study provides an informed judgment that should not be discounted³⁰.

The memory corpus I built includes memory products commissioned or directly produced by UNIPPEP memory players that depict victimhood, heroism, and the role of police agents as peacebuilders. I define memory products as the material outcome of a human effort to build a particular consciousness about the past. UNIPPEP has a complete list of its memory products on a webpage dedicated to its institutional historical memory initiative (Policía Nacional de Colombia, s. f.). I used it to limit the universe of memory products I would sample. I excluded books about legal theory from the memory corpus as they did not touch on the issues my research explored. I also excluded them because they were not as relevant for memory players at UNIPPEP, who usually pointed at different products when they needed to guide me to the most appropriate and representative pieces of their memory work. Legal theory books may sound like an odd exclusion; however, they don't touch on victimization, heroism, or peacebuilding issues, at least not in a way that substantially differs from the one I found in the memory products I included in the memory corpus³¹.

The only source treated with formalized research procedures was the written memory products I included in the memory corpus. This means that I took texts and coded the themes that emerged as they emerged, a common practice of textual analysis informed by grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). In-vivo codes were complicated to handle, as they differed much in form. Therefore, I joined in-vivo codes in more significant categories that helped me to describe the communicative intention behind the representation of lived experiences. Short and long video formats that made it into the corpus were not analyzed using the same procedures I used with written memory products. Still, I took notes on who the protagonists were, the overall argument, and the themes discussed. The reason behind the different procedures was technical. I could not analyze documentaries and short non-fiction videos as written accounts. Web-based digital applications were analyzed using the same methods I used with written memory products, as there was text I

³⁰ I don't mean to say there is no danger of bias. Bias is always there. However, a good ethnographer should reflect on their bias and offer the best possible account of that reflection. I hope I provide an acceptable account of those reflections.

³¹ I went through some of the excluded materials, so I am confident the most formal part of my analysis did not lose sight of relevant information to make sense of victimization, heroism, and peacebuilding as the central themes of the Police memorialization of its past.

could work with. The monuments I included demanded a slightly different approximation. Because I was analyzing images in a politically charged context, my analysis of monuments centered on the message they transmitted, the description they received in UNIPeP's materials (the *Window of Historical Memory*), and the interactions police agents had with them³².

Regarding the multimedia memory products I analyzed, I was more interested in memory products police agents could relate to, so I followed their interests and recommendations. I watched the two available documentaries. I was invited to attend the premiere of one of those documentaries, which took place on the *Fragmentos* anti-monument in downtown Bogotá, near the congress and the presidential house in 2019. I watched the other one on YouTube after hearing repeated recommendations from UNIPeP memory players. I also attended the premiere of *A Pain Saved in the Heart*, a collection of short animated videos that presented the experiences of victimized police agents. I chose to analyze the *Window of Memory* regarding web-based digital applications because it was the first UNIPeP memory product and because it was the only one that presented a national depiction of the victimization of police agents; even when behind the surface, it was much more focused on depicting the Police heroism.

My thematic analysis of memory products plays a descriptive function: it informs how victimhood, heroism, sacrifice, and peacebuilding are conceptualized and presented to the public. However, one should not separate the meaning of those concepts from the larger context that ethnography provides as an interpretative intellectual practice. The analysis of the police memory products should not avoid the fact that Colombia is experiencing a transitional period where official truth-seeking institutions have institutionalized a variant of the human rights memory model, which is critical of the state's security forces and historical forms of structural violence. Those memory products should not be separated from the fact that memory players at the Police and other interest groups in Colombia are very much interested in countering official truth-seeking's political and cultural effects, perceived as dangerous or evil. In other words, those products should not be abstracted from the emergence of the reactionary memory model I discuss in the first chapter.

³² The Window of Historical Memory was the first commemorative intervention put together by UNIPeP personnel. It is special for many reasons, one of them is that it provides a comprehensive map of memory sites that are presumably talkative of the police collective memories and collective identity.

There are some additional analytical challenges I have not yet mentioned, such as those that come from the experiences and human exchanges that inform ethnographic research. As I just stated, my certainty as an ethnographer is that the police memory products are not enough to make sense of them. While they are meant to convey clear messages, and they do as thematic patterns arise rather quickly, the interest of an ethnographer is never reduced to what an actor says (or, in this case, what a cultural material transmits with thematic patterns). It is equally important to consider what the actor does and what the actor thinks they are doing (Restrepo 2016). Because my interest is rooted in interpreting culture and not in proposing a formal theoretical model to make sense of the Police's universal ways of memorializing the past, the thematic analysis I present of the Police memory products emerges from my deep understanding of the Colombian political history, Colombia's society, the ethnographic notes I took during participant observation, and the interviews I conducted with key players of UNIPEP's memory initiatives.

My biography as a "Colombian political minority" also informs my analysis. Therefore, it must be clear to any reader that my interpretation of the Police memory products is not independent of the fact that I was a part of the Colombian student movement, usually associated with the Colombian left, which in that country has always felt like a minority³³. My analysis is not independent of the fact that I feel strong solidarity towards political and racial minority groups that have been affected by official and unofficial state violence for decades. My analysis cannot avoid the fact that my mother, in 1984 as an undergraduate student at the National University of Colombia, was trapped with tens of other students in the university's restaurant by a group of anti-riot police agents for no apparent reason³⁴. They threw cans of tear gas inside the restaurant and shut the doors so that no student could escape from their improvised gas chamber. Luckily, no student died that day, but there are hundreds of denounces of human rights violations, including torture, sexual aggression, and illegal detentions. The university was closed for eleven months

³³ The Colombian left's collective sense of marginalization is reflected in the widespread belief that Gustavo Petro's 2022 election marked the first leftist presidency in the country's history. This perception, while indicative of the left's historical experience of exclusion, is historically problematic. The systematic harassment, killing, and vilification of left-wing political activists by the established political order for decades has reinforced this sense of marginalization, even though it may not accurately represent the full complexity of Colombia's political history.

³⁴ The Universidad Nacional de Colombia was a target of police violence and abuse for many years. Some would say it is still a target of specific forms of abuse. The Truth Commission managed to convince one of the most influential Colombian police generals, Oscar Naranjo, to acknowledge that the police built a stigma around public university students for years. He did not represent the National Police, though, as when he took part of the Truth Commission's event he was a retiree (El Tiempo 2021).

after that day. However, in my writing, I try to discriminate facts and empirical patterns from personal judgments. I also try to make my scholarship an active effort to build democratic peace. For me, building democratic peace means an attempt to include and recognize everyone, including those who, at first sight, do not share what I hold dear or logic. Building peace in Colombia can also be seen as a radical anthropological project that familiarizes the unfamiliar.

My analysis of the Police memorialization's link to a bigger socio-political process followed a different analytical route. I focused on explaining the emergence of the Police Institutional Historical Memory by reconstructing the controversies that led to the institutionalization of truth-seeking or memorialization and those that led to the reactionary sectorialization of human rights as a memory framework by socioeconomic elites and the state security forces. My reconstruction owes very much to the work of scholars like Gonzálo Sánchez, Maria Emma Wills, Winifred Tate, and Jefferson Jaramillo, who have invested significant efforts in providing genealogies of the Colombian human rights movement and that of the official clarification of violence and the armed conflict. And yet, my reconstruction adds novel elements, as it focuses on the contradictory role of conservative and reactionary political organizations in the Colombian scene of human rights memorialization, which is only starting to surface with recent scholarly work (Foringer 2023; Guglielmucci y Rozo 2021).

The period I majorly focused on goes from 2005 to 2022, which I label the Colombian transitional period. As I explain in Chapter One, between 2005 and 2022, we can find the design and implementation of transitional justice policies that, among other things, created the Colombian state's duty to remember. We can also witness during that period the multiplication of stakeholders interested in countermemory and counter-countermemory and the institutionalization of conflicting views of the Colombian inner armed conflict, its actors, and its victims. The Colombian transitional period was also a time in which human rights became common sense. It was also a time when human rights principles became the core of the official clarification of the past.

My selection of newspaper clips informing my more historical concerns followed a simple but effective logic: reconstructing the public controversies between social groups struggling for recognition and justice in contradictory ways. I looked for news about the reception of official historical clarification reports and news discussing the opposition to human rights memory in the country's two most influential and longstanding national newspapers: *El Tiempo* and *El*

Espectador. Opposition to human rights memory was almost always starred by conservative elites and representatives of the state's security forces. Still, sometimes opposition also came from the FARC guerrilla elites, as the human rights memory framework does not buy heroic depictions of the past, a usual trope among armed collectives.

In my research, I chose to anonymize most of my informants' accounts through both the use of pseudonyms and the modification of identifying information, despite having obtained IRB approval and explicit consent to use their names. This decision was based on my assessment that the sensitive nature of their shared opinions could potentially put them at risk. The select few informants whose accounts were not anonymized were cases where anonymization was either impossible or would serve no purpose, given their unique institutional positions or the public nature of their roles.

CHAPTER 1: REACTIONARY MEMORIES

“Nuestra generación no se habrá lamentado tanto de los crímenes de los perversos, como del estremecedor silencio de los bondadosos.”
“In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”
(Delgado Pinzón 2013). This quote is attributed to Martin Luther King and reproduced in FEDEGAN’s counter-counter memory books.

On October 2, 2022, almost four months after the Truth Commission released its final report in Colombia, ex-president Alvaro Uribe Vélez launched the booklet *What Truth? First Alternative Approach to the Truth Commission's Report*³⁵. The booklet was written mainly by Centro Democrático political party figures, and it was meant to criticize the commission’s final report, pointing at its alleged systematic bias and lack of rigor³⁶. Reading it can be a triggering experience, as none of the authors seem familiar with the report they are "providing an alternative to." The few contributors who engaged with the Truth Commission’s final report only did it with the introductory volume, leaving nineteen unchecked³⁷. The “alternative approach” to the Truth Commission’s report seemed more like a pamphlet aiming to discredit the Truth Commission as an institution and even as a representation of the human rights culture rather than a serious challenge to the commission’s depiction of the Colombian conflict, its legacies, and its victims.

While finding a serious scholar defending the “alternative approach” to the Colombian conflict as a serious challenge to the work of the Colombian Truth Commission will be close to impossible by the time I write these lines, collective memory scholars can’t disregard it. The “alternative approach” is a source of questions about the contested nature of the "truth" about the past in post-conflict settings and even about the fragility of what some scholars call official history or official truth. After all, between 2002 and 2010, few people were willing to contest a simple fact: Uribe and his political allies had narrative control over the Colombian inner armed conflict, its causes, and legacies. But in 2022, Uribe and his political allies were trying to sell “alternative approaches”

³⁵ The original name is *¿Cuál Verdad? Primera Aproximación Alternativa al Informe de la Comisión de la Verdad*.

³⁶ The Centro Democrático political party is the most radical representation of the Colombian electoral right.

³⁷ Among the unchecked volumes there are two that no critic should dismiss: the volume on findings and recommendations, and the volume on methodology.

instead of providing official declarations, and they presented themselves, and still do, as victims of an orchestrated re-writing of history by the state.

Even though specialized audiences and the media largely ignored the Centro Democrático's booklet, it faced strong criticism from the few professionals who took the time and effort to review it. For instance, Colombian Check, an organization of fact-checkers, shows that the booklet mainly contained false and questionable statements (Puentes et al. 2022). The booklet's limited public attention, combined with criticism from its few readers, likely influenced Centro Democrático's decision to remove the publication from its website. After all, why would politicians adopt the role of historians unless it offered political advantages? Still, the lack of response to the Centro Democrático's booklet did not persuade everyone inside that political party to stop intervening in the public conversation about Colombia's untampered violence and its recent history of abuse, injustice, and impunity.

In April 2023, a new "commission" called the Civil Commission for Truth Clarification³⁸ announced its first public report and launched it in one of Colombia's capitol building rooms. This time, the report and the commission were arranged by the Freedom School Foundation³⁹, a new alt-right think tank in Colombia. Maria Fernanda Cabal, one of the Centro Democrático's most visible and extreme political leaders, was the session's leading speaker and a contributor to the new civil commission and the report. According to Senator Cabal, the Civil Commission aimed to "tell the other truth that the communist commission did not want to tell" (Zuluaga 2023), explicitly questioning the work the Truth Commission had delivered to the country almost a year before. During the public release of the new counter-report, Senator Cabal, among high-profile victims of kidnapping by the FARC guerrilla like Ingrid Betancourt, also promised to deliver 10,000 testimonies of ranchers who were victims of the conflict as a contribution to the truth the Colombian state has been invested in finding for almost twenty years.

According to Priscilla Hayner's outstanding comparative analysis of truth commissions worldwide, it is typical to find pushback from conservative sectors when a Truth Commission announces its findings (Hayner 2011). However, pushback does not usually come in the form of counter-reports.

³⁸ The original name of the initiative is Comisión Civil para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad.

³⁹ The original name of the organization is Fundación Escuela Libertad.

Not many foresaw the launch of two "counter-reports" in Colombia in less than eight months since the release of the Truth Commission's final report. For sure, denialist outcries were expected by experts, human rights advocates, and bureaucrats, but not much more. The eruption of counter-counter memorial initiatives in Colombia, as I call the organized efforts to react against human rights-based historical clarification, shows that the search for truth in contexts of transitional justice institutional settings, pervasive injustice, and impunity faces new challenges.

Since the dawn of human rights memorialization in Colombia, powerful groups have consistently worked against the discursive hegemony of a human rights-driven understanding of the Colombian conflict, its legacies, and its causes. It did not take much time since the release of the first human rights-informed historical clarification report in 2008 for Colombians to experience, more unconsciously than consciously, the emergence of what I call the reactionary memory model. As an emblematic memorialization framework, the reactionary memory model structures the affective and discursive imprint of influential stakeholders who found themselves on the "wrong side of history" after human rights-informed historical clarification commissions delivered their reports to the Colombian public. The Colombian National Police memory initiatives I discuss in this dissertation would not be possible without the reactionary memory framework I mention, which in turn is a memorialization framework that expands its discursive capaciousness with the Police contributions. The reactionary memory model is an outcome of memorialization initiatives conceived as a reaction against human rights activism and official historical clarification. Still, it is also an outcome of an extended and successful human rights culture where the human rights memorialization grammar is indispensable.

In this chapter, I provide a historical context of the emergence of the reactionary memory model in Colombia, a critical development that collective memory scholars with an interest in Latin America are only starting to pay attention to (Salvi 2015; Salvi y Messina 2024; Palmisciano 2021; Guglielmucci y Rozo 2021; Hacemos Memoria 2024). This chapter is mainly informed by specialized literature reflecting on the Colombian official effort to historicize and clarify its violent past and newspaper clips covering controversies around that process. My selection of newspaper clips followed a simple but effective logic: reconstructing a public controversy between social groups struggling for recognition and justice in contradictory ways. This simple method allowed me to tell a story that has not been told yet, one that suggests human rights memorialization can

be used as a political and cultural tool for sidestepping the most basic forms of accountability. In other words, human rights memorialization can be turned on its head.

Because there cannot be reactionary memories without the substance that produces the reaction, I start this chapter by exploring the emergence of the human rights memory model in Colombia. I will cover the emergence of the human rights memory model and the vital role of official clarification institutions in institutionalizing it. Subsequently, I reconstruct the events that have shaped the emergence of the memory framework I call the reactionary memory model. Finally, the chapter closes with a theoretical conceptualization of the reactionary memory model and a discussion on how that framework is critical to make sense of the way Colombian security forces, including the National Police, have established an affective and discursive relationship with the recent past, as well as a set of commemorative practices that reclaim recognition from the state and society for the sacrifice of public servants during the conflict, while at the same time silences discussions about the state security forces' responsibility for human rights violations.

- The Undesired Results of an Impossible Amnesty: The Human Rights Emblematic Memory Model

The reactionary memory model's social life in Colombia starts with the story of the human rights memory model, as it is a direct reaction to it. This is not a historical hypothesis. I don't consider my exploration of public controversies to satisfy the requirements for that kind of statement. This is an ethnographical hypothesis I elaborated after encountering the explicit and implicit presence of a grievance against the human rights memory model in "reactionary memory players." But even when my hypothesis starts as an ethnographic insight, following the temporal correlation between action and reaction confirms how it is very difficult to imagine a reactionary memory framework in Colombia without the disruption that human rights activists and transitional justice institutions meant for the collective understanding of the "Colombian violence"⁴⁰. The emergence of the human rights memory model in Colombia challenged the silences about political violence many

⁴⁰ The "Colombian violence" is the concept Colombians have used to name what some of us now refer as the "inner armed conflict" after the consolidation of the human rights memory model. The "Colombian violence" is probably one of the most identifiable national issues, It has been for many decades, and its conceptualization has profound effects on Colombian politics and the relationships the Colombian state builds with other countries. More about the concept of the Colombian violence on (N. Rodríguez 2017).

families and human rights advocates encountered during most of the Colombian inner armed conflict when seeking justice and recognition from the state. Still, as later political developments show and my dissertation explores, it also inspired a reaction that rejects and embraces, in very selective ways, the human rights register to make sense of the past.

...

Like many countries in Latin America at the end of the twentieth century, the Colombian State was forced to revise its human rights record as a measure to fight impunity and as a guarantee of democratic principles for domestic and foreign audiences (Tate 2007; Villalón 2015; Hayner 2011). Like other Latin American countries exiting armed conflicts, the Colombian state was pushed to establish truth commissions or similar bureaucratic technologies to build rigorous and holistic accounts of political violence and human rights violations as a consequence of organized political demands made by victims and international organizations (Zvobgo 2020). Truth Commissions aim to acknowledge the suffering of victims or survivors and preserve their material traces for historical records (Castillejo 2013). Truth Commissions also allow perpetrators to admit guilt and seek pardon for reconciliation and social reintegration (Laplante y Theidon 2007; Doughty 2014; Castillejo 2013). Finally, Truth Commissions are supposed to build an overall framework of meaning of the unspeakable for the public, which morally forbids the repetition of human rights abuses and other less direct but systematic forms of violence (Ruiz Romero y Hristova 2019).

However, grouping Colombia with other Latin American cases can be misleading, as the Colombian state's take on revising the past through human rights lenses is unique in at least five ways. First, the Colombian State took part in this revision in a way that differed from those in the Southern Cone. Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay organized truth commissions in the context of a political transition from a dictatorial regime to a liberal democracy. The Colombian State has enacted historical clarification initiatives while transitioning between an era of violent internal conflict and one of peace under a liberal regime yet to come (Foringer 2023). In that way, Colombia is more similar to Peru, El Salvador, and Guatemala, countries that organized truth commissions after experiencing armed conflicts inside their national frontiers. But Colombia's

case is still different than those, as it conducted historical clarification efforts amid the conflict (Riaño Alcalá y Uribe 2016).

The second difference between Colombia and other Latin American cases is timing. The Colombian State started revising its human rights issues almost 25 years after Argentina published its famous *Never Again* report and nearly ten years after the Guatemalan State published its *Memory of Silence*. When Colombian bureaucrats started thinking about clarifying the past through human rights lenses, and some interest groups started fearing the political prospects of such an endeavor, there were many experiences to learn from. Third, even when the Colombian state started to clarify its history of human rights violations after most regional neighbors did, the official clarification of the violent national past was a sort of established tradition in Colombia. Before the first truth commission-like institution in Colombia existed, the National Center of Historical Memory, between eleven and thirteen official commissions meant to clarify the "Colombian Violence" were commissioned between 1957 and 2007.

The fourth difference between Colombia and other regional cases is that the Colombian human rights-informed historical clarification has taken place without an authentic transition from an inner conflict to democratic stability, making the study of the past almost like the study of the present. Finally, Colombia's efforts to officially clarify the past under a human rights orientation were not the product of a transitional regime but of a regime that failed to promote impunity under a model of militarized peacebuilding, which is the Colombian peculiarity I will further explore in this section.

During the twentieth century, the Colombian state settled multiple violent inner conflicts through armed elites' agreements and amnesties that kept most of the nation's territorial integrity and centralized power administration unchanged (Bushnell 1993; Melo 2018). In matters of conflict resolution, the *raison d'état* prevailed over "victims' rights," which would not be a concern or even a namable issue for political elites until the end of the century (N. Rodríguez 2017). However, solving conflicts with warrior's agreements and amnesties began to be more challenging in Colombia, as in much of the rest of the world, with the emergence of human rights as a new global discourse (Teitel 2003; Steinberg 2019; Hartog 2012; Gatti 2017). The Colombian State successfully applied amnesties as a form of conflict resolution until the end of the twentieth

century. Still, with the turn of the century, the organized movement of victims, international pressure, and new multilateral agreements the Colombian state signed with multilateral international institutions made it impossible. At the beginning of the new century, the memorialization of human rights violations, the concern for the social, economic, and political factors facilitating them, and the recognition of victimhood as a new legal category changed the way elites resolved violent conflicts and managed their aftermaths in the country. After the ratification of the Rome Statute in 2002, amnesties were no longer a plausible choice for political elites when negotiating with insurgent or counter-insurgent actors, and victims were a primary concern when negotiating a way out of hostilities between armed actors, as the peace process between the FARC guerrilla and the Colombian state between 2012 and 2016 exemplifies. "Building memory" became an unavoidable practice, a governmental duty that human rights scholars call the state's duty to remember (Campisi 2014).

In Colombia, the official clarification of the past has had to be undertaken amidst an armed conflict that, despite multiple peace agreements, amnesties, and demobilizations, has remained active in many regions of the country. As suggested before, constructing a historical account of human rights violations while the conditions that enable those violations remain largely intact is one of the most striking peculiarities of the complex and unique "Colombian transition" to a more authentic democracy (Acosta López 2023; Riaño Alcalá y Uribe 2016; Lyons 2010). However, the Colombian effort to clarify its conflict did not begin with the Truth Commission in 2018⁴¹. It did not begin with the Center of Historical Memory in 2011, which some scholars consider as the first Truth Commission in Colombia. It did not start with the Historical Memory Group in 2007, either. The collective and institutional enterprise to make sense of Colombian violence is even older than the first Truth Commission Priscilla Hayner mentions in her work. Institutional and non-institutional actors have undertaken the clarification of the causes and effects of the Colombian conflict long before the grammar of human rights became unavoidable in the country. The first official iteration of this process occurred in 1957⁴².

⁴¹ The peace agreement between the Colombian State and the FARC guerrilla established the creation of a Truth Commission with a mandate of three years. The global COVID pandemic got in the way of the Commission's work, and it was granted an additional year to operate.

⁴² By grammar of human rights, I refer to the discursive formation that shapes human rights discourse. Michael Foucault suggested that discursive formations define what can be said, who can speak, and how discourse is

By the end of the 1950s, liberal and conservative political elites commissioned the creation of a group of intellectuals with the mandate to review the state of the country after the events of *La Violencia* (The Violence), a period in Colombia's history characterized by an informal war between members of the liberal and conservative parties across much of the nation between 1948 and 1958 (Melo 2018; Bushnell 1993). The group produced a report describing the effects of violence between political parties in some of the country's most important regions that was not made public. However, Eduardo Umaña Luna, one of the intellectuals the government commissioned to explore the effects of *La Violencia*, decided to publish a book about his findings, along with two of the founders of Colombian sociology: Germán Guzmán Campos and Orlando Fals Borda. The book *La Violencia en Colombia* (*The Violence in Colombia*⁴³) became a fundamental sociological and ethnographical piece in Colombia upon its publication in 1962, as it was the first national radiography of the "Colombian Violence" accessible to the public (Jaramillo 2012).

It wasn't until the seventies and eighties that human rights became a grammar of choice for denouncing state violence. Initially, the grammar of human rights was appropriated by the families of left-wing political opponents who suffered persecution from the Colombian state. The Committee of Solidarity with Political Prisoners published the *Black Book of Repression*⁴⁴ in 1974, a general and militant denunciation of the "oppression of the people" that merged anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist political traditions with the more recent practice of counting victims of human rights abuses as a form of resistance and denunciation of state violence (Tate 2007). The organizations supporting the book and those that followed found human rights to be an effective tool for fighting popular causes and protecting activists from violence by appealing to international solidarity. In other words, the grammar of human rights made their politics and denunciations legible and legitimate, a possibility Cold War politics foreclosed for the socialist vocabulary in Colombia and Latin America. However, by 1988, the grammar of human rights was appropriated by a broader social universe in Colombia, which, although not in conflict with the defense of the

structured in a given time and place (Foucault 1982). Colombian Anthropologist Alejandro Castillejo suggests that there is a humanitarian gaze, an epistemology, that governs the way how the past has been archived in political transition settings (Castillejo 2013). As a discursive formation, the grammar of human rights is the structure of the humanitarian gaze Castillejo mentions.

⁴³ The original name is *La Violencia en Colombia*.

⁴⁴ The original name is *El Libro Negro de la Represión*.

"people's interests," prioritized the political project of "peacebuilding," understood as the defense of human rights. This "new way" of using the grammar of human rights in Colombia was the original contribution of the CINEP, which transformed the way of publicly discussing violence in Colombia with the creation of the Human Rights and Political Violence Database, one of the initiatives associated with its Peace Program⁴⁵ (Sánchez 2018). In the early nineties, human rights became unavoidable when conceptualizing the effects of violence in the Colombian officialdom, regardless of whether violence was carried out by State agents, guerrillas, or paramilitaries (Aparicio 2012; N. Rodríguez 2017).

The turn of the millennium came with a setback for the progress of a human rights-based understanding and clarification of the Colombian violence, which at that point was starting to be conceptualized in intellectual and political circles as an inner armed conflict. The election of Álvaro Uribe Vélez as president in 2002, a populist right-wing politician with a problematic human rights record who offered to the electorate "*mano dura*" (firm hand) against terrorist organizations⁴⁶. Uribe's presidency came with a profound national crisis that overlapped with a historic international crisis. On the national level, the country was going through one of its most violent and hopeless periods. In February 2002, just a few months before Uribe's appointment as president, peace negotiations between the national government of Andrés Pastrana and the FARC guerrilla leadership collapsed. At that time, the FARC had extensive territorial control and was transitioning from a guerrilla warfare strategy to a conventional war strategy against the state, demonstrating that it never had a genuine intention for peace within the context of the failed peace negotiations (Pizarro 2023; Melo 2018). Meanwhile, paramilitarism exerted terrifying control over urban and rural regions that the state security forces could or would not have an interest in controlling (GMH 2013; Comisión de la Verdad 2022c).

⁴⁵ The Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, or CINEP (Center of Research and Popular Education) is a Jesuit organization that originally worked with the Catholic Church Social Doctrine. Since 1987 it became better known for its commitment to peacebuilding and human rights.

⁴⁶ Álvaro Uribe has been linked in multiple ways to the paramilitaries. Many organizations denounced his support to paramilitary groups before winning the presidential elections in 2002. During his presidency, a large part of his government collation in Congress got involved in the "para-politics" scandal, meaning congresspeople received open support from paramilitary structures to win elections. Currently, he is in the middle of a judicial investigation aiming to determine if he bought witnesses against a political opponent that has denounced Uribe's relationships with paramilitary leaders in the Córdoba and Antioquia regions.

On the international level, the United States shifted to a new foreign policy built upon its global fight against terrorism. The Uribe government embraced that shift to redirect millions of dollars of cooperation that the United States allocated to an anti-narcotics Marshall Plan-like initiative known as “Plan Colombia” to its war against the FARC (Tickner 2007). In this context, Uribe's government aimed to "pacify" the country with a dual strategy: confronting "terrorist organizations" (the FARC) with modernized and better-funded armed forces aiming to achieve a military victory; and demobilizing the paramilitaries by offering a general amnesty. This strategy was presented to the public as the policy of democratic security (Mejía y Henao 2008).

Without a doubt, the biggest challenge of Uribe's strategy was granting amnesty to the paramilitaries, as doing so implied recognizing them as a political actor within the framework of an official tradition that, while struggling to define the paramilitary movement absolutely, tended to conceptualize it as a criminal and drug-trafficking organization (Grajales 2011). Despite its ideological closeness to the most political wing of the paramilitary leaders, the Uribe government had to seek ways to demobilize them due to a national and international context that was increasingly hostile against paramilitarism (Human Rights Watch 2001). However, demobilizing paramilitaries was not an easy feat. On the domestic front, a set of internal and international norms complicated the amnesty for those responsible for human rights violations and breaches of international humanitarian law. Perhaps the most severe impediment was the constitutional block, which elevates international treaties to constitutional status in Colombia's legal system. This meant the Rome Statute, signed and ratified by the Colombian State between 1998 and 2002, was part of the national constitution. Additionally, there was an organized reaction from victims' organizations who strongly opposed the possibility of amnesty for the top leaders of the paramilitary forces. On the international front, the United States government included the most emblematic face of the paramilitary movement, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia⁴⁷ (AUC), in the list of terrorist organizations associated with drug trafficking. The United States Government did not favorably consider a general amnesty to the AUC, and the Uribe government was not in the best position to risk its political support and funding.

⁴⁷ The original organization's name is *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, which was the most organized, lethal, and paradigmatic expression of the paramilitary movement in Colombia.

Despite those challenges, the Uribe government promoted a penal alternative law in Congress in 2003 to demobilize the paramilitary movement that contemplated the suspension of sentences for paramilitary leaders if requested by the president (Comisión de la Verdad 2022c; Mejía y Henao 2008). The government presented the law to foreign and domestic audiences as an effective tool for demobilizing a key player in the drug trafficking business. However, significant sectors of Congress, along with organizations like the Colombian Commission of Jurists⁴⁸ and the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), successfully promoted the idea that a "comprehensive" law was needed to demobilize the paramilitaries. The law should address the need to demobilize those armed actors and fight impunity for human rights abuses (Grajales 2011; Lyons 2010). To pursue demobilization only was not acceptable.

The Uribe government failed to achieve the needed congressional support to pass its original project, so it adjusted some of its content to create the Justice and Peace law, enacted in 2005 after a long and contentious legislative process. Though born to demobilize paramilitarism, the Peace and Justice law achieved several advances in protecting victims' rights (Jaramillo 2014). In the end, amnesty became an impossible result for the Uribe government, and its efforts to achieve it opened the doors to a very different political outcome: the implementation of the first set of transitional justice institutions in the country's history.

The Justice and Peace Law is controversial among many analysts for recognizing the paramilitaries as a political organization based on a highly questionable anti-subversive ethos. It has also been questioned for enacting what Foringer calls "elite historical narratives" (2023) and the Colombian historian Maria Emma Wills calls "memories for war" (2022). While those historical narratives are, before anything else, heuristic labels containing diverse interpretations, most deny the existence of an "inner armed conflict." Instead of that, the "Colombian violence" would be explained by the existence of a terrorist menace over the State and Colombian citizens. The law's historical premise posed a significant legal and historical problem: the impossibility of asserting the state's responsibility for human rights violations. Because the conflict was reduced to a terrorist threat against institutions and the population, the law posed a de facto barrier between many

⁴⁸ The organization's original name is *Comisión Colombiana de Juristas*.

individuals and organizations claiming victimhood for state violence and their ability to succeed in the search for justice and official recognition.

The paradigmatic example of this barrier can be found in Article 5 of the Peace and Justice law, which defines the victims of human rights violations and the subjects of reparation and justice. According to that article, victims are individuals who suffered direct harm as a result of actions that violated criminal law and were conducted by organized armed groups outside the law (Congreso de Colombia 2005). In other words, victims of state crimes are not subjects of reparation and justice, as the acts that violate their rights are not legible by the state. Victims of state crimes were not subjects of commemoration, which the law understands as a measure of symbolic reparation for victims. Despite that critical setback, the law incorporated principles of transitional justice that prevented amnesty for paramilitary leaders. It also ended up creating the conditions of possibility for institutionalizing the human rights memory model, which, despite the content of the Peace and Justice Law, took place within the National Center for Reparation and Reconciliation⁴⁹ (CNRR), the first transitional justice institution in Colombia's history.

The CNRR was a forced concession by the Uribe government to interest groups, experts, congressional representatives, and international organizations that demanded accountability and justice for human rights violations committed by the paramilitaries (Foringer 2023; Jaramillo 2014; Wills 2022; Riaño Alcalá y Uribe 2016). The CNRR was unprecedented in Colombia, and its general objective was to satisfy the rights of a newly legally recognized subject: the victim. Kristin Foringer claims that the victim's category in Colombia came to be in 2011 when a different law was passed (law 1448, also known as the Victim's Law). She is partially right. The Victim's Law defines the victim's category to this day, but it was first enacted with the Peace and Justice Law, also called the 975 law.

Bureaucrats at the CNRR, a mixed composition of state officials, civil society members, and victims' representatives, played a critical role in disputing the initial understanding of victimhood in Colombia, hoping to make it more broad and appropriate for international standards and for the demands of the victims' movement. However, they had to search for ways to fulfill victims' rights for the most victims with the initial definition that the Peace and Justice law provided. The CNRR

⁴⁹ The organization's original name is *Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación*.

aimed to fulfill victims' rights by monitoring the policies outlined in the law with limited funding that mostly came from international cooperation (Jaramillo 2014). The lack of government funding was not necessarily bad. It positively affected the corporation's independence and that of its multiple internal divisions, such as the Historical Memory Group (GMH)⁵⁰, the first official body for historical clarification in Colombia under the framework of human rights memory.

The commission's independence was also achieved through the plurality of its composition, which was another result of international cooperation, this time in the form of technical advice provided by organizations such as the ICTJ (Riaño Alcalá y Uribe 2016). The CNRR was not a truth commission despite the commitment to clarify human rights violations the GMH was tasked with. Primarily, the CNRR was a monitoring and facilitation body for the processes outlined in the Justice and Peace Law (which was mostly about the demobilization of the paramilitaries). However, the law established functions that made it similar to a truth commission, which GMH officials strategically used for the sake of justice and accountability. Article 52 of the law mandated the CNRR to "present a public report on the reasons for the emergence and evolution of illegal armed groups" (Congress of Colombia 2005). Article 7 established the "right to the truth" regarding serious acts of violence, and Article 58 mandated an official duty of memory. None of these provisions were necessarily connected in a univocal sense. Still, the agency of GMH's bureaucrats, deeply committed to human rights accountability and promoting democratic values, created the institutional foundations of the cultural success of the human rights memory model in Colombia.

- The GMH, the formation of autonomous bureaucrats, and the institutionalization of the human rights memory framework

In 2013, nearly six years after its foundation, the GMH launched its final report, *Stop It! Memories of War and Dignity*⁵¹, the first national and official depiction of the "Colombian Violence" from a human rights framework, one that re-defined it as an inner armed conflict. The report's release can be understood as a watershed moment in Colombian politics, as it is the first official account of the inner armed conflict where the state's responsibility for patterns of human rights violations is accepted and reported at length, along with that of insurgent and paramilitary groups. Some critical

⁵⁰ The original organization's name is *Grupo de Memoria Histórica*.

⁵¹ The original title is *Basta Ya! Memorias de Guerra y Dignidad*.

voices suggest that the absence of indictments made the final report's narrative "politically correct" (Riaño Alcalá y Uribe 2016; Jaramillo 2014). However, that was not the perspective of political and economic elites or that of high-ranking officers at different branches of the security forces, who thought that the report was already too radical as it was. Suggesting the country had been experiencing an inner armed conflict rather than a terrorist menace was publicly presented by influential representatives of the political elites as a politically motivated distortion of the past (Rico 2018; Castaño, Jurado, y Ruiz 2018).

Within the context of my ethnographic work, which allowed me to speak with representatives from each of the four branches of the Colombian security forces (army, navy, air force, and police), the GMH's final report was often portrayed as an affront to the dignity of state agents, law enforcement and truth. I often heard the GMH's final report was a form of treason, as my interlocutors argued that no state bureaucrat should question the state security forces. The repeated diatribes I heard against the work of the GMH and the Truth Commission, which published its final report in 2022, were summarized once by a soldier with a well-known phrase in Colombia: "Ahora los pájaros le tiran a las escopetas" (now the birds shoot at the shotguns). This phrase is typically used to draw attention to an inappropriate and rebellious role reversal between persons from different generations or social standings. In my conversation, the phrase was used to express disbelief, even anger, over the unacceptable behavior of a group of bureaucrats that, under the soldier's logic, should not point fingers at the security forces. The phrase captures the profoundly different values held by different memory players I found during my fieldwork. While many police agents and soldiers appreciated authority, loyalty, and subordination, which usually meant a self-serving silence, bureaucrats at the GMH reclaimed their "rebelliousness" as one of the most significant values of their work. For them, "shooting at shotguns" is not a mark of shame; it is a minimum requirement for democratic life.

