

**Becoming activists of meaning:  
Resisting violence and enforced disappearance in Colombia**

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University of Pittsburgh, 2022

In this dissertation, I explore human rights activists' training and learning practices in times of transition to democracy in Colombia. The peace agreement that President Juan Manuel Santos and the Marxist guerrilla FARC signed in 2016 opened a political window of opportunity to victims' struggle for recognition.

My starting point is the experience of the Nydia Erika Bautista Foundation for Human Rights, an organization of victims of forced disappearance based in Bogotá, and from there I argue that social organizations of victims deploy powerful pedagogical strategies for the construction of peace and offer alternatives for reconciliation.

Assuming the daily life of the Nydia Erika Foundation as a starting point, I argue that the pedagogical processes of training activists are possible thanks to the configuration of three different types of communities: memory, practice, and emotional. By participating in these communities, victims and non-victims constitute activism of meaning aimed not only to reconstruct the identities of victims exterminated by the practice of enforced disappearance. It also offers ways to re-signify the experience of citizenship amidst transitional moments. Activists of meaning deploy symbolic strategies to raise awareness about the atrocious experiences that victims experienced and struggle to strengthen human rights discourse in Colombian public opinion. The activism of meaning is the product of merging local knowledges of victims of enforced disappearance with academic knowledge. It is a paradigmatic space of encounter that aims to

overcome structural inequality that makes it difficult the recognition of victims of political violence as citizens.

From a perspective of collaborative sociology, this dissertation gives an account of the joint work of "seeker-women" and non-victim populations in Colombia's defense of human rights. Through this joint work, seeker-women and volunteer professionals configure ethical – and political horizons for renewed collective action. Therefore, the activism of meaning recreates horizontal bondages between victims and non-victims and deeply renewed ethics of care.

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## **List of abbreviations**

ACC: United Self-Defense Forces of Casanare – Autodefensas Campesinas del Casanare

AUC: United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia – Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia

ASFADDES: Association of Relatives of Disappeared Detainees – Asociación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos

BCB: Central Bolívar Bloc of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia

CEV: Truth Commission – Comisión de la Verdad

ELN: National Liberation Army – Ejército de Liberación nacional

FARC: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia

FEDEFAM: Latin America Federation of Associations of Relatives of the Detained

Disappear - Federación Latinoamericana de Asociaciones de Familiares de Detenidos-Desaparecidos

FNEB: Nydia Erika Bautista Foundation – Fundación Nydia Erika Bautista

ICMP: International Commission of Missing Persons

JEP: Special Jurisdiction for Peace – Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz

MOVICE: Movement of Victims of State Crimes - Movimiento de Víctimas de Crímenes de Estado

OMC: Memory and Conflict Observatory - Observatorio de Memoria y Conflicto

SIVJRNR: Integral System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Guarantees of Non-Repetition – Sistema Integral de Verdad, Justicia, Reparación y Garantías de No Repetición

UBPD: Unit for the Search of People Presumed Disappeared – Unidad de Búsqueda de  
Personas Dadas por Desaparecidas

## Preface

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To you all, thank you.

## **1.0 Introduction**

The year 2016 was a milestone for victims' organizations in Colombia. The government of President Juan Manuel Santos and the guerrillas of the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) signed a peace agreement in Havana, Cuba to put an end to more than fifty years of continuous armed activity. After intense years of negotiations, the Marxist FARC laid down their arms, and the Colombian government pledged to take steps to strengthen democracy. This agreement provided the victims of the conflict with a window of opportunity to make their demands known, seek reparations and guarantees of non-repetition in a manner unprecedented in Colombian history.

During 2015 and 2016, several delegations of victims of political violence traveled to Havana to take part in the negotiations. The victims shared their testimonies of suffering and their experiences of pain to a wide audience of bureaucrats, peace negotiators, guerrillas, and members of the international community. Those who spoke for the victims' movement, including Yanette Bautista and Nancy Galarraga of the Nydia Erika Bautista Foundation, played a very active part. As Nancy mentioned in an informal conversation in March 2018, "We, the victims, went to Havana to tell our stories. And the government officials and the FARC guerrillas listened carefully. And do you know what, Sebastian? We saw them weep when they heard our testimonies. There we understood that the peace process was serious and that we, the victims, were going to be heard." The victims of political violence who visited Havana went not only to share their testimonies but also to demand that the negotiating table incorporate their demands for reparation, justice, and guarantees of non-repetition. The victims used this opportunity to make the peace agreement

revolve around their demands and all the transitional infrastructure that the agreement created to include their experiences as a starting point for the transition to peace.

The peace agreement introduced Colombia to a period of transition in which the victims would enjoy a central place. Since the creation of the infrastructure for the transition, the organizations of relatives of victims of enforced disappearance human rights organizations have begun to denounce large-scale human rights violations. The Justice and Peace Law (Law 975 of 2005) took steps to recognize atrocities and the suffering of the victims, and the victims of political violence found this as an ideal stage to raise their voices vehemently. The government of President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) had managed to weaken paramilitary structures as a result of mass demobilizations in which some 32,000 combatants laid down their arms, but the recognition of the victims was a slower process. With the persistent application of the law, lobbying, and pressures from the organizations of relatives of victims, human rights NGOs, and the victims' movement in general, they succeeded in having mechanisms of recognition, reparation, and truth included in the transitional regime. As a result of the pressure exerted, State institutions created the National Center for Historical Memory, an institution responsible for collecting the memories of the victims and producing diagnoses of the effects of the armed conflict.

The 2016 peace agreement contained some specific provisions that favored the demands of the victims' organizations. The Integral System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Guarantees of Non-Repetition was intended to lend dignity to the historical struggle of the victims for truth and justice. It created three key institutions: the Truth Commission, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, and the Unit for the Search of People Presumed Disappeared.

Each of these institutions has a specific mandate. The Truth Commission aims to elucidate the causes that fueled the degradation of the conflict. The Commission has no legal teeth to

sentence those responsible; rather, it seeks to offer society a "truth" about the reasons and causes of the conflict, while tracking the resistance strategies of the communities and civilian population affected by the war. The Commission aims to lend dignity to the experience of the victims through this search for truth.

The Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) seeks to impose legal measures on those most responsible for heinous actions. In addition to its powers to punish, the JEP establishes responsibilities in terms of a model of restorative justice that depends on the "truths": the greater the truth, the lesser the punishment to actors responsible.

And thirdly, the Missing Persons Search Unit aims to locate victims – survivors or bodies – all over the country. As expressed by its President Luz Marina Monzón, the Unit aims to "alleviate" the suffering of victims' relatives who continue to have to cope with the uncertainty of knowing what happened to their loved ones.