...

From the outset, the CNRR aimed to emulate the experience of truth commissions in countries such as South Africa, Guatemala, and Peru. This fact could puzzle analysts trying to make sense of Uribe's government as a coherent totality, as it was known to be profoundly hostile against human rights advocacy and victims' rights (Foringer 2023). I will say that the will to emulate a Truth Commission was not the product of the government's needs or wants, as it wasn't the

consolidation of a transitional justice system with the Justice and Peace law. It was the result of the diverse backgrounds that informed many of the CNRR commissioners and their general will to own the autonomy that the Justice and Peace law provided to them.

Since day one, essential CNRR commissioners, like Eduardo Pizarro, were interested in creating a group of specialists capable of developing a publicly relevant historical clarification program. It was later known as the "Historical Memory Group (GMH)⁵²." A general and competitive call looking for candidates with proven academic excellence and experience studying the "Colombian violence" was made between 2006 and 2007. The CNRR commissioners were interested in selecting experts with profound ties with human rights organizations, as they understood they were critical stakeholders and were interested in their emerging memory infrastructures⁵³, which included unofficial human rights reports and clarification commissions, community parks, and museums⁵⁴. Ultimately, the task of defining a historical clarification program that would fulfill victims' rights under the Justice and Peace Law was entrusted to prominent public intellectuals and activists, including Maria Emma Wills, Gonzálo Sánchez, Maria Victoria Uribe, Jesús Abad, and Alfredo Molano, whose work was deeply rooted in community engagement.

According to both public reflections from GMH members and external analysts, the group's initial priority was establishing its autonomy from the Uribe government's political agenda, which they viewed with significant skepticism (Jaramillo 2014; Wills 2022; Sánchez 2020; Riaño Alcalá y Uribe 2016). The search for independence was crucial due to the authoritarian and populist nature of the Uribe administration, but also as a general preventive measure against improper political control over the process of historical clarification. The institution's autonomy manifested in two ways: seeking and securing non-governmental funding and consolidating a "bureaucratic

⁵² Pizarro is an interesting intellectual figure in Colombia. He is the son of a Colombia's Navy admiral, the brother of a notable guerrilla commander who got killed when running for the Colombian presidency, and the uncle of a leftist congresswoman. He has been part of various official attempts to clarify and tell the Colombian conflict and its effects, and he was able to gain the trust of critical figures inside the Uribe government and in some sectors of the Colombian army. He was appointed director of the CNRR in the absence of the vice-president, who was initially appointed as such but was not as interested in directing the agency. He was later named as the head of the Historical Commission of the Conflict and its Victims. His more recent contribution was a history book written for the army press, where he argues that the army won the inner-armed conflict despite its end came with the signature of the peace deal (Pizarro 2023).

⁵³ Jonah S. Rubin defines memory infrastructures as distributed networks "that enable and constrain the circulation of past experience in the public sphere" (J. S. Rubin 2018, 215).

⁵⁴ In Colombia there are two types of human rights organizations, those of privileged and educated professionals at big cities, and those of victimized communities. The CNRR were more interested in the latter.

imagination" within the organization (Wills 2022). The "Bureaucratic imagination" is a concept created by Maria Emma Wills, one of the most influential members of the GMH, to designate the independent work that she and her colleagues developed in relation to the interests of the executive branch and the content of the Peace and Justice legal framework. According to her, bureaucratic imagination does not exist in all state institutions. Still, its existence in some of them should complicate the study of the state because it recognizes the impact of bureaucratic agency on its formation and the development of social processes. The bureaucratic imagination within the GMH produced a hallmark philosophy to conduct historical clarification that transformed how the "Colombian violence," its causes, and its effects were officially depicted. It also played a critical role in the interpretation GMH commissioners made of the Justice and Peace law to carry out a work that could respond to the rights of the largest number of victims.

On the financial front, the GMH obtained funding from the Ford Foundation, USIP, the Swedish Embassy, the Spanish government, the UNDP, and other organizations and governments (Riaño Alcalá and Uribe 2016). The funding from those sources was instrumental in enabling what ended up being a very critical take on the Uribe government's conceptualization of the "Colombian violence" and achieving financial sustainability. The GMH's take on the Colombian violence grew from its hallmark philosophy, one that expressed a profound concern for creating a historical memory that would be productive for improving Colombian democracy and for fulfilling victims' rights (Acosta López 2023; Stern 2018). It is important to mention here that the work of the GMH members did not occur in a vacuum; rich intellectual trajectories and experiences informing the GMH commissioners played a fundamental role in consolidating a philosophical identity for the organization. In this regard, it is essential to acknowledge that some influential members within the GMH have already participated in state-funded historical clarification initiatives. It was the case for Gonzalo Sánchez, who, before directing the GMH for eleven years, participated in an official commission to explore the causes of the "Colombian Violence" in 1987 (Jaramillo 2014; Sánchez 2020).

Politically, the GMH bureaucrats took distance from an anti-state tradition that had largely dominated the intellectual climate of universities and think tanks specializing in the study of the

"Colombian violence"⁵⁵. Gonzalo Sánchez suggests that by the late 1980s, the critical intellectuals who had solidarized with and, in some extraordinary cases, allied with the guerrilla struggle, as exemplified by the iconic case of Camilo Torres (Sánchez 1988), began to give way to an intellectual commitment for democracy. "Intellectuals for democracy" or "intellectuals for peace" was an identity most GMH members felt comfortable with (Wills 2022). The GMH commissioners saw themselves as part of this intellectual movement and, in turn, viewed the state as a strategic space from which positive changes could be produced to consolidate a democratic and peaceful society.

The GMH commissioners adopted the grammar of human rights, although it is entirely possible there were no other viable options. After all, the CNRR and the GMH within it are products of a transitional justice system. Deviating from the grammar of human rights would most likely have resulted in a resounding failure⁵⁶. However, this does not mean that the GMH was only interested in denouncing infractions to international law. The GMH bureaucrats denounced unequal land distribution as a structural form of violence connected to direct forms of violence experienced by victims of the conflict. They also found gender inequality as an explanatory variable to many of the expressions that violence took during the conflict, which in practice meant the first institutional attempt to connect feminist frameworks to the explanation of human rights violation patterns⁵⁷.

The commitment of the GMH commissioners to democracy needed a name. From a very early time in the institutional life of the GMH, and due to the closeness of some members to various victims' organizations, commissioners decided that the memory the group would offer to Colombian society would be labeled as a "plural memory." The decision to produce a "plural memory" was not necessarily novel, as the Peruvian Truth Commission had already developed that notion (J. P. Feldman 2021). Still, it resulted from a process of consultation and relationship-

⁵⁵ Two expressions from that tradition, one Marxist and the other one anti-imperialist, can be found on the report of the Historical Commission of the Conflict and its Victims (*Comisión Histórica del Conflicto y sus Víctimas*), an initiative that took place the midst of the peace negotiations between the state and the FARC guerrilla as a measure to define who was the most responsible violator of human rights, an issue that paralyzed negotiations for many months. It is not known if the commission's report had any effect on the negotiation table, but it sure was productive to show the multiple ways how the past has been remembered under different intellectual traditions in Colombia.

⁵⁶ This is not a mere conjecture. Darío Acevedo, the only director aligned with the reactionary memory model that a historical clarification institution has had in Colombia, failed in every attempt to redirect the humanitarian perspective and narrative that the GMH built over the years. More on this in the next section.

⁵⁷ Before the GMH bureaucrats did that, feminist collectives had started to lead historical clarification exercises in that direction (Alfonso y Beristain 2013).

building between the GMH members and communities and organizations affected by human rights violations, which are profoundly diverse in Colombia (Riaño Alcalá y Uribe 2016; Wills 2022; CNRR 2007). According to Riaño and Uribe, consolidating a "plural memory" was critical to comply with the Justice and Peace law and to fulfill victims' rights of recognition, reparation, and justice (2016).

The plural memory, also referred to by most public advocates as memory for democracy and even memory for peace (Pizarro 2015; Sánchez 2020; Wills 2022), was a project that opposed reducing the complexity of the Colombian conflict to a terrorist threat to democratic institutions. Instead, it aimed to address structural violence that does not usually fall within the concerns associated with first-generation human rights or the historical clarification practice of the first truth commissions (Castillejo 2013; Gonzalez, Naughton, y Reátegui 2014). In contrast to the Uribe government's reductionist narrative of the conflict, which media outlets massively distributed, the GMH sought to examine how, alongside the most atrocious forms of direct violence committed by legal and illegal armed actors, existed structural variables explaining the reproduction of violence against civil society. The GMH accepted that violence in Colombia was complex and multi-causal.

Plural memory was not a response to the provisions of the Justice and Peace Law; it was the product of activating a bureaucratic imagination that "rebelled" against the Uribe government's political definition of "Colombian violence" as a terrorist menace. It was also an attempt to expand the limits of human rights memorialization in Latin America. Maria Emma Wills, in a thorough account of the institutional life of the GMH, suggests that the bureaucratic imagination exists when officials mobilize their agency "to situate themselves in their own historical circumstances, take stances, innovate and improvise, and not just repeat" (Wills 2022, 88). Bureaucratic imagination is only possible under circumstances where there is a high degree of autonomy, which, according to her experience and that of her colleagues, depends on three variables: officials willing to set their own goals, administrative and financial capabilities to advance toward them, and articulation with political and social support in critical junctures. Within the operative framework of the GMH, officials managed to establish their priorities thanks to the achievement of funding from international sources and social support, in addition to having officials willing to improvise to achieve their objectives.

In practice, the plural memory of the Colombian conflict placed victims and their experiences at the center of the entire investigative process, a methodological design distinct from that of the Truth Commission in Argentina, which focused on the clarification of forced disappearances, or that of South Africa, which focused on the testimonies of perpetrators seeking amnesty. Doing so within the normative framework of the Justice and Peace Law was possible because Article 7 established the right to the truth, conceptualized as the right of society and victims to know the truth about crimes committed by organized armed groups outside the law (Congress of Colombia 2005). However, centering historical clarification on the victims implied a significant logistical and financial challenge, as the number of victims in Colombia by 2007 was more significant than the total population of countries like Uruguay, Paraguay, or Bolivia⁵⁸. The GMH, then, focused on studying massacres, as it was a pattern of victimization that traversed the experience of most victims and also illustrated how the armed conflict was a complex war against the civilian population by all actors in the war (GMH 2013). However, in Colombia, a massacre can occur every two days, as suggested by data from 2011 (Guarnizo 2023). Accordingly, selecting case studies became a critical question.

Within the GMH's autonomy, the commissioners decided that the selection of cases should follow their explanatory capacity and pedagogical power (Stern 2018). On the explanatory level, they sought the selected massacres to illustrate and reveal more significant dynamics: who the armed actors were, what the state and non-state responsibilities were, modes of victimization, power structures, and memories of pain and resistance. Pedagogically, they aimed to choose exemplary cases regarding the imprint they had left or could leave on the public. After all, the importance of the enlightening work was not necessarily to contribute to specialized literature but to contribute to a public understanding of the horror experienced by the victims and what enabled it, intending to eradicate its root causes. Then, the GMH commissioners selected "emblematic cases" such as the Bojayá massacre, the Bahía Portete massacre, the Trujillo massacre, and the Rochela massacre, among others, to make sense of the Colombian violent dynamics during the conflict. The GMH's

⁵⁸ The final report presented by the GMH estimated that approximately 15% of the Colombian population, 5.7 million people in 2013, were victims of forced displacement. The Truth Commission estimated in 2022 that the number of victims of forced displacement had risen to eight million. These numbers do not necessarily account for victims of other human rights violations such as forced disappearing, kidnapping, torture, forced recruitment, etc.

final report synthesized the findings from studies on emblematic cases published from 2008 to 2012.

The autonomy achieved by the GMH was undoubtedly positive. The GMH set the priorities and principles of its clarificatory work, which expanded into new directions with the work of the Truth Commission between 2018 and 2022. However, this does not mean that the work of the GMH had no issues. Uribe and Riaño suggest that the GMH encountered three dilemmas that weakened the construction of a plural narrative of social memories in Colombia and served to "domesticate" and "instrumentalize" those memories. The dilemmas were reconstructing historical memory amid war, framing certain voices while excluding others, and discussing the issue of victimization without fetishizing that identity (Riaño Alcalá and Uribe 2016). Reconstructing historical memory in the context of war hindered the generation of the necessary trust to represent all the voices involved in the conflict. Likewise, the fear of retaliation could have prevented the emergence of key issues due to self-censorship. Some collaborators reported threats, while some others had to run into exile. The GMH could not access the testimonies of members of the FARC and other "left-wing" guerrilla groups, as they were not part of the demobilization process carried out between the Uribe government and the paramilitaries. However, the GMH commissioners were always very cautious when integrating the testimonies of the "perpetrators" into their work, as, according to many of them, they could "stigmatize victims" (Riaño Alcalá and Uribe 2016, 17).

The voices of the victims in the GMH reports, including the final report, were limited to those victims who trusted the GMH as an official organization for historical clarification. Institutions like the Movement of Victims of State Crimes (MOVICE)⁵⁹ were suspicious for a long time about how their testimony would be used and the editorial role of the government when producing the reports. Another problematic aspect was that the victims who achieved greater visibility in the reports were those belonging to the more "established victims organizations," which also had allies or members of their organizations inside the GMH. This means that the experiences of unorganized populations did not get a proper representation of their injuries during the conflict. Despite GMH's will to do otherwise, the GMH could not avoid the problem of homogenizing the victims into a singular political and emotional community (Riaño Alcalá and Uribe 2016; Jaramillo 2014).

⁵⁹ My translation. The organization's official name is Movimiento de Víctimas de Crímenes de Estado.

The previous issue had two immediate consequences: on the one hand, Colombian public opinion became aware of the magnitude of victimization for the first time, and the victims became a topic of daily concern, achieving a level of representation in the media never seen before⁶⁰. On the other hand, the victim's condition was radically depoliticized, which negatively affected the groups of militants that suffered the effects of political violence. But despite the depoliticization of the victim subject, the victim's condition entered the political arena as never before. Political actors began a crusade to be acknowledged as the proper spoke persons of victims. Victims eventually became independent political actors who achieved representation in the peace negotiations between the state and the FARC guerrillas. Later, after the signature of the peace deal, they managed to get representation in Congress under the "peace-seat" formula⁶¹. However, the depoliticization of victimhood also carries a consequence that I explore in this dissertation: the balkanization of victims and the relativization of their pain according to sectorial interests.

...

The GMH can be understood as the bird that shot at the shotguns. The GMH did not accept the limitations the Uribe government wanted to impose on what could be known and said about the "Colombian violence" and its victims. The GMH rejected the government's ideological platform that suggested violence was the product of a terrorist and criminal menace. Instead, it claimed the inner armed conflict required a political solution and accountability from all actors, including the state. This does not imply that the GMH was an anti-state organization, as its reports, especially the final report, acknowledge the illegal armed actors as the biggest perpetrators of human rights violations⁶².

- A reaction in three movements

⁶⁰ After the publication of the first GMH reports, a large number of journalistic initiatives began to appear seeking to cover the conflict from a human rights perspective (Rutas del Conflicto, Verdad Abierta). The victim became a constantly present subject in Colombian political culture.

⁶¹ Who gets to be a victim is still a very problematic issue in Colombia, as some of the latest election results have shown. For instance, one of the peace-seats at congress is currently occupied by Jorge Rodrigo Tovar Vélez, the son of "Jorge 40", one of the bloodiest paramilitary leaders in the Atlantic coast. Jorge Rodrigo Tovar ran for that seat with the support of Asociación Paz es Vida, a grass roots victim's organization in the North of Colombia, where paramilitaries had a great deal of influence and power during the nineties and the early 2000's.

⁶² Some authors interpret the Colombian State as the most responsible party for human rights violations because they assume paramilitary crimes are state crimes (Foringer 2023). However, historical clarification initiatives in Colombia have disaggregated those human rights violations to suggest the state and paramilitary forces are different initiatives answering to their own and independent chains of command.

The reactionary memory framework is, above all, a defensive reaction to the memorialization framework that the GMH institutionalized with its work, which was later continued and extended by the National Center of Historical Memory (CNMH) and the Colombian Truth Commission (CEV). The reactionary memory framework is simultaneously a protest against the human rights memorialization framework and a selective adaptation of its grammar. The adoption of human rights memorialization grammar is critical to making sense of this memory framework. It takes it apart from more conventional emblematic memories in Latin America held by conservative sectors, like salvation or heroic memories where political elites and security forces are portrayed as saviors of the nation in times of crisis (Stern 2018; Wills 2022).

The reactionary memory framework organizes meaning following a human rights register that has been compelling for many. It codes the past just as historical clarification commissions and human rights activists have done in Colombia for almost two decades but with two substantive differences: scope and general purpose. By scope, I refer to the selection criteria that every emblematic memory implies. By general purpose, I refer to every emblematic memory's general political direction, the organization of countermemory or counter-countermemory⁶³. In terms of scope, it is limited to the victims of the sector searching for official and public recognition. In other words, there is no “universal” concern for victimhood but a sectorial one, a selection criterion that separates the reactionary memory framework from the human rights memory framework. Its purpose is not necessarily justice and recognition but vindication. While human rights memory in Colombia is better known for demanding accountability from the state and national elites for violence inflicted on the population of victims, the reactionary memory political focus is countering the moral, political, and cultural consequences of suggesting the Colombian state and its political and economic elites share responsibility over the origin and duration of the Colombian armed conflict and, of course, over the perpetration of human rights abuses.

The social life of the reactionary memory model in Colombia provides enough evidence of its political association with the emergence of an institutionally accepted human rights memory model. In this section, I argue that three critical moments allow us to trace the social life of the

⁶³ Steve Stern’s conceptualization of emblematic memories is critical here. Stern defines emblematic memories in the following way: “Emblematic memory refers not to a single remembrance of a specific content, not to a concrete or substantive “thing,” but to a framework that organizes meaning, selectivity, and countermemory” (Stern 2004, 105).

reactionary memory model in Colombia, a memory model that, so far, has a negative balance in terms of its political and cultural results. The first moment is the reaction to the historical and clarificatory work of the GMH, later known as the National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH)⁶⁴. This was a reaction to the GMH's insistence on involving the state and the political and economic elites as facilitators or responsible parties for human rights violations. This moment is marked by the emergence of new memory actors at the civil society and state levels. The second moment was the frustrated attempt to "cancel" the plural memory efforts led by the CNMH and to institutionalize the reactionary memory model following the electoral victory of a new Uribe government in 2018. During this moment, the institutionalization of the security forces' memories, including the National Police, was consolidated into offices with a portfolio of memory initiatives that visibilize an underestimated universe of harm and sidestep calls for accountability. Finally, the third moment is the sectorial, but partially unified, reaction to the Truth Commission's final report, which was interpreted as a political opportunity to build a new and more extreme right-wing platform where culture war plays a central role in the mobilization of electors.

Steve Stern reminds us that making collective memories is reciprocal with politics, a quality that becomes particularly evident when considering the chronology of memory struggles and their overall cultural influence (2004). The movements I describe in the following pages demonstrate that emblematic memories are not plain collective recollections but complex cultural products that incorporate the depiction of real experiences with situated political needs. The reactionary memory framework development in Colombia shows that human rights memorialization has been profoundly successful in the country as the overall culture of human rights. However, it also shows that human rights discourse cannot guarantee a singular political outcome, as it can be repurposed in several ways.

- First Movement: The reactions to the institutionalization of counter-memories

In the first week of memory ever sponsored by the Colombian state through the CNRR in September 2008, the GMH launched its first partial report: *The Trujillo Massacre: A Tragedy That*

⁶⁴ In 2011, the Colombian congress approved the victim's law, a new legal framework to deal with victim's attention and rights restitution. Just as the Peace and Justice law did before, the victim's law contemplated the importance of historical clarification. The GMH became the CNMH under the content of that law.

*Does Not End*⁶⁵. The report made visible the suffering of Trujillo's community, which by 2008 had 342 legally acknowledged victims of forced displacement, torture, murder, and disappearance that occurred in a period of extreme violence between 1988 and 1994 (Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación 2011). The report was also a public declaration of the emergence of human rights memorialization as a new official way to memorialize the "Colombian violence," its causes, and responsible agents⁶⁶. However, the human rights memorialization that the report was announcing implied new features concerning international uses of human rights memorialization. As an updated human rights memory variant, it contained at least two innovations compared to other institutionally driven attempts to memorialize violent pasts with a human rights perspective in Colombia and abroad.

On the one hand, there was a novel conceptualization of harm, which in human rights-driven narratives worldwide used to be more pragmatically rather than historically defined. In the traditional scheme, harm is the physical manifestation of human rights violations on a victim over a clearly defined period of time, such as the effects of torture, genocide, displacement, or disappearance (Miller 2021; Foringer 2023). Within this conceptual framework, the context of the victim is irrelevant, as the important aspect of clarifying the past is documenting the violation of international law and the state's duty to redress the harm through public recognition of wrongdoings, something codified as the right to truth and reparation (Castillejo 2014; Teitel 2003). In its first partial report, the GMH distanced itself from that model and aimed to understand harm more holistically, paying close attention to the contexts that threaten the conditions for experiencing a genuinely democratic life, working towards empowering victims in their struggles and recognizing historical memory as a political project of social justice, not just as symbolic redress for victims (Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación 2011). The innovation was not absolute, as the past continued to be expressed within the universe of meaning that the grammar of human rights allows, something that has led some scholars to suggest that the

⁶⁵ I characterize this as a 'partial' report because it later served as one source for the GMH's final report of 2013, which, rather than focusing on a specific case study, presented a comprehensive analysis of Colombia's history of violence during the internal armed conflict.

⁶⁶ As I stated before, by that time, the "official truth," promoted by the Uribe government, suggested that the "Colombian violence" was a consequence of terrorist groups waging war against Colombian society

memorialization grammar of the GMH was politically correct⁶⁷ (Jaramillo 2014; Riaño Alcalá and Uribe 2016).

The second innovation, which was relevant to the Colombian case, caused the greatest political effects, as it directly opposed the discourse with which the Uribe government tried to make sense of human rights violations in Colombia. As previously mentioned, the Uribe government conceptualized violence in Colombia as the product of a terrorist and narco-trafficking threat against democratic institutions. This conceptualization, which took legal form with the Justice and Peace law, disregarded the State's involvement in human rights violations, depoliticized violence in a way that presented it as a conflict between good and evil, and stigmatized the victims of a complex counter-insurgency strategy that primarily affected the civilian population (Wills 2022; GMH 2013; Truth Commission 2022). The GMH's first partial report suggested that the Colombian state was directly involved in violating the rights of victims and maintaining impunity, which in practice meant ignoring the provisions of the Justice and Peace Law. The report also denied any moral privilege to any armed actor, whether legal or illegal, effectively equating them in terms of the abuses they committed against civilians⁶⁸. Political, economic, and security elites consistently resented GMH's refusal to accept the state's moral privilege to commit violence against the civil population. Finally, the report questioned the imposition of a democratic order through war, which was the most important political banner of the Uribe government.

Despite the GMH criticism of governmental assumptions and the state's official behavior, the Uribe government surprisingly welcomed the report on the Trujillo massacre, which was one of the first public outcomes of the Justice and Peace Law application, and the first example of what GMH bureaucrats called plural memory (CNRR 2007). In the aftermath of the report's release, the government formally acknowledged state agents' involvement in the Trujillo massacre through a public apology, dispatching both the vice president and minister of defense to the town to deliver this official recognition (Redacción El Tiempo 2008a). Soon after that, the Prosecutor's Office

⁶⁷ I take distance from that line of thinking, as the story I tell in this chapter suggest there was nothing politically correct about the GMH's memorialization of the past. It was profoundly uncomfortable for political and economic elites. It was also very uncomfortable for the elites of legal and illegal armed groups, who up to this day find it hard to read the conflict through the eyes of civilian communities affected by war.

⁶⁸ This has been denounced by conservative and security forces' elites as a measure of the official historical clarification perversion. I interpret this fact as a measure of the political maturity and democratic values of the GMH bureaucrats.

ordered 20 arrests for the massacre: six directed at paramilitaries and hitmen, two against former local officials, and twelve against members of the Army and the Police (Redacción El Tiempo 2008c). Meanwhile, the departmental government, using funds sent by the national government for that purpose, announced the construction of housing for the victims' families (Redacción El Tiempo 2008b).

In September and October 2008, announcements of arrests and new indictments continued to appear in the newspapers, and thus, as if by magic, 20 years of impunity seemed to disappear due to the goodwill and efficiency of a government committed to the reparation of the victims⁶⁹. However, the government's attentive and positive reception of the GMH's work could not last, as it implied a rhetorical shift that challenged the political identity of the Uribe government. The government's identity was built on a populist agenda that fragmented the national political community between patriots committed to the anti-insurgency project and anti-patriots, identifiable by their critical positions about the government and the state security apparatus (Bayona 2021; Pardo 2020). Additionally, the increasing focus on the paramilitary and its enabling conditions, also linked to political events such as the eruption of the parapolitics scandal, began to cause unease in economic and political elites⁷⁰.

In particular, the sector of cattle ranchers, which was profoundly influential and closely connected to the Uribe government, viewed the emerging victims' movement around the CNRR and the GMH's focus on paramilitarism with disfavor. A plausible reason for this discontent lies in the concern for the emergence of public awareness about the historical relationship between land dispossession among poor peasant families and land accumulation by large landowners who turned to cattle ranching (Hurtado-Hurtado, Ortiz-Miranda, y Arnalte-Alegre 2024). Additionally, the GMH's plans to investigate connections between prominent figures in the cattle ranching sector and the paramilitary movement, intended as a follow-up to their first partial report, appeared to

⁶⁹ Four years after the report's release, a GMH documentary exposed that the housing promised by both departmental and national governments remained as abandoned, half-constructed ruins. Moreover, the documentary revealed that the judicial process had completely stalled, with not a single perpetrator having been convicted for the massacre (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2012b)

⁷⁰ The parapolitics scandal encompassed a series of allegations and judicial proceedings in the 2000s against politicians who had received paramilitary support. The investigations revealed that a substantial number of Congress members from Uribe's governing coalition had benefited from paramilitary backing, including direct financial support and coerced voting schemes. This scandal transformed public understanding of paramilitarism, revealing it as a systemic problem that implicated state institutions alongside regional political and economic elites throughout the country.

generate considerable concern about the public exposure of these relationships (Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación 2010; 2009). The National Cattle Ranchers' Federation⁷¹ (FEDEGAN), the visible and organized face of the cattle rancher sector since the 1960s, did not take long to react to the GMH's work. In September 2009, just four days before the release of the GMH's second partial report, which explored the El Salado massacre in a municipality located in the Montes de María region⁷², FEDEGAN launched its report on human rights violations called *Ending Forgetfulness*⁷³, which is the first consolidated cultural product belonging to the reactionary memory framework⁷⁴.

FEDEGAN's closeness to Álvaro Uribe's government was more than just an ideological commitment, as the government promised to be a source of financial support for the production of large national agricultural enterprises. FEDEGAN collaborated with the government on programs like *Agro Ingreso Seguro*, designed to protect agricultural producers' income from external shocks as Colombia accelerated its economic liberalization (Congreso de la República 2007). FEDEGAN found in the government an ally that served two crucial purposes: providing security guarantees against guerrilla harassment of the sector, and offering political support in the face of human rights activists' persistent accusations about the cattle ranching sector's questionable ties to paramilitary groups. On September 30, 2005, during National Cattle Rancher Day, FEDEGAN convened a meeting with high-ranking officials, including Attorney General Mario Iguarán, Agriculture Minister Andrés Felipe Arias, and the President of the Republic Álvaro Uribe, to denounce what they termed a “cattle rancher genocide.” (Delgado Pinzón 2013). Despite the prominence of the attendees, this event received no coverage in national print media.

The few available photographs show an audience of formally dressed men and women seated before a panel where high-ranking officials and dignitaries were gathered. On the walls hung “preliminary lists” containing more than 2,000 names of kidnapping and murder victims,

⁷¹ The original organization's name is *Federación Nacional de Ganaderos*.

⁷² It was a region with paramilitary control and historical conflicts between large landowners and peasant movements

⁷³ The original book's name is *Acabar con el Olvido*.

⁷⁴ I decided to exclude my analysis of that unsubstantial book from my dissertation. However, I want to point out to the Martin Luther King quote that opens it, and that has been repeatedly used by conservative actors committed to cast doubt over human rights memory: “In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the **silence** of our friends.” The quote is often used to highlight the failure of good-hearted people in taking a stand for justice. FEDEGAN memory players use it to suggest that the human rights community decided to avoid the suffering of cattle-ranchers.

accompanied by the emerging memorialization movement's slogan: “We look back to remember our past... We look forward to building our future.” The attendees' formal attire and urban gathering place marked a distinctly corporate, elite “us,” which contrasted sharply with the “us” portrayed four years later at the launch of *Ending Forgetfulness*, where low-income rural peasants were centered as the primary victims. This stark contrast in representation revealed two very different approaches to embodying and representing victimhood. But despite the problem of defining the most authentic “us” in the Colombian rancher business, it is clear that FEDEGAN's memory motto shows the core value of its proposal: its sectorial nature. WE look back to remember OUR past... WE look forward to building OUR future.

The elites, including those under the umbrella of FEDEGAN, reenacted their public reaction to the human rights memory framework with the release of the GMH final report in 2013, called *Stop it! Memories of War and Dignity*. The report synthesized the research the GMH personnel conducted over six years between 2007 and 2013. The final report drew from a substantial body of research, built upon fourteen partial reports that documented diverse manifestations of violence across Colombia: massacres, forced displacement, gender-based violence in conflict zones, ethnic violence, attacks against judicial officials, community resistance to violent regimes, and kidnapping in various regions of the country. The final report did not say anything that the partial reports had not already said. Still, it projected a national representation of violence, its causes and effects that no report had transmitted in the past. It was also the first public outcome of a new transitional justice law that corrected the limitation of the Peace and Justice law: the Victim's Law of 2011.

Despite its general lack of innovative attributes, the *Stop it* report produced a reaction that none of the GMH's previous works had garnered. *Stop It* received the first official condemnation that official human rights memorialization ever received, a somewhat contradictory fact, but not that much under democratic regimes⁷⁵. *Stop It* was also quoted by most of my informants as a justification for creating historical memory offices in the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and the

⁷⁵ It is easy to overlook the fact that the state can be even more complex under democratic regimes than under autocratic ones. In democracies, conflicts between state institutions are not only more visible, but likely more frequent, as these institutions represent diverse constituencies, interests, and timeframes. Furthermore, democracies are designed to regulate power by dividing it among various institutions or branches, each intended to exert checks and balances on the others.

Police. In other words, the *Stop It* report marked a historical rupture that propelled the security forces' elites to engage in memory politics with an institutional response.

The *Stop it* final report was a mandate of the 1448 law, also known as the victim's law, approved in 2011 after almost four years of congressional debates (Foringer 2023). The victim's law was a partial victory for the human rights movement in Colombia and a reaction to the limitations that the Justice and Peace law imposed on the concept of the victim. The victory was partial because, as Foringer demonstrates, the definition of victimhood in the law adjusted more to "elite historical narratives" held by congressmen than to the experiences of people who suffered from political violence or the takes of human rights experts who had a more comprehensive understanding of the Colombian violence (2023). Still, it was a victory for the human rights and the victims' movement. For instance, the law acknowledged victimhood in a much more pertinent way than the one found in the Justice and Peace Law. According to article 3 of the victim's law, victims are "those people that individually or collectively have suffered harm for events occurred from January 1, 1985, as a consequence of violations of International Humanitarian Law or serious and flagrant violations of international Human Rights standards, which occurred in the context of the internal armed conflict"(Congreso de la República de Colombia 2011).

The Victims' Law marked two crucial departures from the Justice and Peace Law: it acknowledged potential state responsibility for human rights violations and officially recognized the existence of an internal armed conflict. Regarding memory initiatives, the law established remembrance as a state obligation and created the CNMH (National Center for Historical Memory), which was modeled on the GMH's organizational structure and staffed by many of its personnel. The CNMH was almost like a truth commission but did not have judicial powers. Still, it was expected that the CNMH would keep the historical clarification work the GMH had conducted and guide policy in matters such as victims' reparation and social reconciliation.

The CNMH 2013 report was, up until that point, the most significant national representation of the Colombian conflict from a human rights perspective. It included a general depiction of the forms of violence committed by legal and illegal armed actors over the civil population, a still rebellious historical depiction of the inner armed conflict, a critical analysis of the judiciary system operation in issues related to the conflict, the impacts of the war over the civil population, and a testimonial section where the CNMH explores themes like suffering, dissonant interpretations of the past, and

resistance⁷⁶. According to the final report, the conflict between 1958 and 2012 resulted in 218,000 casualties, with civilians accounting for 80% of these deaths. The report documented 27,000 kidnapping victims, attributing 91% of these cases to guerrilla groups. It also recorded 1,982 massacres and 23,000 victims of selective killings. While illegal armed groups (guerrillas and paramilitaries) emerged as the primary perpetrators, state security forces were identified as responsible for 10% of selective assassinations and 8% of massacres⁷⁷. The state is also depicted as responsible for illegal detentions, physical and sexual abuse, stigmatization, and collaboration with the paramilitaries.

The *Stop It* final report did not provide anything entirely new if we take into account the partial reports the GMH and CNMH released between 2008 and 2013. Still, it was the first national depiction of the Colombian armed conflict under a human rights framework that the GMH bureaucrats helped to institutionalize between 2007 and 2011. But it was also a report that came one year after the Colombian state started its peace talks with the FARC guerrilla, and when the depiction of responsibilities for human rights violations could affect the outcome of the negotiation. Both actors on the negotiation table had issues with the report (Rico 2018).

- Second movement: The institutionalization of a counter-counter memory approach

The reaction to the plural memory of the CNMH took on an official air soon after the release of the *Stop It* report, as Juan Carlos Pinzón, the Minister of Defense, discredited it by suggesting that its conclusions were the product of the "hypotheses of radical sectors" (Casa editorial El Tiempo 2013). The minister's annoyance, shared by the elite members of the security forces, stemmed from the perceived equivalence drawn between the military and police forces and the paramilitaries and guerrillas. The equation of state security forces with illegal armed groups stands as one of the most persistent controversies in post-conflict contexts (Weld 2014; J. Feldman 2021; J. P. Feldman 2021). While conservative elites and security forces assert their exclusive legal and moral right to exercise violence, human rights organizations challenge this claim by holding both legal and illegal armed actors accountable under the same principles. This position does not reject the state's

⁷⁶ Instead of accepting 1985 as the starting date of the conflict, as the Victim's law coded it, the report started its historical narrative in 1958.

⁷⁷ In this case proportions are misleading. Security forces did not only conducted massacres, they assisted the commission of massacres by the paramilitaries. Global figures do not reflect that well, but the final report narrative does.

legitimate pursuit of a monopoly on violence. Rather, it reflects the human rights community's principle that human rights violations should be judged independently of the perpetrator's legal status or institutional affiliation.

However, not just the "establishment" elites were dissatisfied with the report. The FARC elites, who were by then gathered at the Havana peace table, also questioned the report, although with less energy and radicalism⁷⁸. The FARC suggested that the CNMH's work was unreliable due to its connection to the state as an official body and called for the creation of another clarifying commission "from which the inescapable responsibilities of those who have been part of the conflict beyond the armed groups must be derived" (La W 2013). In summary, while the conservative elites, official and unofficial, questioned the "equating" of the security forces with illegal armed actors, the subversive elites questioned the silence around the responsibility of actors that were not part of the revolutionary movement. In both cases, I believe there was a rather selective and incomplete interpretation of the GMH final report.

Following the 2016 peace agreement, FARC commanders aligned with the human rights memory model, at least if one interprets their reluctance to discuss the past beyond the requirements of transitional justice institutions as such an alignment. In contrast, conservative political elites pursued the institutionalization of a reactionary memory model through two interlinked strategies: the co-optation of the CNMH and the coordination of a unified memorialization initiative across security force branches. While conservative elites' broader interventions in Colombia's memory debates fell outside the scope of my research, I can address their involvement in security forces' initiatives and their public opposition to the human rights memory model.

Conservative elites in the Santos government (2010-2018) were mostly, but not exclusively, represented in the national government's Ministry of Defense. During the peace negotiations, the Minister of Defense performed the state's hardline on illegal armed actors, including the FARC. This was consequential with one of the principles of the peace negotiation table: "Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed" (Institute for Integrated Transitions 2018). It is also possible that the Ministry of Defense's hard line toward the FARC was also the product of lessons learned from failed peace negotiations in the past. Whatever the cause for what sometimes seemed like a disconnected ministry from the national purpose of achieving peace with the FARC, the Ministry

⁷⁸ Peace negotiations between the Colombian state and the Farc took place in Havana, Cuba between 2012 and 2016.

of Defense also became the space where security forces could find political support and a public platform to air their concerns and anxieties during the peace negotiations and the incoming transitional period. In 2016, the Ministry of Defense and security forces' high commands established a strategy to counter human rights-driven historical narratives, anticipating the creation of new transitional justice institutions from the state-FARC negotiations. This initiative was built upon Law 1448 of 2011, which recognized members of the security forces as potential victims of human rights violations and invited their participation in constructing the national historical narrative⁷⁹.

The Ministry of Defense and security forces' commands formalized their opposition to the human rights memory model in the 2016 strategic security plan. This document established, among other matters related to peacebuilding, that the security forces should develop their own independent historical memory as a cultural product “built under a vision of victory, transparency, and legitimacy.”(Ministerio de Defensa 2016). The proposal came after frustrating interactions between representatives of security forces commands and the Ministry of Defense with the CNMH bureaucrats following the release of the *Stop It* report (Wills 2022). In the end, the fact that security forces commands decided to organize their take on the Colombian past indicates that it was unacceptable for them not to have some degree of control over the definition of the central themes of the national historical memory that the state was going to promote during the post-conflict. However, in my ethnographic research, it became clear that the proposal to build a coherent historical take by the security forces remained a strategic goal without a clear implementation policy beyond what each branch of the Colombian public force wanted to undertake on their own⁸⁰.

To the best of my knowledge, conservative elites at the Ministry of Defense did not articulate or support in any relevant way memory initiatives until 2018, when the right-wing government of

⁷⁹ The article 143 is always used to justify the armed forces creation and operation of historical memory offices: ARTICLE 143. THE STATE’S DUTY TO REMEMBER. The State's duty to remember is reflected in fostering the necessary guarantees and conditions for society, through its various expressions such as victims, academia, think tanks, social organizations, victims' and human rights organizations, as well as state bodies with appropriate competence, autonomy, and resources, to engage in memory reconstruction efforts as a contribution to fulfilling the right to truth, which belongs to both victims and society as a whole

⁸⁰ Evidence of this fragmentation appears in the general absence of joint memory initiatives. My informants suggested that each branch preferred to work independently to avoid assuming unwanted responsibilities or being associated with other forces' actions. I found a strong reluctance of most my informants to accept the possibility of working with the Army, as they had many problems they did not want to be associated with.

Iván Duque won the presidency. In that year, the government reclaimed control of the CNMH and, in early 2019, appointed Darío Acevedo as its general director, a historian of little renown but ideologically close to the Uribe government's interpretation of the conflict.

Between 2019 and 2022, I found that each branch of the security forces acted differently in clarifying the past. For example, while the Navy, the Police, and the Army hired external researchers to carry out specific research projects, the Air Force had a stable team of civilians working on memory initiatives. Furthermore, it became clear to me that each branch of the public force had its own interests concerning the Colombian post-conflict scenario. For instance, during my predissertation fieldwork of 2019, the Air Force's historical memory area representatives told me they were not working on memory initiatives with the Army because of their problematic human rights record, which posed a problem for their “clean” public image⁸¹. Police memory players consistently emphasized to me their independence, stressing that they were neither part of the military forces nor subordinate to the Army.

Within the 2016 strategic security plan framework, the only coordinated projects between the security forces' branches took place under Ivan Duque's government (2018-2022), and the guidance of key functionaries like the Minister of Defense and the director of the CNMH, that by that time was an Uirbist. With the support of the executive, the Colombian security forces released a joint book in 2022 (Ardila et al. 2022), the same year that the Truth Commission was expected to release its final report. The book was far from being a priority for the government or any branch of the security forces. It was presented to the Truth Commission, probably more as a sign of protest and antagonism than as a contribution, as it was publicly presented. The CNMH also launched a digital initiative, *Our Memory Counts*, containing stories of victimized security forces agents. Still, little was done to make them available or known to the public. In many ways, the Duque government was much more interested in closing conversations about the past than in making them louder. After all, Duque represented the mildest wing of the *Centro Democrático* political party and interpreted culture wars as an unnecessary and dangerous game, unlike some of the most

⁸¹ The army is involved in the “False Positive” scandal, another way to call selective killing of civilians. According to the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, the Army killed, between 2003 and 2008, more than 6.400 civilians that were presented as guerrilla casualties for promotions, money, and a general sense of victory over the guerrillas (Uprimny 2023).

extreme political figures that can be found there, like Maria Fernanda Cabal, the wife of FEDEGAN's president.

- Third movement: A timid attempt to counterbalance the Truth Commission and its final report

Ivan Duque, a congressional representative from the *Centro Democrático* political party and close to Alvaro Uribe, won the presidential elections in 2018 with an anti-peace agreement platform (Redacción Política 2018). By the time Duque won, the peace agreement had already been signed, and transitional justice institutions such as the Truth Commission, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, and the Unit of Disappeared People Search were protected by international agreements and were already working. The CNMH was the only transitional governmental agency where Duque could have had some degree of influence by placing a new director. So he did. Extreme right-wing political figures saw the CNMH as a strategic site to fight the cultural influence of human rights memory, as it was the site that institutionalized it and was under the control of the National Government. Finally, it was also the most authorized site to question the Truth Commission's clarificatory work, which was only started in 2018, and even a site to question "judicial truth" that could transpire from the Special Jurisdiction for Peace.

The designation of a new head for the CNMH ended up being harder than expected for the new government, as the Colombian Uribist movement did not have many candidates to fill the void left by previous director Gonzálo Sánchez, one of the most celebrated historians in Colombia. During the second semester of 2018, the government failed to name Mario Pacheco as the new director, a local journalist who had publicly suggested that the FARC infiltrated the CNMH. Pacheco was also known for publicly suggesting that a government agency should not question the state or act against its interests in a clear reference to the CNMH's uncomfortable historical clarification work (Colombia 2020 2018). Duque's failure to name him as the new head of the CNMH can be attributed to the organized public resistance displayed by national and international scholars, human rights advocates, and many victims' organizations.

Duque's administration also failed to name Vicente Torrijos, a journalism professor famous for his public defense of the security forces and his rejection of the CNMH contributions to make sense of the Colombian conflict as a multi-causal violent social process. Torrijos got close to securing the position as the new chair of the CNMH, but public attention on his profile revealed he faked

his PhD diploma. After his fake diploma became public, he quit his appointment as the new CNMH director (Bolaños 2018). After those failures, the government named Dario Acevedo the new CNMH director in 2019. This historian denied the existence of the inner armed conflict and was an acquaintance of José Obdulio Gaviria, the main ideological advisor of Alvaro Uribe and nephew of Pablo Escobar Gaviria, the famous Colombian drug lord (Redacción Colombia 2019).

Acevedo did not have an easy time during his tenure, as he faced the opposition of many actors and the support of few. One of the first consequences of his selection in 2019 was the remotion of the archives that some of the most influential victims' organizations had donated to the CNMH. The UP, a leftist political organization that faced a policy of systematic extermination by the state during the eighties and nineties, and the Minga Association, an organization of indigenous peoples, Afro-Colombians, and peasants, were some of the most significant. Later, in early 2020, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience suspended the CNMH membership due to concerns about the denialist attitudes of Dario Acevedo (Nelson 2020). In May 2020, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace prohibited any alteration to the pilot script of the National Museum of Memory by Acevedo's administration out of concerns that he could damage the interests of victims' organizations⁸². The court's decision was ratified in 2021, showing that a critical portion of the transitional justice institutionality did not trust Acevedo's intentions (Colombia en transición 2021).

Although Acevedo's denialist attitudes raised concerns among human rights activists and CNMH bureaucrats, he failed to substantially transform or challenge the institutionalized human rights memory framework. While he welcomed and supported security forces' memory initiatives, these merely became additional contributions to the national understanding of the conflict, just another CNMH project for an institution whose most significant public moment had been the 2013 release of the *Stop It* report. When the Truth Commission released its final report in June 2022, it faced no institutional challenges or commentary. By then, Gustavo Petro, a leftist former guerrilla member, had secured the presidency. He attended the report's release and shared his perspectives, while incumbent President Ivan Duque neither attended nor promoted the event. The Centro Democrático party's October 2022 attempt to critique the Truth Commission's report through a booklet failed to generate either public discourse or meaningful impact. However, the same can be

⁸² One of the legal mandates of the CNMH was to administer and design the museum's script.

said about the Truth Commission's massive report, which has not generated meaningful political conversations up to this point.

- Reactionary Memories

Until this point, I've shown the emergence of the reactionary memory framework by establishing its relationship with the institutionalization of human rights memory. I've also described the way how conservative political actors and state agents who interpret accountability as a menace to their values navigated the cultural success of human rights memorialization in Colombia. In this section, I delineate the parameters of reactionary memories as a memorialization framework that organizes meaning, selectivity, and, in this case, counter-counter memory. Because, as I've shown in this chapter, collective memories are much more than the recollection of private experiences, I start my definition of reactionary memories by defining memory politics, the socio-cultural background, and the essential enabler of emblematic memories as a cultural reality.

I define memory politics as a political struggle over the meaning of the past that memory entrepreneurs start and primarily sustain in search of official recognition from the state, justice, and effective political participation. Memory entrepreneurs start counter-memorial political action against the dominant depictions of the past because the way it is depicted is a source of injustice or oppression that contributes to frustrating the ability of a community to thrive. Memory entrepreneurs have a primary role in sustaining the political struggle over the meaning of the past because they have profound interests invested in the recognition of their experiences and histories. But, memory entrepreneurs are not the only ones sustaining memory politics. This chapter shows that institutions play a critical role in these controversies by authorizing and expanding certain memorialization discourses. For instance, the GMH, the CNMH, and the CEV institutionalized and made the human rights memory framework popular. Political adversaries of memory entrepreneurs also play a significant role in sustaining the political controversies that I frame as memory politics, and they can eventually become memory entrepreneurs. My exploration of the Colombian controversy around the institutionalization of human rights memory shows there are emergent movements of memory entrepreneurs seeking to institutionalize a counter-counter-memorial narrative, which challenges the political success of human rights culture and the political mobilization of victims of state crimes.

Reactionary memories are the framework that organizes the meaning, selectivity, and political direction of the memorialization discourse that social sectors that oppose the moral and political consequences of human rights memory share. Reactionary memories are emblematic memories and, as such, compete with others for cultural hegemony. Given that the sectors building this emblematic discourse to make sense of the past are mostly conservative and associated with the state's security forces, it is important to ask how this discourse differs from the conventional salvation memory⁸³. Salvation memory, also labeled as heroic memory, is popular in Latin American countries that have experienced periods of profound oppression and violence, as well as periods of reckoning after successful social mobilization and the institutionalization of transitional justice technologies. Argentina, Chile, Guatemala, and Perú have experienced different variations of salvation memory. Reactionary memories differ from salvation memories because the latter do not rely on human rights grammar to select facts, organize meaning, and provide a general political direction. Salvation memory informs reactionary memories in profound ways, as will be clear in the upcoming chapters where I explore the Police Institutional Historical Memory. However, reactionary memories are an answer to the failure of salvation memories to challenge the Latin American general movement against impunity for human rights violations. It is also an answer to the cultural hegemony of human rights as a cultural discourse, an accommodation of powerful elites and institutions to its discursive parameters and values.

My ethnographical research with the National Police institutional historical memory pushed me to explore the social life of the reactions against official efforts to clarify the past since the foundation of the GMH in 2007. For all of the most critical decision makers I met in the Police memorialization initiatives, their stories as police memory players start with the role transitional justice institutions and the *Stop It* report have played in “delegitimizing the Police” or in “re-writing history” in improper and politically motivated ways. By looking into the reactions to human rights informed historical clarification, but also its particular shape, I found there was a new framework of collective memories that had not been sufficiently studied in Colombia or Latin America: the reactionary memory model.

The reactionary memory model is not a set of predictable codes or a coherent historical narrative, even when it assumes an identifiable form and content that is better described by the struggle

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against “silence,” one that human rights advocates and institutions reportedly produce. Therefore, the reactionary memory framework is better defined by a collectively shared attitude of rejection against historical narratives that challenge a privileged social position that is conceptualized as just and deserved. In the case of Colombia, reactionary memories started as a collective memorialization action led by cattle ranchers. They first denounced human rights activism, which was critical of their economic sector’s history, and then came up with a report that critiqued the findings of the GMH reports. The reactionary memory model is better characterized by a questioning attitude against counter-memories⁸⁴ that become or are on the way to becoming common sense than by a particular and well-developed historical consciousness⁸⁵. Reactionary memories can also be seen as counter-counter memory interventions meant to re-establish, with certain unavoidable and essential discursive fractures that update old narratives, once dominant depictions of the past, and the identity of, more times than not, powerful social groups. In other words, reactionary memories are the narrative resistance of somewhat powerful collectives to the ideological success of counter-memories that are usually held and promoted by subaltern groups.

Of course, the concept of reactionary memories is a theoretical reduction of the richness of a cultural and social process that never stops unfolding. Powerful and subaltern groups are not pure or unchanging substances, especially under democratic political regimes. On the other hand, the shape of a commemorative reaction cannot be predicted, as it is open to the ethics and political considerations of the actors who decide to take part in memory politics. Therefore, the reactionary memory model is only a general theoretical blueprint that does not say much without the details of concrete cases. Reactionary memories exist in Colombia, Argentina, Spain, and even the United States. Still, they all differ in the actors that push them, their motivations, the strategic content of those memories, the grammar, and the final cultural form they take.

⁸⁴ As a concept, Foucault famously championed counter-memory in his attempt to question the most positivist, monumental, and teleological takes on history (Foucault 1982). Verónica Tello defines it in a recent essay as “a concept (for re-thinking time) and agent of political subjectification that refuses the nationalist-normativity of remembrance (...) while also attempting to forge temporalities attuned to the social movements and struggles of the vanquished” (Tello 2022, 390). In other words, when we think about counter memories, we think about the history of the oppressed, which is not accepted as an official depiction of the nation, at least for a particular period.

⁸⁵ Antonio Gramsci conceptualized common sense as the outcome of a hegemonic pact between dominant and subaltern classes. Common sense would enable domination by consent, which is a form of domination Weber did not consider when exploring the link between power and the state as a form of legitimate coercion (Weber, s. f.).

In Colombia, reactionary memories are a model of collective memory that opposes the cultural, political, and social consequences of the Colombian variant of the human rights memory model, which has achieved an unparalleled grade of institutionalization I've shown in this chapter⁸⁶. However, actors pushing reactionary memories do not reject the human rights grammar. The concern for human rights is a critical feature of reactionary memories in Colombia. For instance, the cattle ranchers' memory interventions denounce a "genocide against ranchers." The Centro Democrático "historical reports" of 2022 and 2023 focus on forced recruitment of children by the FARC, sexual violence against FARC ex-combatants who opposed the peace negotiations (members of the Rosa Blanca Foundation), and kidnapping of security forces personnel. Those reports denounce a systematic effort to silence and even deny those crimes against humanity, which happen to be common denunciations made by human rights activists against the state in Latin America. In other words, social agents participating in reactionary memory initiatives are appropriating human rights activists' discursive repertoires, including their concern for denouncing violence and powerful groups interested in silencing the truth. However, social agents participating in reactionary initiatives in Colombia have a significant difference from more conventional human rights activists: they will additionally denounce the "re-writing" of history, implicitly suggesting that the nation once had an authentic and truthful version of the past that some stakeholders or dogmatic intellectuals are malignantly manipulating.

The reactionary memory model in Colombia is also characterized by its sectorial nature, especially if we compare it with the human rights memory model. Until now, reactionary memories are held and pushed by particular stakeholders who are only interested in "their memories" and collective representation. If the guiding principle of the CNMH and the CEV as historical clarification institutions were to center every symbolic act of memorialization in the experiences and interests of a sort of universal victim, the guiding principle of agents pushing the reactionary memory framework is to center every memorialization initiative in the experiences and interests of the sector they belong to. This feature is so extreme that there is no unitary memory division inside

⁸⁶ The human rights memory model in Colombia acknowledges the existence of a complex inner armed conflict where legal and illegal armed actors have victimized civilians and where economic and political elites have different degrees of responsibility for directly supporting illegal armed groups or for encouraging through different means infractions to international humanitarian law by state officials. It also denounces structural forms of violence tied to gender and race that speak of the fundamental social injustices that enable the discursive justification of direct violence against gendered and racialized bodies (GMH 2013; Comisión de la Verdad 2022a; Alfonso and Beristain 2013).

the Colombian security forces. Every branch of the Colombian security forces has independent memory offices that try to distance themselves from each other to answer to their own self-interest. Even if they all could agree that they are fighting against the historical distortions made by human rights activism, they won't work together to build a joint interpretation of the past, as each branch fears they will end up taking responsibility for the abuses committed by others. Another example of this feature is the memory work conducted by FEDEGAN, which is only interested in discussing the memories of cattle ranchers and the contributions of cattle ranchers to the Colombian nation. The sectorial nature of the Colombian reactionary memories may eventually become less salient as the Centro Democrático political party is trying to join all the voices of those who have felt excluded from the plural memory that official historical clarification institutions have been institutionalizing. However, reactionary memories cannot be plural, as they are meant to vindicate very concrete social groups.

The Colombian model of reactionary memories also features a mild form of denial, as strong or definitive denial remains feasible only in undemocratic regimes where freedom of expression is actively repressed. Social agents advocating reactionary memories in Colombia cannot fully deny their sector's or institution's involvement in human rights violations, as established 'judicial truths' from international and national courts prevent such denial, and as democratic guarantees enable those rulings to have a judicial and cultural effect⁸⁷. Instead of strong denial, these reactionary memories avoid portraying cattle ranchers or security forces institutions as perpetrators or facilitators of human rights violations. Colombian reactionary memory initiatives focus exclusively on depicting victimhood in the ranks of the sector that displays its past. This victimhood serves as a discursive strategy to deflect institutional or sectoral responsibility for abuse and crimes against humanity and to challenge the legitimacy of the human rights memory model, whether explicitly or implicitly.

The upcoming chapters explore the National Police Institutional Historical Memory as an expression of the reactionary memory framework. I concentrate on exploring the features that make the Police memorialization a compelling discourse that seems to be aligned with human

⁸⁷ This is something that the GMH bureaucrats understood very well since the beginning of their work. Their first report discussed the Trujillo massacre, which by 2008, when the report was released, had already been acknowledged as a case of human rights violations by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. The infractions to international human rights were so undeniable that the Uribe government had to welcome the report, as I showed earlier.

rights principles and the human rights memorialization process in Colombia. However, I also emphasize how the Police memorialization of itself and the conflict deviates from the human rights memory framework in ways that make it a completely different emblematic memory.

CHAPTER 2: HEROIC MEMORY WITH A TWIST: VICTIMHOOD, SACRIFICE, AND PEACEBUILDING AS THE MARKER OF A NEW POST-CONFLICT PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

"Selective memory to remember the good, logical prudence to avoid ruining the present and defiant optimism to face the future. " (*Isabel Allende*, quoted in Policía Nacional de Colombia 2019)

Reactionary memories in Colombia are a memorialization framework that competes with institutionalized human rights-driven counter-memories for public attention. However, competing against human rights-driven memorialization does not mean rejecting its grammar, as the values and discursive order those memories incorporate are present in the cultural products that reactionary memory players produce and mobilize. As a unique memorialization framework in Colombia, reactionary memories differ from the human rights memory model in two key aspects: they explicitly limit grievable lives in memorialization initiatives and public commemorative displays, and they reject questions about state and powerful socioeconomic groups' responsibility in human rights violations. Those two factors alone make it feasible to suggest reactionary memories are hardly something different than a public relations campaign used by institutions with an interest in avoiding or denying wrongdoings. However, my exploration of the Police institutional historical memory points to a more nuanced conclusion.

Even when it is impossible to separate reactionary memories from an emerging movement that rejects accountability and instrumentalizes the human rights grammar for that purpose, reactionary memories are emblematic memories that transmit real experiences and authentic socio-cultural conflicts that sit behind obvious political interests of the institutions and sectors that mobilize them. Studying emblematic memories like the reactionary memory model in Colombia should be considered an opportunity to make sense of the complex socio-cultural constitution of a discourse that organizes collective identity and shared expectations for the future. Reactionary memories are evidence of how human rights grammar is a discourse without guarantees, one that elites mobilize in very instrumental ways. Still, those reactionary memories are not disconnected from the

concerns of subaltern populations that see human rights culture with suspicion, as they feel it is mobilized against them by their enemies.

In 2016, the National Police Unit of Peacebuilding (UNIPeP) implemented the Institutional Historical Memory initiative to lead a meaningful intervention over how historical clarification institutions depicted the Police. This started with a radical rejection of the clarificatory work published by the CNMH in 2013. Still, it is publicly presented as a contribution to the national historical memory and to the Colombian Truth Commission (CEV), which operated between 2018 and 2022 and populated with CNMH bureaucrats who found in the CEV a natural place to continue their work. The Police Institutional Historical Memory has produced several memory initiatives in multiple formats that communicate its political position concerning the recent institutionalization of counter-memories with the introduction of transitional justice technologies. In this chapter, I explore the most meaningful themes the Police memory products transmit. I write about what can the Police memorialization of the conflict tell us about the cultural universe that police agents inhabit in Colombia. Finally, I discuss whether collective memory scholars and human rights activists should reject the Police's reactionary memories.

This chapter explores the Colombian National Police's reactionary memorialization initiatives. Focusing on the historicity, capaciousness, projection, and embodiment of the Police memorialization initiatives, I describe and discuss the representation of police agents and the Police institution in UNIPeP's memory products. Ultimately, I contend that the Police memorialization of the Colombian conflict is a sectorial attempt to update traditional tropes that mark the identity of the Colombian security forces for the Colombian "post-conflict." In particular, the Police memorialization of the conflict updates the link between law enforcement and heroism by introducing victimhood as the cost Colombian Police agents have paid for "building peace." Therefore, the Police memorialization of the past is as much a reaction against the institutionalization of counter-memories, reflected in institutions like the Colombian Truth Commission, as it is a redefinition of the Colombian police ethos, allowing the reproduction of institutional legitimacy under the current cultural and political climate.

This chapter is informed by Steve Stern's method for studying emblematic memories, particularly regarding the identification of the features that make them credible and culturally significant. According to Stern, five features make an emblematic memory feasible and influential, which is

critical for groups that take part in memory politics in an active way: historicity, capaciousness, projection into public or semi-public spaces, embodiment in a convincing social referent and effective carriers. By looking into the materials I included in the memory corpus I built and explained in the introduction, I explore the historicity of the Police memorialization, its capaciousness, its public projection, and its embodiment. My analysis of memory products is coupled with my participant observation notes and the content analysis of interviews with key memory players. I concentrate on the carriers of the police reactionary memory in the last chapter, where I discuss the role of expertise in validating the Police memorialization of the conflict.

- Encountering the Police memorialization of the conflict

In the summer of 2019, I conducted pre-dissertation fieldwork in Colombia. I was interested in studying the Colombian Truth Commission's bureaucratic extraction, management, and discursive organization of the "truth" in those days. However, I was also curious about the political opposition to historical clarification, which in that year translated into the government's political cooptation of the Center of Historical Memory (CNMH), an issue I already discussed in the previous chapter. In 2019, Colombia had a conservative government that pledged to revise the peace agreement with the FARC in a way that would reverse some of its most critical features. It was also a government that was hostile to accountability and had an ideological interest in portraying the state's security forces as institutions under political attack by illegitimate transitional justice institutions and bureaucrats.

I searched my social media accounts for old acquaintances who could be connected to the state's security forces in one way or another. I wanted to better understand how security forces personnel felt about the political controversies Colombia was experiencing concerning the clarification of the inner armed conflict history. I was also very curious about the position that regular police agents and military personnel had of institutions like the Truth Commission. After a while, I contacted representatives from the Army, Air Force, Navy, and the Police. To my surprise, they all claimed their institutions had "historical memory" offices I could visit. I even managed to schedule appointments with representatives of the Air Force, the Navy, and the Police. Unfortunately, I failed to schedule a meeting with the representatives of the Army I contacted.

After my conversations with representatives of those institutions, it was immediately apparent to me that the Police had the most developed and meaningful historical memory program. The Police,

just like the other institutions I visited, had published "historical memory" books, but they had published more. The Police also took part in producing documentaries and monuments, demonstrating that their "memory portfolio" was much more impressive. The Police also published more meaningful texts. For instance, the Police was the first institution with a methodological guide to memorializing the conflict, which was later used as a guide by the other institutions. The Police also had a dedicated team of police agents for UNIPEP's historical memory area, which I did not find elsewhere¹. Finally, the Police had a team that gave me the impression of authentic "moral entrepreneurship." In other words, the police agents I met felt like authentic activists who were fighting against grievances they cared about². Despite my lack of political and affective alignment with the Police priorities in the convoluted post-conflict Colombia, I became interested in studying how police agents navigated Colombia's field of memory politics.

The COVID-19 global emergency frustrated my attempt to study the Colombian Truth Commission, as it closed its in-person work and made it more challenging to gain meaningful access to the bureaucrats I wanted to work with. In contrast, the Police historical memory area was interested in scholars curious about the ins and outs of constructing the "truth" and willing to explore the Police's "contributions to the Colombian historical memory." UNIPEP's bureaucrats saw in my research an opportunity to make their memory work more visible, which was one of the leading institutional priorities. UNIPEP bureaucrats trusted their memory work to me, were willing to talk about it, and even had me in the historical memory area for various months. Those qualities made the police memorialization interesting, as state security forces in Latin America are usually depicted as institutions interested in denial, which implies seclusion and opacity. The Colombian state security forces' memorialization of the conflict is also a new and understudied development. UNIPEP's openness was a precious opportunity to explore memory politics beyond the frameworks and experiences that inform the justice seekers' movements to which collective memory scholars usually pay attention.

¹ The Air Force had a team of contracted civilians led by an officer. The lack of a more meaningful community of memory players disqualified them from my ethnographic interest.

² I did not find the same "moral commitment" in 2022, a reality that informs my conceptualization of memory players as agents that are different from memory entrepreneurs or justice seekers. Memory players enrich our understanding of memory politics and the agents that have political influence in it.

- Historicity and embodiment in a convincing social referent: the inner armed conflict and the victimhood of police agents

Emblematic memories are frameworks of meaning that organize the past in particular ways and compete for public attention and recognition. Their ability to gain influence depends on various features. Historicity and embodiment in a convincing social referent are two of them (Stern 2004). Stern defines historicity as a rupture that marks the biographies of entire generations. Emblematic memories are built from those ruptures, attach collective and private experiences associated with them meaning, and hold them as crucial referents for organizing collective identities and “social imaginaries of the future” (Castillejo 2015). The Colombian Police memorialization of the conflict, despite its institutional shape, is no different in that regard. The historical rupture that makes it culturally possible and meaningful is the inner armed conflict, a complex historical problem for Colombians to define in an uncontroversial temporal frame. Still, “the conflict,” as a historical reality that has fractured millions of lives in Colombia, is the rupture that the Police memory products discuss. Its meaning is the one that memory players at the Police dispute.

The embodiment in a convincing social referent is one of the definitive features of emblematic memories. They provide a living example of those memories and symbolize their political urgency. For instance, the holocaust survivors embody the remembrance of the highly efficient and modern savagery of the concentration camps during the Second World War. As an intellectual figure, Primo Levi is a good example of that. For the Colombian police institutional memorialization efforts, the police agent victim of the conflict is the primary social referent that sums up the Police memorialization claims. However, as I show in this section, “victimhood” has been a problematic concept for police memory players, as its meaningfulness is still a matter of controversy in multiple ways. “Victimhood,” as the concept that structures the Police memorialization social referent, clashes with the hero figure, the traditional referent that conveys the Colombian security forces' tradition, collective identity, and official history. On the other hand, “victimhood” facilitates a politically and culturally productive reinterpretation of the Police collective identity and enables the transmission of private experiences that the figure of the “hero” renders invisible.

The inner armed conflict and victimhood are two central features of the Police memorialization of the conflict. They facilitate the transmission of experiences that the institutionalized human rights memory framework missed, as police agents do not usually translate as anything different than

perpetrators of abuse during the conflict. They also facilitate transmitting private experiences that could not circulate in the Police before. The inner armed conflict and victimhood govern the memory labors of endogenous and exogenous Police memory players³. However, those features are volatile, as the Police memory players have not reached a cultural consensus on the role that victimhood must play in the representation of police agents' collective experiences during the conflict. The Police memory products are evidence of that, as well as my interactions with the Police endogenous memory players.

...

The police memorialization initiative emerged, in my initial assessment, as an endeavor to sanitize the force's history of conflict-related crimes, especially those that historical clarification commissions attached to the "security forces⁴." However, my initial exposure to the Police memorialization preceded direct contact with police agents. In other words, my preconceptions greatly influenced my initial appreciation of the Police memorialization. The notion of police victimization, presented to me in 2019 as the central feature of the Police memorialization of the conflict, seemed paradoxical in Colombia, where state security forces are implicated in targeted killings, paramilitary cooperation, and systematic abuse of protesters and minorities (Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos 2022; Temblores, s. f.; GMH 2013; Comisión de la Verdad 2022c). Though this contradiction persists, particularly when confronting contemporary police brutality in Colombia and globally, my perspective changed after engaging directly with agents working on memorializing the conflict. While it is impossible to discard the link between the Police memorialization of the conflict and public image sanitation, my ethnographic exploration of memory players at the Police shows that the Police institutional memories are much more than plain propaganda. They are also representations of meaningful and traumatic experiences that were not communicable under the human rights memory framework, nor even under the traditions that inform the collective identity of police agents. Those memories testify to cultural and political conflicts behind the curtain of institutionality.

³ Memory players fall into two categories: those who are members of the Police institution (endogenous) and those who, while not belonging to the institution, collaborate with it (exogenous).

⁴ Police agents at UNIPPEP were aware of the way how most people like me (academic, humanist, and social science enthusiast) thought of the police memory initiative. Their willingness to work with me came from the audiences they were interested to talk to. I interpret it as an authentic democratic opening UNIPPEP police agents offer.

The Colombian National Police case about the issue of police victimization is compelling in many ways. From the perspective of international law, the Police is not a military body; it is a civil force that works to prevent crime and maintain public order. Hence, the Police should not be a military objective, not even by guerrilla groups in an inner armed conflict (ICRC 2015). And still, the Colombian Police agents have been, and still are, a military objective for many illegal armed groups⁵. The concrete consequences of becoming a military objective in Colombia are dire, especially since legal and illegal armed groups in Colombia increase their political capital by accumulating dead bodies⁶. Police agents have been targeted and systematically killed in the streets of big and small cities by multiple illegal armed actors, some more political than others (Redacción Judicial 2022). Armed groups kidnap agents to use as political hostages in undignified conditions, and not all return home, not even after the signature of peace agreements (Comisión de la Verdad 2022a).

When I initially heard about the police victimization, I was, to my surprise, unmoved. I guess I had been for years while I grew up as a Colombian citizen. News about the kidnapping of police agents or the selective killing of them was part of the landscape in Colombia. Savagery, when it is so usual, it just becomes routine. In addition to that, as I developed my early political consciousness rooted in what I will call this time an "anti-capitalist tradition," all that is human gets diluted into an abstraction that presents you with an overly simplified picture: that of the repressive capitalist state vs. the masses that seek liberation. In my "political mental map," the Police were the state, and I never felt much solidarity with a machine of oppression. I imagined myself as part of the masses, and my solidarity was pretty much limited to what I could conceptualize as a part of that sociologically obscure set. I am still surprised to find out how many qualifications I sometimes

⁵ The Colombian inner armed conflict is very complex, and the involvement of the Colombian National Police in it is far from simple, as some of its units engage in combat against groups that have been considered insurreccional at different points in Colombia's recent history. This means that international protection over civilians sometimes does not cover some members of the Colombian Police, as they take part of hostilities against insurgent groups in multiple ways. Having said that, most police units do not take part in hostilities, but they are targeted as military objectives.

⁶ The Colombian army enhanced the political capital of its generals and the Uribe government by killing civilians and falsely presenting them as guerrilla casualties, an act widely known as the "false positives" scandal. Illegal armed groups, which construct their collective identity around revolutionary and anti-capitalist narratives, often target and kill police agents as a demonstration of territorial control and to leverage influence in potential or ongoing peace negotiations.

need to feel the pain some police agents experienced during the conflict. This real pain informs in fundamental ways the Police memorialization of the conflict.

My ethnographical research helped me to open the universe of my solidarity and to extend my ability to feel for those who appeared to me as "the Other" for a long time. It also helped me confirm that the state exists in a contradictory ontological shape, just like Timothy Mitchell suggested in the early nineties. The lines that divide it from society as a separate entity are a cultural arrangement that blurs how it is also society (Mitchell 1991). I would add that the state is also the collection of human groups that anthropologists are interested in, and while it is easy to forget that, sometimes too easy, we shouldn't.

In Colombia, as police agents frequently emphasized, law enforcement lacks popular support. Police agents ticket you for speeding; they remind you to behave when your loud sound system is a pain for your neighbors; they can treat you as a suspect. I can think of some other things that make them unpopular, like ganging against protesters, raiding small media outlets critical of them and other state agencies, or a complicated history of collaboration with paramilitary groups. Still, thinking of Colombian police agents as "the Police" erases a set of human experiences that are not only worthy of intellectual interest but also recognition and even empathy. Thinking of the Colombian police agents just as "the Police" is like thinking of rebels just as terrorists or of protesters just as looters. Thinking in that way is a cognitive and even political act that disconnects police agents from the rest of society and villainizes them or heroizes them in improper and potentially damaging ways. In this vein, I must say, the Police memorialization of the conflict was illuminating for me.

The tears and words of victimized family members of police agents I met during fieldwork were an emotional turning point, or in Stern's terms, a very convincing social referent of the Police's reactionary memorialization of the conflict. In August 2022, I was invited to attend a commemorative act honoring disappeared police agents. That was the first time I heard stories about police victimization uttered by their protagonists. Even when my encounters with victims of the conflict connected to the Police by family bonds were rare, they connected me to the Police's

claims of victimhood and suffering in meaningful ways⁷. The loss those families experienced is just too real and profound to discard. And still, those families were ignored by the Police for many years. According to memory players at UNIPPEP, no commemorative events to honor victims existed before the institutional historical memory started in 2018⁸. The conception of police agents as victims of the conflict was just not there. Police agents were heroes, especially when they died. Death was almost a certification of heroism, not of victimhood.

The Police, as an institution, did not just embrace police agents' victimhood because it was obvious police agents could also be victims of the conflict. The shift from conceptualizing police agents as heroic public servants to victims of the conflict was not an easy or uncontentious process inside the Police. Memory players at UNIPPEP suggested that before they started their memory work, they knew almost nothing about human rights or victims⁹. They also confided to me that they found many challenges in convincing their superiors about the importance of acknowledging police agents' victimhood, documenting it, and narrating it through memory products. As I spent time sharing with police agents at UNIPPEP's offices, I discovered it was not hard to understand why.

The first problematic implication of police agents' victimization I found was ideological, as claiming police victimization goes against the grain of a profoundly masculinist collective identity that I could witness even on the bathroom walls at UNIPPEP. On the first day of my institutional ethnography at UNIPPEP's offices, I found a note reminding agents of the importance of tidiness and proper "bathroom behavior" printed on a white sheet that stated: "We are masculine and we are supposed to behave as that, be mindful of cleaning habits that were instilled on us since childhood, this is our second home and we must be disposed towards tidiness and cleaning at every

⁷ The voice of victims has a moral authority that is difficult to contest or resist (Fassin y Rechtman 2009). In Colombia, transitional justice institutions have embraced that fact knowing the risks. It is an ethically informed empirical decision (Comisión de la Verdad 2022a; GMH 2013; Stern 2018).

⁸ This is debatable, as celebrations of Independence Day usually are a time when the lives and sacrifice of soldiers and police agents is honored. However, it is true there were not acts aiming towards the memorialization of human rights violations taking place inside the security forces. For instance, in special days associated to the human rights culture, like the day of victims (April 9), or the day of the disappeared (August 30), military personnel did not use to be honored, not even in security forces institutions. That has changed after the signature of the peace agreement.