With the implementation of these transitional institutions, victims' organizations and human rights NGOs undertook the task of drafting reports on the cases of human rights violations they represent. In fact, the experiences and achievements of victims' family organizations and human rights NGOs are the most critical inputs to the work of the institutions of the transition. The signature of the peace agreement enhanced the recognition of victims as a central variable. It fostered a very powerful content of creativity in the organizations themselves. In many important areas - from investigations where diagnoses of the modus operandi of armed actors are presented, through the elaboration of life-stories of victims to the preparation of documentaries and audiovisual material that expresses the struggle for memory - the victims' organizations and human rights NGOs undertake intense campaigns to make their achievement in the struggle visible.

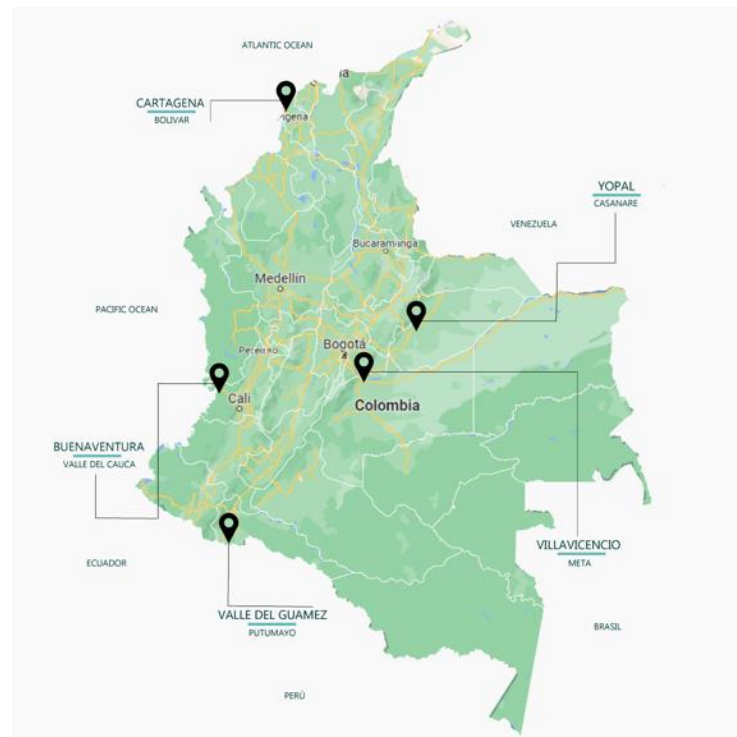
The Nydia Erika Bautista Foundation for Human Rights played an active part in this moment of effervescence, creativity, and denunciation of human rights violations, in addition to its contribution to the design of the institutional infrastructure for the transition. In addition to playing an active part in the design of the institutional infrastructure for transition, it also initiated the process of drafting reports. These reports reflect the struggle of the Foundation for Human Rights over more than 30 years.

Nydia Erika was snatched by military intelligence officers from a party held in 1987 to celebrate her son Erik's first communion and spirited away into oblivion. As soon as they realized what had happened, the Bautista family began a desperate search for her. Nydia Erika was a militant member of the M-19 guerrillas and was a student of Sociology and Economics at Universidad Nacional de Colombia at the time of her disappearance.

In exile, the Bautista Family founded the Nydia Erika Foundation in Germany in 1999, in honor of Nydia's sister, who disappeared in 1987. Since then, they have been engaged in a persistent struggle for the defense of the rights of the disappeared and come to be a benchmark in the world of human rights in Colombia. The activities and achievements of the FNEB have been radically transformed by the incorporation of students and volunteer professionals. Since the family's return to Colombia in 2007, the Foundation has been composed mainly of seeker-women. With the arrival of the non-victim population, the FNEB widened its pedagogical spectrum and became a powerful informal space for the training of activists.

The Foundation specializes in the legal representation of relatives of victims of enforced disappearance. As Figure 1 shows, it has a presence in five Colombian Departments: Valle del Cauca, Casanare, Meta, Bolívar and Putumayo, and in Bogotá. Each of them supports families of

victims of enforced disappearance in judicial litigation and provides them with psychosocial support. More importantly, the FNEB trains and empowers families to defend human rights.



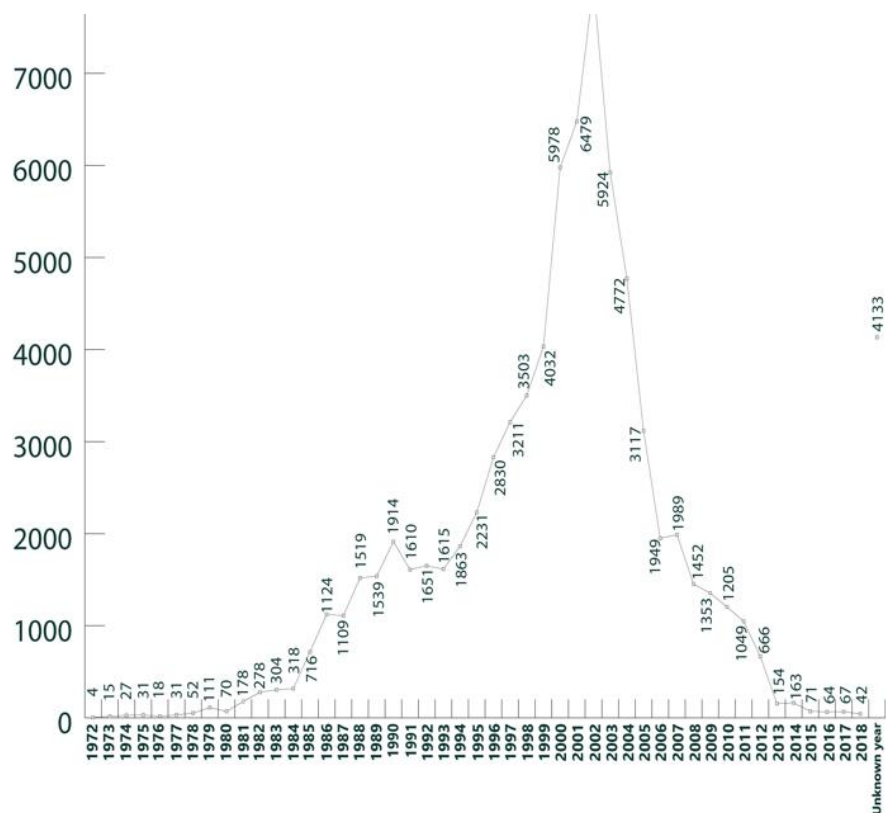
**Figure 1 Nydia Erika Foundations' regional work.**

This dissertation traces the daily life of the FNEB organization in this moment of transition. It explores the pedagogical strategies that the FNEB deploys to train "activists of meaning", activists oriented not only to reconstruct the exterminated identities of the disappeared, but also to re-signify the experience of citizenship in Colombia.