⁹ Pride came from interpreting themselves as pioneers of a revolutionary cultural process inside the Police. It also came from their confidence in taking part of a significant pioneering role in the context of the broader Colombian discussions about the past and the role the police played in it.

moment¹⁰." I took a picture of that note because I was surprised by the emphasis the notice put on masculinity. For me, it was utterly unnecessary. Still, the note was a good reminder of the macho culture you can breathe in the Colombia Police. This culture makes it difficult for many police agents, some of them memory players at UNIPPEP, to accept the victimhood of police agents.

I heard of this problem from different people at UNIPPEP. Most would point out that "old-fashioned" high officers did not understand the importance of acknowledging police victimhood and building memorialization initiatives around it, at least during the historical memory area early days. Therefore, it took a lot of effort for memory players at UNIPPEP to convince their superiors to fund and approve memory initiatives depicting police agents as victims of the conflict. I never had the chance to talk with those initial gatekeepers I repeatedly heard about. However, I managed to interview a mid-level officer in UNIPPEP who was very unsatisfied with the notion of police agents as victims of the conflict and who also directed UNIPPEP's historical memory division for a time. According to him, to define police agents as victims was a form of submission. Even when he had to publicly accept there were police agents who were victims of the conflict and work in their identification due to his institutional responsibilities at UNIPPEP, a privileged place to work for most police agents, he just did not buy it¹¹. He thought the idea of police agents' victimization was profoundly problematic and questionable.

I'm being honest. It's a good thing this is anonymous. I wasn't interested¹². And I'm telling you frankly, not because of what the historical memory area did, but because of what the victims' area did.

Brother, I cannot believe that someone would bow down to claim they were a victim of the conflict! Bro... Noooo... We are who we are, and that's it. We joined, we structured ourselves in a conflict that was happening. But nowadays, the police agent believes that he was a victim...

"Please, attend to me... Give me money¹³."

Bang on the table.

"Dude, what is that?"

¹⁰ The original notice reads as "Somos masculinos y debemos comportarnos como tal, tener presente los hábitos de limpieza que nos inculcaron desde nuestra niñez, este es nuestro segundo hogar y por lo tanto debemos propender por el aseo y limpieza en todo momento"

¹¹ The Colombian police agent can either patrol (meaning a lot of things in a continuum of personal danger that escalates quickly) or engage in management duties. While patrolling comes with more days off, administrative roles mean less danger, a sense of good social standing, and unparalleled networking opportunities, as police managers are right next to high ranking officers with much capital to allocate.

¹² He is referring to his work as the boss of the historical memory area at UNIPPEP.

¹³ It is a mocking quote. Suddenly his voice is lame and dull. In Colombia that voice tone is used by men to suggest other men are improperly feminine and weak.

Bang on the table.

"If you come here to declare, it's simply because you think you're going to get more money¹⁴. You're not going to get more money, dude. Seriously! It's not like, oh, maybe it could earn me some money. But where? It's something that, no. You already got compensation from the police. But stop making a show. People who really have been victims, and who have mutilations, who have no hands, no legs. Those people, despite the fact that we know it here... Why did we come? To die... I mean, the motto is clear: you either die or you lock yourself up. Retiring is an achievement. And General Vargas used to say it: "Cry for happiness because you managed to finish a career of so many years without any damage to yourself." Reaching 19¹⁵, going through what I've been through... That's something I remember... It's brutal... And it hits me hard. I mean, being a victim. You don't have to humiliate yourself and say, "I am a victim." You knew what you were getting into; you were prepared for it. I repeat, a victim is someone who doesn't know where they're going and who, due to their circumstances, had to assume that role because someone threatened them. Either you do it, or they kill you, or they kill your family. So, that's different. But here, nobody."
(Informant 1 2022)

The Major's rant, sometimes challenging to follow, expressed his indignation about portraying police agents as victims of the conflict. He argued that police agents knowingly accept death or imprisonment as occupational risks, choices that render incoherent and false any attempt to embrace the victim's subjectivity. The brutality of the Police way represents a paradoxical source of pride and pain for the Major, and the police victimhood challenges both his identity and the meaning he derives from his experiences as a Colombian police agent. His mocking representation of agents who claim victim status suggested that he thought of victimhood as a transgression against masculine ideals that have played a significant role in his biography as a police agent. In a few words, the figure of the victim is an unacceptable symbol of the experience of police agents for the Major I am quoting.

While not every memory player I interviewed thought of police victimhood as a form of unmasculine submission or as a form of dishonesty and lack of consequence with the life choice of becoming a police agent, the Major I just referred to was not the only one distrusting police agents identifying themselves as victims. Another of my interviewees shows that claiming victimhood in Colombia is already worthy of suspicion. A female agent who acknowledged there

¹⁴ The Major is referring to declaration days to identify victims of the conflict. The police started to organize those days in articulation with the Unit of Victims after the signature of the peace agreement. The Unit of Victims was created under its mandate.

¹⁵ He refers to 19 years as a police agent. By the time we talked, he was one year away from retirement.

were victims inside the Police also doubted their moral fiber. For her, people looking for recognition as victims were most often rent seekers, something that was morally wrong. She insisted victimhood should only be a condition for the state to acknowledge, not a condition to gain money from.

So, for me, the word victim here in the country, I see it as money. Here in this country, if you're a victim, it's about getting subsidies for this, subsidies for that, scholarships at universities, not paying for school. That's what being a victim means, but the symbolic recognition doesn't exist; they don't care about that. They don't care if you can do many things in the communities, but if you don't generate development and jobs, then it doesn't matter, it's worthless. So, many families have tied victimhood to money, to economic recognition, and that's not it. I think the essential thing is to recognize that this really happened in the country and what actually happened. To be a victim, you don't need to discriminate; you need to define why you are a victim."
(Informant 13 2022)

Distrust against self-proclaimed victims abounded at UNIPPEP, especially for victims claiming the state was responsible for the harm they suffered. As I am showing, some police agents even distrusted their colleagues when claiming victimhood. Some police agents thought most police agents embracing victimhood as an expression of their individual experiences were taking improper advantage of an institutional window of opportunity to gain some extra money. However, despite the distrusting attitudes I found, most memory players would not doubt the existence of police agents' victimhood as a silenced or invisible issue. A subofficer at UNIPPEP who was finishing his police career and who was also critical of some of the most conservative aspects of the Colombian Police did not see a single problem with the idea of acknowledging the victimhood of police agents. He believed in the judicial fact of police agents' victimization, as he also thought of it as an invisible reality. According to him, there was a collective misunderstanding about what the Police were and what it was not. That conceptual challenge was guilty of causing a lack of recognition of police agents' victimhood.

Mm, I think they are in a complex position compared to other victims, because, let's say, there are, there are countless associations that, over all these years since the enactment of the Victims' Law, have done a good job of making them visible, mmm of demanding their rights, mm of supporting them. But in the case of police victims, they have been somewhat invisible because, in the collective imagination, police agents are seen as actors in the conflict and not as victims. So people feel that by declaring themselves as victims, they are taking advantage of the state, that they are taking advantage, that they are claiming entitlements beyond what is appropriate,

because, well, we are not victims, that the real victims are the civilians. This ignores the fact that police officers are also civilians; our nature is civilian. So, I think they have had a difficult position; they have had to fight more for their visibility, and this, let's say, is understandable in the case of police agents who are civilians, but now imagine the situation for military victims, it's an even more difficult struggle for them to be recognized (Informant 7 2023).

The subofficer thought that in the Colombian collective imagination, there was, unfortunately, no room for police agents to be victims of the conflict¹⁶. He argues that the Police are victims because they are civilians too, something that is not well understood by the public and that obscures the police victimization. For him, having victims on the Police was a matter of fact, not the outcome of fragile new generations that were not willing to accept obvious occupational risks. He did not see police agents who identified as victims of the conflict as scammers. They were victims because illegal armies attacked them, and police agents are civilians. As such, police agents are subjects of international protection against hostilities.

Despite the cultural and political friction that the victimhood issue generated inside the Police, it seems that the potential benefits of exploring police agents' victimhood outweighed critical voices. UNIPPEP, along with the national Unit of Victims, began organizing missions to identify and certify victims belonging to the Police. The Days of Declaration, Characterization, and Certification became common in many Colombian cities. A stronger awareness of police agents' victimization after almost nine years of continued work around that issue is one of the variables that could explain the emergence of these certification commissions and their increasing importance¹⁷. However, institutional documents defining the Institutional Historical Memory initiative are consistent in depicting victimhood as a reality that helps to explain the Police fulfillment of its mission, not as a problem with cultural or political value on its own.

¹⁶ He was not wrong, as even some police agents at UNIPPEP thought that way! I also have found strong pushback from colleagues just by mentioning the idea.

¹⁷ UNIPPEP, as a branch of the Colombian National Police, was created in 2016.

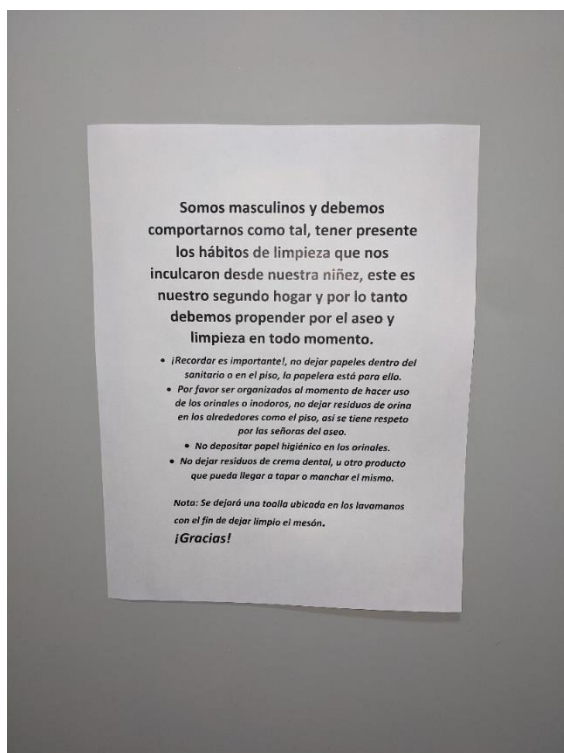


Figure 1 UNIPPEP men's bathroom notice.

UNIPPEP's institutional conceptualization of victimhood has a different register than the one I found in my interviews and the one that is common in human rights culture. Victimhood is institutionally conceptualized as an indicator of the Police fulfillment of its "mission." According to the *Police Guide for Building the Institutional Historical Memory*, the Institutional Historical Memory "is a contribution to the construction of National Historical Memory, recognizing the Colombian National Police in fulfilling its mission and its contribution to national institutions in the context of the inner armed conflict, highlighting police officers who have been victims and their families" (A. L. Salazar et al., s. f., 11). In this definition, the biggest priority of the Institutional Historical Memory is the recognition of the Police fulfillment of its mission¹⁸.

The concrete conceptual definition that UNIPPEP memory players provided to "police victimization" and "victimization deed" also points to a fundamental feature of reactionary memories: the sectorialization of grievable lives. Those definitions, meant to provide a coherent

¹⁸ According to the Colombian political constitution, the Police mission is to maintain the necessary conditions for citizens' liberties and the fulfillment of their rights.

outlook for the Police memorialization initiatives, demonstrate that the figure of the victim has profound political implications that the Police memory players knew very well.

Police Victim

Members of the National Police of Colombia will be considered victims if, individually or collectively, they have suffered temporary or permanent harm, resulting in some type of physical, psychological, or material injury, as a consequence of actions by organized armed groups outside the law during the internal armed conflict.

Victimizing Deed

A violent act in which a person, individually or collectively, has suffered harm (physical, psychological, and material) as a consequence of actions (terrorist acts, attacks, harassment, threats, crimes against freedom and sexual integrity, forced disappearances, forced displacements, homicides, massacres, anti-personnel mines, unexploded munitions and improvised explosive devices, kidnappings, torture, and/or forced abandonment or dispossession of lands) carried out by illegal organized armed groups outside the law, occurring in the context of the internal armed conflict. (A. L. Salazar et al., s. f., 28)

UNIPeP's provided definition of both concepts ignores that police agents can be considered legitimate military targets under certain circumstances by international humanitarian standards. It also ignores that the 1448 law establishes that a victimizing deed, a legal category under Colombian law, can be committed by state agents, not only by illegal organized armed actors. UNIPeP memory players ignored those problems for institutional legitimation, as they knew the content of the 1448 law. The cherry-picking attitude that those definitions transmit is a profound characteristic of the Police Institutional Historical Memory, as the memory products I analyzed showed.

The victimhood of police agents, as a theme, appears more starkly in testimonial memory products tracing experiences of victimization inside the Police. It is also present in other memory products¹⁹. One of them is *The Window of Historical Memory*, a web map that showcases sites of memory and "memorializes" victims of the conflict belonging to the Police²⁰. Victimhood in most of the Police memory products I analyzed is mainly transmitted by showcasing the loss and pain that families or individuals have endured after the death, disappearance, or injury of particular police agents

¹⁹ My analysis focuses on testimony-driven books, short videos, and documentaries, excluding historical volumes.

²⁰ Some of the victims commemorated at the police memory sites won't necessarily be accepted as victims of the conflict by transitional justice institutions of human rights experts. More about this in the final section of the chapter.

whose personal stories get to be reconstructed. It is portrayed as a traumatic experience endured by some individuals or Colombian families and as a consequence of two variables: the existence of terrorist organizations (or illegal armed actors) and the selflessness of the Colombian police agent. Terrorist organizations, presented as the source of the inner armed conflict, as a historical rupture, cause harm or victimizing deeds. The selflessness of the Colombian police agent put them in harm's way, but it also confirms the Colombian Police fulfillment of its mission. There is no fear to be found in the Police representation of its victimized agents, no regret of getting involved in one of the most dangerous professions in Colombia, which, by the way, was one of the most common emotions I found in informal conversations with police agents. Commemorated police agents are virtuous, heroic, and proud of their profession²¹. Harm reported in UNIPPEP memory products is a sacrifice for the cause Colombian police agents believe in, which is, at the same time, an institutional mandate.

Javier's favorite color was always green²²; you'll soon know why. He lived very close to the Puerto Wilches Police Station in Santander, where he was known for his bravery. Many remember him as the teenager who went out to find the police officers after seeing some thieves attempting to rob a family home and a commercial store. For years, he dreamed of joining the Institution, not only because of his friendship with all the officers of that time but also because the social context of his town demanded it, and he felt he had to do something.

Javier was raised with the best values. He was always committed to his ideals, known as a good friend, son, brother, and an excellent husband and father, whose priorities were his three princesses and his family. He used to say that, for every problem, a smile was a good starting point for a solution. His kindness and sensitivity to the suffering of others led him to train as an explosives technician, as he always thought of others' well-being.

For breakfast, arepas were a must, though without milk, as he couldn't tolerate it. His favorite dish was fish; he would eat as much as he was given and always had a healthy appetite.

On April 1, 1999, he had to travel to Tame, Arauca. When he arrived, he found an explosive device attached to a communications radio; from a distance, he silently observed everything happening around him. He requested a sniper to destroy the radio.

²¹ I did meet many police agents during my fieldwork, and I can only recall two who were proud of their profession. One of them was so proud that he was called The Mystic by his peers. But they were rare exceptions. The fact that every police agent who was commemorated appeared to be proud of their profession was suspicious, and I felt it dishonest.

²² Green was the official color of the Colombian National Police uniform until the “social explosion” of 2021. Since then, the uniform’s color is blue.

After some time, he approached alone to finish defusing the charge, but as he got close, it detonated and, within seconds, took his life. His family and the Institution remember him for his countless acts for the community. (Amado 2019, 39)



Figure 2 Picture of Javier and his family. I took it from Un Segundo para la Eternidad, next to Javier's story.

Not every testimonial account in UNIPPEP's memory products is in the third person or as short. However, most testimonial accounts I found in the police memory products follow the same structure: First, an introduction of a regular but virtuous main character with a family they love and that love them back. In the words of the Police endogenous and exogenous memory players, that editorial decision is intended to humanize the police agent. Then, there is a depiction of the "victimizing deed." Memory products always introduce victimizing deeds as a consequence of terrorist actions and heroic acts. The responsible party behind victimization is usually mentioned (often the FARC), but sometimes it is impossible as it is unknown. Finally, there is a visual representation of the victim and their family²³. In the case of the third-person testimony I just quoted, the responsible party is absent from the narrative, as it is impossible to tell who was responsible for the arrangement of the explosive device²⁴. The third person is also an authoritative voice, not frequent in testimonial accounts, as they usually are told in the first person. While there are variations across the multiple personal stories the police have put together in their testimonial depictions of victimhood, they are not significant. Ultimately, the testimony in the third person, in written or audiovisual format, transmits the loss or injury of a hero (police agent) and the suffering

²³ In some memory products, like the the video shorts, the graphic representation of the victims (agents and their families) is everpresent.

²⁴ It is easy to assume the responsible party is an insurgent group in the context of the volume's testiomies. The lack of clarification is profoundly problematic.

of family members. Victimhood is, in every instance, associated with the purpose of safeguarding the Colombian nation. It showcases a meaningful sacrifice that connects an individual agent to the institutional fulfillment of the Police mission.

In the latest testimonial memory products, there has been a move towards using the first person to narrate victims' stories, a point of view that the Police exogenous memory players, most journalists, usually prefer. Family members of victimized police agents tell their stories from their perspective. Those narratives are similar to those told in the third person in terms of the content of the stories. Still, the first-person voice commands an empathy that is difficult to deny. Just like the chair of the Colombian Truth Commission used to say, the victim's voice challenges us in the most fundamental ways (Comisión de la Verdad 2022a). In addition to that, the representation of police agents as virtuous individuals disappears, as the protagonist of the story is a family member. The audience knows the memory product presents the story of a police agent, but the agent, when told by family members, only happens to be an agent.

A Pain Held in the Heart²⁵

Efrén Cepeda

Efrén and I loved the countryside and animals. We met in the Boy Scouts, and he quickly won me over with his tenderness. We loved each other, but since we were so young, my grandmother opposed the relationship. We didn't see each other again and went to different universities. The National University, where Efrén studied, closed for a year. So, he was advised to study at the Cadet School, and he managed to enroll there.

A few years later, we met again, and from then on, we never parted. We got married, our little Nicolás was born, and we were expecting our long-awaited Pebbles. I became a teacher, and Efrén became an expert in bomb disposal. He and his team made significant blows against drug traffickers and guerrilla groups. We were happy, dreaming of one day living in the countryside surrounded by animals, as Efrén wanted Nicolás to grow up with fully awakened senses.

But one day in June 1997, while Efrén was at work, a car bomb exploded, shattering all our dreams. After that, I felt as if my life was darkened. Yet, I had to work hard to fill it with color again for my children. As they grew, they listened intently to the stories

²⁵ This is a short-video series where the stories of victimized police agents and that of their families is represented with animated plasticine figures. A family member indirectly narrates a story that has been carefully edited. To the best of my knowledge, the edition satisfied family members.

we shared about their father, whom they hadn't had the chance to know. We all missed Efrén deeply, especially in challenging times.

For years, I held onto the past until I finally managed to say goodbye to him in a dream. My children and I continued to pursue our dreams. Now we live in a country house, just as he would have liked.

*My name is Zeira Restrepo, and I shared my life with Captain Efrén Cepeda Soto, who, in the context of the armed conflict, died in the line of duty. Today, I thank the National Police and UNIPPEP for allowing us to give new meaning to this event through art and, in doing so, to make ourselves visible. Today, my message is one of love: that, out of love for those we share our lives with, we can avoid repetition by teaching love*²⁶ (UNIPPEP 2022).

This piece has some variations compared to the first one I reproduced, but the most fundamental aspects of the Police memory framework remain. As the fragment shows, we still have a story that helps the audience to understand the "humanity behind the uniform." It also indicates heroic deeds, but they are not as relevant. Finally, there is mention of the victimizing deed, which, this time, is presented as a traumatic event that interrupts the life of a family rather than that of a police agent's heroic career. It is important to say that different people edited the two stories I presented. The first story, told in the third person and focused on victims as heroic sacrifices, was edited by one of UNIPPEP's police agents. An influential Colombian artist edited the second one, as UNIPPEP hired him to produce a short video series focused on the victimization of police agents and their families²⁷.

Besides testimony, UNIPPEP memory players also represent the victimhood of police agents by connecting individual and institutional stories to memory sites across the country. Some memory sites were built with the intended purpose of communicating the police agents' victimhood and the fulfillment of the Police mission through their "sacrifice." Some others memorialize victimhood only because they were subjected to a convenient reinterpretation by UNIPPEP memory players.

The police started to build new monuments, gardens, and permanent exhibitions for their Institutional Historical Memory initiative in 2016. Angelica Salazar, one of the most influential officers at UNIPPEP, led the construction of a "remembrance garden" at the National Police Officers'

²⁶ In this section of the video, Zeira Restrepo appears for the first time in her flesh.

²⁷ The differences between memory players working for the institutional historical memory is something I explore in chapter three.

school in Bogota, and she also led the construction of a permanent exhibition of portraits in the National Police General Headquarters. In both cases, the interventions honored victims of forced disappearance. In 2017, UNIPeP commissioned the construction of a monument called *Peace Builders* in the National Police Officers' School. The monument honors police victims of the conflict and their sacrifice, as its plaque suggests. The same monument has been reproduced with some "regional variations" in other cities, and there are plans to keep building new ones (Edificadores de Paz [@PoliciaUNIPeP] 2024). The *Peace Builders* monument also became a miniature gift UNIPeP agents give to their collaborators or people that the Police acknowledge as contributors to national peace²⁸.

But not all of the memory sites the Colombian Police claim as reminders of police agents' victimhood and sacrifice were initially intended to memorialize those markers of collective experience and identity. For instance, the plaques that regional police stations have placed for decades in sites where police agents got killed, sometimes by unidentified actors and unclear circumstances, started to be reinterpreted as sites that convey the victimization and heroism of police agents. This is especially visible in the *Window of Historical Memory* digital initiative, which promises to show "the places of Institutional Historical Memory that dignify and remember the sacrifice of thousands of male and female police agents victims of the conflict" (UNIPeP, s. f.-b). During my analysis of those sites, I found that many plaques are impossible to associate with the actions of illegal armed actors, which, according to UNIPeP's definition of "police victims" and "victimizing deeds," is a central requirement to claim victimhood. The same happens with monuments honoring outstanding dead police agents that were included in that digital initiative. Those agents' deaths are not in any way related to the inner armed conflict or the actions of illegal armed actors.

Victimhood, as represented in UNIPeP's memory products, is contradictory, especially when it comes to defining the source of harm and loss. Sometimes, the harm and loss that produce commemorated cases of victimization are occupational risks, and sometimes it is entirely unclear. I first found that problem analyzing a testimonial story in one of UNIPeP's books, the story of "Bomberman." Bomberman was the nickname of Richar Toledo, a sub-officer and explosive

²⁸ Notably, I witnessed the police gave those gifts to ex-guerrilla fighters. I also received one for my participation in one of their peacebuilding congresses.

technician who, as the story goes, was depicted as a "great friend" by his co-workers and family. He died in 2009 after he threw himself over an active grenade at a police station. Based on the account provided in the testimonial book containing "bomberman's" story, it seems that the activation of the grenade was an accident (Amado 2019). Still, he appears in a book that is looking to memorialize victims of the conflict, defined as those who "have suffered temporary or permanent harm, resulting in some type of physical, psychological, or material injury, as a consequence of actions by organized armed groups outside the law during the internal armed conflict" (A. L. Salazar et al., s. f.).

Memory sites depicted in the *Window of Historical Memory* also prove the contradictory depiction of victimization. For instance, the Santa Marta police mausoleum that was included as a site of memory, which I could visit during my fieldwork, is unrelated to the socio-political experience of the Colombian inner armed conflict. My sources in the field told me that the mausoleum, located at one of the city's oldest graveyards, was a Catholic church donation to the Police that took place many decades ago. The donation took place because priests in the town were concerned about the costs that families of police agents had to cover when burying them. The Catholic Church has strong bonds with the Colombian Police, and police agents' families struggle economically²⁹. The inner armed conflict and its effects were not a part of the mausoleum's story, but it was depicted as a site to commemorate police agents' victims of the conflict.

²⁹ The Colombian Police motto is God and Homeland. In addition to that, every commemorative act I attended to was preceded by a catholic service.



Figure 3 A site of memory. It was built in 2018 with the intended purpose of depicting police victimhood. In particular, the issue of forced disappearance.



Figure 4 A thematic park reinterpreted as a site of memory in one of the Police's memory products: The Window of Historical Memory. This park was built over Pablo Escobar's Hacienda Napoles, and Memory players included it as one of their memory sites. This place could talk about the Institution's fight against drug trafficking. Still, I couldn't stop feeling how improper it was to suggest an attraction was a site of memory honoring victims, much more so when they were not included in the decision.

The contradictory treatment of the harm that produces police agents' victimization can be interpreted in several ways. The possibility of a politically motivated act of disinformation based on the overrepresentation of police agents' victimization as a political issue is feasible. It is important to acknowledge that the Police memory initiatives cannot be separated from the emergence of the reactionary memory model, one that antagonizes the claims of victims' organizations against the state security forces. The Police Institutional Historical Memory is a direct reaction against representations of police agents as perpetrators of human rights violations. But it could also be the product of incompetence. Memory players behind the UNIPeP's memory products were not human rights experts. For most of them, the legal intricacies behind the definition of victimhood were a mystery, and memory work was a strange thing to do. The *Window of Historical Memory* was coded by an officer in Bogotá who told me he did not know much about human rights before being named a member of UNIPeP³⁰. The officer contacted patrollers across national police stations, ordering them to compile lists of local "sites of memory." They received no training for this task. Most patrollers executing this order, like UNIPeP memory personnel before their assignments, were unfamiliar with concepts of 'victim' and 'site of memory.'



Figure 5 The tweet's description reads: We invite you to take part in this day of declaration, characterization, and certification today and tomorrow, October 24. Between 8 am and 5 pm in Libertadores Avenue. No.2-100, Free Zone. (Health Care Unit). #God and Homeland #WeBuildPeaceTogether.

³⁰ This was a common acknowledgement I found.

Another possible explanation for the contradictions I mention is related to not-so-visible anxieties and grievances police agents have that I found in informal conversations with informants. Those grievances could have leaked into the police memory products. Many agents, including officers and sub-officers, considered themselves victims of unfair circumstances. They were victims of useless politicians who could not solve the country's most relevant problems. They were victims of activists and protesters who did not understand police agents responding to protests were not responsible for the injustices they fought against. They were victims of criminal violence and political violence across the country. Some police agents I talked to thought of themselves as victims of their poor social and economic standing, which they quoted to explain their reason for joining the force³¹. I believe no ethnographer can discount the role these possibilities play in the contradictory shape of police agents' victimization in UNIPeP's memory products. To determine which of those possibilities played a more significant role is something that I will have to leave for future research.

- The Police as a force made of heroes.

The previous section stresses that defining police agents as victims of the conflict was a primary concern for the Institutional Historical Memory. Although not every memory player at UNIPeP agreed with the idea, police victimhood became a fundamental concept to make sense of police agents' experiences during the conflict, mainly when mobilized against the “truth” that transitional justice institutions have offered to Colombian the public for almost 20 years. But police agent's victimhood is in no way coherent with traditional depictions of victimhood. Victimhood in the Police memorialization of the conflict is rarely independent of heroic actions, shapes, or implications. The depictions of police victimhood put much energy into representing the heroic qualities of each victim and that of the overall body of Colombian police agents. I found that harm and loss are sometimes absent from the representation of "victims" in memory products. The police victims of the conflict are represented as heroic victims, sometimes just because they belong to the Police, a decision that separates the Institutional Historical Memory from the most classic human rights memorialization uses.

³¹ In all my interviews with police agents I asked them to tell me how and why they entered the Police. Most suggested they got into the police because it was their only feasible option to improve their economic conditions.

In my content analysis of UNIPPEP testimonial books, I found that for each code I placed over a section that elicited harm or pain, I could put three codes that elicited heroism and other virtues that set police as outstanding individuals. Each testimony represents the victim as extraordinary for their role in their families, community, and the Police. The sample I present next corresponds to the story of Gonzálo León Chivita. It comes from a testimonial book that introduces testimonies in an atypical way, but one that helps us better understand the role of heroism in the Police memorialization of the conflict. Testimonies, in this case, are presented as interviews conducted with the families of victimized police agents. A hyperbolic tale of the memorialized police agent and the Police as an institution introduces the interviewer's questions, one that leaves the interviewees' answers as insignificant, as an excuse to tell the heroic tale.

The missions assigned to him tempered his character like iron—forged at the highest temperatures of fire—and made him generous in answering the citizens' call in an adverse era when it was important to be the neighborhood police officer, but also, due to difficult public order conditions, to join specialized groups like the Special Security Operations Group (GOES) and the Armed Special Corps (CEA). This was in response to the urgent need to counter new criminal modalities and confront the monster of drug trafficking, whose gigantic tentacles were then looming over society. The officers belonging to these specialized units always faced the risk of crossing, at any moment, the threshold between life and death. Given his limitless dedication to serving the country and the premonition of not seeing him again, what was his last memory? (...)

Without a doubt, he was a fierce protagonist in operations that were more thrilling than any action movie, set against the backdrop of the armed conflict in Colombia. More than three hours of intense confrontation eventually wore down the Command's strength, and although an armed helicopter attempted to form a protective ring to shield the police on the ground, it crashed; later, the aircraft was set ablaze by the guerrillas. Did the police officers inside have no choice but to surrender to their captors? (...)

The hostility of captivity was no obstacle to their desire for resistance against all adversity, which ultimately allowed them to return to freedom. After 9 days on the

run and reaching the shack of a coca plot manager, they were betrayed and recaptured by the guerrillas, who called for reinforcements to fulfill the orders of Negro Acacio to bring them back, dead or alive. At dawn, the guerrillas surrounded the place where they had taken refuge, and no journalistic account could adequately capture the barbarity with which they were killed. A hail of bullets struck them as they ran swiftly toward the river. But was that really where Gonzalo's trail was lost forever?

Over time, those sheets became a metaphor for the shroud that dries the tears of heroes, a revealing testament to their sufferings and their feats in the battle against all forms of evil. In fact, accounts reveal that Captain Quintero and all the members of the Security Forces with him were so strong that they did not yield to the humiliations and degrading treatment inflicted by the guerrillas. At what point did hope arise that they might be found alive? (M. V. Pérez 2020, 47-53)

These disjointed passages mediate between a family's testimony and the Police's institutional "truth," a narrative that demands recognition of police agents as heroes in opposition to the "perpetrator" label advanced through human rights memorialization. Different from "victimizing deeds" or "police victims," heroism has no definition in UNIPeP memory materials. It is not supposed to be a theme to commemorate or memorialize, but as the passages I quoted, it is sometimes a more prevalent theme than victimhood. Heroism is usually represented in testimony-driven stories by selflessness and an unparalleled conviction in the cause of protecting good people from evil. In written or multimedia formats, braveness, honor, and morality are very common adjectives in testimonial accounts of the victims' lives. In testimonies that include depictions of insurgent groups, such as the one I just quoted, combatants are villanized.

Heroism is mobilized as a truth that is being silenced by those who have been entrusted to rebuild the national historical memory of the inner armed conflict by the state. For instance, the monument *Peacebuilders*, one of the most iconic Police memory products, implicitly denounces on its plaque an ongoing effort to silence the sacrifice of thousands of selfless police agents' lives.

Colombian National Police

Do not let the sacrifices thousands of Colombians have offered go unacknowledged by future generations.

Peacebuilders

We are an ensemble of experiences, feelings, and expectations that, added together, help us face the pain that the inner armed conflict left on us. It is at this moment that, under a single breath of hope, we plant symbols of peace and reconciliation, remembering those who offered even their lives for a better country: Our female and male police agents.

Bogotá D.C., november 2017

The paradoxical nature of police memorialization manifests in its simultaneous appropriation of human rights discourse while categorically rejecting the conclusions drawn from human rights-based memorial frameworks. While the Police commit to principles like “peace and reconciliation” and even embrace women as a meaningful part of the Police, it implicitly denounces human rights memory as an effort to silence the Police heroism, presented as the most significant, if not the only, feature of the Police history.

The most striking images of heroism are undoubtedly found in the two documentaries UNIPPEP produced with journalism scholars from the Sergio Arboleda and the Jorge Tadeo University in Bogotá: *Jungle Commando – Honor and Glory Forever*, and *Granada: an Account About Forgiveness*. The *Jungle Commando* documentary was probably the most popular memory product I found during fieldwork. Almost every one of my informants asked me if I had seen the documentary. For most memory players at UNIPPEP, it was the finest example of their memorialization work, as it presented to the public the ultimate experiences of sacrifice, selflessness, and pain that Police agents have experienced during the conflict.

The Jungle Commando is a special police unit that complicates the notion of police agents as subjects of international protection in every case. The Jungle Commando is a militarized unit trained to conduct operations against drug trafficking and organized crime in both urban and rural settings. In Colombia, a country with insurgent organizations that raise funds from drug trafficking, it is difficult to separate those units from the militaries for most people. Just like the documentary shows, the Jungle Commando engaged in combat with the FARC guerrilla, just as military personnel would.

I did not meet a single police agent who did not admire the Jungle Commando agents, and no agent who did not enjoy the documentary after watching it. As police agents told me, Jungle commandos were “men of respect,” men for whom everyone should feel admiration and appreciation. The

admiration for them was consistent across sub-officers and officers, something that suggested to me that, in many ways, the Jungle Commando is, at this point, the synthesis of the Colombian police collective identity. It is also a dramatic outcome of a country where civilians cannot avoid the experience of war. To belong to the Jungle Commando is an aspiration for many, and for those who do not aspire to be like that, it is still a source of awe.

I watched the documentary with my wife, and while I found it somewhat out of touch with the national endeavor to build peace and human rights culture, we both found it entertaining. The documentary is almost like a Colombian documentary version of the *Black Hawk Down* movie. It reconstructs what I would describe as a strategic, operational mistake that left a group of commandos stranded on the shore of a jungle river surrounded by "hundreds" of guerrilla fighters that overwhelmed the disgraced jungle commandos. Many commandos died, and only a couple were rescued by a military chopper, almost as if it were a real-life Hollywood scene. While it's true the documentary has its fair share of emotional moments, primarily when survivors and family members reflect upon losing the commandos who died, it has been challenging for me to accept that documentary in the context of an institutional memorialization effort meant to highlight the victimhood of police agents. How is a commando who dies in a war zone a victim of the conflict? A commando is a combatant. But, again, victimhood for the police memory players is not the same as for human rights activists or experts in international law. Victimhood and heroism are inseparable concepts, and sacrifice is mobilized as the best way to depict the police agents' experience during the inner armed conflict.



Figure 6 Monument honoring the Jungle Commandos. It was reinterpreted as a site of memory of police victimization for the Window of Memory digital initiative.

The documentary *Granada: an Account About Forgiveness*, which I watched at its premiere, is much less inclined to center the representation of police agents' experiences on heroic images. The less heroic-driven tone could be related to the political dispositions of the researchers who served as directors and the nature of the events. The documentary depicts the most devastating urban attack the FARC ever committed over a civilian population and a police station. The attack took place in Granada, a small town in the mountains of Colombia's Andean region. It left 28 people dead, including five police agents. The documentary traces the story of the attack from the perspective of police agents who survived it, as well as from that of the family members of the five police agents who died. In the documentary, police survivors recall their struggle to preserve their lives after a car with more than 400 kilos of dynamite detonated in front of the town's police station. Surviving police agents and their families communicate indignation, desolation, and a certain sense of cluelessness that victims of atrocity commonly feel when trying to make sense of the rationale of perpetrators.

The documentarists, with the approval of the Police memory players, interviewed Alias Karina in search of answers, which, according to my sources, was a controversial decision among many higher-grade officers attending the premiere. She was the guerrilla chief leading the attack on

Granada. She is also popularly known as the face of the organization's most inhuman side. Karina surrendered to the authorities under the Uribe government, and then she became a sort of political ally of that government in its ideological and military war against the FARC. She agreed to serve as an example of how monstrous the FARC was from jail. In the documentary, she is depicted as a monster who, in her viciousness, explains all that is needed to understand the motives behind the attack. She is also represented as a defeated monstrosity who asks for the forgiveness of the victims, especially for the forgiveness of police agents. Hence the documentary's name: *Granada: an Account About Forgiveness*.