## **1.1 Political violence, enforced disappearance, and resistance in Colombia**

Some authors agree in identifying two significant cycles of violence in the last seventy years of Colombian history (Pécaut, 1997; Sanín, 2020, p. 26). The first of them, called "La Violencia" mainly involved the Liberal and Conservative political parties and their struggles to impose themselves hegemonically in Colombian society. The trigger for this first cycle of violence was the assassination of Liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán on April 9, 1948. The bipartisan conflict left approximately 300,000 dead, but the Colombian calendar has no date set aside to commemorate the memory of the victims of that period.

With the installation of the Frente Nacional (National Front - a bipartisan pact that contemplated the alternation of power between them) to halt the internecine conflict between the political parties, the political elites managed to attenuate the expressions of violence among the population in general; but the bipartisan pact failed to provide spaces for effective political participation to sectors that escaped the influence of the two traditional parties.



**Figure 2 Number of victims of enforced disappearance by year 1972 - 2018. Data source: OMC**

There are differences of opinion about the origin of the second cycle: some authors place the 1960s as the triggers for the new cycle of atrocities (Palacios, 2012; Pécaut, 2008; Sanín, 2020). In 1964, halfway through the period of the Frente Nacional, Marxist guerrillas erupted in a conflict with the Colombian State which only ended in 2016, with the signature of the peace agreement. While the political elites managed to curb bipartisan warmongering, they failed to consolidate an inclusive political spectrum for political expression outside the Liberal and Conservative parties. The second cycle of violence coincides with the counterinsurgency dynamics that the United States envisioned in Latin America as a force to contain Soviet expansion (Gill, 2004). Although there are records that indicate that the armed actors of the time used enforced disappearance as a mechanism for the imposition of regimes of terror since 1958 (Uribe, 2013), it was not until the

end of the 1970s that armed actors systematically used this practice, which reached its peak in 2002 during the Conservative administration under Andres Pastrana, followed by Alvaro Uribe.

The counter-insurgency operation contemplated the expansion of paramilitary forces (Grajales, 2017; Gutiérrez Sanín, 2018) that worked hand – by hand with local elites and businessmen. The formation of paramilitary squads was a reaction to the increasing power of the guerrilla structures embodied in the Marxist groups of the FARC, the ELN, the M-19, and the EPL, among others. The paramilitary expansion reached the vast majority of Colombian regions and used forced disappearance as a mechanism of territorial control.

Under the rubric of "taking away water from the fish", Colombian paramilitaries persecuted peasants accused of being guerrilla helpers systematically. With their growth and consolidation as a para-state force, paramilitary forces established terror regimes in several Colombian regions. What was an initial reaction to the increased power of guerrilla groups, Colombian paramilitary groups shifted towards a complex structure of economic power and local political power that resembles the dynamics of "para – state-building processes".

According to numbers from the Observatory of Memory and Conflict (OC), this second cycle of violence produced around 81,000 disappeared people. However, victims' organizations speak of 120,000 people forcibly disappeared (ICMP, 2020).

Far from being paralyzed by the effects of enforced disappearance, the families of victims have been organizing collectively since the 1970s to demand searches for their relatives' whereabouts. In most cases, it is the families themselves who begin that search, in a desperation that subsequently becomes politicized. In fact, according to a recent report published by ICMP (International Commission of Missing Persons) (ICMP, 2020), the number of NGOs associated with enforced disappearance and the number of victims' families organizations increased with the

intensification of armed actions by legal and illegal actors. As Figure 3 shows, the number of organizations of victims' families and human rights NGOs has been steadily increasing since 1970, to 41 today. Comparing Graph 1, we find that the greater the degree of repression expressed in enforced disappearances, the greater the number of organizations founded. The 1990s were particularly intense regarding the numbers of disappeared: it was the decade in which the human rights organizations proved most fiercely in resisting violence.

Source: ICMP

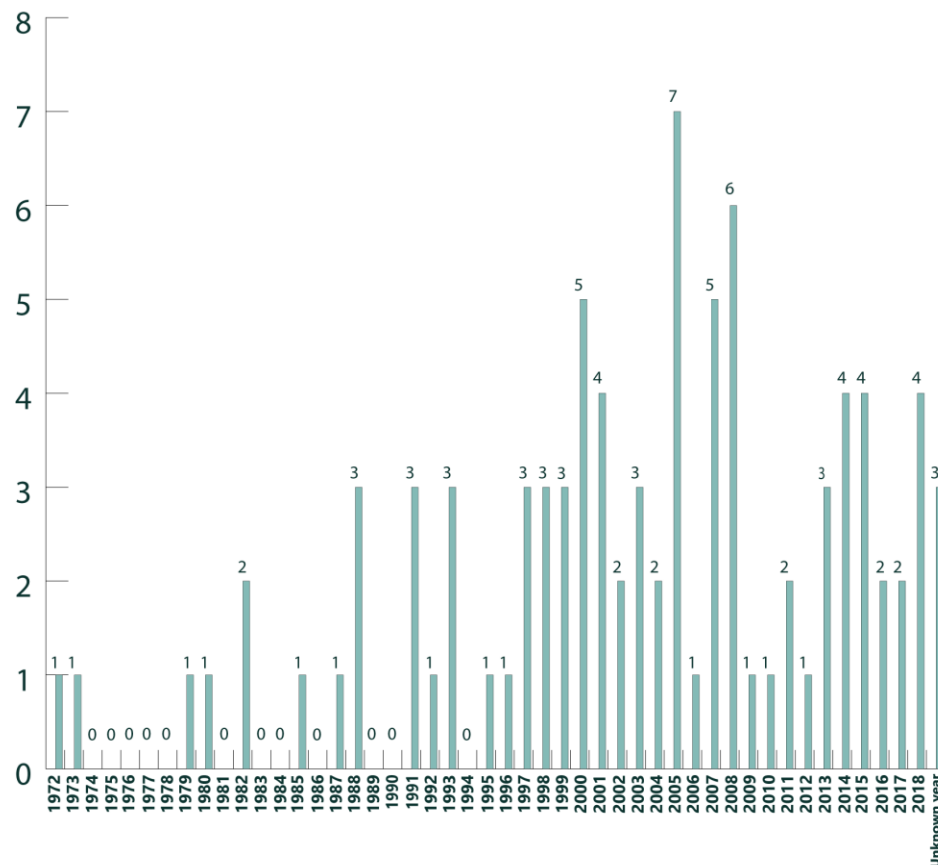


Figure 3 Number of human rights NGO's and organizations of relatives of missing persons by year 1972 –

2018. Data source: OMC

As Figure 2 shows, the number of enforced disappearances declined in 2002. This decrease coincides with the demobilization policies of paramilitaries under the government of Álvaro Uribe Velez. As figure 3 suggests, after implementing Justice and Peace Law in 2005, victims founded more organizations of human rights advocacy thanks to the window of political opportunity that the paramilitary demobilization opened. This increase in the number of human rights organizations expresses the need for victims to demand truth and punish the responsible for atrocities under a renewed discursive rubric. As figure 3 shows, both the demobilization processes of paramilitary squads and the peace negotiations with FARC were favorable to collective organization of victims.