In the case of Granada's documentary, it is difficult to argue against the fact that the spectator is in front of a clear infraction of humanitarian international law perpetrated by the FARC. A police station in a town is not a legitimate war objective. Much less the civilians inhabiting it. However, as one of the premiere attendees explained to me, the documentary was a profoundly partial snapshot that did not communicate the complex story behind the attack and that reduces Granada's sad story of violence and human rights violations to a convenient image for the Police.

A grassroots activist and member of Asovida³² who had to enter the premiere uninvited as an act of protest happened to be seated right next to me during the premiere. I could feel her discomfort, even anger, throughout the entire documentary. When I decided to ask her if my impression of her feelings was correct, she let me know it was with no lack of emphasis. She was furious that no member of Asovida received an invitation to the premiere. After all, Asovida had collaborated with the Police in producing the film. She was also upset about the content of the documentary. According to her, it presented police agents only as victimized heroes who did not have anything to do with the violence and destruction that Granada inhabitants had to endure for decades, which was a distortion of Granada's case. She reminded me that, just some days before the FARC attack on the police station took place, paramilitaries had taken the town and killed 19 people they judged as collaborators of the FARC. That is factually correct; it happened one month before the FARC attack (ASOVIDA, s. f.). She also told me that police agents at the time were known for being friendly with paramilitary groups and that the attack on the station was a retaliation against the

³² Asovida is an organization of civilian victims in Granada, Antioquia. They collaborated with the production of the documentary about the Granada attack. They included pictures of police agents in their wall of victim's pictures, located at the Salón del Nunca Más, the first independent museum about the inner armed conflict built and administered by victims of the conflict.

paramilitary massacre that preceded it. She did not try to suggest the FARC attack was justified by any means; she just tried to point at an ethically questionable lack of self-criticism in the Police, one that, according to her, led them to exclude her and Asovida from the documentary's premiere.

As I said earlier, *Granada: an Account About Forgiveness* does not directly represent police agents as heroes. It is very different in that way from the documentary *Jungle Commando – Honor and Glory Forever*. Still, it presents the FARC guerrilla as a group that is defined by its savagery and monstrosity while silencing the stories that complicate the multiple historical meanings of the attack. At the same time, the police agents are represented as the victimized defenders of Granada's civilians, as individuals capable of enduring and overcoming hardship and savagery to succeed in their heroic labor of protecting citizens. So, in this case, the Police take a less explicit way of vindicating their role as heroes of the nation, as defenders of peace, or, as they have started to suggest in the last eight years, as peacebuilders. Heroism is then updated to the symbolic demands of a post-conflict setting, where ex-guerrilla fighters ask forgiveness to be included in the nation and where the Police's positive contributions to the country should be the only aspect to remember of the Police participation during the conflict.

- The Police as a peacebuilding force

Collective memories are never disconnected from shared expectations about the future (Castillejo 2015; 2013; Ruiz Romero y Hristova 2019; Wills 2022). In the literature about collective memories and battles over memory in Latin America, this fact is easily forgotten or radically simplified when discussing issues like official memory or official history. Because the state is the one to produce, sustain, and distribute those narratives, considerations about how they indicate shared expectations are difficult to find³³.

UNIPEP's memory products transmit a collection of shared expectations I found during my fieldwork, such as social recognition for the work police agents do, political legitimacy in the post-

³³ To the best of my knowledge, Argentinian scholars like Salvi, Messina and Palmisciano have analyzed the right-wing memorialization of the dictatorship for a while now (Salvi y Messina 2024; Salvi 2015; Palmisciano 2021), but it is not a usual academic endeavour. In Colombia, scholars like Wills, Roza and Guglielmucci are starting to look into the security forces difficult relationship with official historical clarification of the conflict (Wills 2022; Guglielmucci y Roza 2021). However, none of those attempts are ethnographically informed, meaning that they only provide discourse analyzes that can't give an account of the actors' motivations. Those analyzes are meaningful and productive, but they fail in depicting the grievances and anxieties that inform counter-counter memories.

conflict³⁴, and even public recognition of the pain some police agents and their families have endured during the conflict³⁵. Those expectations are not equally shared in the unequal social field that exists behind the front of the Police as an institution of the state³⁶. Still, I can say that the discursive figure of the peacebuilder is an excellent place to look for some significant hegemonic pacts inside the Police. Those implicit pacts allow us to examine the shared anxieties informing the Institutional Historical Memory alignment with the reactionary memory model. UNIPEP memory products do not present the Colombian victimized police agents as heroes and professional peacebuilders only because it is convenient for the Institution's elites. They do it because individuals in the Police social field, like any other individual, strive for a meaningful and socially recognizable life. Hence, the Police memorialization of the conflict is also a symbolic reconfiguration of its identity for a new cultural context.

The memory product that better transmits the Colombian police agent as a peacebuilder is the monument *Peacebuilders*, which, as I explained before, has been deployed in some of the most important cities in Colombia. The monument is a rather abstract representation of a police agent embracing the Colombian nation. The nation is readable by the shape of the northern section of Colombia's national territory, which the agent embraces. The whole map of Colombia is not there, but we have enough of its geography drawn to understand the point. The embrace is protective. It almost feels parental. Below the representation of the police agent, there is a big pedestal sustaining the statue. In the middle of it, a plaque suggests that every police agent is a hero and a peacebuilder, especially those who "even sacrifice their lives" for Colombia's peace. The plaque offers a reinterpretation of the Colombian police agent. It presents them as peacebuilders and suggests that the cost of building peace in Colombia has not only been paid with the lives of sacrificed heroes but also with a lack of proper recognition. The plaque asks its audience in the first sentence: "Do

³⁴ Colombian bureaucrats have been talking about "the postconflict" since early 2000's, when Colombia implemented its first transitional justice system. The postconflict is a time period that is still yet to come, characterized by the absence of war in Colombia.

³⁵ Colombian bureaucrats have been talking about "the postconflict" since early 2000's, when Colombia implemented its first transitional justice system. The postconflict is a time period that is still yet to come, characterized by the absence of war in Colombia.

³⁶ Anthropological studies of the state do not usually conceptualize the state as a front or a mask, like Abrams proposed in the seventies (Abrams 2006). Still, the fine line dividing the state from society is a performance, an enforced performance.

not let the sacrifices thousands of Colombians have offered go unacknowledged by future generations."



Figure 7 Peacebuilders monument. Bogota, Colombia.

The author of the plaque's first sentence, which became iconic in the police commemorative interventions and who was involved in the commission of the monument to an independent artist in 2017, did not have much to tell me about the monument's name. In other words, he did not comment on police agents as peacebuilders. However, he told me the sentence came from the need to fulfill a "moral compromise" with victimized police agents. "Beyond the duty of memory that the state and its institutions, such as the National Police, have, there is a moral commitment. Yes, a commitment to those police agents, to those men and women who have been victimized and who gave their lives in the fulfillment of their constitutional duty" (Informant 18 2023).

UNIPPEP memory players have not limited their interventions to the commemoration of their fallen comrades. Memory players have been actively trying to fight what they believe is an unfair depiction of the Police and themselves as police professionals. Their memorialization practice is profoundly political, just as any other, and intended to counter the negative image they feel human rights activists and official historical clarification commissions have cast over the Colombian security forces. The author of the opening sentence of the *Peacebuilders* monument, and a former

member of UNIPPEP's historical memory area, openly presented to me his indignation for what he considered "unfair" representations of the Police:

We had a duty, a moral commitment to our men and women in the police force, because, for example, Rosa María Sánchez, a police officer who ended up in a wheelchair, she is featured in the first book of Memory of Courage... In one of her talks at the book launch, she said:

"I offered a part of my body for Colombia's peace. What have you given?"

Look at the kind of reflection this provokes. How many police officers have sacrificed even their lives for Colombia's peace? And it's not fair that in some documents, the security forces, the police, are systematically depicted as human rights violators and state repressors. I'll tell you this: I spent three years at the General Santander School, the only school that trains police directors or officers for the National Police in Colombia, which, not long ago, suffered a terrorist attack by the ELN, where 21 or 22 cadets died. And in 20 years, I've neither violated human rights nor faced investigations for it! Nowhere in our institutional doctrine is there anything about collaborating with paramilitaries, dismembering, throwing bodies weighted with stones into rivers, or anything of that sort. So, how is it that today, in some accounts, not all, I don't generalize, it's claimed that "the National Police has systematically violated human rights"?! Because that has a very complex implication, as if it were an institutional doctrine.

On the contrary, all of our police training is directed toward those essential ends of the state, as Article 18 states, with the primary purpose of maintaining the necessary conditions for exercising public rights and freedoms so that Colombians can live in peace. That has always been the focus. And now there's a historical political responsibility that must also be assumed, which hasn't yet been addressed. (Informant 18 2023)

The officer's justification of the memory players' moral commitment to "remember" victims of human rights violations confirms two priorities in the Police memorialization initiatives: First, the proper recognition of those who sacrificed their well-being or their lives for the nation. Second, to vindicate the police profession from criticism reported as unfair. The "unfair criticism" was taken very personally by the officer I am quoting, but it was usually a personal matter for most police agents I talked to. Many thought of their profession as an activity that used to be respected but that, in the present, was publicly bullied and disrespected. It is essential to say that I conducted fieldwork only one year after Colombia's stretched "social explosion"³⁷, two years after George

³⁷ Protests against police violence started in late 2019 after the killing of Dialn Cruz, a high school student who was protesting against unpopular economic measures with hundreds of other protesters. Protests stopped due to the COVID-19 global pandemic but reignited after the brutal killing of a civilian who was not complying with the

Floyd's assassination, and three years after the Chilean "social explosion," which were global mediatic events questioning the Police use of excessive force during protests and everyday encounters between civilians and police agents³⁸. I could feel how discussions about the Police implication in the conflict merged with concerns about the Police's use of disproportionate force and lack of recognition. They also merged with conspiratory mindsets, suggesting "the media," elites, and international criminal/terrorist organizations were orchestrating a global campaign against law enforcement.

Criticism of the Colombian police as an institution was usually interpreted as criticism against every police agent by most of my interlocutors and even by civilian researchers who chose to collaborate with UNIPeP's memory products. Most felt that criticism against the Institution was also a criticism of the police agents' decision to join the force and their professional ethics. At times, I sensed a collective fear of the unknown consequences that might arise from acknowledging the criticism human rights activists and historical clarification institutions make to the state security forces, leading to a strong tendency to avoid engagement with it. At the same time, I sensed in many memory players a desire to reinvent the Police collective identity, likely seen as a less threatening avenue to necessary change than accepting collective responsibility for problematic behaviors and specific human rights abuses.

While the Major I quoted earlier did not have much to say about peacebuilding, other memory products suggest UNIPeP memory players were actively trying to translate the police professional goal and the Police legacy for a post-conflict Colombia. One of the most important objectives behind the Institutional Historical Memory, as found in documents from the Ministry of Defense and the Police (Ministerio de Defensa 2016; A. L. Salazar et al., s. f.), is to vindicate the Police as an institution where virtuous professionals work to serve Colombian citizens and protect "Colombian institutionality." And in post-conflict Colombia, to be a peacebuilder means to fit in all those slots.

I believe it's very important for Colombians to know the stories of their police agents. We must continue striving for people to view institutions differently, not as they do now, unfortunately, looking at us with disdain, as if we weren't approachable, without realizing that we constantly put ourselves at risk so citizens can be safe. We should

quarantine. In 2021, the quarantine was lifted, and with it started the most extended round of protests ever recorded in Colombia's history, stretching for something close to six or seven months.

³⁸ Those events were also indicators of the most undemocratic qualities of law-enforcement in western countries.

feel proud; we need to motivate young people to join the Institution... To recognize its importance (Quote from Carmen Alicia Salazar, in Policía Nacional de Colombia 2019, 70).

Carmen Alicia Salazar is one of the female police agents that the police memory products honor and commemorate. She achieved a middle-level authority rank after 26 years of service. She earned two "medals of valor" after surviving two combats with the Farc guerrilla and conducting "heroic deeds" in both. Her quote was introduced in one of the Police memory products and was taken from her retirement ceremony in 2014. It vindicates the Police as an institution and a group of virtuous individuals. It also shows she regretted police agents were seen with disdain by civilians despite their "sacrifice³⁹." The quote synthesizes a collectively built grievance among police agents, one that the Institutional Historical Memory is helping to communicate. However, Carmen Alicia Salazar's quote has not yet been coded in human rights grammar or translated for post-conflict Colombia. The following quote shows that this old grievance has been translated for a new political context.

Building the memory of our own, honoring their lives and stories, is not only a balm to soothe the pain of their absence but also a powerful documentary tool against impunity and forgetting. It serves to celebrate the triumph of virtue, exemplary work, and police service amid the most adverse circumstances, all for the love and defense of life itself (Introductory words of Major General Oscar Atehortua Duque, in Amado 2019, 21).

This quote introduces one of the Police memory products, written by the Colombian National Police's top general in 2019, General Oscar Atehortua. The quote is not very different than the one that came before, although they belong to two very different police agents: the first one was uttered by a subofficer, and the second one was written by the most important Police officer in the nation. Both quotes transmit the notion of a grievance related to the lack of public acknowledgment. However, the second one does it on a different register, closely aligned with human rights grammar. Impunity and forgetting are now the concepts that drive the old search for public recognition of the Police. In addition, the general suggests police agents work with a higher purpose, informed by love and the defense of life, two principles that the *Peacebuilders* monument transmits.

³⁹ She does not mention that concept, but putting yourself at risk communicate a willingness to be sacrificed. While there could be other interpretations, Colombian police agents usually think about this in terms of sacrifice.

The embrace of peacebuilding as the new marker of the Colombian National Police ethos is UNIPEP's main proposal for the future of the Colombian Police, which caused surprise among government figures in 2016 and still does. UNIPEP is not just a regular Police subdivision; it is one of the unexpected and positive outcomes of the peace agreement between the Colombian State and the FARC guerrilla in 2016. Sergio Jaramillo, the High Commissioner for Peace in the Santos government, explicitly stated that UNIPEP was a "police initiative" (Oficina del Alto Comisionado para la Paz 2017), suggesting nobody but the police created a peacebuilding unit. UNIPEP was initially responsible for providing security to FARC ex-combatants, a commitment that took place between 2016 and 2022. But UNIPEP did more than protect the bodies of FARC ex-combatants during their transition to full-citizen status; UNIPEP agents tried by different means to re-establish their human dignity. During a peacebuilding conference I was invited to in 2022, I witnessed a striking scene where police agents acknowledged and praised FARC ex-combatants for the role they played in the Colombian national peacebuilding effort. The scene was striking because the Police and the FARC guerrilla were enemies for more than 50 years. Additionally, the Police played a critical role in depoliticizing the guerrilla movement by presenting it as a terrorist and drug-trafficking movement. They still do in their memory products.

Despite UNIPEP's ambivalent treatment of the guerrilla movement, some agents working at UNIPEP discuss conflicts with the fluency of experts in Peace Studies and Galtung's philosophy, earning admiration from international figures like John Paul Lederach (D. Arias y Lederach 2021). Lederach has made public his admiration for UNIPEP's efforts to transform the Police's handling of protests in Colombia, which have been steadily increasing in recent years. UNIPEP has led initiatives to build procedures and specialized units for peacefully handling social protests, and it has created strong bonds with international and national humanitarian organizations that are shocking in a positive way⁴⁰. These gestures show that UNIPEP has taken critical steps to improve the Colombian National Police's human rights record and democratic culture.

However, UNIPEP's peacebuilding commitment came with a cost for many insiders: being depicted as traitors by their colleagues. I heard of animosity against UNIPEP personnel and their peacebuilding initiatives from police agents with whom I shared informal conversations. Some

⁴⁰ UNIPEP has worked closely to the UN's IOM (International Organization for Migration). It has also collaborated with the CINEP, a Jesuit organization that pioneered human rights documenting in the country, and that is usually depicted as a leftist think-tank in conservative circles.

told me that colleagues on the ground saw their new approaches to handling protests, including efforts to build dialogue before launching tear gas cans, with disbelief and suspicion. Other agents working in Human Rights education for their colleagues saw hostility in their audience, as they were usually associated with friends of the FARC. For instance, Daniel Geovanny Neira, a Colombian YouTuber with a big audience of police agents and probably of conservative viewers, uploaded a short video in January 2017 directly mocking UNIPEP police agents for "being lazy," but especially for "being friends with FARC guerrillas" (Daniel Geovanny Neira 2017). Animosity against UNIPEP is concerning, but it is also promising. There is no change without conflict, as some police agents inspired by Johan Galtung's political philosophy reminded me.

While the reinterpretation of the Police as a peacebuilding force puts UNIPEP members in awkward situations with their peers in other branches of the Police, historical memory initiatives seem to try to relax a necessary conflict by relying on more traditional mindsets and representations of law enforcement as a heroic endeavor, and the Colombian state as a clean and just organization. I interpret this contradiction as a cultural tension that is yet to be resolved, one where Police agents are not the only participants. Political choices in the future will probably be very influential. Peacebuilding can be thought of as a progressive way to solve conflicts but also as one that resorts to force and violence (Richmond 2023). Reinterpreting the Police as peacebuilders is not a guarantee of justice, democracy, and human rights.



Figure 8 Announcement of John Paul Lederach's talk at the second International Congress of Peacebuilding, hosted by the Colombian National Police.

- The Police memorialization crisis of capaciousness and projection: the limits of sectorial human rights memories.

Steve Stern suggests that emblematic memories function as an open-air tent that invites people to find meaning for their memories. The more flexible the meaning framework emblematic memories provide, the more effectively people can build a collective imaginary that seems like a shared real experience (Stern 2004, 115). In other words, capaciousness and projection into public spaces are necessary to build the ability to bridge loose and personal memories with emblematic discourses about the past. Human rights memorialization in Colombia has been successful because it's been profoundly capacious and directed toward a broad public. Despite critiques made by conservative elites and security forces representatives to human rights memorialization, the experiences of the victims of insurgent groups and terrorist organizations have a place in the human rights memory framework. The very existence of the reactionary memory framework proves this point. It builds over the discursive possibility of demonstrating the victimization of police agents, military personnel, and wealthy landowners. But there is a political price to pay when the capaciousness of an emblematic memory is deliberately limited to the confines of a particular sector's experiences and interests: inflexibility and public irrelevance.

The Police memorialization of the conflict faces a profound challenge in terms of its ability to convey interest outside UNIPeP, or at least that is how endogenous memory players feel about their work, how some key exogenous memory players think about the Police memorialization, and how I experienced the Police memorialization effort. The police memorialization of the past is a failure in terms of its ability to reach the public outside the offices of UNIPeP. I mean to say that not even regular police agents know the Police memorialization of the conflict exists. Families cannot benefit from many of the sites of memory that commemorate the "sacrifice" of their loved ones, as those sites were built in inaccessible places. Human rights activists find it hard to appreciate the police memorialization of the conflict, as it limits the universe of grievable lives to those belonging to or related to the Police, leaving no room to recognize the harm that victims of Police violence have endured in the long and contradictory history of the Colombian inner armed conflict. The Police reactionary memory framework condemns the experiences of harm that police agents have suffered to the outskirts of national historical memory, to survive as loose memories that won't be able to generate a political effect with the ability to improve the lives of police agents and their families.

...

During fieldwork, I was very interested in the content of the Police memorialization initiatives and how that content was created, in other words, the process leading to the production of memory products. For me, the collective work of building a narrative about the past was a profoundly interesting indication of how a particular community inside the state encountered critiques that transitional justice institutions and grassroots organizations posed to them in the search for justice, reparations, and non-repetition. As I explored both aspects of the Police memorialization initiatives, I found that the audience of the Police memory products was an interesting composite of unrealized expectations and pragmatic decision-making that helps to understand the concrete ways power sometimes silences the past and where it fails to do so.

One of the priorities that the first memory players at UNIPPEP defined was to document the victimization of police agents. Retired Colonel Fernando Pantoja, the chair of the Institutional Historical Memory area and UNIPPEP for a significant period of its short institutional life, explained to me there were no reliable figures of the police agents' victimization in any institution of the state (Pantoja 2022). Endogenous memory players interpreted the documentation of the police agents' victimhood as a "moral responsibility" (Informant 18 2023) as an act of camaraderie in the service to those who had sacrificed something for the nation during service. I would add that there was also an interest in rescuing the professional dignity of a collective that interprets its socio-cultural standing in decline. However, this is difficult to establish with the information I retrieved. In the context of my interlocution with police agents, I found a general feeling suggesting police agents were no longer as respected as before by the public. I believe there is a strong relationship between the Police memorialization of police agents as virtuous and heroic members of the Colombian nation and shared concerns about the increasing distance and lack of consideration police agents experience with citizens in their everyday lives.

Documentation of police agents' victimization was mainly directed toward the Colombian Integral System of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and No-Repetition, made by the Colombian Truth Commission, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, and the Victims' Unit. According to the endogenous memory players' reports, all their memory products were presented to those institutions. While nobody elaborated on the particular reason for delivering memory products to those institutions, the conceptualization of the Police Institutional Historical Memory as a contribution to the national historical memory (A. L. Salazar et al., s. f.; UNIPPEP, s. f.-a; F. Arias

2020; Allende 2019) explains this behavior. Because the clarification of the Colombian historical memory is officially assigned by law to transitional justice institutions, contributions to those institutions have been perceived by every single memory player and justice seeker in Colombia as a secure path toward authorization and legitimacy of their claims and historical discourses. If this were not true, explaining the political relevance of historical clarification institutions I described in the first chapter would be difficult. Ad hoc transitional justice institutions authorize private and collective experiences of suffering and injustice, as the scholarship on memory politics has shown for multiple cases (J. P. Feldman 2021; Hayner 2011; Milton y Reynaud 2019; Ruiz Romero y Hristova 2019).

The audience I found during my fieldwork was made of three populations: a tiny group of national and international governmental representatives, including those of national transitional justice institutions; a small group of victims to honor (and show); and a huge group of police agents whose presence could only be described as a duty⁴¹. The only time I went to an event where those populations were not there, I found myself in front of an empty room pretending to talk to an audience that was not there⁴². Governmental representatives always had their seats among those of high-ranking officers, who were always occupying the front seats. That was a site of honor and prestige. The bureaucratic public is probably interpreted as a source of opportunities and capital for high-ranking officers and as a source of institutional legitimacy⁴³. High-ranking officers were very interested in talking and spending time with national and international bureaucrats, an interest they did not equally show with honored victims. Every public event I attended had representatives of the national government, the UN, and transitional justice institutions. Sometimes, there were representatives from international cooperation institutions like the USIP⁴⁴ or the GIZ⁴⁵. The importance given to that audience was not the product of most memory players' wants and needs at UNIPPEP. That public was relevant for the Police higher ranking officers, who belonged to other departments and secretaries, most of whom I never met, but people who were always on the back

⁴¹ Colombian Police agents do not usually have the time to go to conferences. Most go to conferences because they are ordered by their superiors to do so.

⁴² More about this illuminating experience in the next chapter.

⁴³ The preparation of those events brought great anxieties over lower grade officers and subofficers. Higher grade officers at UNIPPEP did not feel any better, as they knew any mistake would have to be assumed by them. However, higher grade officers also saw in those events as opportunities for professional growth inside and outside the Police.

⁴⁴ United States Institute of Peace

⁴⁵ German Development Agency

of the heads of my informants. According to my conversations with UNIPeP memory players, those officers were the gatekeepers, funding granters, and career obliterators. The importance the Police gave to bureaucrats was evident in public events, and the public that the Police actively looked for their memory products: the Truth Commission, the CNMH, and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace. I never heard they delivered their memory products to victims' organizations.

Despite the pragmatic and politically productive focus on transitional justice institutions, the authorization police memory players were expecting for their memory products never came. Various of my informants, who preferred to discuss this issue outside the record, communicated their dissatisfaction with not hearing back from transitional justice institutions. The bureaucratic silence they reported to me was interpreted as a politically motivated disregard of the Police claims of victimization among their ranks. A female captain told me that she did not trust the Colombian Truth Commission's final report because its functionaries had ignored the volumes of research UNIPeP had provided to them. Her distrust was so extreme that she would not revise any of the Truth Commission's volumes or interactive website, even when she was passionate about history and politics. While I cannot attest to the Truth Commission's treatment of the Police memory products, I am inclined to believe it was not an easy body of knowledge to process for at least three reasons: the Truth Commission's limited resources, the manipulation of testimony⁴⁶ that appears in the police memory products, and the outrageous implicit denial those products mobilize concerning the Police as an institution that perpetrated and facilitated human rights violations during the conflict. In other words, it is more than likely that the pragmatic definition of the Police memorialization of the past as an intervention directed toward transitional justice institutions failed to expand its institutional memory's public presence and legitimacy.

Besides the "institutional audience" the Police memory players usually reached out to, memory players at the Police also demonstrated an interest in building audiences in educational and scholarly settings. Memory products were launched at universities, academically driven expositions like the Colombian Book Fair, and memory sites where educating future generations on the nuances of the Colombian inner armed conflict was a usual practice (for instance, the Center

⁴⁶ As I've shown, testimony in the Police memory products is not plain. It is a profoundly editorialized version of original discourses that, some times, are completely absent from memory products. The biggest problem is that there is no public data base containing the testimonies that inform the Police memory products. For institutions like the Truth Commission, those problems make it impossible to include the Police memory products as valid sources of information.

of Memory, Peace and Reconciliation in Bogota). I explore the relationship between expert knowledge production and the Police memorialization of the conflict in the upcoming chapter, but it is important to point out that memory players interpreted educational landscapes as important sites to carry their message. Generally, the Police endogenous memory players were very interested in having their depictions of the past known by a wider public, and some of them were interested in productive controversies that could inform their work, as they believed in the importance of rigor and outreach.

Q: What was missing from UNIPPEP's memory initiatives?

Informant 18: I would think that, at a higher academic level... Someone told me, "We worked with a person from the National University who worked on memory issues," a foreign man, I don't know if you know him, I don't remember, and it made me feel sad, but also brought me to reality, that everything we had done was grey literature. He classified it that way.

It became clear after so much effort and sacrifices, paying out of pocket... And for someone, an academic eminence like that, to tell you: "You're being too literal." In fact, he didn't know that I was behind many of those initiatives, those books. I remained quiet and started to reflect. Could he be right? Ultimately, one says: I don't care about making grey literature, because we've left something that's for life, both digital and physical, and if it doesn't burn, well, it will rest in a library.

Because we delivered them, we made a book distribution plan, precisely to... well, with district libraries, they delivered books to the Truth Commission—all commissioners were given their package of books.

So we tried to, at least that. But yes, I would think that perhaps... We tried to give it prestige with Jorge Cardona, the general editor of *El Espectador* newspaper. He was the editor of the book "El Género del Coraje," first edition. So we tried to seek precisely that high level of recognition.

And let's say that could have been missing because, look, today, there are many people, even police officers themselves, who don't know about this. So, we also lacked much dissemination through strategic communications, strong support.

Because that was also one of the shortcomings: from communications, it was a daily struggle to get help, because "oh, they're going to publish and that's our issue." Yes, there were like internal jealousies, questioning why and everything. And well, we needed their endorsement and things like that.

So many times... uh... and I'm sure they are police officers too, and we ask them and they're unaware of many of the memory initiatives that were done, because we precisely lacked that strong institutional support for visibility and dissemination of all these products, regardless of them being grey literature. (Informant 18 2023)

Unfortunately, for some endogenous memory players, the Police memorialization of the past did not attract a big audience. The Police as an institution did not lend many resources for promoting

those events, probably because it was not interested in a big controversy or debate about its past during the conflict. As an ethnographer, my impression is that the Police as an institution was satisfied by sending broad messages about the Police agents' victimhood, heroism, and sacrifice. That is the impression I get from the prefaces that high-ranking officers offered every memory product I analyzed. The exaltation of the Colombian police agent's heroism and sacrifice was the only most prevalent concern they transmitted. Nuanced scholarship and the conversations that make it possible were not a priority despite the wants of the most committed memory players at UNIPEP.

An audience that I thought was going to be essential for the Police memorialization of the conflict was the community of police agents across the nation and the victims belonging to or related to the institution. However, in both cases, I found that there was not a strong focus on those populations. While victims belonging to the Police had a place of honor at UNIPEP's public events and were recipients of public attention and praise, outside those events, they were not usually reached out or attended in any meaningful way. Three victims who participated in UNIPEP's memory initiatives I could contact suggested that, while they appreciated the Police's recent interest in their cases and family memories, they were never contacted again by the Police after they provided their testimonies. One of them was very upset, as her testimony implied criticism of the Police practices that did not make it in any shape or form into the memory product the Police published. In other words, the Police memorialization of the conflict did not have any space for self-criticism, not even if it came from the experiences of the population that was supposed to get more benefit from the Police memorialization of the conflict.

Q: Do you feel that this memory work carried out by the Police has an intention of institutional face-washing?

Natalia Cáceres: Yes, of course. Yes. Well, it's... it's marketing, right? It's marketing. And somehow, the Armed Forces need to have the support of the population because, well, we've seen many things, many injustices in the country that make people distrustful, make the police distrust the army, distrust everyone, and they are the authority. So they need to regain that support somehow. And yes, it's... it was also a strategy. Uh, because well, since my father passed away, what they did, well, was to engrave his name on a monument they have in Bogotá and... that's it, that's all. There wasn't any kind of process afterward.

Well, uh... the police didn't care about anything afterward. Uh, my mom, as an officer, as an active member, also saw many injustices against her. Mmm... orders, poorly given orders. Yes, uh, when she was very close to retirement, they sent her on a commission to a red zone, her being a widow with two children, and she was the only woman sent to the commission. And it was an order.

And most things in the police happen because of that, because of orders. And in the army too. We cannot deny that one of the... factors that led to the existence of false positives were the orders. And orders from the presidency.

So, for me, yes. For me, it does mean that. I mean, I also think that the police didn't try to have these kinds of encounters precisely to avoid these uncomfortable events, right? To avoid the bitter taste of victims telling them: "Well, it was your order; this happened because of you." But no, they simply wanted like the quick and good part of the situation (Cáceres 2023).

Natalia Cáceres' critical view on the Police memorialization of his deceased father, an anti-explosives police agent, does not imply she saw value in the overall initiative. For her, the memorialization of his father was profoundly valuable and deserved. She was thankful. However, she interpreted that the institution's interest to gain legitimacy came before the victim's right to own their past, and the political need to review the state security forces' bad practices, which included unfair and dangerous orders that caused the death or endangerment of family members.

In my perspective, victims were both a source of ethical concern for memory players and a political commodity at an institutional level. This does not mean that victims would not find some sort of satisfaction in the representation and the commemoration of their loved ones by the Institutional Historical Memory. The ones I could talk to found in the police representation of their family members as victims and heroes a just and satisfying experience (Salcedo 2024; Cáceres 2023). However, criticism of the Police as an institution is entirely absent from the Institutional Historical Memory products, even in cases that are related to the lived experiences of victimized police agents and their families. Tales of heroic and sacrificed individuals are pasted over complex real lives connected to families and communities, reducing lives to symbols that are productive for the Police as an institution in search of public legitimacy and a new identity for the postconflict political climate. That is why I am not surprised to find that the Police memorialization, just as one of my interviewees suggested and I encountered in the field, is not known by most police agents. The Institutional Historical Memory is much more a domestication of the past for a very exclusive set

of political interests than an authentic reflection of police agents' experiences during the Colombian conflict.

- The Police memorialization of the conflict as a contribution to reactionary memories

The Police Institutional Historical Memory's lack of capaciousness does not mean it is a discourse doomed to failure. The Police memorialization of the conflict is only one of the pieces of a bigger puzzle made by a complex assemblage of experiences and social groups looking to gain political influence to solve their grievances against human rights culture and its insistence on universal accountability. The jigsaw I am referring to is the reactionary memory model. The police memorialization of the conflict should be thought of as a contribution to reactionary memories, which, as I hope is clear by now, is not necessarily a complete and total rejection of human rights principles and memorialization. It is a selective limitation of grievable lives that serves multiple purposes: the production of institutional legitimacy in the face of public criticism, the satisfaction of limited social groups that have felt in some ways alienated by the human rights memory representation of their communities, and the production of a new collective identity. The consequences of the Police's contribution to Colombia's reactionary memories are yet to be seen. However, I don't want to diminish the potentially damaging effects those memories may have on fulfilling justice and constructing a more democratic society.

The Police Institutional Historical Memory's unwillingness to discuss the Police's role in human rights violations and abuse put into question the Police's ability to become a democratic force of peacebuilding, as well as the ability of victimized communities to trust the Police. It also creates a problematic political climate in a context in which members of the state security forces are being investigated and punished for their role in the violation of individual and collective rights. If future Police agents were to be socialized into the history of the Colombian conflict with the materials provided by the Institutional Historical Memory initiative, how could they make sense of the Police responsibilities for injustice or the institutional need to change? How could they build a police institution sustainably focused on democratic peacebuilding?

Regardless of the contingent political problems and the limited framing of the past, the Police Institutional Historical Memory demonstrates that old heroic discourses are being challenged. Human rights culture, even when limited by particular and elitist interests, penetrated the walls of

the Police institutions in undeniable ways. The figure of victimized police agents and the efforts to identify those agents across the nation is, in the end, an action that may turn on its head the most likely cause of memorializing: institutional legitimacy. Just as Alvaro Uribe Velez's introduction of transitional justice technologies in Colombia ended up institutionalizing counter-memories that were critical of the Colombian state and its government, we may end up witnessing how the Police Institutional Historical Memory creates progressive outcomes. As a witness, I can say that I saw various police agents interested in getting to know the Police implication in human rights violations, as they thought that, by having a better grasp of that reality, they would be able to build a better institution. I don't know if I could have encountered that reality if it hadn't been for the Police Institutional Historical Memory, an initiative that made them aware of the importance of looking at the past from a human rights perspective.

CHAPTER 3: THE NEUTRALITY FACTORY: POLICE AGENTS, EXPERTS, AND THE ILLUSION OF VALUE-FREE MEMORIALIZATION

Angélica Cruz cannot tell her story because, on August 18, 2011, she died three times—or, at least, in three different ways. First, from the bombs and grenades that fell on her body. Then, from the machine guns that didn't stop until they were empty. And, as if that weren't enough, from the fire that consumed everything. Angélica cannot tell this story, even though she loved to write, and I must tell it for her so that those who sought to kill her, disintegrate her, and reduce her body to particles do not have the last word (Paola Guevara in the Police memory product *El Género del Coraje. Crónicas sobre mujeres policías, víctimas en el conflicto armado interno colombiano.*, n.d.).

On July 29, 2022, I had my first official research meeting with a group of UNIPPEP's memory players, which included two police officers and a university professor. Only a couple of weeks before, I was accepted into UNIPPEP as a “volunteer researcher” who would contribute to a volume discussing the victimization of police agents during the “social explosion,” a wave of protests that took Colombian streets by surprise in 2021, and one that eroded in an unprecedented way the public trust on the Police. I accepted the role of volunteer researcher because I was interested in spending time with UNIPPEP’s memory players and, by doing so, understanding better the processes by which the memory products I knew got produced. The Police memory players agreed to collaborate with my research as long as I contributed to one of their memorialization initiatives¹. The meeting was my formal introduction to it.

The meeting took place in one of the few private offices on UNIPPEP's floor, encircled by five of them and filled with rows of desks assigned to administrative police personnel. Despite the uniformity of the rows of desks, there was a geography that I learned to identify with time, each associated with UNIPPEP’s area police administrators answered to. To the east, comprising the

¹ When I got to UNIPPEP offices, the Police memory players were more interested in memorializing the institution's most recent past, which is not associated with the Colombian inner armed conflict in the terms by which the Colombian lae defines it. However, it was profoundly associated with issues of Police legitimacy, human rights abuses, and human rights activism.

major section of the office, police administrators were answering to the peacebuilding area. UNICEP's peacebuilding team used to plan and enforce the protection of FARC ex-combatants. Police administrators planned and managed while troopers in the field implemented. By the time I started my fieldwork, the peacebuilding area was much more focused on constructing the future of the Police during the post-conflict, which, among other things, included strengthening the Police outside big cities. To the south of UNICEP's floor was a group of police administrators working for the Victims' sub-area. They managed data and requests from other institutions. Their activities were considered sensitive, and they did not share much of their everyday work with me. To the north was a small cluster of desks dedicated to the Institutional Historical Memory. High-ranking officers owned the individual offices encircling the floor, and from there, they sent their assistants with orders and requirements that organized the everyday life of police administrators.