From a general perspective, several academics have explored the practical universe of human rights defenders in Colombia (García, García, & Cecilia, 2008; González Jácome, 2019; Sánchez, 2008; Tate, 2007; Van Isschot, 2015). According to Tate, the first cohorts of human rights defenders were activists associated with left-wing political parties (Tate, 2007). With the degradation of State violence and the political exclusion of subaltern populations from the Colombian political scene, some militants of the political parties critical of the establishment took up the legal defense of imprisoned activists. Tate describes the process of professionalization that characterized the training of human rights activists and the institutionalization of discourse as a critical framework for the visibility of armed repression.

From a more discursive perspective, González Jácome argues that the discourse of human rights displaces the old discursive structures of a revolutionary and Marxist base in the early years of the 1970s (González-Jácome, 2018; González Jácome, 2019). This new structure of meaning allows activists to distance themselves from the revolutionary discourse that legitimized violence as part of the recipe for political change. In this sense, the discourse on human rights in Colombia

is part of the transnational network of discourse and assumes the achievement of peace as the starting point.

While taking distance from the revolutionary discourses, human rights defenders focused their activities on defending human life and protecting it from the actions of armed actors since the 70s (García et al., 2008; Van Isschot, 2015). The discourse of "protecting life" acquires a prominent role in the repertoire of grassroots organizations that resist the persistent violence in Colombia. This dissertation contributes to this literature by showing the transformative process of victims into human rights defenders, which scholars have less explored. The FNEB's trajectory follows this master framework of "protecting life" and provides insights into how grassroots organizations resist violence and enforced disappearance.

## **1.2 A note on method: towards a collaborative sociology**

This dissertation is based on my personal experience of becoming an activist of meaning. Rather than seeking an ethnographic description that narrates in-depth the senses that circulate within the organizations of victims of forced disappearance and defense of human rights, their practices of resistance, their active role in the transitional scenario, this dissertation acquired a markedly collaborative component. By joining the Nydia Erika Bautista Foundation for Human Rights team, I became able to understand that the flow of interactions, social relations, and bonds that we collectively established were powerful places of collective knowledge construction between the victim population, seeker-women and non-victim population. In other words, I was aware that beyond preserving a place as a participant-observer of the various activities given the interactions I had with the seeker-women, this work led me to a process of vital transformation: I

changed from conventional academic to convinced sociologist, in the validity and legitimacy of the struggles of the victims of violence in Colombia and the struggle hand-in-hand with them. In this sense, this thesis, rather than tending to offer a description of the practices of seeker-women, gives an account of a process of "walking together" in the universes of meaning that the struggle for human rights implies.

Methodologically speaking, my work at the Nydia Erika Bautista Foundation acquired a double character: on the one hand, it has a markedly self-ethnographic nuance (Adams, Ellis, & Jones, 2017; Holman Jones, 2007). Somehow, my fieldwork at the Nydia Erika Bautista Foundation shook my deepest existential anchors. My life has revolved around conventional academia for over a decade: but sharing with seeker-women implied a break that led me to become an activist of meaning. Therefore, my personal experience is a critical ethnographic place for understanding the training and learning processes of activists. Being a radical break in my biography, I include my personal experience as a privileged place of ethnographic analysis in this dissertation.

In the second instance, fieldwork acquired a deep collaborative component (Borda, 2013; Cendales, Torres, & Torres, 2005; Rappaport, 2020). When I joined the Nydia Erika Bautista Foundation as coordinator of documentation of cases of enforced disappearance, my job was to coordinate the research teams that drafted the reports for the transitional institutions. However, beyond the process of writing reports that implied "academic knowledge" because of the institutions receiving them, the daily relationships between volunteer professionals, students and seeker-women is the point of this ethnographic exploration. In other words, this dissertation explores community-building processes between victims of violence and non-victim individuals. Through these interactions, seeker-women and non-victims build local knowledge and knowledge

about the struggle for the defense of human rights, configure ethical-political horizons of collective action and ultimately undertake the struggle for the resignification of the experience of citizenship.

I am a privileged, academic middle-class white Colombian male. And, I am not a victim of violence. These multiple connotations that determine my place of enunciation as a sociologist and as a member of the organization made me ask myself several methodological questions: how do I account for realities that escape my accumulated collections? Or how do I express experiences so radically alien to my origins and upbringing? The same seeker-women gave me the answers to these questions. Rather than assuming them as objects or even subjects of study, seeker-women became my teachers of struggle in defending the claim of human rights. Being fully aware of this situation, I understood that I had to "unlearn" what I brought to the organization in academic terms so that I could "feel" the starting points of the struggle of seeker-women. The fieldwork ended up being a permanent exchange of learning. Beyond having a point of arrival, my experience in the organization remains, sometime after finishing writing this dissertation, a starting point as a sociologist committed to the struggle for the defense of human rights. This situation will be difficult to change. Learning and training in the defense of human rights together with seeker-women is effective training for the heart.

### **1.3 Chapters outline**

In the second chapter, I define my approach to meaningful activism. By expanding on the proposed concept of Gabriel Gatti, who defines activists of meaning as individuals who reconstruct the facts and ways of death of victims of forced disappearance, and who aim to reconstruct the identities of those exterminated by state repression (Gatti, 2014), I argue that activists of meaning

are re-socialized by participating in three different but closely-interrelated types of community. The activists of meaning configure communities of memory where, in addition to updating the memory of the forcibly disappeared, they manage to establish a political agenda that re-signifies the experience of citizenship in a broader and more generalized way. In this sense, activists of meaning are, at the same time, activists of memory.

Third, activists of meaning establish communities of practice and build local knowledge to process the experience of enforced disappearance. Activists progress from the formation of these communities of practice, to the production of local knowledge about the defense of human rights with which they do battle against State institutions. So, to some extent, activists of meaning establish informal pedagogies to train new community members. Seeker-women consolidate tacit knowledge about the search for their missing relatives, and in this process, they transmit their knowledge horizontally to women who initiate the search processes. Activism of meaning therefore implies a deep network of empirical knowledge where sorority ties are recreated between seeker-women and the non-victim population.

Finally, activism of meaning shapes emotional networks between relatives of victims and the non-victim population. Activists of meaning use these networks as their starting-point to set up an emotional community that involves individuals who have not necessarily experienced conflict in their hearts, minds and bodies. By sharing their testimonies and their narratives of suffering to the non-victim population, activists of meaning build emotional and existential bonds between them and manage to extract the process of searching for loved ones from the intimate and family dimension. In other words, the emotional community recreates bonds of solidarity between victims and non-victims, enhancing the scope of the struggle for human rights.