My first official meeting occurred in one of those offices, Lucía's office, UNICEP victims' area director, and the institutional link with ESPOL, the Police Graduate School². The office was spacious, containing a desk with a computer, a couple of cabinets, and three chairs: one for Lucía and two for visitors across from her desk. On the day of the research meeting, there were four chairs: one for Lucía, one for Malcolm, the lead researcher UNICEP found for its project, one for Capitan Morales, the minute-taker, and one for me, the new guy at UNICEP and the emerging research team.

Introductions did not take much of the meeting time. It was business time, and to my surprise, it was a very apolitical business. I was expecting to hear some politically charged opinions about the protests that originated the public backlash on the Police and about the "authentic" role that police agents played in them. I was looking forward to hearing some aired thoughts about memorializing human rights violations and their victims in the country. However, I ended up having a profoundly unremarkable conversation about timelines, research outputs, and "neutrality." Malcolm, the university professor the Police hired to lead the research process, was very interested in discussing the potential benefits of publishing a book and a scholarly article. Publishing an article in the proper academic journal could be much more productive than publishing a book, which is the usual memory product UNICEP focuses on. "It gives more points in Colciencias," he said, alluding to

² Presudonym. I don't use the real name of my informants to avoid potential sources of harm against them.

Minciencias and its reward system for Colombian scholars³. Major Lucía was also very interested in Minciencias metrics as, according to her, one of ESPOL's priorities when supporting research projects was to improve its research output's ratings. The minute taker, who had been working at UNIPEP for some time, recommended two or three outreach events to gain additional points from the "social appropriation variables" the Ministry of Science also includes to score the quality of research outputs. Some universities were considered good places to host those events, and others were considered wild and possibly interesting adventures but never as real opportunities to consider. The *Universidad Nacional de Colombia*, the most important public university in the country, surfaced as a great place to talk about the police agents' victimization, but also as an unrealistic and possibly damaging objective⁴.

Regarding the research itself, nobody talked about the questions we would ask or the methods we would use to explore police agents' victimization during the "social explosion." Nobody spoke about how protesters could violate human rights or how responsibility for those possible violations should be thought of. Nobody said a single word about the political significance of writing a book about the police agents' victimization during the social explosion or the potential problems of doing that only a few months after the end of those protests, which were animated by multiple factors, including police violence. Despite that lack of what I interpreted as meaningful conversations, Malcolm and I, the "researchers," were reminded by Major Lucia of the importance of keeping our research neutral, impartial, and scholarly, terms that she and most police memory players I met used interchangeably⁵.

In this chapter, I am exploring the uses that the Police memory players gave to neutrality, a critical concept behind the Police Institutional Historical Memory. I focus on exploring its importance in the Police memorialization of the conflict and how the different motivations and perspectives I found in endogenous memory players complicate the ideal of building a neutral account of the

³ Colciencias was created in 1968, and it used to be a governmental institution meant to promote science in Colombia and measure its impact. It stopped existing in 2019, when a law elevated that institution into the Ministry of Science, or Minciencias.

⁴ For over forty years, students from the Universidad Nacional and anti-riot police agents have maintained a profoundly conflicting relationship. A comprehensive history of this fraught relationship remains unwritten.

⁵ Another concept that surfaced in my conversations with the Police memory players when they were referring to neutrality was objectivity. Objectivity, neutrality and impartiality were interchangeable terms some of my informants used during my research to make sense of the Police memorialization when compared to the one conducted by official historical clarification institutions.

Police implication in the conflict. I also look into how exogenous memory players, interpreted as experts by UNIPPEP functionaries, experienced their participation in “impartial” memorialization initiatives and how police memory players mobilized the “expertise” of exogenous memory players as a guarantee of sound scholarship. In other words, this chapter explores the introduction of the value-free ideal into the Police memorialization of the past, the apparent contradictions that the implementation of such an ideal entails in the reconstruction of a past that is profoundly political, and the complex configuration of reactionary politics that informs the Police memorialization of the conflict.

This chapter owes a great deal to disconnected conversations that I am trying to bridge: the concern for the role that expertise plays in the production and authorization of collective memories and the filtration of the value-free ideal into the clarification of the past. Expertise has been depicted as a critical yet unexplored issue in the collective memorialization of the past (B.M. French 2012). While there is a body of interdisciplinary work exploring the thematic patterns and controversies surrounding the museumification of violent pasts (William 2007; Sodaro 2018b; J. P. Feldman 2021; Guglielmucci y Rozo 2021), there has not been enough attention on the way how expertise gets mobilized in those projects, why, and the effects that expert authorization and experts’ discourses have in the development of political controversies about the past.

I can’t avoid noting that much of the Colombian controversies surrounding the definition of “the truth” about the past feed from the political relevance of the figure of “the expert.” Between 2008 and 2011, the Historical Memory Group’s expert reports on emblematic cases of human rights violations during the Colombian conflict generated a level of public awareness that surpassed what victims’ movements had been able to achieve independently for decades, as I explained in the first chapter. On the other hand, the conservative reaction against human rights memory is not as focused on the claims and experiences of victims’ movements as it is on the expert communities that authorize their claims, usually described as radicals or politically motivated (Delgado Pinzón 2009; Casa editorial El Tiempo 2013; I. Garzón 2022; Garzón Vallejo y Agudelo 2019). As I show in this chapter, the Police focus on presenting expertise as a guarantee of neutrality and as a marker of the Police’s historical memory contributions value.

Neutrality as a memorialization value has been a public concern for conservative sectors reacting against the human rights memory framework. Representatives of the human rights memory

framework, even when knowledgeable and concerned about rigor and generally accepted rules of inference, or research methods, have not been shy in suggesting their work is political in the sense its ultimate objective is to repair victims and to build a stronger democratic system and culture (Comisión de la Verdad 2022b; GMH 2013; Sánchez 2020; Wills 2022). On the side of reactionary memory players, while there has not been any rigorous effort to conceptualize neutrality, the way how UNIPPEP functionaries talked about it, sometimes interchangeably with concepts like objectivity and impartiality, made me think about the pervasive presence in popular culture of the value-free ideal, one of the most fundamental justifications of science as a unique tradition for producing reliable and universally valid knowledge.

According to philosopher Heather Douglas, the value-free ideal is a consensus in the scientific community suggesting that “social and ethical values” should influence only the external aspects of science, like selecting which project to undertake and which methods are ethical, not its heart, which is the moment of inference (Douglas 2016). In other words, only accepted canons of inference, like theoretical saturation in qualitative research, can derive meaning from evidence and observations. The Police memory players were not philosophers of science or experts in epistemology, but they knew quality knowledge was supposed to be neutral, meaning value-free. That profoundly installed notion about knowledge production, which is more a global cultural consensus than a particularity of the Colombian police agents, made endogenous memory players look for the production of a neutral depiction of the Police past, or at least one that could look like it. However, one of the problems with the popular understanding of the value-free ideal is the fraudulent presentation of knowledge production as a value-free endeavor when it is not. While methodological refinement can diminish bias, values are never absent from the multilayered endeavor of producing knowledge. Multiple traditions in the humanities and social sciences have recognized that transparency about the values informing knowledge production is a more productive and ethical approach (Douglas 2017; 2014; Liong 2015; Wallerstein 1996), and it is over that consensus that this chapter offers a criticism of performing neutrality.

I don’t believe Police agents were interested in posing as neutral knowledge producers to deceive the public; at least, that was not the primary concern that the Police endogenous memory players demonstrated. Police agents participated in discussions about Colombia's past by presenting their accounts as neutral because performing neutrality was their means of engaging in meaningful

political controversies while remaining active members of the institution. As I explore in this chapter, Police endogenous memory players' motivations for participating in these discussions varied but aligned with values that remained undisclosed to the public. While my fieldwork did not focus on transparency issues, it became clear that Police agents had many obstacles to disclosing the values that informed their memorialization efforts, starting with legal restrictions on their ability to engage in political discussions. Without neutrality as the banner of the Police memorialization effort, the Police endogenous memory players could not take part in the memorialization of the Colombian conflict. However, it is also true that relying on neutrality was also a calculated rhetorical move against the more established and influential human rights memory model, viciously depicted as biased by conservative political forces. This chapter examines the problematic use of neutrality as a memorialization value. It provides an in situ description of how different actors involved in the Police's institutional historical memory experienced the construction of a "neutral" depiction of the past.

- The memorialization of the past according to endogenous memory players

In September of 2022, Captain Morales invited me to a secret meeting he was attending in Bogota. It was a secret meeting because his bosses at the Police did and should not know he was taking part in it. He scheduled a meeting with a group of human rights activists who were working at the *Universidad Nacional de Colombia* and were interested in exploring a possible partnership with UNIPPEP to examine human rights issues and memorialization. Captain Morales met them for the first time at a public event where UNIPPEP presented one of its memory products to the public, and the group was particularly critical of the Police memorialization focus on agents' victimization while avoiding any mention of police agents' responsibilities in abuse and collaboration with paramilitarism during the conflict. Still, after discussing with Captain Morales, a generous man, they found a window of opportunity they were interested in exploring. Morales was also very curious about the direction that a conversation with such a group could take, but he was not interested in involving the Police in it. When I asked him why, he said that, more times than not, the "institutional dynamic" could spoil things. That was the first time I heard about the "institutional dynamic," a powerful and problematic force in the Police. However, in the case of the meeting I attended with Captain Morales, the "institutional dynamic" did not spoil things. It was not invited to the meeting. But the "cultural dynamic" did.

Like most of the endogenous memory players I met, Captain Morales was genuinely invested in his role at UNIPEP. He valued the opportunity to interact with individuals from human rights circles, whom he found intellectually engaging despite their different perspectives. He enjoyed discussions that allowed him to demonstrate to these intellectual human rights advocates that police agents were complex individuals, not merely human rights infractors. He was also interested in exploring how his intellectual work in the historical memory area could improve and thought of his exchanges with contradictors as a way to discover shortcomings. His background in political science made these interactions with human rights activists especially meaningful, as they provided opportunities rarely available within the Police force. When I asked if he had specific expectations from the meeting we were secretly attending, he responded that his only goal was to better understand the activists' intentions regarding the Police and assess the feasibility of potential collaboration. He believed that involving the human rights community with the Police's historical memory was a necessary step to create more transformative cultural interventions.

The meeting stretched nearly two hours, leaving me exhausted after witnessing an unsurprising development: the human rights activists showed complete disinterest in Captain Morales's priorities and concerns. It was unsurprising because I could recognize myself in those activists. Throughout the meeting, they offered thinly veiled mockery of Morales's arguments about the humanitarian significance of exploring the police agents' victimhood. While some activists reluctantly acknowledged that police agents' victimhood might exist as a legal concept, I observed no genuine expressions of empathy. Captain Morales also failed to identify them. For the human rights activists hosting what ended up as a very hostile meeting, in matters of historical memory reconstruction, the Police's sole role was to answer for its record of human rights violations, nothing more.

I can't say I was surprised because, as I already said, I could see myself in the human rights activists we met. Captain Morales was not surprised either; he saw it coming, and in some way, he enjoyed validating his preconception before the meeting: human rights activists do not understand the Police. He invited me to a beer and told me there was a reason why the Police did not trust transitional justice institutions like the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) and the Truth Commission (CEV). He said those institutions were filled with the kind of people we met who were not interested in hearing the Police. It was interesting to see that, before entering the meeting,

Captain Morales rejected the Police institution, leaving it outside the meeting. However, after encountering the rejection of the “human rights community,” he embodied the Police; he thought of himself as the Police.

My experience with Captain Morales stuck and helped me to understand that the Police memorialization of the past, while institutionally arranged to achieve strategic objectives whose direct beneficiaries I never met, was also representative of a complex emotional world that police agents navigate when encountering critics of the Police outside the walls of the institution that provides them with an identity. Individual police agents, virtuous or not, carry a heavy weight on their backs whenever they leave a station. It comprises the institution’s history and legacy, as well as individual actions made by police agents and institutional policies enacted by multiple actors. The police memorialization of the conflict is a way to navigate that encounter, but one where specific framings are more realistic. Choosing a particular frame over another is an ethically or politically informed decision. It is the first breach of the value-free fiction that the Police use to legitimize its institutional historical memory.

In UNIPEP's institutional historical memory area, I encountered a plurality of memory players that complicate the description of the Police memorialization as a neutral or value-free endeavor. The Police memorialization of the past, when ethnographically inspected, is a collective effort with multiple and conflicting values that I wish to present by distinguishing between different types of memory players: The entrepreneurs, the hard-liners, and the converted. The types I mentioned are not essential qualities I can’t associate with police agents’ grades, social class, gender, or any other sociological variable. While the police agents’ grade is essential to make sense of entrepreneurial framings of historical memory, the way memory players think of institutional historical memory and engage with it is personal. The entrepreneurs were low and high-ranking officers who usually seemed more concerned about their careers in the Police than about the political and cultural implications of revisiting the past. They knew the stakes of looking at the past and were willing to instrumentalize that look for climbing ranks inside the Police without much interest in the content of the look. The hard-liners were also low- and high-ranking officers, but they considered themselves patriots and, more than anything else, ideological police warriors in a struggle against a conspiracy against the Colombian state security institutions. The hard-liners defined the National Police memorialization of the conflict guiding principles, and they convinced the higher-ups of the

importance of investing efforts in memorializing the past under the rubric they defined, which is the one I described in Chapter 2. The converted were mostly low-ranking officers and sub-officers, who, even when concerned about the growing stigma against police agents in general, were interested in pursuing a more pluralistic memorialization work, one in which the Police could face its demons. They were frustrated with UNIPEP's memory division for different reasons but were hopeful, yet fearful, of the possibility of expanding the police perspective on its past. It is important to remember that I am talking about ideal types, abstractions that reduce the complexity of ordinary life into digestible ideas. I did not find pure entrepreneurs, hard-liners, or converted police agents. Every memory player is different, but categories help make sense of meaningful behavior and thought patterns.

- The entrepreneurs

In February 2023, Major Ospina, one of the most important functionaries of UNIPEP, granted me the interview he had promised two months prior. The interview he gave me was one of the most tedious and plainest I collected. He dodged most of my questions. Yet beneath his silences lay an evident truth: not all police officers shaping the Institutional Historical Memory sought to counter what they saw as "unfair" portrayals by activists, NGOs, and truth commissions. Some officers weren't primarily concerned with defending the institution's dignity. Instead, they focused on appearing competent to a select committee of high-ranking officials who controlled their assignments, promotions, and retirement terms. Some memory players in the Police were strategic actors, carefully calculating their moves to maximize benefits in a game they clearly understood. While Ospina wasn't the only opportunist I encountered, he was undoubtedly the most blatant.

With his promotion evaluation imminent, Ospina carefully weighed his words' potential impact on his career advancement and retirement benefits, his admitted primary motivation for remaining with the Police. While he likely provided responses that were "politically correct," his delivery took an unexpected form. When discussing his work in memory initiatives, he demonstrated little recall of specific events, instead emphasizing his administrative effectiveness and problem-solving abilities. Asked about his most significant moment leading Police memory projects, he responded:

I believe we are going through the most crucial moment because when I arrived at UNIPEP, there was already a structure, an infrastructure, some tasks, some processes that were already aligned, already organized. They were already achieving different institutional responsibilities. So what do I do? I come to provide *that plus*, to

improve existing processes, to provide dynamism. During the last few months (...) I believe we have had the most special time, the biggest challenge, precisely because we have been transforming our institutional command. The national government demanded of us a lot, and we had to restructure our strategy. We have had to create new channels, new strategies to come up with different areas, new groups, a strategy to expand in the national territory to answer effectively and efficiently the new challenges (Informant 8 2023).

As it should be evident at this point, Major Ospina's answer to my question does not provide anything substantial about the significance of the historical institutional memory, and none of his answers to my questions did, despite my efforts. At first, I thought the problem was methodological. Something about my question could be wrong. However, most interviewees provided meaningful answers to that question, so Ospina's lack of content was probably related to other issues. From my perspective, the lack of substance I found could be related to his promotion. Still, after going over my notes and the interview itself, I realized he always saw the Police institutional historical memory as an administrative problem, a process he could trace and improve with his ingenuity, his ability to search for the correct partners, and to manage resources efficiently. He was not interested in the substance of memory, even when he knew what kind of memory was needed from the historical memory area at UNIPPEP. He was interested in making things happen for his audience, which was more likely than not a committee of higher-grade officers that would analyze his administrative skills.

The understanding of memory as an administrative responsibility to pursue with institutional prudence and efficiency, disregarding the content of that memory in some ways, was not a unique trait of Major Ospina. I also found the same kind of cynicism in two colonels who directed the area of memory and victims: Colonel Palacios and Colonel Ortiz. Colonel Palacios, who was in charge of UNIPPEP for a short period, never presented himself as someone with whom I could establish a relationship. He would not do that with most people on UNIPPEP's floor. His presence on UNIPPEP was intimidating, as regular activities stopped whenever Palacios was out of his office. Palacios summoned me a couple of times. Once, he called me to interrogate my motives for being there as an anthropologist and to clarify my contribution to UNIPPEP during my fieldwork. He summoned me some other times to discuss a proposal I made about launching a memory initiative that included recognizing human rights violations committed by the Police. This proposal surprisingly caught his interest for a while, but not because he was committed to fighting impunity. Palacios never transmitted a profound commitment to any particular representation of the Police in public

discussions about the past. He only expressed a consistent interest in novel projects that could set him apart from previous directors at UNIPPEP.

In his interest in novelty and his overall disaffection with any particular historical narrative, I saw a window of opportunity to introduce a proposal to work on a more pluralistic depiction of the past in the Police memorialization interventions. Palacios interpreted the introduction of a more pluralistic narrative as dangerous, as it could mean a sort of self-incrimination that he and other police agents called *daño anti-jurídico*. I had to invest a lot of time trying to show that including a pluralistic take on the police depiction of its past did not mean institutional self-incrimination; it meant acknowledgment of wrongdoings and a positive starting point for producing meaningful change between the Police and civil society. Palacios eventually understood that and interpreted the move to a plural account of the past as an opportunity he could profit from, as the presence of a new leftist government in Colombia⁶ could mean that his memory move would be appreciated in the political spheres he needed for future promotions⁷. In time, he became so interested in my proposal that he invited me to present a formal project with a detailed budget.

After I presented the project and Colonel Palacios expressed his satisfaction, the following days and weeks came with a loud silence. Colonel Palacios became challenging to find, and the few times I could meet him, I only heard that we needed to wait to start the project. Then, I received invitations to meetings with agents I did not know who would question many aspects of the project (budget, administration, and focus) with no apparent interest in finding solutions. I never heard of a formal rejection of the project, but the project never started. I tried for many weeks to make sense of that. Did I do something wrong? Was the budget exaggerated? I never received an answer to those questions, at least not directly.

Colonel Ortiz, a retiree when I met him and another memory activist I conceptualize as an entrepreneur, helped me understand. According to him, looking at the police responsibility for human rights violations was something he and his team considered, but only in secret conversations, as none would be as dumb as to ask for their own professional coffin. In his words:

⁶ In 2022, Gustavo Petro, the first leftist president in Colombia according to many, won the presidency. He won under a set of promises that included the construction of a “total peace,” in many ways articulated to the strengthening of operating transitional justice institutions and the historical clarification of the past.

⁷ Incoming generals require congress approval, meaning high-ranking police officers have to navigate the world of national and regional politics.

We knew, internally in the team, that we had to discuss that (the role of the Police in human rights violations), but there were particular anxieties there, most related to prudence, because who would be the director of that project? Who lend themselves to do that? So eventually, both my boss and I, as well as the rest of the team, understood nobody was willing to take that shot (Ortiz 2024).

Ortiz never knew of my project with Palacios, but he helped me to understand that my project was not prudent enough. Despite Palacios' interest in novelty and attention, and his more profound interest in promotions, Palacios probably decided that relying on the support of the new Colombian leftist government was not a secure move. It is also possible that the arrival of a general to UNIPPEP as its new director changed Palacios' plans, as he was relieved from the direction. I am sure taking political risks as a subordinate was not as easy. In any case, my interactions with Palacios demonstrated he did not care as much about a fair representation of the Police in the Colombian political transition as he did not have a clear consciousness of what that was. He was interested in making the institutional historical memory a platform for his promotion, and, as Colonel Ortiz suggested in our conversation, prudence ended up being more important than risk.

I met Colonel Ortiz thanks to the help of a captain. By the time we met, he was a retiree despite his relative youth and was working as an advisor for the government's peace initiatives. His experience at UNIPPEP was critical to achieving that position, so I looked for him. We agreed to meet at an exclusive coffee shop in one of the wealthiest Bogota localities. We chose that place because it was convenient for him. Colonel Ortiz is a living example of how the Police institution is a promise of socio-economic mobility in Colombia. According to the World Economic Forum, a low-income family in Colombia may take twelve generations to approach middle income (2020). He joined the Police hoping to improve his social and economic position, to have power, as he repeatedly told me during our interview, and even to improve his masculine attractiveness. However, the reality he found in the Police was far from his expectations. During his twenty years of service, he discovered he would not achieve his objectives as a police agent, not even with his standing as a high-ranking officer. He found he could not decide how to live his life as a police agent, as their success rests upon the agents' willingness to obey superiors, or what is usually labeled as "the institutional dynamic." The salary was not great, as he found out on an international mission where he compared his wage with police agents from France, Chile, and some other countries. Despite Ortiz being an officer, he recalled most of his everyday life was that of a subordinate. Ortiz told me he did not have the power he expected, as everyone "ruled" the Police

and, by extension, "ruled" him. Finally, he did not feel his professional identity helped him to be attractive to women, as he would usually be rejected based on his profession.

I joined (the Police) for that reason. Honestly, the vocation to serve was not part of it. I joined because I saw the Police as a means to an end, period. In conclusion, for me, the Police was initially a means. I had a job; I didn't have to go out and look for one. I had 20 years of service and the right to a pension. I was going to have status. I was going to have recognition, at least in theory. I was going to have command, leadership. Let's say that at the time, I thought I was going to have power, but later, I understood that it wasn't real power. And that's it, I was very wrong. That's what motivated me; it was a means to achieve what I wanted. After 20 years, I was already a commander; I had money, I managed people, I had a certain status, but a status exclusively within the institution (Ortiz 2024).

My conversation with Colonel Ortiz led me to believe that contributing to the Police's institutional historical memory was just another step in achieving the power and status he was interested in. However, he confessed that memorializing the Police past was not just a regular step in his career but a rewarding step that allowed him to express himself in a way he never could in his profession. He was finally thinking for himself, leading initiatives with almost complete freedom instead of receiving and executing orders. Memorializing the police agents' victimization was a step that, probably for the first time in his career, made him care about something. Building the police memory for Ortiz came from a contradictory set of motivations, some of them tied to his desire to be recognized outside the Police as an individual with status and power. Some other motivations were associated with the relationships he built with other memory activists inside UNIPPEP and with victims, people he eventually felt he needed to "help" and, in some cases, "save" or "heal."

Yes, Doña Delfina. Her son was an auxiliary and died, I don't remember where, the man died in a bombing, I mean, I think he was disintegrated, he died, an auxiliary⁸; and at first, they didn't want to recognize her as a victim due to her son's death, her son's story had never been told, and that lady almost lost, actually lost her life due to the grief left by her son's death; so how through memory initiatives did we manage to save that lady's life and recover her? Why? Because we finally managed to make her son's story visible and for his story to be made known to many people, and we managed to heal that person. That lady was sick. We met her in Villa Vicencio at a victims' meeting we held for families, for police victims, and from there, we made a commitment to her to make her son's story visible, and we fulfilled it. We included him in a book (...); and we invited her to all events, and that lady healed. I think that lady can die peacefully today because she felt she had failed her son in this area, that nobody knew his story, and that for her, her son was a hero; he had given his life for his country, but nobody knew it (Ortiz 2024)

⁸ *Auxiliaries* are conscripts serving mandatory military service within the National Police.

Colonel Ortiz arrived at UNIPPEP for his experience in peacebuilding, which included fieldwork experience with demobilized guerrilla fighters and international humanitarian missions representing the Colombian Police. He told me he was excited to join UNIPPEP because he correctly calculated that working in that office would open doors for him in the future with the government or international organizations. Working at UNIPPEP was also an opportunity to test his knowledge, as by the time he arrived at the institution, he had recently completed a master's in human rights and peace culture.

Colonel Ortiz was assigned as the chief of the historical memory area without much knowledge of the topic, despite his master's degree, so he thought of his work as a management challenge. Still, as he recounted, he became affectionate to memory labors rapidly, as he encountered for the first time a reason to stay in the Police longer than he had to, longer than his retirement option after 20 years of service. The first amusing thing he found in UNIPPEP's area of historical memory was a higher purpose and a group of people who honestly believed in it. He did not need much effort to build affection for that cause. Another positive aspect of building memory was the real and not-so-common opportunity to create meaningful projects among a group of enthusiastic individuals. As Colonel Ortiz puts it, "There, I felt that what I was doing, that what I did was worthwhile and that I was truly contributing and, in some way, positively impacting some families" (Ortiz 2024).

Ortiz thought of building memory as an opportunity to save lives. He was adamant that some memory products he intervened in, like the *Comando Jungla* documentary I briefly described in Chapter 2, saved the lives of alienated victims and their families. He recounted that the life of Savedra, a police agent depicted in the *Comando Jungla* documentary, positively changed after its release. According to Ortiz, Savedra was now a conference speaker instead of the "crazy person" he was becoming when UNIPPEP and its external associates reached out to him with the offer to contribute his testimony for the documentary. As Ortiz put it, Savedra was going crazy, and years later, after that project, Savedra ended up being the hero, recognized and admired by everyone. "We changed Savedra's life, and now he gives lectures, and now, of course, he's retired. We also saved Savedra's life. Savedra is a different person. (...) Through memory, lives have been saved, and lives have been changed" (Ortiz 2024).

Memory was also the chance to honor police victims ignored by other institutions and to explore new problems. Ortiz suggested that he and his team were committed to showing the public the

suffering of the Police families that experienced loss. They committed to making the families of victimized police agents feel proud of them and of themselves for belonging to the Police institution. But Ortiz was also interested in exploring new themes, like the take "the other side" had of the conflict, especially the take it had of the Police and its role. For Colonel Ortiz, understanding the point of view of the "other side," or the FARC guerrilla, was exciting, as for him it was another mirror to observe the police magnificence. He suggested to me how amazing it would have been to learn from ex-guerrilla fighters what they thought about police agents like Savedra, a "hero" who withstood with less than ten police agents the assault of "hundreds" of guerrilla fighters in the jungle.

But Ortiz and his team decided to avoid exploring "the other side," as he and his collaborators discovered the police leadership and the government were not ready. "I am clear on this: what is missing from our memory wasn't done, not because we couldn't do it. We could have done it; we had the contacts, we had everything needed to do it. But it was a matter of prudence because the leadership, and perhaps the country at that time, wasn't ready to close the cycle" (Ortiz 2024). The lack of opportunities to look into "the other side" was frustrating for Ortiz as it was the funding and support UNIPEP memory initiatives received from the police leadership. The lack of preparedness and openness from the police leadership meant that the Police's historical memory had a shortcoming in its potential. For Ortiz, at a more personal level, it meant an obstacle to his ability to pursue the significant and revolutionary projects he was interested in.

I remember that one of the leaders or commanders of the FARC who was there in Curillo when the Jungle Command incident happened, alias Marcial, we found him.

"Mr. Marcial, we need you to tell us what happened on January 18, 2002 (...) when you shot down a helicopter". "Oh yes, yes, I remember," he said; "You shot down quite a few that day". "Right, when we returned the bodies." "Do you want to talk about this for a documentary?" "Yes, go ahead."

Then we asked the General if we could include Marcial as one of the spokespeople in the documentary, to get the full version, the complete story, and then we can submit it for an international award (...). "What are you thinking? How are we going to include a guerilla fighter?" (Ortiz 2024).

For an entrepreneur like Ortiz, memory was also the opportunity to get awards, public recognition, and promotions inside the Police. However, he found that "overreaching" could put him at odds with the higher-ups, as they were not ready to work with the FARC, even if that work could serve to represent the Police as an institution made of heroes like Saverda. Memory meant for some

police agents inside UNIPPEP an entrepreneurial activity that could pay dividends in better retirement, escalating the institutional hierarchy, and the possibility of doing something extraordinary that could take a police agent into different spheres, those of power and prestige. Memory as an entrepreneurial activity does not mean agents behind it have no affective connection to the topics that memory touches on, as Ortiz's testimony shows he learned to care in some ways. He learned to care for the victimized police agents he met and their families, and probably, he also cared for an imagined community of victimized police agents. For Ortiz, the best part of his career took place in UNIPPEP as a facilitator of memory initiatives, which, while profitable in many ways for his career, showed him he could "save lives." But building memory for an entrepreneur was, before anything else, an opportunity to accumulate capital in an institutional game that demanded administration skills, efficiency, and prudence, tons of prudence.

Values always inform knowledge production. This holds in natural and social sciences and definitely when defining a narrative about the past. Calls for neutrality and value-free approaches obscure how everyday life, social positions, and political contexts inform selectivity when "building memory." The experience of entrepreneurs in the Police Institutional Historical Memory suggests that a framework of meaning about the past is sometimes built around mundane personal interests that encircle and limit inclusion criteria that could affect in unpredictable ways the outlook of an emblematic memory. However, those personal interests are also informed by the rules of the social fields actors navigate. What ended up being straightforward for me is that entrepreneurs understood that it was very costly to include any recognition for institutional misbehavior in the Police memorialization of the past. To do so could endanger their careers in ways they did not want to test.

- The hard-liners

When I first visited UNIPPEP's offices in June 2019, I was received by Lorena, a female sub-officer who expressed concern that institutions such as the CNMH and the CEV had misrepresented the National Police through what she considered broad and imprecise allegations of state crimes. She contended that the National Police should not be characterized as a perpetrator or enabler of human rights violations. Such characterization, she argued, falsely equated the Police with the FARC guerrilla and overlooked the fundamental distinctions between the military and the Police. She was confident that, even when it was impossible to deny there were "rotten apples" in the Police, the

institution was mainly made of selfless individuals willing to sacrifice their lives for Colombians. According to her, that was precisely the reality that institutions like the CNMH of the CEV would be silencing: The institutional mission and the character of most Colombian Police agents. Lorena's perspective reveals how the most influential memory players within UNIPPEP viewed the institutional historical memory. For hard-liners like her, it was a tool to demand recognition that official historical clarification commissions denied to the Police as an institution, to police agents as public servants, and to victimized agents and their families. Memory players like her felt alienated by popular depictions of police agents as abusers. She sought to portray the Police as heroic professionals and "peacebuilders," which was how she probably thought of herself and her colleagues. Any characterization of the Police as perpetrators of human rights violations was deemed unacceptable and could only stem from ignorance or malicious intent.

Lorena ended up leaving UNIPPEP and the Police to join the CNMH, directed by Dario Acevedo, a polemic historian appointed by the right-wing government of Ivan Duque in 2019. I never got to talk with her about her experience at the CNMH. However, she introduced me to Capitan Angélica, one of the most central figures of the Institutional Historical Memory initiative, another passionate hard-liner who opposed official historical clarification narratives. Most of her friends and collaborators at UNIPPEP said she was a brilliant and hard-working officer. She was also depicted as straightforward and courageous, who would not shy away when expressing her convictions. I never saw her in conversations with higher-grade officials, as when I arrived at UNIPPEP to conduct participant observation, she had just left the institution to join another Police unit. But in my conversations with her, I could confirm she was not shy; she was accustomed to being right, and she could even get condescending on "people like me," scholars who thought they knew everything about the Colombian conflict but who "didn't really know." The condescending attitude I found in her was not only hers, as I could find it in most hard-liners. Hard-liners did not present to me as interested in exploring and explaining the nuanced and sometimes contradictory contours of the truth about the past. I think contradiction was very uncomfortable for them, something they preferred to omit by concentrating on institutional rules of behavior that they usually confounded with experience⁹.

⁹ My discussion with hard-liners about the Police wrongdoings usually ended in a similar place: the Police had no responsibility for human rights violations because there are no rules suggesting Police agents can commit abuses. As

Angélica came from a family of Police sub-officers. She completed a bachelor's degree in political science and tried to enter the Navy as an officer. She was rejected there but later accepted to the National Police Officer's career. She began her professional career as the commander of a CAI (Comando de Atención Inmediata - Immediate Attention Command) in Bogotá, one of the small police stations strategically distributed throughout major Colombian cities to provide local law enforcement services. Following her successful tenure as a CAI commander, she joined SIJIN (Seccional de Investigación Criminal - Criminal Investigation Section), the National Police's criminal investigation division. She was assigned to a strategic center for narcotics research, where, by her account, she investigated drug trafficking routes, emerging substances, and consumption patterns. Her research experience at the SIJIN and her academic background in political science drew the attention of UNIPPEP leadership, leading to her appointment to the unit in 2017. She found an intellectually stimulating place where her training as a political scientist, and probably her unapologetic personality, gave her the necessary credibility to design the institutional historical memory primer, which would guide the National Police incursion into the controversial discussion about the history of the Colombian inner armed conflict.

Angélica demonstrated great pride and passion for her work at UNIPPEP's institutional historical memory area. She reached out for help from professors she knew at the ESPOL, the police graduate school, to help her design the institutional historical memory primer and its contents (However, their contribution is not officially acknowledged). She also managed to convince the head of Bogotá's Center of Memory and Reconciliation, one of the many internationally renowned Colombian places of human rights-driven memory, to lend the premises for a public launch of the primer. She convinced the ESPOL administration to build the "reminiscence garden," a decorated yard honoring police agents victims of forced disappearance, and she also organized a permanent exhibition of miniature 3D crystal portraits honoring the same victims in the National Directory of the National Police. Angelica fondly remembered all her hard work in making those interventions: "I can say that I love, and I will always love that process. And sometimes it hurts to see some failures, that perhaps I don't say I am perfect, but I did everything to make those

there are no rules suggesting that police agents can commit abuses, responsibility for abuse is always attached to individual agency, or "rotten apples."

initiatives, even the support of outside people, to fund a snack with a bottle of juice, the photographs” (A. Salazar 2022).

The love she felt for her work did not only come from the intellectual rewards of engaging in memory work, which Colonel Ortiz appreciated very much, as mentioned above. Angelica's love for the memorialization of the past mainly came from her strongly felt need to fight a grievance: the unfair treatment transitional justice institutions, intellectual elites, and human rights advocates were giving to security forces, and more specifically to the Police. I identified Angelica's grievance in her conceptualization of human rights bureaucrats and intellectual elites as biased, in the understanding she had of herself and the historical role she had to play, and in her disgust of what she defined as the peace agreement's "preferential treatment" of FARC ex-combatants over the state security forces. Angelica's view of intellectual elites and transitional justice institutions as biased was the primary fuel of her emotional grip over memory work. In one of our interviews, when discussing the personal significance of working in the historical institutional initiative, she told me, "In every situation I got into, in each memory initiative, there always was an additional drop, a fragment of me, even a chunk, because I consider that the truth of the country cannot come from a single side. The truth of the country must include all sides, and for instance, I am completely opposed to the distribution of the Truth Commission's final report because it is one-sided, completely one-sided" (A. Salazar 2022).

Her case against the one-sidedness of the Truth Commission was not necessarily consequential, as she did not have problems with the fact that the Police's historical memory was pretty much one-sided. When I asked her why the police memory initiative did not consider human rights abuses committed by the Police, she told me that it was unnecessary to go over that, as institutions like the CNMH and the CEV, "the other side," were already denouncing those problems. Instead of consequential, her case against bias was somewhat retaliatory against institutions and social groups she felt were charged against people like her: a police agent and a conservative. She was motivated to demonstrate that the "other side," as she referred to sympathizers of the human rights memory, was wrong. For instance, Angélica told me that one of the most outstanding achievements of her memory work was consolidating the Police memorialization in academic settings and

"demonstrating that the police were not as ignorant as many thought"¹⁰ (A. Salazar 2022). For me, it was very curious to see that victims or justice weren't part of her considerations when thinking about the Police memorialization. Retaliation against a plural and possibly thought as "elitist" other side was her most significant achievement as a memory player, and I believe she was not the only one to feel that.

Colonel Fernando Pantoja, the most notable director of the Police institutional historical memory, was also very proud of the Police memory products' ability to contest the human rights memorialization of the conflict. He was more nuanced and cautious than Angelica when talking about the representatives of the human rights memory model, which comprises state bureaucrats at different agencies, human rights advocates, and political figures. Still, he shared her overall understanding of them: they were politically motivated agents who took part in a cultural war against the Police and the state's security forces. For a hard-liner like him, the memorialization of the Police participation in the Colombian conflict was very difficult to summarize without invoking political correctness, an invocation he used in the name of one of the unstated principles of the Police memorialization of the past: "prudence."

Juan Carlos Rico: Among the different voices in the *historical* discourse, which one do you identify as the most predominant and why?

Colonel Pantoja: "The thing is, I'll say it again, there are ideological tendencies in education. Well, you can be... I'll say this in a politically correct way... You can be someone who has studied extensively... But tendencies exist. For better or worse, you are shaped by a school of thought. Or rather, to put it better, you are grounded in a school of thought. But that school cannot... cannot... allow itself to be above the holistic conception of an event, of a situation. When you are a researcher, I hope and aspire you must have sufficient capacity to perceive the different elements that will help you construct your final product... And not because you have a tendency and are determined that you can generate that dominance.

Really, the one who writes history is the one who wins the war, not the majority. But sometimes, it turned into the silence of rifles and the war of pencils. And that's what awaits us when you finish a document that should become the knowledge of the history of truth. You cannot force someone, by norm and by law, to make the conclusion of that report their conscience and their end, but rather, it should be nourishment for you to generate your own conception at the level of other constructs (Pantoja 2023).

Colonel Pantoja's "political correctness" leaves room for different interpretations. Still, he clearly articulates a position where historical accounts are viewed not merely as representations of past

¹⁰ Salazar was clearly charging against leftist activists, who usually mock police agents for their assumed lack of education and alleged stupidity. Salazar and other Police agents resented that very much, and they usually communicated to me how much police agents study.

events but as reflections of the power dynamics and ideological positions of those who document them. His opposition to the dominance of specific interpretations of the past over others must be read in the context of the Colombian politics of memory, which, as I have laid out, has been conquered by advocates of the human rights memory model. His reference to *la guerra de los lápices* (the war of pencils) is a little unclear when read alone, but not as much when considering another conversation I had with him, in which he answered a similar question. I asked him to explain why the Police memorialization of the conflict was thematically inseparable from the concept of “the victim.” He answered: “One of the philosophical elements that were handled during the Cold War and in the Nazi Holocaust was, let's say, the war of weapons would end and the war of letters would begin, first; second, that you should recognize, and reestablish, but even more than these two Rs, there was a third R, which was to repair” (Pantoja 2022). This is another problematic sentence to make sense of as it is, much more if the historical events he quotes are taken very seriously (Cold War and Nazi Holocaust), but there are two critical elements in it: the explanation of the memorialization effort, and the explanation of the concern for victims.

Pantoja believes that memorializing the past is unavoidable in the aftermath of conflicts. As direct and violent conflicts end, conflicts over the meaning of the past start. Colonel Pantoja seems to believe that he, as a part of the Colombian state, is obligated to continue the fight the state was able to win by forcing the FARC to sit and negotiate¹¹. Colonel Pantoja was aware of the politically charged intervention he led with the Police memorialization of the conflict. Still, he was also aware of how improper it was to present it as such. However, he could not help but show the Police memorialization as an extension of the Colombian war against the FARC¹². His elicitations of the “Cold War philosophical elements” and the war of pencils suggest how memory is conceptualized as an extension of armed conflict. But why does the Police concentrate on victims? The answer is the Holocaust.

¹¹ The state security forces have tried to suggest that the FARC sat at the negotiation table because they lost the war. The most unambiguous statement in that direction was published as a part of the army’s historical memory collection in 2023 (Pizarro 2023).

¹² Thinking of memory as a violent conflict is not a problem of the state security forces. Essential figures in the construction of the Colombian human rights memory framework like Maria Emma Wills and Gonzálo Sánchez usually talk about “battles over memory,” when reflecting on the Colombian cultural debates over the past. The Colombian and Latin American field of memory politics is dramatically conceptualized as a zero-sum game.

Colonel Pantoja identified that principles like recognition, re-establishment, and reparation were central elements of historical narratives after the Second World War. Human rights principles associated with peacebuilding and memorializing the past were seen as a necessary language to frame the past. In other words, Pantoja seems to communicate that participating in Colombian debates over the past with a human rights discourse is the product of a historical and cultural period in which there is no other way around it. Winning the battle over the past demands to be attuned with the appropriate form. I believe that the end of the Second World War was not as influential for the Police institutional decision to memorialize the conflict as the Colombian victims' movement, which pushed for the institutionalization of the Human Rights memorialization discourse. In any case, the cultural hegemony of human rights discourse affected the Police behavior during the Colombian transitional period.

The hard-liners' political motivations to reject the human rights memory as an imposition of particular visions over their own were never explicitly disclosed to me. In an informal conversation after one of our interviews, Angelica told me she was a "radical centrist," suggesting she had no political biases. Lorena and Colonel Pantoja never mentioned their political identities. Still, they considered their memory work a reaction against an offense. Even when they all knew their work was partial, they also seemed to think that their partiality was justified in the partiality of their contradictors. And where is neutrality here? Lorena, Angelica, and Pantoja pointed to experts and "third-party validators" as the answer to that question. Because the Police memorialization initiatives were usually conducted by university professors, or introduced with prefaces by journalists, they felt their work guaranteed neutrality in ways that human rights advocates and transitional justice bureaucrats could not offer. "Unlike them, we constructed memory in a multi-focal way. We said we needed third-party validators; we needed people who would look at us and give a multiple version, even if they are liberal." (Pantoja 2022).

While neutrality is not a motivation for hard-liners, the performance of neutrality was deemed critical for the Police memorialization initiative. The Police reliance on what I call "exogenous memory players" to write books, book chapters, and scholarly articles should be considered a political maneuver to depoliticize the hard-liners' memory initiatives. For hard-liners, who were also the most influential architects of the Police Institutional Historical Memory, neutrality was a necessary tool to react against unfair depictions of themselves and the rest of the Colombian state

security forces, and probably against the human rights culture, one that they associated with liberalism and leftism. However, such a rejection was not total, as even hard-liners appropriated the human rights discourse to their politics.

- The converted

UNIPeP's historical memory area hosted officers who interpreted historical memory mostly as a transaction to achieve their interests inside and outside the Police. It also hosted officers who interpreted themselves as historical agents meant to set things right by fighting "the other side" in transitional justice institutions and history books. However, there were some officers and sub-officers who thought that the Police should take responsibility for its implication in human rights abuses by exploring and socializing a self-critical look into the police culture of human rights abuses and its implication during the conflict. Their beliefs were privately held, while sometimes shared in the context of camaraderie between office partners. However, they knew their take on the institutional historical memory was not meant to be shared with the higher-ups, as it could mean devastating punishments, a professional coffin with the ability to change their lives for the worst.

The "coffin" was almost like a folk monster among medium and high-ranking officers. Colonels, majors, and captains talked about it with me when I tried to convince them about the importance of looking at the Police past with a more critical attitude. A retired Colonel told me off the record that nobody would pursue a critical look of the Police because "they would make a coffin" for those who attempted that. The coffin represented the destruction of a career, and "they," the higher-ups I never met, are high-ranking officers with the power to define who gets to be part of their club and who doesn't. From what I heard, the higher-ups were old conservative people, primarily males, who would not stand criticism of the institution they ruled over. Nobody's career at UNIPeP has been terminated for exploring the Police's less gentle and scary side, but nobody has attempted to challenge the hard-liners' memorialization framework.

Major Matamoros, one of the officers I met in UNIPeP, was the clearest example of the costs police agents must pay when swimming against institutional currents. He was critical of the Police general lack of accountability, and he shared with me his interest in exploring memory initiatives in which, while the police agents' victimization remained a central concern, the Police could also face its history of abuse. However, he knew very well that he could not suggest that the Police

should recognize wrongdoings. Before entering UNNIPEP, he was part of a different Police administrative area where he enjoyed his work. He lived close to his family and enjoyed his relationships with his work partners. However, everything changed drastically after he made a “mistake” on one of Bogota's most traumatic days of the 2019 street protests.

On November 23, 2019, Dilan Cruz, a high school student and protester, was killed by an anti-riot police agent who shot at him with his “non-lethal” weapon. Major Matamoros was assigned that day to patrol the sector where Cruz was killed, a responsibility that most administrative police agents have in times of significant demand of the police force (even UNIPEP agents could not avoid the obligation to patrol the streets in days of protest). He learned of Dilan Cruz's death almost immediately through radio communications with other police agents. However, before his team could be fully briefed, they were surrounded by furious protesters, forcing them to seek refuge in a nearby building. Major Matamoros, deeply affected by Cruz's death but also concerned for his own safety and that of his personnel, wrote on a large piece of cardboard: "The lives of police officers and students matter." Holding the sign above his head, he emerged from their hiding place. Upon seeing this message, the protesters ceased their attacks on Matamoros' unit. But his cardboard received more visibility than he expected, and the higher-ups started a disciplinary process against him.

According to the higher-ups, Major Matamoros misbehaved, an accusation he could not contest. As a punishment, he was terminated from his administrative responsibilities in Bogota. He was sent to a different city as the head of a Center of Immediate Attention (CAI) in a dangerous neighborhood where police agents, out of concern for self-preservation, preferred to stay inside the station. Major Matamoros worked very hard to get an administrative position back in Bogota, a position he wanted because it allowed him to stay close to family and put him far from the streets. Matamoros always knew the cost of going against the wishes of higher-ups. Everyone does in the Colombian Police. But he never calculated that a common-sense allusion, like "The lives of police officers and students matter," which can be translated to “all lives are equal,” could put him at odds with them. Matamoros knew he would never engage in controversies again as long as he stayed in the Police force. His quality of life and ability to care for his family were not negotiable.

Major Matamoros was a political scientist, and much of his political consciousness against abusive practices and impunity was grounded in the philosophy courses he took as an undergraduate

student. However, some police agents developed their critical view of the Police's narrow memorialization of the conflict by participating in the Institutional Historical Memory initiative. That was the case of sub-officer Will, a clever and very critical individual who, while proud of the Police memory products' contribution to the recognition of police agents victims of the conflict and their families, was also ethically conflicted by the Police omission of its mistakes during the conflict. He got immersed in the human rights culture before joining UNIPEP. His ability with languages (English and French) allowed him to participate in an international mission in Haiti, where he met United Nations personnel and police agents from other countries. Soon after the mission was over, the Police recruited him to become a member of UNIPEP, as the institution valued his experience with the United Nations as valuable to consolidate the Police unit of peacebuilding.

By the time I met Will, he had already served in every one of UNIPEP areas, meaning he had worked in the protection of FARC ex-combatants, in the documentation of police agents victims of the conflict, and the administration of historical memory initiatives. His period in the historical memory area was the duller because he was not allowed to research or participate meaningfully. He only administered contracts and recorded historical memory research and interventions. Still, he wished he could join in a more meaningful way, as he believed that the Colombian conflict, after years of political violence, was a product of ignorance and a form of tribalism that grew from it.

Well, I think that (...) the source of conflicts in general is an idea that one has about... about the other. So, like these young people from the documentary I'm telling you about, for them the enemy is the state and all the repressive manifestations of the state, which includes me. So they don't know me, but I automatically become an enemy because of an assumption they have about a specific population, which is the military forces and police population.

For me, conflict is fueled by ignorance, and one of the main ways to end conflict is through education. And so, being able to be in a group that can say, "Hey, look, no, we don't have to be enemies; we could approach this in other ways." Look at history, look at history; I am a child of displaced people just like you. I think that, uh, this is a very important step we have to take to overcome the... the violence is through education, and what we do here is to nurture, let's say, a truth, a truth that people need to know before taking up arms. If, even after learning the truth about the history of the armed conflict they decide to take up arms, well... but if by knowing our truth, uh, we can prevent people from taking up arms and avoid taking many paths, I think we are... contributing to something much deeper in the construction of peace (Informant 14 2022).

Will's understanding of memory building differed significantly from the one I found in hard-liners and entrepreneurs. He was interested in the consolidation of peace through mutual understanding. This process required "young people" to understand their similarities with the populations that wore the state security forces' uniform and "the truth" about the history of the Colombian conflict. For Will, the truth about the Colombian conflict was not simple. When thinking about the conflict's truths, he elicited concepts like capitalism, drug trade, inequality, international interventions, and alienation. I was surprised by confirming that his interpretation of the Colombian conflict was far removed from the simplistic depictions conservatives usually relied on. He considered himself a complex historical subject, a police agent, and a part of the masses, the population that elites have exploited in Colombia's capitalist history. He was even critical of the Police's unwillingness to revise its record of human rights violations, as he thought that was a crucial step in building peace.

I think that, that the police is very fearful of showing a bad image to the public, and I think that we should abandon that fear and dedicate ourselves to finding the truth about the armed conflict. It doesn't matter if that makes us look a bit bad - we don't always have to be the good guys in the story, we have to seek the truth. Uh, and I think that the Police sometimes has, has this fear and that makes processes a bit difficult. We must abandon this fear and dedicate ourselves to seeking the truth, mmm, like, remove the filter a bit, remove the filter from the things that are produced (Informant 14 2022).

But Will knew that he was powerless as a sub-officer. After 20 years of service, his ability to change things did not exist, as decisions about the "filter" he talked about were never his to make. The higher-ups and their interests dictated the focus of the Police memorialization of the past, and he knew it well. He did not think making the police agents' victimhood visible was wrong. He appreciated that objective. However, he felt the one-sidedness of the Police memorialization did not contribute to building peace, which, according to him, was the ultimate objective of memorializing the past.

Since I left UNIPPEP, I have not stopped to imagine what the police memorialization of the conflict would look like if the values that inform it were not those held by hard-liners but those that the converted held. In any case, the UNIPPEP historical memory area never appeared to me as a value-free scene where methodological protocols and universal theoretical principles guided the inspection of the past. Values were always there, and power structures inside the Police, as it happens outside of it, defined the filters that ended up in place. Entrepreneurs could identify them and act according to them. The converted also knew them and preferred to roll with them as a

measure of self-preservation. But it would be a mistake to believe the Police was the only responsible party behind its memorialization focus. Most memory players at UNIPPEP were just like Will, administrative intermediaries who could not contribute in a meaningful way to the memorialization of the conflict, the Police, and police agents victims of the conflict. The Police memorialization of the conflict depended on the contributions of independent civilians, as the Police memory players defined them as a guarantee of the impartial and neutral depiction of the past they were looking for.

- Performing Impartiality

In most of my interviews with UNIPPEP's endogenous memory players, I asked informants to list ten concepts they could elicit when thinking about the Colombian Truth Commission. I asked that question because I knew it could be triggering. As I've been suggesting throughout this dissertation, the Police memorialization of victimized police agents emerges from the reactionary memory model. I wanted to get a good sense of how a set of "reactionary memory players" thought of the cultural success of the human rights memory model during the implementation of the peace agreement of 2016. Words strongly associated with *impartiality* consistently surfaced¹³. Surprisingly, they mostly affirmed the Truth Commission's impartiality regarding the conflict's history and legacies. Some memory players elicited bias, which was what I was expecting to hear from most; almost every memory player that elicited bias when thinking about the truth commission were the intellectual architects of the Police institutional historical memory who, as I discussed previously, were hard-liners that thought of memory as a resource to win a political conflict. In any case, *impartiality* was considered a critical principle of historical memory-making and a marker of the kind of "contribution" the National Police wanted to make to the national historical memory.

The Police institutional historical memory has seven guiding principles: inclusion, pluralism, coherency, willingness, verification, integration, and impartiality¹⁴ (A. L. Salazar et al., s. f.). Those principles reflect the consensus that the human rights memory model was built around the production of national history during the last twenty years, especially with principles like inclusion

¹³ Words like objectivity and neutrality were frequently used. However, I chose the word impartiality because it is the official term used by UNIPPEP to convey the principles underpinning their memorialization initiatives.

¹⁴ The principle was originally labelled as verifiable (*verificable*).

and pluralism (Ruiz Romero y Hristova 2019). However, institutional historical memory architects use those principles as indirect criticism of the human rights memory framework, which they became acquainted with before starting their memory work¹⁵. For instance, inclusion is defined in the Police historical institutional guide as "the integration of different points of view, without excluding the participation of anyone, regardless of their profession, occupation, age, race, gender, economic, social, or religious status" (A. L. Salazar et al., s. f., 15). While memory players at institutions like the National Center of Historical Memory (CNMH) or the Truth Commission (CEV) would not have issues with that definition in most circumstances, they did not think of inclusion in that way to build "historical memory" or "truth"¹⁶. From the perspective of memory players at those institutions, inclusion was more selective, as not all voices should weigh the same in the Colombian transitional period. The victims' voices were the most important. Their experiences and testimony were the central concern of empirical and ethical considerations (Stern 2018; Comisión de la Verdad 2022b; GMH 2013). Of course, such a position implies a de facto exclusion from the perspective of some Police agents, especially those who created the Police Institutional Historical Memory. Colonel Pantoja explained that the Truth Commission's approach, as well as that of most transitional justice institutions, could not effectively represent how a victimizer can also be a victim¹⁷ (Pantoja 2023).

It is important to remember that the CNMH and the CEV were not only interested in the voices of victims above all others, but they were also unapologetic about their politics. The CNMH and the CEV were run by intellectuals who were not shy in suggesting that Colombian democracy was profoundly problematic and poor. The most visible and influential intellectuals at those institutions affirmed in many ways that they had a historical role to fulfill by uncovering and publicly discussing those issues (Sánchez 2020; Wills 2022; Jaramillo 2014). Many Colombian social science practitioners and scholars, myself included, admired the CNMH's blend of academic rigor

¹⁵ Some of the most relevant architects of the institutional historical memory got training in memorialization from the National Center of Historical Memory.

¹⁶ In Colombia there is an understandable confusion regarding the difference of those concepts. In 2019, when I had the chance of talking with Lucía González, one of the eleven original truth commissioners. She told me historical memory was the kind of thing the CNMH did. Truth, on the other hand, was the kind of thing that the CEV was going to do. She could not explain what was the difference, though.

¹⁷ I believe this is an unfair assessment of the limits of the human rights memory model and the work that memory players have conducted in official historical clarification commissions. However, even if one were to accept these criticisms, the Police memorialization initiative fails to address these epistemological concerns. Instead, it reinforces these very limitations.

and political activism during its more decisive years. However, the inherent biases of such a commitment caused discomfort among various stakeholders, including the National Police, usually blended into the figure of "the state security forces" and that of "the perpetrators" in the human rights-informed historical discourse.

Actors who have perpetrated, facilitated, or sustained violence against "victims" are not at the center of historical reconstruction under the human rights memory model. If included at all, the "perpetrator's take" is carefully curated when incorporated into the human rights memory model narratives. This "conscious bias" upset the Police institutional historical memory architects, as they perceived it as a politically motivated act of exclusion against them¹⁸. The institutional historical memory guide turns the human rights memory model definition of inclusion on its head to reclaim the recognition many police agents feel has been denied to them in many ways¹⁹. It does it by implicitly suggesting that the Police memory initiative is inclusive in ways that the official human rights memorialization is not.

All institutional historical memory principles I could find in the Police institutional historical memory guide are interesting topics of discussion, as most implicitly indicate the grievances that inform the Police elites' interest in "contributing" to the national historical memory. However, only one principle consistently emerged in my conversations with the Police memory players: the principle of impartiality. Like the other principles, impartiality was an indirect critique against human rights activism and historical clarification conducted by ad hoc institutions like the CNMH and the CEV. According to the institutional historical memory guide, the Police memory is impartial because it is directed towards neutrality, meaning there are no personal favoritism or institutional interests in the processes leading to its "construction" (A. L. Salazar et al., s. f., 17).

The principle of impartiality had two functions to play in the Police institutional historical memory: first, to suggest that historical clarification institutions were biased, and by doing that, to probably support a larger pool of grievances against human rights activism and transitional justice

¹⁸ This is not only an issue for police agents elites. Most of the elites of all the different branches of the Colombian security forces are on the same page. For instance, Carlos Ospina, the only truth commissioner with a military background ended up quitting the Truth Commission arguing that there was bias against him and the state security forces.

¹⁹ I could witness the hard time human rights memory activists experience with the notion of recognizing police agents as valid interlocutors. My research did not focus on that relationship, but it is certainly an interesting avenue of research and of meaningful cultural and political interventions.

policy held by conservative elites and those of other branches of the state security forces²⁰. Second, to shield the Police's "contribution" to the national historical memory from potential critique by performing one of the most respected principles of knowledge production and even justice provision. Both functions come from a widespread understanding of techno-scientific knowledge production that has been appropriately thought of as limited by philosophers of science like Heather Douglas, who question the disregard for the role that values play in science and the broader production of specialized knowledge (Douglas 2017; 2014).

Impartiality, also called objectivity or neutrality by Police agents, is a vital ideal for knowledge production, which Douglas calls "the value-free ideal" (Douglas 2016). I believe that pursuing an objective account of the past, or neutral, as Colombian police agents liked to call it, is a reasonable ethical horizon to chase. Still, ethical horizons do not say much about behaviors, their consequences, and their motivations. The pursuit of objective, value-free accounts of reality is a performance that obscures the direct and indirect roles that values play in expert knowledge production²¹. In the case of the National Police memorialization, it is a problematic performance that grows from the apolitical ethos of the Police as an institution of the Colombian state, which demands consistency in multiple ways. I would add that the principle of impartial memorialization also grows from a poor understanding of research and the inherent politics of memorialization. Disregardless of the cause, the Police call for an impartial depiction of the past and its promise to deliver it is a critical part of the Police memory players' take on the national historical memory and their contribution to it.

UNIPeP endogenous memory players found three ways to perform impartiality under the value-free ideal: first, by building a team of professionals in politics, sociology, law, and history belonging to the Police; second, by searching for "independent researchers" who could lead and conduct research projects deemed "scholarly" by the Colombian Ministry of Science. And third, by searching for the approval of *terceros validadores* (third-party validators), a process they did

²⁰ I already covered some of this in the first chapter. In any case, Andrei Gómez-Suárez's depiction of the peace negotiation between the FARC and the Colombian state is a masterful account of the grievances that some political and social sectors had against transitional justice measures (Gómez-Suárez 2016)

²¹ Douglas argues that values are always present in the production of scientific and expert knowledge, distinguishing between their direct and indirect roles. She asserts that non-epistemic values must not influence the characterization of phenomena or the evaluation of hypotheses. Allowing such values to intervene risks steering science and expert knowledge away from empiricism. It also risks public trust on expert communities (Douglas 2016; 2023).

not quite get as a research scholar would, and one that entirely depended on the knowledge, networks, and preferences of the researchers that endogenous UNIPeP memory players hired, from now on labeled as exogenous memory players.

Consolidating a team of endogenous experts was not initially considered a requirement to build the Police Institutional Historical Memory. It was considered a strategic need to face the challenges of the Colombian transitional period, interpreted by the Security forces elites as hostile (Pantoja 2022). As I previously showed, Colonel Pantoja suggested to me that with the end of the Colombian conflict a new war was starting, one that would be fought with letters instead of weapons. He explained that the new political situation (one where the conflict would be solved with transitional justice institutions) demanded strategic awareness of the transitional justice framework. So, he recruited police officers with degrees in social sciences and the humanities, including political scientists and law professionals, for UNIPeP. He aimed to better understand the opportunities and menaces transitional justice and politics implied for the Police. He quickly found out with his team that police agents could be victims too under the rule of the victims' law and that the Police institution was entitled to start its memorialization program as long as it did not need funding from the government. It was at that moment that the Police Institutional Historical Memory began.

Endogenous UNIPeP memory players thought that their professional backgrounds were a source of legitimacy and a guarantee of impartiality, and at first, they did not look for external experts to help with memorialization initiatives. UNIPeP's initial memory products, which include the institutional historical memory guide and the *Window of Historical Memory* digital map, were conceptualized and developed by police officers who volunteered. Multiple sources suggested that the historical memory guide was launched at the Center of Memory, Peace, and Reconciliation in Bogota, an emblematic place among peace and human rights activists. I was surprised when I heard that, and more when I heard that the human rights community that runs it was excited about it²². *The Window of Historical Memory* was covered and publicized by the CNMH, which was more cautious with the excitement (Valencia 2018). However, despite the initial success endogenous

²² My interactions with human rights advocates who knew about UNIPeP and their work suggested they always saw it as an institutional opportunity to humanize the Police. The incoming leftist government of 2022, the first one in history according to many, also encountered UNIPeP as a positive surprise. Newly elected bureaucrats did not expect to find a relevant Police office engaging with human rights and peacebuilding.

police memory players had by launching their products with the symbolic support of the human rights community, police agents quickly turned to outside experts to help them conduct their historical memory projects.

Major Sergio Ramirez, one of the intellectual architects of the institutional historical memory, was the first endogenous memory player to present doubts about the suitability of having police agents write about the police agents' victimization. I met him in the national prosecutor's office, where he worked as the link between the National Police and that institution. Like most historical memory pioneers in the Police, he remembered his time at UNIPeP affectionately. He felt he was doing something important for the country, for victims, and for the Police, which he felt was his home. He recalled that he and his team started to think about outside experts after a conversation with his wife, who was worried about the public's perception of his husband's work once it became more public.

So we began, "What are we going to do? How are we going to build memory? How do we do it?" And that's where the story of how historical memory came about begins, because the Historical Memory and Victims area of UNIPeP was divided into two groups: the 'Victims Group' and the 'Memory Group.' In theory, I was supposed to join the Victims Group, but at that time, there was an older man who was kind of the head of the memory area. He sat down with Captain Angelica, Lorena, and me because Angelica and Lorena are political scientists. He told us, "Let's write a book with a gender perspective that documents the history of women in the police force. Let's do it like this." But he wanted us to write it. My wife is a journalist and handles all that kind of work, so I told her, "Look, this is the situation." She said, "No, look at it carefully because it's not good for the police themselves to tell their own story. It's important to have third-party validators. It shouldn't be the police telling the stories, but rather a third party, preferably an academic, who tells and validates that story." (Informant 18 2023, 9)

Major Ramirez's conversation introduces the second and third ways the Police impartiality is performed: the involvement of outside experts and the search for third-party validators. Ramirez's recapitulation also hints at a possible rationale behind those ways: public credibility. With no

outside experts or third-party validators the police memorialization initiatives, especially those shielded under the principle of impartiality, were in danger of not being credible enough²³.

Major Ramirez had mixed feelings about the police memorialization commitment to impartiality and how the public could receive their work. On the one hand, he demonstrated pride in knowing that external scholars conducted most of the Police historical memorialization. For him, the fact that the “Police story” was being told by external agents was a guarantee of honesty and truth. On the other, he resented that the police memorialization initiative was seen as unacademic by some scholars he talked to. He and most endogenous police agents thought of their historical memory products as an academic output or something that should be “good enough” to be called academic. An “academic quality” was powerful in their imagination and a good way to avoid compromising discussions about the values that informed the overall initiative, values that police agents perceived as dangerous and self-damaging. Police agents have no values to protect, as they can only enforce the law. Legal and self-imposed limitations associated with the Police collective identity made impartiality crucial and the ability to perform it unavoidable.

- Embodying the Police needs: passionate and not-so-passionate experts.

Police agents are not the only memory players fascinated with the value-free ideal. Truth Commissions and similar historical clarification institutions worldwide use expertise as a legitimizing force. While impartiality or neutrality are not the words those commissions use to describe their take on historical and/or human rights abuses clarification, independence does, and experts are meant to perform it (Posthumus y Zvobgo 2021; Zvobgo 2020). Despite meaningful differences between impartiality, neutrality, and independence, those words convey a similar message: Expert’s historical clarification should be free from outside influences and reflect the truth. What makes the Police memorialization initiative unique is not its commitment to concepts like neutrality, impartiality, or independence, which can be found in Colombian historical clarification institutions like the CEV and the CNMH. The difference is in the political function of expertise.

²³ Not every memorialization intervention UNIPPEP conducts is presented as an impartial depiction of the past. For instance, artistic interventions are thought of as a form of symbolic reparation for victims, despite the fact most are located at inaccessible places for honored victims.

Unlike official historical clarification commissions in Colombia, the Police are not aiming to produce a rigorous, comprehensive, and holistic account of the past, as the CNMH and the CEV tried. Endogenous Police memory players do not look for experts hoping to build a research center of endless intellectual possibilities to promote democracy and justice. The Police's main “historical concern” is to react against the depiction of the Police as a systematic perpetrator of human rights violations during the conflict. Recruiting and sustaining an independent, rigorous, and innovative historical clarification team is not as crucial for the Police as presenting police agents as heroic victims of the conflict, a message that complicates questions associated with the concrete responsibility the Police has for multiple patterns of human rights violations that took place during the conflict, and those that will probably persist after it²⁴. This is not the position every endogenous police memory player holds, as I showed earlier. Still, it is the unstated but obvious institutional stance every Police memory player knows, as I experienced while volunteering at UNIPPEP.

I arrived at UNIPPEP with a desire to understand the ins and outs of the novel encounter between the Colombian Police and the Colombian state's duty to remember. I can also put this as an interest in exploring the conflicting relationship between the emergence of a human rights-driven common sense and a concrete reaction to it, the one that the Police have been building since 2016 with UNIPPEP's area of historical memory. I was not particularly eager to introduce my interest as an exploration of conflict, as I knew it could be interpreted as menacing by police agents. I preferred to introduce it following my first formula, but the setback was its abstraction. Police agents did not usually understand where my interest was going. After all, what does it mean to encounter the state's duty to remember? I did not take long to present my research as an exploration of the institutional historical memory, how police agents produced it, and what they thought about the work of official historical clarification commissions. That made my research goals more transparent and not menacing.

I can say the Police endogenous memory players saw my interest as an opportunity they could exploit in two ways: first, by connecting UNIPPEP's work to an audience of international scholars they were interested in; second, by ensuring an additional source of intellectual labor at no cost. In

²⁴ By the time I began my PhD research, it was valid for scholars to speculate with the fantasy of ending the war in Colombia. But February of 2025 broke that possibility in its entirety. The biggest scene of forced displacement ever seen in the history of the conflict, this time a product of the violent conflict between the ELN and neoFARC armed structures, reminds us that while peace agreements are good, they are never enough.

a pragmatic move, and after a couple of screening meetings with high-ranking officers, the Police gatekeepers and I agreed to work together²⁵. I would get access to UNIPEP offices in exchange for supporting the Police memory initiative UNIPEP officials would be interested in pursuing. I was accepted as one of the Police exogenous memory players.

My acceptance as a memory player was atypical compared to the cases of other external “researchers,” which is the term police agents use to describe people who assist them in their more “academic” memorialization interventions. Some external researchers were reached out by individual decision-makers from UNIPEP, who, for one or other reason, took an interest in their work. I could talk with seven external researchers, three of which were principal investigators of projects the Police commissioned. I was told by UNIPEP police agents that principal investigators had complete independence and freedom to conduct their work, including consolidating a research team. However, I learned that sometimes research collaborators were “strongly suggested” to them by police memory players, who had discretionary power over many aspects of the research process²⁶. While most of the Police exogenous memory players felt they conducted their work in liberty, as I did, the Police had a firm editorial control they could exercise in multiple ways, like deciding to exclude uncomfortable sections or avoiding its publication.

Oscar Durán was one of the researchers that the Police recruited to lead and complete a variety of memory products. He’s probably one of the most important partners UNIPEP has had in its memorialization initiatives. I met him in 2019 after the premiere of *Granada, Relato de un Perdón*, one of the two Police documentaries UNIPEP helped to produce. At that time, he was very proud of his work with the Police. He saw it as a vanguardist approach to peacebuilding and was not the only one thinking that way about his work. According to Oscar, his documentary received praise in international human rights and non-fiction cinema competitions. In 2022, three years after our first interview, his initial excitement was less visible. The Police involvement in the repression of protesters between 2019 and 2021 had taken a toll on his faith in a humanizable Police institution.

²⁵ They included agents that worked for UNIPEP and those that worked for the ESPOL, the Police graduate school.

²⁶ I experienced that reality from every possible angle. The first time I experienced it I was imposed on the lead researcher for the project I participated in. I would say he took it very well and saw it productive. The second time I experienced it I was trying to become the lead researcher on a different project, one that would host the Police memory products in a website were there were also a section on recognition for abuse committed by police agents during the conflict. That time, an officer told me he would support my idea if I included his wife on my researcher’s team.

However, he could remember his work with the Police as an interesting and even inspiring experience. For him, his work at UNIPeP enabled him to keep telling innovative stories, which he presented to me as his passion and most essential priority.

Oscar is a journalist from the Atlantic coast who became a university professor after working for a while on Colombian TV. He considers himself a pure journalist and has pursued innovative storytelling methods as a professor. At the University Jorge Tadeo Lozano, Oscar created the *CrossMediaLab*, a digital multimedia experiment where students and professors upload and host stories the Colombian media does not usually cover. The search for new stories took Oscar and his partners to the Yari plains in 2016, where the FARC guerrilla hosted its tenth and final general conference, which ratified the organization's will to accept the peace agreement with the Colombian state after four years of negotiations. The guerrilla invited Oscar, his team, and many other journalists to cover the event. They replied a sounding yes, expecting exciting stories for their platform and other journalistic sites Oscar could reach out to. When they got to the tenth general conference and were greeted by a "humanity" they were not expecting (guerrilla fighters are monsters in the collective imagination of most Colombian urban dwellers), they decided to write stories that could "humanize" FARC combatants. Oscar published three stories in *La Silla Vacía*, a small but influential digital news and analysis outlet in Colombia. By that time, there were not many journalists trying to depict guerrilla fighters as human beings, something that attracted the attention of police agents. However, at first, the ones he attracted did not belong to UNIPeP.

When we arrived, we presented our stories and started submitting them to competitions. We said, "Wow, this is good, cool, great, whatever." I don't know how, but I was leaving class one morning, and the department's secretary called me. (...) She says, "Professor, there are some police agents waiting for you in the office." Damn, what happened? This isn't good. These guys were wearing those green jackets. I was terrified. Oh crap, what did we do?

They greeted me and introduced themselves. One was on crutches, another was there, and a commissioner, a sub-officer, was present. If you're somewhat familiar with their language, he said, "I'm a sub-officer, the commissioner in charge of the police in Santa Fe. I saw a project you did about the guerrillas, and I saw that you shared stories about guerrilla fighters and victims of the armed conflict. Here, I'm bringing you three more stories so you can share this version too."

Can you imagine? It's such a beautiful story. So, I'm like, "Oh crap." I said, "Well, nice to meet you..." (I don't even know what I said). They told us some stories, and the commissioner, a gentleman who is now retired, wrote to me to thank me. He said,

“I went to Javeriana, I went to another university, and no one bought the idea.”
(Duran 2023)

When Oscar told me the story of his recruitment, I could not find its beauty. For how he said it, it seemed to me like a police agent was trying to intimidate him, almost forcing him to write “a different version” of the story he had published in *La Silla Vacía* about guerrilla fighters. However, that was not the case. Oscar found an opportunity to write another set of exciting stories that would complicate conventional wisdom about victims and perpetrators. Oscar seemed fascinated with the reality that uniforms disguise: the human behind the uniform of legal and illegal combatants. The commissioner’s visit presented itself as an opportunity to keep exploring unusual stories with a potential social benefit: “peacebuilding.” From my perspective, receiving an unexpected visit from a police agent interested in the historical representation of the Police reveals something significant about how much individual agents value their institution's public image and legacy.

The commissioner was the commander of the Police station in Santa Fe, Bogota, the neighborhood where Oscar’s university is located. Oscar worked with him to find victimized police agents whose stories would be told in a story series for CrossMediaLab. Oscar gathered a team of students to conduct the interviews and some writing. He did not tell me much about the process. For him, it was usual journalist business. Once interviews, photos, videos, and the writing were made, Oscar published the stories in CrossMediaLab under a special called *The Other Face of the Conflict: Countenances and Stories*. The special included five life stories of victimized police agents titled with the virtues that represented each story better: friendship, courage, heroism, honor, and dignity (Duran, s. f.). Stories were not framed only as stories of suffering. They were presented as stories about reconciliation and forgiveness. These concepts have captured the collective imagination during the Colombian political transition, especially among the sympathizers of the peace process between the FARC and the Colombian state.