Taking my ethnographic experience at the Nydia Erika Bautista Foundation for Human Rights, Chapters 3,4,5 provide different angles of a narrative about the empirical experience of the configuration of each of the communities. Chapter 23 explores the dense networks of meaning that circulate in the physical space of the Nydia Erika Bautista Foundation and that structure the mnemonic dimensions of activism of meaning. I argue that the physical distribution of the FNEB, being a free space, condenses the ambivalent senses that characterize the experience of enforced disappearance. The new members who arrive at the Foundation are imbued with these senses of ambivalence and co-figurative memory communities. Enforced disappearance, after all, is a state of being that escapes the classifying frameworks of language: the disappeared are neither alive nor dead; they inhabit a limbo that is expressed in the spatial distribution of the FNEB headquarters, giving it an "enchanted" sense. While the spaces of the FNEB house these memories of ambivalence, they also condense records of the struggle of activists of meaning not only for the memory of the disappeared but also for the expansion of the scope of the discourse of memory, justice and reparation within public opinion.

Chapter 4 explores the pedagogical processes involved in forming activists of meaning. The starting-point is the pedagogical practice of the "School of Leadership" of the FNEB, and I describe in-depth the implicit and explicit, formal and informal knowledge that seeker-women deploy in their daily practices. The School of Leadership is a community of practice aimed at "empowering" seeker-women. In this empowerment process, the senior women of the School train newcomers in the technical languages of the defense of their rights. The exchange of experiences of seeker-women also promotes the configuration of sororities where pain is transmuted into resistance. Ultimately, Chapter 4 tells the story of how seeker-women become researchers, lawyers, and empirical therapists.

Chapter 4 tells the story of the configuration of the Community of Hope. This community that embodies the bond between seeker-women and non-victim individuals has a significant emotional component where the testimony of the victims plays a role in generating social ties. Rather than reproducing a moment of compassion, testimony permeates non-victim listeners and generates mechanisms of identification. However, those outside the armed conflict cannot feel the pain that seeker-women bring in their minds, hearts and bodies, witness summons and recreate solidarity. In addition to sharing their testimony, seeker-women and non-victim populations (university students, volunteer professionals) share scenarios of intense emotional effervescence. In these spaces, the structural differences in race, class, and gender are suspended, giving way to the configuration of *communitas* or horizontal solidarities that enhance the bond between seeker-women and the non-victim population. The Community of Hope as an emotional community marks the third moment of activists of meaning.

## **2.0 Towards a conceptualization of activism of meaning**

During the first months of 2018, I carried out doctoral research on the implicit hierarchies across populations in the realm of “victims” in transitional Colombia according to public opinion. I was codifying previous interviews with agents of state institutions and undertaking extensive press archival analysis when I received an unexpected call. On the other end of the phone was Yanette Bautista, director of the Nydia Erika Bautista Foundation for Human Rights (FNEB). She told me, "Sebastian, I am calling you to make a proposal that you cannot refuse," and suggested I work as coordinator of documentation of cases of forced disappearance in the organization. Although I already had much of the fieldwork for my initial research project already completed, I agreed to her request, without hesitation, and that same day I joined the organization. Riding in a taxi to the organization's headquarters, I felt nervous. After all, I knew from secondary sources the complexity of the problem of forced disappearance at the Latin American level. I had delved into the causes of the reproduction of the Colombian conflict, and I was descriptively exploring the universe of victims. However, I had never experienced long-term relationships with victims of political violence. Unknowingly, Yanette Bautista's call and my subsequent incorporation into the FNEB would radically transform my life.

While I was familiar with the layers of meanings that circulate in the world of victims and human rights, I only knew them from the comfort of books and articles. In my previous fieldwork, I had the opportunity to participate in workshops with victims and human rights defenders where I met FNEB members without knowing what awaited me in the future. However, these meetings never affected me as profoundly as the two years of intense sharing that I experienced with the

FNEB community. By profoundly integrating myself into the daily life of the FNEB, my perspectives on activism and its relationship with sociological praxis profoundly changed.

In other words, my immersion in the FNEB led me to "unlearn" what I had learned in Sociology up to that point by inhabiting the daily lives of those who defend the human rights of the disappeared and their families. Through this first-hand process of "unlearning," I explored the world of emotions that circulate in the universe of forced disappearance, by coming to intimately know the daily life of human rights defenders.

After six months of immersion in the daily life of the FNEB, my fieldwork was taking a substantial turn of which I was not fully aware. Yanette told me, "Sebastian, here at FNEB, we are pleased and grateful for your work. You have demonstrated a commitment that comes from your heart, and we want you to continue to work with us. We know you are doing a thesis, and I want to tell you that the FNEB is at your disposal for whatever you need." This brief conversation with Yanette provided to be critical to my work.

On the one hand, Yanette gave me the green light to access the infinite information in the organization to structure my dissertation. Countless topics worthy of a doctoral dissertation passed through my head. To name a few, I was interested in exploring subnational manifestations of violence and resistance strategies of victims of the conflict, and as well as the complex relationships that human rights organizations had woven with state institutions. At other times, I thought of exploring the social construction of impunity that structures family members' struggle against forced disappearance and the vindication of their rights. I had access to privileged and unique information about the dynamics and resistances of grassroots organizations, a dream for many graduate students. However, Yanette's phrase "commitment from the heart" was the one that raised the most questions about my fieldwork and my place in the organization. After intense

days of reflection, I concluded that beyond searching for causal relationships between variables or correlations, my dissertation would revolve around the process of activist learning; a learning that is related, precisely, to training the "heart" of activists. Not surprisingly, the time I was at the FNEB transformed me into an activist and a human rights defender. I became what we at the FNEB call an "activist of meaning," (*activistas de sentido*), that is, an activist who combines the reason of the heart with the heart of reason.

The training of the heart necessarily involves exposure to the testimonies of suffering and pain of relatives of victims of enforced disappearance. Being the family member of someone who is forcibly disappeared entails being plunged into a world of ambiguity and uncertainty where there are not sufficient linguistic categories to explain it. Being an experience that escapes rational explanatory frameworks, the emotional dimension plays a crucial role in re-socializing activists of meaning and in the crystallization of horizontal solidarities; it constitutes the referents for collective identity and structures the frameworks that enhance collective action. However, the emotional dimension also defines the transmutation of narratives of pain and suffering into the political struggle for the vindication of the violated rights of victims' families. As Yanette mentions in all the encounters with victims we had, "it is not ideology that mobilizes us. It is the love for our missing ones that inspires us to continue our struggle."

By mobilizing the memory of the disappeared, the FNEB seeks to remove the forced disappearance from the state of social death it finds itself. Although legal and illegal armed actors used it systematically in the internal armed conflict, forced disappearance in Colombia is one of the least visible practices in public opinion (CNMH, 2013).

The FNEB is a paradigmatic space where people are trained as activists of meaning. Those who arrive at FNEB get into a deep network of meaning (Geertz, 2008) associated with the

experience of the war in Colombia. Beyond the explicit training that new members receive in the technical language of human rights, activists of meaning learn by exposing themselves to a powerful assemblage of emotional circulation. These emotions that circulate in the space and are inscribed in the members' practices end up constituting the tacit knowledge (Conway, 2006) around the experience of forced disappearance. In other words, this emotional knowledge connects activists of meaning to the social fabric of those who have experienced enforced disappearance.

Based on this empirical context, I expand the concept of activists of meaning proposed by Gabriel Gatti (Gatti, 2011b, 2014) who defines them as individuals who reconstruct the facts and ways of death of victims of forced disappearance, and who aim to reconstruct the identities of those exterminated by state repression. Gatti argues that activists of meaning face a paradox given the "catastrophe" that forced disappearance entails: it reconstructs an identity that inhabits limbos and liminal places and times (Gatti, 2011a). According to Gatti, archaeologists, archivists, psychologists, and members of social movements are part of the universe of activists of meaning since their goal is to make sense of what violence takes away in existential terms. These actors' attempts to rebuild the worlds of the disappeared detainees frequently include reconstructing their memory and ensuring justice, truth, and reparation processes.

Activists of meaning tend to reconstruct exterminated identities, erased from the face of the earth. In this process, activists of meaning reconstruct the worlds left behind by missing people, their social and intimate relationships, and their life plans. But more importantly, activists of meaning have a vocation for presentist action: they tend to help the relatives of disappeared people to re-inhabit their daily lives. The process of re-habitation assumes the "reality of the present" as a starting point. But this reality of the present also tends to structure futures where activists configure ethical-political horizons of action. The relatives of the disappeared politicize during

the process of searching for their relative along with the non-victim population that accompanies them.

The social context of the activist of meaning includes the relatives of victims of forced disappearance, volunteer professionals who arrive at the movement, and experts defending human rights. In this profound network of interactions, activists of meaning learn the technical language of the defense of human rights and incidental knowledge about the dignity and value of life. With this knowledge, activists of meaning seek to sensitize the general population about the effects of enforced disappearance. In this way, activists of meaning ultimately seek to re-signify the experience of citizenship in Colombia.

## **2.1 Activism in social movements: between rationality, emotions, and knowledge**

I argue that activists of meaning "become" activists. This process of becoming is closely related to the layers of meanings circulating within the organizations of victims of forced disappearance. These range of possibilities condense the referents for the configuration of collective identities and circulate collectively shared narratives that guide the practices and actions of activists. The testimonies of the relatives of disappearance victims serve as to anchor meaning and structure memory initiatives.

Social movement literature has made significant contributions toward understanding how and why individuals participate in social movements. Some authors argue that peoples' risk and cost assessments predict their participation in social movements (McAdam, 1986, 1990, 2013; Tindall, 2002; Wiltfang & McAdam, 1991). Other authors have identified the configuration of

networks and social links as the primary variable explaining activists' involvement in social movements (Diani, 2004; Diani & Mische, 2015).

Authors such as McAdam suggest that activists conduct risk and cost assessments to decide whether to engage in particular movements. McAdam suggests that costs refer to "the expenditures of time, money and energy that are required of a person engaged in any particular form of activism"(McAdam, 1986, p. 67). In turn, the risks have to do with "the anticipated dangers – whether legal, social, physical, financial... of engaging in a particular kind of activity" (McAdam, 1986, p. 67). While low risk/cost activism requires sympathetic and receptive political attitudes, high risk/cost is reserved for those who have "biographical availability" (Wiltfang & McAdam, 1991).

Activists frequently lack constraints that would otherwise increase risks and costs of participating in the movement, such as full-time work, marriage, and family responsibilities (McAdam, 1986). In addition to risk/cost assessment, in his Freedom Summer Project study (McAdam, 1986, 1990) McAdam suggests that activists who participated in this high/risk-cost project had extensive prior civil rights activity. Activists were previously affiliated with multiple organizations and had strong ties to other participants of the project.

The risk/cost model effectively explains the participation of individuals in social movements from a rational approach. Activists calculate means to achieve specific goals and assess their personal lives by participating in the movement's activities. In many cases, activists who engage in high-risk/cost activities have previous trajectories of participation in other related activities and have established networks. In other words, activists know all too well the implications and consequences of their actions.

Despite this robust rationalist approach, McAdam recognizes that high-risk/cost activists need training and education. Far from making decisions adrift, high-risk/cost activism is "the byproduct of a gradual process of integration and resocialization through which the individual becomes an activist in the same way he or she learns and internalizes any new role" (McAdam, 2013). During this resocialization process, activists become more at odds with the movement's goals and its referents of collective identity. However, the high/risk activism model does not explore these training processes.

Activists of meaning engage in high-risk, costly activities. In fact, at the beginning of 2019, the FNEB headquarters was attacked by unknown assailants. In the first days of January, security cameras recorded an individual throwing stones at exterior windows in the early hours of the morning. The FNEB hypothesized that the attack wasn't an attempt to steal or access the information stored at the headquarters since the attacker didn't force the doorplates. For the directives, it was a clear case of harassment. It is worth remembering that by January 2019, the FNEB was finishing the reports for the Truth Commission (CEV), demonstrating state agents' participation in cases of forced disappearance. Although the event caused uncertainty and anxiety, all the members of the FNEB persisted in our work.

Those of us who work in the FNEB—and similar organizations that defend human rights—become fully aware of the abuses and excesses that state institutions have committed during the armed conflict. We acquire knowledge of the "modus operandi" of the armed forces and illegal actors. We know the mantle of impunity created by the judicial institutions responsible for protecting human rights. In addition, we know first-hand the narratives of pain and suffering of victims of forced disappearance. Despite these circumstances, activists of meaning persist in the

struggle for the restoration of rights. In other words, activists of meaning know the risks and consequences of our actions, but solely rational precepts cannot explain our persistence.

As a reaction to the strong rationalist models that explain the motivations of activists, some academics highlight emotions as a structuring axis of the participation of individuals in social movements (Flam, 2015; Flam & King, 2007; Goodwin & Jasper, 2004; Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2004; Jasper, 2008, 2012; Jasper, 2013; Jasper & Polletta, 2018). Emotions are social, cultural, and political constructs (Ahmed, 2004; Hochschild, 2012). Emotions move social movements, and their absence marks their decline (Eyerman, 2005) Scholars of social movements suggest that the emotional universe within movements manifests through reflex emotions (fear, surprise, anger, disgust, joy, and sadness), affective bonds, moods, moral emotions, and strategies (Goodwin & Jasper, 2004).