After the stories were published in CrossMediaLab, Oscar looked for more places to publish them, and some made it into more established media. Soon after that, UNIPEP Police agents eventually contacted him to explain their interest in working together. They invited him to a meeting and also informed him he would no longer work with Bogota’s Metropolitan Police (it was the commissioner’s police unit), as it was not authorized to pursue memorialization initiatives. Oscar went to the meeting with UNIPEP police agents in the company of the commissioner with whom

he had worked, as he did not trust this new unit of police agents contacting him. In the meeting, the commissioner was scolded for overreaching his functions and dismissed from the Police memorialization efforts. In contrast, Oscar was offered a new project to keep exploring the Police agents' experiences of victimization during the conflict, a theme that had successfully captured his journalist's interest.

Oscar did not seem troubled with UNIPeP's monopoly over the production of the Police past. I believe he thought the treatment of the commissioner he witnessed was just a feature of police agents' ways. And it is. However, it is also an indicator of the strict control the Police, as an institution, wants to have over the representation of its members. UNIPeP is not only a unit tasked with the memorialization of police agents; it is also policing the who, the how, and the why behind the memorialization of police agents' experiences during the conflict. After the meeting, Oscar started working for UNIPeP as a researcher, which was convenient for him. He did not receive payment for his work with UNIPeP, but he could present it as his research output to the university. He could also enroll some of his students in exciting research projects, a privilege few students can have in Colombia, and few professors can offer.

During our conversation, I eventually asked him if he had ever felt pressured by the Police to tell stories in a certain way. He found it hard to see how his memorialization work could have been something different from independent, as most of my interviewees did. However, after thinking about it for a while, he told me there were only two instances when he felt pressured to change his work. The first time was when he decided to include in one of his stories some critical comments that the mother of a disappeared police agent was making about the Police. According to Oscar, the comments transmitted her rage against the institutional neglect that families of victimized police agents endure. Endogenous memory players demanded that he cut those comments from the video he was producing. On another product about disappeared police agents, UNIPeP endogenous memory players demanded to include a note suggesting the Police had built a monument to honor the police agents' victims of forced disappearance. Oscar recalled those impositions as upsetting episodes but not as a deeply problematic intrusion on the overall representation of the Police role during the conflict. His objective was to humanize the Police, and he felt he managed to do that.

For me, it was illuminating to find out that some of the Police “academic” memory products were conceived and produced by a scholar who started his involvement with Colombian collective memories because he attempted to humanize guerilla combatants with media coverage of their everyday life at a critical turning point in Colombia. It was also surprising to see that the first police agent who contacted him was a sub-officer, and he wasn’t associated with UNIPPEP. This particularity suggests to me how police agents across units and hierarchical positions share a grievance against what they perceive as the exclusion of their “versions” in the overall historical discourse that tries to make sense of the Colombian history of conflict. The Police’s ability to work with scholars like Oscar tells me that the Police memorialization of the conflict is not only the product of an institutional need but a possibility that emerges from the Colombian peacebuilding culture, one in which every victimized actor should have a privileged voice.

Oscar eventually stopped collaborating with UNIPPEP after participating in at least six “academic” memorialization projects. He stopped cooperating with UNIPPEP after the social explosion, suggesting he had lost interest in victimization stories, and students were no longer excited about working with Police agents, as they felt it was politically unbearable after the behavior of anti-riot police agents during the “social explosion.” Oscar did work on various memorialization projects with the Police, but I was surprised to find he did not have much to say about UNIPPEP agents. While they were critical in aspects like coming up with research projects, finding people to interview, logistics, and approving the content of memory products, there were not many interactions with them. Endogenous memory players were mostly absent from the “building memory” business in Oscar’s experience.

In my experience, UNIPPEP’s police agents were always near. After all, I requested access to UNIPPEP’s floor (I was the only researcher who ever did that). Still, I could relate to Oscar’s lack of interaction with UNIPPEP agents, as they were an irregular sight. Although UNIPPEP agents assigned to the historical memory area were supposed to work on historical memory, they had to run various errands unrelated to that task. Most times, they had to work in coordination with agents from the victims’ area to send reports that different organizations and institutions requested to the Police. Other times, they had to work on “vigilance,” meaning they had to go out to the street to do the usual police agents’ work. I was surprised to see how much time they invested to organize events. It turns out the Police have many of them. For me, UNIPPEP agents assigned to the historical

memory area were “historical memory brokers” whose presence on UNIPPEP’s floor was difficult to predict. As historical memory brokers, they kept track of UNIPPEP’s memorialization projects, facilitated the work of partners like me with logistics, and sometimes searched for new collaborators. They were not supposed to engage in the intellectual work of making sense of the past or representing the Police role and troubles during the conflict despite a couple of intellectually driven agents wanting to engage in “academic” memorialization activities. However, under the principle of impartiality, to do such a thing would compromise the Police’s historical memory neutrality.

The experts the Police hired to produce the institutional historical memory were mainly university professors from journalism departments and would not work with the Police during the research process in matters different from logistics. Their visits to UNIPPEP’s floor were only related to academic administration business and not to discuss the substance of the research process or its content. UNIPPEP offices were not the site where the Police version of the past was being written. The sites where those histories were produced were outside, in university offices where the individual interests of professors aligned with the Police institutional “need” to dignify victimized and regular police agents, and in a much more implicit way to deflect calls for accountability. However, that does not mean that the Police collaborators were looking forward to supporting the Police sidestepping of its responsibilities. Sometimes, contradictory agendas work together.

Some of the students who worked with Oscar Duran in the Police memorialization of the conflict felt they wanted to contribute to the Colombian national project for building peace, and found in the Police memorialization of the conflict a significant opportunity. By hearing and translating the testimonies of victims’ families, they felt they were helping a poorly acknowledged community heal and get the recognition they deserved, just as any other victim of the conflict. But accepting the Police as an institution with victims’ stories was not easy for everyone. Daneisi, one of Oscar’s students and collaborators, said she had to think a lot before accepting to join Oscar’s project with the Police. Before working with UNIPPEP, she did not care much about the Police and saw it as an institution with much to hide.

Juan Carlos

Very well, very well, before starting to work with Professor Durán and with UNIPPEP in the National Police, how would you describe your relationship with that institution?

Daneisi

Oof, problematic, haha! Well, let's say I never, eh, never felt like perhaps some people do; the previous generations have a vision of the police or the institution that's a bit more elevated, so to speak. Many see it with much more respect, yes. And I'm not saying that I don't respect the institution; however, we didn't... like I had quite a few biases, perhaps also about how they handled the issue, taking into account that well, there were, we already had a history of arbitrary actions, and in the work that one does or in the particular investigations that one does, eh, one also realizes about abuses of power or human rights violations that the institution committed in some areas of the country.

So my vision of the National Police was quite negative; I mean, I had... in fact, the first time that Professor Oscar mentioned to me the possibility of working with the police, I thought about it a lot, because I didn't feel mm very coherent with what I had worked on before, like I felt that I was going to work for the state, so to speak, perhaps to tell a vision, an official version that they wanted me to tell and the space wasn't going to be so so open eh and that's why it was very difficult for me at the beginning. And, well, yes, my vision towards the institution, towards... was very negative, very negative (Rubio 2023)

Her poor perception of the Police was informed by the stories of her family, who suffered from forced displacement, and from her difficult experiences with the Police while growing up. According to her family testimonies, FARC incursions into their town were followed by police agents who extorted money from residents. In terms of her experience, she told me that in the Bogota neighborhood where she grew up, police agents were known as another violent agent that increased the population's perception of insecurity. But her problems with the Police memorialization of the past were also associated with her distrust of the Police's intentions. When Oscar invited her to join his project with the Police, she was aware of the conservative takeover of the CNMH. She also knew of the human rights community's concern for reproducing "official narratives" that could discredit victims' communities, the legacy of the CNMH, and the work that the Truth Commission initiated in 2019. However, her trust in Oscar and the theme she would work with (victimized female police agents) convinced her to take the risk.

Juan Carlos

Mm, good. After that work you did for UNIPPEP with Professor Óscar, how do you describe your relationship with the National Police?

Daneisi

Phew, haha. I feel that it has changed, that my perception changed, and it actually changed recently. It didn't change at the beginning, but it did change as a result of an experience we had, eh on a trip in 2021 when we went to the ETCR (Territorial Space for Training and Reincorporation) of Pondoires in La Guajira, and there we could talk with the police officers who were there. The thing is that in the region eh or in these spaces where the conflict has touched in a more direct way... I mean, in the city we live in... let's say, we are isolated a bit from everything that was experienced in the regions and from from all the pain but also from all the resilience capacity that people have. So seeing how all the police officers in this area, eh, could calmly dialogue with ex-combatants and coordinated actions with different communities and, let's say, like they would organize bazaars and very everyday things that at one point had been unthinkable because, well they were two groups that used to shoot at each other, so eh I found it very interesting and let's say that there I met eh police officers who had been trained in human rights, who had well that interest somewhat, like in preserving what had been the peace agreement. So, well, it was a completely different perspective because it was like, well, the institution has, has, let's say, like some negative things, yes, which we already saw in the national strike (...), but eh there is like a branch that is focusing on.. not only on making memory, but also on supporting those processes in the regions, so let's say that from there my perception did change towards the institution, and right now I feel that while there are many things that need to be adjusted, improved, eh at least from UNIPPEP, I feel that the work that was being done at that time, I don't know now what they're up to, but at that time was very positive for the communities and was very positive also for the agreement (Rubio 2023)

The risk of collaborating with the Police helped Danieci Rubio to find expressions of the Police that connected with her values so profoundly that her perception of the Police changed a bit. She found in UNIPPEP agents professionals who were committed to the national peacebuilding process, a project she approved. Most of the exogenous memory players UNIPPEP worked with changed their perceptions of the Police by hearing the testimonies of victims and by witnessing the work UNIPPEP agents did. In other words, most were initially suspicious of the Police's intentions, and aware of the political challenges of memorializing the Police “version” of the past. But they were also convinced of the universality of the victim’s condition and interested in their visibilization and dignification, and connecting to police agents’ experiences of injustice allowed them to interpret the Police in a different light. The only ones who didn’t have any concerns with the Police memorialization of the past were advocates of the state security forces before being reached out to by UNIPPEP. This is the case I found with Alvaro Velandia, a professor of journalism at Sergio Arboleda University.

Alvaro Velandia, another journalist and university professor who worked for the Police memorialization initiatives, never found a single obstruction to his work, not in his mind, not in practice. Velandia is an admirer of the army and the figure of the hero, and he was essential in pushing the more heroic-driven narratives that the police memory products offer²⁷. I met him because Colonel Pantoja and Colonel Ortiz remembered him as a critical part of the police memorialization of the conflict. For him, the memorialization of the Police was an opportunity to put the public into the shoes of heroes who had to face life-threatening decisions, something that is easily identifiable in the memory products he directed, and especially in the ones he was interested in pursuing. He interpreted the Police memorialization as an effort to recognize the Police contributions to the nation and the fulfillment of its mission. He also saw it as an opportunity to honor police agents who had made sacrifices in the line of duty. Memory was a vehicle for finding meaning in the sacrifices regular police agents made (Velandia 2023).

Juan Carlos

Good. So, if I've understood you correctly, your topics of interest are "Memory" on the one hand, "the study of archetypes," right? Eh... And anything else?

Álvaro V

Fundamentally, yes, narratives applied to memory, contributing to memory reconstruction through narrative products and everything related to these narratives taken to transmedia possibilities. Currently, my concern is understanding how a user can participate in memory reconstruction processes. Or how to make these narratives interactive, giving users greater participation?

Juan Carlos

OK, interesting. Another element that I find very interesting to review now is: would this be the topic of how a user can participate in memory construction?

Álvaro V

Wow and there are some very interesting exercises! I hope to eventually be able to develop engaging exercises in which, for example, the use of gamification or the use of augmented reality or virtual reality are also part of memory reconstruction, which also generate certain facts, emotional connections. At some point, with some students, I tried to make a pilot video game about a documentary we made with the

²⁷ He directed the documentary about the Jungle Commandos I commented on in Chapter 2.

Police. The first result was already very interesting. I mean, it wasn't a very extensive technological development, but the simple fact of putting users in the position of making decisions similar to those that the police had to make when they were being attacked by a subversive group, well, that already gives another different dimension to that memory.

Juan Carlos

Of course, wow, very interesting. Eh that video game, were you able to finish...

Álvaro V

No it's a pilot, it's a pilot. It was developed on the web; I mean, with the tools we had at hand, we didn't have such strong design development, but yes, that pilot exists, and all it did was invite you; the story would be told, and you had... the user was given the possibility to make a decision. **If the decision were the same as the one taken by the character about whom the memory was being reconstructed, you would go to the next level; if the decision was wrong, well, the user could end up dead.** Right, well, due to the same situations of what was happening (Velandia 2023)

Velandia was convinced of the social importance of representing police agents as heroes. Although I couldn't explore the source of his conviction, it clearly aligned very well with the hard-liners' discursive priorities. Velandia thought of Police agents' experiences almost as inevitable. Memorialization was about understanding the Police decision-making as an unavoidable outcome. His objective was to make the users understand "in their flesh" why police agents did what they did when fighting insurgent groups, as failing to comprehend their infallible logic had a doomed outcome. Again, I did not talk with Professor Velandia about the sort of fatalist approach he was taking with the memorialization projects he was interested in. I did not ask for clarifications. However, knowing his work with the Police, I can say Velandia underestimates the complex implications of the Colombian National Police and its agents in the Colombian conflict. While police agents have experienced life-threatening events that Velandia memorialized in his collaboration with the Police, the meaningfulness of their experience surpasses their survival decision-making. Police agents I met talk bitterly about how the institution puts them at risk in places far from home. They also discuss the problems they face because of selfish decisions political figures make. They even talk about the hardships they experience when it comes to deciding if they can survive without collaborating with illegal actors, one of the most challenging aspects of the Police implication in the Colombian conflict. The families of victimized police agents usually talk about institutional neglect and abandonment. None of those problems can be

found in the police memorialization of the conflict, and certainly not in Velandia's work. And still, Velandia's work was probably the most appreciated by police agents I met. The few who knew UNIPEP's historical memory collection would refer to Velandia's documentary about the Jungle Commando, where police agents are depicted as soldiers, heroes, and victims of the FARC savagery.

While I can't share Velandia's approach, it is impossible to deny he could translate what most police agents at different hierarchical positions probably wanted to communicate to the public during the Colombian transitional period. Police agents, despite their differences, want to communicate their social function in the face of increasing public criticism against policing and the historical role of the state's security forces. Police agents want their "sacrifice" to be better acknowledged by the public. Police agents do not want their legacy to be defined by the acts of "rotten apples." Most find it hard to understand the human rights advocates' general distrust for the police and the use of unaccountable force. Velandia provided the kind of heroic representation most police agents I met felt was fair and inspirational. He presented victimization not only as a consequence of injustice but as the natural outcome of a heroic life where sacrifice is, in the end, necessary to achieve victory. Velandia was accepted as an officer of the Colombian Police after engaging in the memory initiatives he led, a symbolic gesture the Police have with friends of the institution.

- Experiencing the "neutral" memorialization of the conflict

I spent four months working on a book chapter for one of UNIPEP's memory projects. The project was an exploration of Police agents' victimization during the "social explosion" between 2019 and 2021, a wave of street protests that is currently thought of as the most significant expression of street politics in Colombia's history. Leftists think of it as a political turning point because the first leftist political government in history was elected in the aftermath of those protests. I did not experience those protests in the flesh, but social media and news outlets showed constant violent exchanges between protesters and anti-riot police units. Images of beaten and dead protesters were common, and images of chaotic and organized violence directed against police agents also were. Eventually, calls for institutional reform in the Police and local negotiation tables with protesters calmed the streets. After all, much of the protest's energy and motivation came from the active

rejection of police aggression on protesters, most of them young people demanding opportunities, dignity, and some form of political change that never managed to become a unified political movement.

I can't understate how uncomfortable and wrong it felt for me to focus on "memorializing" the police agents' victimization. When I started working on UNICEP's initiative, I was convinced of the ethical value of publicly portraying the difficult experiences police agents endure, experiences that the public takes for granted. However, I was not comfortable doing it while at the same time ignoring the institutional violence that affected the lives of protesters, many of whom believed in the political futures I also believed in. But I never felt I had the liberty to go and share my concerns with the colonels and majors that directed the initiative. I found myself living the world that "the converted" experienced when reflecting on the awkward and enforced limits of the police memorialization. I feared that going against the current could mean the frustration of my fieldwork.

So, I never protested against the one-sided research agenda I was taking part in. At least I never did it in front of UNICEP's command. But UNICEP agents did not impose everything on me. I had the right to select my chapter's sub-theme. I believe UNICEP agents would probably say they did not impose anything. Still, the fact is that UNICEP defines the research agenda according to its interests, which individuals in charge usually dictate. Colonel Palacios was interested in moving away from controversies about the inner armed conflict because he felt that memorializing the recent developments was much more "impactful." Impactful for whom? He never clarified, but I am willing to risk a hypothesis: It was productive for him to show his superiors he was working on dignifying the police agents after the public relations catastrophe that the social explosion meant for the Police²⁸. I think this way because Palacios also considered pursuing a project that included the stories of victimized civilians after I argued it would look bad if the Police published a memory product discussing only the issues experienced by police agents. He considered that option until he stopped considering it without explanation.

²⁸ It was so bad that the National Police had to change the color of its uniform, the anti-riot unit's name, and even promise an institutional reform. The meaningfulness of the aesthetic changes the Police experienced is yet to be tested.

As part of a research team led by a professor with experience in environmental and development policy, I can't say that I received much guidance or pressure in any direction. Professor Malcolm directed a team of four researchers, including himself: A female professor from one of the most combative public universities, another female professor, this time from the Police officer's graduate school, who was also Colonel Palacio's wife, and me²⁹. Professor Malcolm was an advocate of the "academic division of labor," and as such, he requested us to define the chapters we wanted to write and discuss those choices with him. He would then defend those choices in UNIPEP. We never discussed methods, epistemological approaches, or even our values. We were all supposed to produce a publishable scholarship that was good enough for UNIPEP agents and rigorous enough for the peers Malcolm was thinking about. He offered the Police to look for an external publishing house. The book I participated in would be the first research material UNIPEP would publish outside the Police.

I proposed a historical essay explaining the emergence of the wave of protests that surprised the political establishment of countries like Chile, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Colombia between 2019 and 2021, focusing on the arguments that advocates used to justify contentious politics. Against the backdrop of those arguments, I promised to include the experiences and perspectives of the agents who participated as anti-riot units or as supporting personnel. While writing the essay, I found that endogenous memory players were not allowed to participate under the premise of impartiality, but mostly because their role was more administrative than intellectual. Wil handed me some exploratory and interpretative work he had conducted with Captain Angélica, which suggested that left-wing international and terrorist organizations had organized the street protests in Colombia and the rest of Latin America. But no agent, besides the few I interviewed for that chapter, communicated an intention to revise or adjust my work. I ended up writing a reasonably critical essay about the Colombian socio-political establishment that led to the social explosion that included police agents' interpretations of their role in protests, the shape of those protests, and their grievances against violence inflicted upon them and their fellow police agents.

²⁹ Public universities in Colombia have been for many decades emblematic scenarios of anti-sistemic political activism, as well as of insurgent romanticism that is starting to be questioned with incoming generations of students and professors that did not grow up during the restricted democratic system of the National Front, or the anti-comunist hemisphere of the Cold War (Yepes 2025).

I presented my essay three times with the rest of the research team. First, in front of UNIPEP's command, later in UNIPEP's international peacebuilding congress, and finally in an empty room of the Universidad Libre. The first presentation was the official closure of the research process. UNIPEP's command heard the presentation of every contributor, but more as an administrative obligation than an intellectually driven activity. I was surprised to find that my contribution did not receive criticism or calls to tone down some of my comments. I explicitly suggested that the Police needed to take responsibility for the abusive actions that some of its members committed during the 2019-2021 period. But nothing was said. The meeting was cordial, and we, the researchers, felt we had successfully finished our obligations with UNIPEP.

The other two presentations we did were requisites to get points from the Ministry of Science. In Colombia, the Ministry of Science evaluates all research projects based on their outputs, regardless of funding status. Projects receive a predetermined number of points for producing edited volumes with multiple contributors. Additional points are awarded for publishing scientific articles and delivering academic presentations. The Ministry of Science employs a metric-based system of research outputs and points to differentiate between high-performing and underperforming research groups, guiding funding allocation decisions. UNIPEP was invested in producing the largest number of points, so we agreed to give at least three public presentations of our findings. I participated in the first two but was not invited to the last one for reasons I don't know.

The book has not been published yet, and I have not been briefed on the reason behind it. UNIPEP is very strategic in releasing its memory products, as some memory players explained to me. So, UNIPEP may have no interest in releasing a memory product about "victimized anti-riot police agents," which is a hypothesis Wil shared with me in June 2023.

I never experienced pushback or interest in my contribution from UNIPEP memory players. I can say that I did not witness any of those from the work that my partners contributed. Everything felt like a simulacrum. I never sensed that UNIPEP police agents cared about our project or that there would be a community of police agents or families interested in it. From the beginning to the end of the project, everything felt like a sterile search for the Ministry of Science points. In some ways, I find it difficult to say that the police memorialization was not value-free. The hard-liners were no longer part of UNIPEP when I conducted my fieldwork, and the converts I met in UNIPEP

offices did not have a say in the direction that the Institutional Historical Memory was taking. Only entrepreneurs were handling the Police memory-making, which included decisions about what research project to pursue and what body of available research products to publish. I concluded they preferred to keep the memory box closed, as Steve Stern talks about the unwillingness to open the Pandora's box of collective interpretations of the past.

- A “neutrality factory” for appropriate times?

Most of the Institutional Historical Memory products were launched between 2018 and 2020 when the Truth Commission invested a lot of funds and effort in making its revision of the past an eventful conversation³⁰. The Truth Commission organized various public hearings in the hope of drawing the public’s attention, and the Police answered in its way by publishing memory products that, in their own quiet way, put into question the criticism that police agents felt transitional justice institutions were making of the Colombian state’s security forces. The volume of publications between 2021 and the present diminished abruptly, something that could be connected to the aftermath of the Covid-19 lockdown. Still, it could also be connected to the rhythms of politics.

In 2021, the Colombian social explosion re-ignited after the lockdown with increased intensity, and the Police institution was at the center of national conversations about the crisis, protesters, and police violence. During 2021 and 2022, the Police launched no memory product alone. In 2021, the Police contributed an entry in one of the CNMH digital projects organized by Dario Acevedo after the Duque government took control of that institution. In 2022, The Police contributed to a Ministry of Defense edited volume launched just before the Truth Commission finished its mandate in June. In 2023, one year after the end of the social explosion but also after the un-eventful launch of the Truth Commission’s collection of hefty reports, The Police presented a big surprise for many. In the 2023 Book Fair, annually held in Bogota, the Police did not feature a single of its memory products in its stand, and the only materials I could find were recruitment flyers. The Book Fair was an emblematic site for UNIPPEP’s memory players, and some of its advocates, as that was the annual event where they preferred to launch their memory products. The

³⁰ From a total of 19 memory products the Police has launched until 2025, 15 were launched between 2018 and 2022.

edited volume to which I contributed a chapter was initially scheduled for publication to coincide with the Book Fair. However, as of February 2025, the manuscript remains unpublished.

Despite calls for “impartial memorialization,” the Police seemed very aware of the politics they navigated with memory products. By 2023, the incentives to play memory politics were over. There was no Truth Commission, whose report went painfully under the radar of the media and the public’s concerns. The incoming leftist government in 2022 removed from the Police the most significant number of generals in recent memory, a move that reshaped the Police command. I am unsure if the Police Institutional Historical Memory has much future, as it always was a reactionary move against the human rights memory model and its public influence. The storm that transitional justice meant for high-ranking police agents is almost over. I can only imagine that the higher-ups don’t have many reasons to keep investing resources in controversies that won’t make a difference.

And yet, the Police memorialization never made a difference. Most Colombians don’t know of it, and not even many memory players at institutions like the CNMH and the Truth Commission know about it. In the Police, not many knew about it. And this is not the product of the Police’s inability to raise its voice. I believe the Police memorialization of the conflict is a good example of the kind of politics that institutions like the Police engage with. As a sensible part of the state, police agents at strategic positions only tense the cords when they feel necessary; they never try to break them. The Police memorialization of the conflict is a complex political reality, as it is made of strategic decision-making conducted by a small and very inaccessible group of powerful individuals and also of the concerns that most police agents feel, those who interpret as problematic the sweeping criticism of the Police in times of political and social crisis. The big problem with this form of memorialization is that the interests of the few prevail over those of the many, and neutrality, as a utopian but worthy ethical pursuit, is used as a misleading excuse.

There is no value-free knowledge production and definitely no neutral or impartial memory-making. My exploration of the Police Institutional Historical Memory shows this, as it also shows that the values that define a particular line of inquiry or commemorative stance are the product of power relations in concrete social fields. During my fieldwork, I never felt that UNIPEP was the site where the Police memorialization of the past was being defined. UNIPEP was a symbolically appropriate place to project the Police memorialization of the past, but what defined its shape and

priorities was outside UNIPEP offices. Hard-liners at UNIPEP managed to organize the shape of the Police memorialization of the past because their priorities aligned with those of the higher-ups. Hard-liners also managed to organize the police memorialization shape because they could translate the command's concerns into the language of human rights, which allowed the Police to participate in a discussion that the state security forces' elites feared with the support of people that could serve as symbols of neutrality. Academics and third-validators played a de-politicizing role that, while impossible, appeared as a feasible repertoire for endogenous memory players.

CONCLUSION

As I finish writing this dissertation, debates over the interpretation of Colombia's recent past and its implications for justice have intensified, creating mounting frustration among human rights advocates, victims of state crimes, and their supporters. On January 13, the Medellín Mayor's Office, under Federico Gutiérrez's administration, ordered erasing a day-old mural with grey paint. The mural commemorated the struggle against impunity led by mothers of disappeared persons from Medellín's marginalized communities, especially Comuna 13. The mural depicted an elderly woman affiliated with the Movement of Victims of State Crimes (Movimiento Nacional de Víctimas de Crímenes de Estado - MOVICE), who carried herself with dignity and pride, accompanied by text that read: "The grannies were right" ("Las cuchas tenían la razón"). The mural was painted after a long-awaited revelation: the Search Unit for Disappeared Persons (UBPD) had finally found the first human remains in La Escombrera (the slag heap) after 20 years of searching.

La Escombrera is a site where both formal and informal construction companies have disposed of demolition debris and construction waste for decades. Still, according to testimonies from paramilitary leaders in transitional justice tribunals and accounts from victims' associations, it also served as a clandestine burial ground for disappeared persons (P. D. Pérez 2015). Public awareness of the Escombrera's inhumane function increased following multiple military operations ordered by Álvaro Uribe's government in Comuna 13. During these operations, the army, Police, and paramilitary forces collaborated to defeat and expel various insurgent movements. Subsequently, paramilitary groups maintained control and imposed their armed authority in the area (Cajar 2025; Corredor 2022; P. D. Pérez 2015).

In 2014, excavation work began at La Escombrera, a site covering 194,000 square feet, after a former paramilitary leader confessed and provided specific coordinates for locating human remains. In 2016, after two years without findings, Mayor Federico Gutiérrez, during his first term, terminated the excavation, declaring that there were no bodies to be found (BBC News Mundo 2024). The search for the disappeared did not restart until 2023, when the Special Jurisdiction for Peace ruled La Escombrera as a protected site under precautionary measures. In late December 2024, after two decades of searching, forensic experts recovered the skeletal remains of three

individuals. This discovery served as a stark reminder of the atrocities that armed actors, including state agents, had concealed beneath tons of rubble.

The reminder was gruesome but hopeful for victims' families and human rights advocates, as the bodies of the disappeared bring the potential of closure and justice. I believe that "The Grannies Mural" emerged from a mixture of celebratory momentum and protest against the head of a local government that helped erase the conflict's brutality. Artists, activists, and victims' collectives came together to create this work. I confess that I did not expect Federico Gutiérrez to re-enact the erasure politics he enacted almost ten years ago. Just one day after the mural's completion, city workers were covering it with grey paint, following Gutiérrez's directive justified through a statement he posted on X (formerly Twitter):

There's graffiti as an artistic expression, for example, what has been achieved in Comuna 13 and other areas of Medellín. Moreover, it is regulated by a municipal agreement. And in our Development Plan, we have set out to intervene 30,000 square meters with urban art.

Something very different is the disorder and those who simply want to generate chaos and make the city ugly and dirty.

Here we respect artistic expressions and support them, while at the same time we are clear that the city's public space belongs to everyone and must be kept clean and beautiful (Gutiérrez 2025).

With a profoundly stigmatizing yet hollow argument, Gutierrez suggested that the mural made the city ugly and dirty, evading his responsibility for halting the humanitarian exhumation efforts to provide a form of justice and healing to victims of state crimes in Comuna 13. Gutierrez's response sparked outrage across the human rights community in various capital cities, where local artists reproduced the mural as a sign of solidarity. To the best of my knowledge, every mural was erased with grey or black paint by reactionary groups, most of them in the anonymity of the night. In Ibagué, Tolima's department capital city, a group of Colombian army reservists and veterans erased the mural in daylight as a political statement they presented as "apolitical."

This is a message for all people from Ibagué: the idea is to paint murals that unite us. The Ocobos tree, the Nevado del Tolima, the late, may he rest in peace, Manuel Elkin Patarroyo. Something that unites us as people from Tolima with identity, not things that divide us. And for the city to be beautiful (Veteran quoted in Rodríguez, 2025).

In this case, the memory of state crimes is presented as a divisive inconvenience. Yes, murals are good, but as long as they unite the nation and locals with familiar symbols. Interestingly, Gutierrez

and the veterans who covered the denounces of brutality and state crimes did not deny that "the grannies" were right. The voices of the grannies and the dead are just avoided with calls to what is "beautiful" and valuable to unite everyone. Their call is to close the memory box that "divides people." Their self-serving call demonstrates that, consciously or unconsciously, they dream of a society where dissent does not exist and where the pile of dead bodies that demonstrate the state's implication in human rights violations is left to rot under the oblivion of mass graves.

In particular, it seems that Federico Gutierrez has no issues helping to remind people about certain victims of abuse, but only those that drug trafficking brought to Medellin inhabitants. He is also willing to foster images of proud fighters against injustice, but only if they are aligned with a pact of silence favorable to conservative elites. Gutierrez led during his first administration (2016-2020) the construction of the Inflection Park (Parque Inflexión), meant to commemorate victims of drug trafficking violence. It was built over the rubble of a famous Pablo Escobar building that was usually visited by tourists interested in his story or looking for hidden treasures. The park was inspired by famous memorials like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. The park holds one of the National Police Peacebuilder's monuments, portraying them as heroes and victims of the state's war against druglords and narcotics. The park mourns victims of injustice, but it does nothing to complicate a conflict's history that is grey instead of black and white. It certainly does nothing to acknowledge the experiences of Medellin's marginalized communities, who usually suffer from the violence that legal and illegal actors exert over them in their fight for hegemony.

This iteration of counter-counter memorial collective and institutional action demonstrates there is a strong affinity, if not coordinated action, between conservative political elites, like the one Gutierrez represents as a close ally and sympathizer of Alvaro Uribe Velez, and the community of state security agents. Human rights memorialization and its critically informed pluralism are interpreted as a national, aesthetical, and hygienic menace that deserves immediate reactions. Memory is not the enemy, as conservative and security agents have memories and symbols that elevate the value of their collective identity. In Medellin, the Inflection Park reminds us that conservatives and the community of state security agents share collective memories that help them to build a collective identity and to cast a collective project for the future based on principles like "beauty," "union," and even "hygiene." The enemy is the human rights memory framework in its

more pluralistic and critical format. It has had an institutional life of almost 20 years now, and it is interpreted as a menace to the legacy of Colombian conservatism and the honor of state security agents.

The de-facto alliance between conservative political figures and the state security forces is talkative of a historical political movement that appears as an overwhelming cultural totality that can be interpreted as coherent and consistent when looked through the headlines of major news outlets and the distance of "armchair sociocultural analysis." However, ethnographic research demonstrates that cultural totalities, like quantum particles that fascinate technology enthusiasts and venture capitalists these days, are elusive and resist simple observation. The reactionary memory framework that conservative elites and state security agents share is entangled with the human rights movement and its relative cultural success in Colombia and, as my research proposes, is superposed with human rights language that is already transforming the way how a group of police agents are coding their collective identity for the future. While Police agents are not completely rejecting heroic and arbitrary masculine figures to make sense of themselves, conceptualizing their work as a contribution to peacebuilding informed by human rights principles should not be understated. The invitation to close the "Colombian memory box" that institutional and no-institutional reactionaries have been starring is only one of the expressions of reactionary memories. The Police Institutional Historical Memory suggests that some reactions to the human rights memory framework accept the invitation to revise the past with the human rights template, but in a way that sidesteps accountability.

Looking closer into the factory of the institutional and reactive memories the Police have been publishing in different formats, it is more than evident that there is an organized attempt to exert control over the way how the Police institution deploys a consistent narrative about its implication in the Colombian inner armed conflict. The control relies on centralizing memorialization initiatives in UNIPPEP and close editorial vigilance over what to publish and when. The editorial vigilance I mention builds from the politically informed judgments of endogenous memory players that successfully interpreted the values high-ranking officers invested in institutional memorialization, most likely because they share them. Values, not private interests, better explain the police memory players' commitment to reactionary memories. And yet, the Police institutional historical memory presents its memorialization as a neutral endeavor where facts, instead of

political ideologies and personal values, rule the representation of the past the Police offer to the public.

It is undeniable that the National Police Institutional Historical Memory complements the reactive cultural totality that opposes human rights culture and justice-seeking of victims of state crimes in Colombia. However, it is also a concrete sociocultural response to a multitude of disparate experiences that must be included and acknowledged in the Colombian democratic debate about the past and the future. Police agents and military personnel feel cornered by a human rights culture that is profoundly hostile to their ways and enacted by people who, more likely than not, don't understand the meaning of embodying the state's authority and the "sacrifices" attached to that way of life. Police agents resent a human rights culture that represents them in pejorative ways, and their reaction against human rights memory is not necessarily a reaction against the truth but one against the cultural stigma of being represented as a "pig" by street activists who cling to more rebel strings of the human rights tradition. The particularity of this sociocultural response should not only be thought of exclusively as an indication of undemocratic behaviors, even when there are very good reasons to do so. While I understand and adhere to the diagnosis, I am more interested in thinking about the conflicts police agents have with human rights memory as a puzzle for those who believe in the productivity of engaging with the difficult task of learning and re-learning to live together.

The Police Institutional Historical Memory is full of deafening silences for people like me, raised in a tradition that is critical of arbitrary power and impunity. I could never reconcile the need to visibilize victimized police agents at the expense of due acknowledgment for victims of state crimes. I was happy to find that some police agents and family members of victimized police agents felt the same way. But that is not the only silence the Police institutional memorialization of the past entails. Other silences enable a more complete understanding of the implications of reactionary memories. For instance, the Police Institutional Historical Memory silences the motivations that inform its intentional reduction of grievable lives. A more transparent disclosure of those motivations could enable a more meaningful dialogue with the Police memory players, one that could include a more plural set of concerns to their memorialization efforts. The Police Institutional Historical Memory enforces silence about the experiences of most police agents and their families, particularly when these agents were victimized, and the institution failed to meet

their expectations. Experiences of abandonment and frustration regarding the Police's institutional commitment to police agents are left as loose memories, as the Police elites have an interest in keeping them out of the public consciousness inside and outside the institution. The subtle silences within Police memorialization of the conflict reveal that institutional memories, like the strategic documents that prompted high-ranking officers to pursue them (Ministerio de Defensa 2016), aim to shield institutions from criticism rather than vindicate ordinary security agents. Shielding institutions from criticism, as anthropologists know, means to shield decision-makers from accountability for the harm they produce.

The Police Institutional Historical Memory is problematic in that way, but, again, cultural totalities are never straightforward and univocal. Even the Police institutional memory has a democratic potential, as human rights codes are starting to organize the project for a new collective identity. Activists and engaged scholars should start identifying the possibilities of working with Police units engaging with human rights principles like UNIPPEP does. In the end, just like Tzvetan Todorov suggested with his brilliant essay on the abuses of memory (Todorov 2000), politically productive remembrance must be balanced with the need to move forward, a movement that I interpret as the difficult art of living together respecting the different expressions of what makes us huma

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