This emotional dimension is of fundamental importance for organizations of relatives of victims. As I will show in chapter three, emotions such as love mark the horizon of action of the organizations of relatives of victims. Indeed, the maxim of the struggle of most organizations of relatives of victims is "love mobilizes us. Love for our disappeared. Let them return them to us alive because they were taken alive!" Family members of victims of forced disappearance constantly experience feelings associated with uncertainty. Since enforced disappearance involves entering a liminal world (see chapter 3), victims' relatives experience this uncertainty and pain in their bodies and interiorities/subjectivities. Once they reach the FNEB, the organization begins a powerful process of emotional/affective work with them to transmute their pain and uncertainty into political mobilization.

Emotional work in this case then is a process of learning, a process of training activists. Social movements manage to articulate affective links between their members and enhance the

references for constructing collective identities with this learning process. Later in this chapter, I describe the bonds between victims' relatives, volunteer professionals, and university students as an "emotional community," the FNEB's Community of Hope.

Academics who privilege emotions as an explanatory reference of social activism recognize that activists *learn* to feel the emotions circulating within social movements. As Helen Flam suggests, "now what new social movements attempt to do, is to resocialize their (potential) members and the larger public. They teach their members to work on emotions directed towards themselves and their opponents" (Flam & King, 2007, p. 24). This process of "resocialization" is similar to that posed by rationalist perspectives when describing high-cost/risk activism. However, neither perspective offers a clear explanation regarding *how* social movements re-socialize their potential members.

I argue that it is essential to explore the pedagogical, dimensions of the formative or resocialization processes of activists of meaning in order to understand their motivations, and, from a broader perspective, to understand the political, cultural, and social impacts of the social movement of victims in Colombia. In other words, the pedagogical dimensions are intimately related to the emotional universe and are crucial to understanding the recruitment processes and construction of collective identities of victim organizations. By isolating the pedagogical variable, we can also evaluate and understand the processes of knowledge production that social movements deploy in times of crisis or transition. At times like these, the "issues of knowledge take center stage in public debate, about knowledge itself, and about practices and transmission" (Della Porta & Pavan, 2017, p. 1). In the case of the FNEB, knowledge is bounded to peaceful living through the reclamation of human rights.

Surprisingly, social movement theory does not place the pedagogical dimensions at the center of its conceptual framework. In this sense, it is not surprising that Choudry suggests that "not only can people's everyday practices in struggles contribute to constructing alternative forms of knowledge but attending to his learning and knowledge production and helps us understand social movements" (Choudry, 2015, p. 81). It is worth remembering that the production of knowledge of social movements precedes academic theorizing on many occasions. This circumstance ends up minimizing or belittling social movements' knowledges that circulate outside academia. In fact, "the voices, ideas, perspectives and theories produced and those engaged in social struggles are often ignored, rendered invisible, or overwritten with the account by professionalized or academic experts" (Choudry & Kapoor, 2010, p. 2). In a similar vein, Chesters suggests that the theoretical traditions that inform social movements studies have reified the production of knowledge that occurs within social movements. Rather than assuming them as producers of knowledge, it continues to see them as objects of study (Chesters, 2012).

I agree with Conway when she invites us to think about social movements as pedagogical projects. Pedagogy, in this sense, is a form of cultural politics, as a purposeful intervention in the shaping of knowledge and identities for a political project and as a constitutive of a permanent process of ongoing cultural transformation (Conway, 2006, p. 26). In the specific case of the FNEB, its pedagogical strategies aim to "train the heart " and thereby have an extraordinary emotional component.

## **2.2 Activist of meaning, memory activism, and knowledge about the past**

Recently, several academics have pointed out the heuristic value of understanding the role of memory within social movements (Altınay et al., 2019; Berger, Scalmer, & Wicke, 2021; Eyerman, 2015; Gutman, 2017; Jelin, 2003; Kubal & Becerra, 2014; Reading & Katriel, 2015; Rigney, 2021; Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2010; Zamponi, Zamponi, & Plant, 2018; Zarecka, 1994). These academics agree that the emotional dimension tied to collective memory is crucial to understanding cultural and meaningful actions of social movements.

Rigney asserts that there is a crucial nexus between activism and memory (Rigney, 2018, 2021) (Rigney, 2018, 2021). She argues that "the mutual entanglements and feedback loops between memory activism (contentious action to promote certain memories), the memory of activism (acts of remembrance about earlier social movements) and memory in activism (the role of memory in new acts of contention)" (Rigney, 2021, p. 299).

Activists mobilize not only the memory of particular events but also the emotions attached to these events. Activists of meaning transform the emotional character of their testimonies and memory initiatives into demands that transcend the specificity of violent episodes and transform the experience of citizenship. This kind of activism fuses the commemorative and mnemonic universe of the victims with that of committed academics, volunteer professionals, and university students. By incorporating new non-victim members into their memory communities, victims' family organizations broaden their impact and advocacy base and manage to generate resonances for people outside the narratives of pain and suffering with their renewed citizen demands. Therefore, the organizations of relatives of victims as memory activists transform themselves into activists of meaning. Based on renewed repertoires of protest, activists of meaning tend to assist victims of forced disappearance to "re-inhabit" their daily lives and demand structural changes so

that the atrocious events never repeat in the future. As Yanette Bautista repeatedly mentions in group activities, "we at FNEB are radical pacifists. We fight for forced disappearance to disappear from the repertoire of repression and denounce the structural inequality that makes disappearance possible in the first instance. It is a struggle to generate critical citizenship."

Organizations of victims' families have succeeded in institutionalizing commemorative dates associated with enforced disappearance. According to the 2020 ICMP report (ICMP, 2020) and the National Center for Historical Memory, MOVICE declares March 6 as the Victims of State Crimes day. On April 9 (the date of the assassination of the liberal and popular leader, Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, in 1948), organizations commemorate the National Day of Memory and Solidarity with the Victims after the implementation of Law 1448 of 2011. Victims' organizations also commemorate the last week of May as the International Week of the Disappeared Detainee following the provisions of FEDEFAM in 1981 and recognized in Colombia by Article 14 of Law 1408 of 2010. Far from being government initiatives, these commemorative dates are the product of the persistent struggle to recognize the disappearance of the organizations of victims' relatives.

In addition to these national-level commemorative triumphs, victims' organizations hold commemorative events in accordance with the international and institutional human rights regime. On August 30, International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances enshrined in the General Assembly of the United Nations declaration in resolution 65/209, 2010. For the FNEB, this day is of particular significance since it commemorated when members of the military forces disappeared Nydia Erika Bautista in Bogotá in 1987. Additionally, family organizations celebrate National Human Rights Day on September 9, in tribute to the death of St. Peter Claver. Law 95 of 1985 and Decree 174 of 1999. Finally, the organizations celebrate International Human Rights

Day on December 10, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights commemorative date at the United Nations General Assembly in 1948.

Victims' organizations take to the streets, hold sit-ins, and expose their memory galleries to denounce the violation of their rights on these commemorative dates. For victims' organizations, memory has a performative character (Alexander, 2004) and is used to shake up the lives of citizens outside the dynamics of conflict. The objective of these memory initiatives (Uribe, Salcedo, & Correa, 2010) is to sensitize the population to the effects of war on their personal and collective lives. These initiatives articulate the experiences of the violent past, with these organizations' resignification of them in the present. These experiences are emotionally charged (Stephen, 2018) and facilitate actions that foreshadow the future.

But beyond the particularistic demands of the memory of the disappeared relatives, the organizations of victims' relatives have an agenda that transcends personalized claims and aims to establish a public agenda. In this way, the organizations of victims' relatives have a leading role in the jurisprudential design to process forced disappearance. On one hand, organizations are the main protagonists in creating the institutional and normative infrastructure to process cases of forced disappearance in either ordinary or transitional regimes. In other words, victims' organizations as activists of meaning are moral entrepreneurs (Becker, 2017; Wagner-Pacifci & Schwartz, 1991). Wagner–Pacifci, and Schwartz suggest that

*Attitudes and interests are translated into commemorations through enterprise. Before any event can be regarded as worth remembering, and before any class of people can be recognized for having participated in that event, some group, must deem both event, some individual, and eventually some group, must have the influence to get others to agree. Memorial devices are not self-created; they are conceived and built by those who wish to*

*bring to consciousness the events and people that others are more inclined to forget. To understand memorial making in this way is to understand it as a construction process wherein in hits way is to understand it as a construction process wherein competing "moral entrepreneurs" seek public arenas and support for their interpretation of the past"* (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991, p. 382).

In addition to the mnemonic agenda, organizations of relatives of the disappeared such as FNEB or ASFADDES materialize their claims through laws that guarantee the judicial processing of cases of forced disappearance. The organizations of relatives of victims, as moral entrepreneurs, design laws to criminalize forced disappearance. They are also "moral crusaders" (Becker, 2017) and monitor their accurate application. Thanks to the persistent and "stubborn" work of victims' organizations, Colombian legislation has laws, decrees, and regulations aimed at prosecuting the perpetrators of forced disappearance. These laws establish the prohibition of forced disappearance as a practice of war, and they also guarantee investigations into perpetrators.

Additionally, they dignify the universe of victims. As Yanette Bautista mentioned in an informal conversation, "we as victims' organizations pressure the Colombian state to execute the laws that we, with our struggle and persistence, have created and forced it to comply. We focus our efforts to build a world where our children and grandchildren can grow where forced disappearance does not exist."

In a recent conference at the National University of Colombia, Gloria Gómez, general coordinator of ASFADDES, argued that "In its forty years, ASFADDES has participated in all peace processes attempts. After being a small organization in Bogotá, it is now an organization of national character, and we have several sectionals, of course, presence throughout the national

territory. ASFADDES is the architect of regulations and laws regarding enforced disappearances "(Gómez, 2007).

Since the beginning of the 1980s, the organizations of relatives of victims fought for the Colombian legal apparatus to recognize forced disappearance as a crime. Thanks to political mobilizations, lobbies, and alliances with human rights defenders of recognized trajectory, they participated in the Constituent Assembly of 1991. This assembly would define the terms of a new constitution, and organizations of victims pushed to incorporate article 12, which prohibits forced disappearance based on its status as an instrument of war. In addition to recognizing this ban, organizations of victims' relatives achieved other subsequent legal victories that ensured the immediate search for and safe return of missing persons. The organizations also succeeded in incorporating legislation that would guarantee penalties for perpetrators corresponding to the damage caused. Victims' organizations managed to get Congress to approve Law 589 in the year 2000, which criminalizes disappearance, forced displacement, and torture. In addition, Law 589 gives rise to the "Urgent Search Mechanism," an inter-institutional tool that obliges the authorities to search expeditiously for disappeared persons once the victim's relatives file a complaint.

In addition, the organizations of victims' relatives achieved the approval of Law 1408 of 2010 called "Law of Graves" or Law of "Cemeteries." Law 1408 stipulates that the relatives of victims of forced disappearance have the right to accompany the exhumation processes of bodies. Additionally, Law 1408 obliges state institutions to hand over the bodies found with dignity. Recalling the leading role that she had in creating and implementing this law, Yanette told me that "the state institutions, Prosecutor's Office of Legal Medicine and Forensic Institute, delivered the remains to the families in garbage bags. That unworthy delivery is another way to re-victimize us. We fight so that the delivery is dignified following the religious beliefs of the victims."

Therefore, family organizations are memory activists (Gutman, 2017). As I will show in chapter two, the FNEB invokes the memory of the disappeared as a means of struggle that is updated in the present to seek recognition and legitimacy of their demands. The organizations set up their political agendas to attempt to re-socialize citizens to become more sensitive to the pain of others. With this new locus of enunciation, the organizations denounce the structures of class, gender, and race-based oppression that exacerbate the dehumanizing practices that have characterized the Colombian armed conflict. Based on their experience as moral entrepreneurs, victims' organizations expand their scope for action by incorporating the non-victim population into their struggle.

### **2.3 Activists of meaning and communities of practice, social movement knowledge and activist learning**

Despite the tense relationship between the universe of activism and studies on social movements, some authors recognize the critical role of knowledge production and activist training deployed by social movements. Through these perspectives, social movements configure deep networks of resocialization/formation and training where they update their knowledge in the present and articulate prefigurative policies. This process of learning and training has its center in the repertoire of practices that activists deploy in their daily lives.

As Melucci notes, "knowledge is a crucial resource for new conflictual actors, both because it is a focus of major conflicts (those over the appropriation and control of knowledge and information, and over the instruments of production and circulation of these), and because only in knowledge can the texture of social relationships be disclosed which lie behind the façade of

neutrality that the dominant apparatuses seek to impose on social life” (Melucci, 1996, p. 223). This opposition becomes 'cultural' and comprises antagonist languages and symbols; it is founded on a capacity to appropriate non-manipulated knowledge.

Eyerman and Jamison's cognitive practice provides the core identity of a social movement. It is a deep structure that allows individuals to draw distinct boundaries around a movement as it develops over time and evaluates actual movements' current status and potential (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991, p. 44). This cognitive practice encompasses the symbolic, expressive, and significance of movements and articulates movements' pasts with prefigurative scenarios. For Eyerman and Jamison, cognitive practice is the core activity of movements and informs all its activities. Additionally, the cognitive practice articulates the movement's external collective identity with its internal learning processes.

Social movements' production of knowledge occurs through practice. These practices configure subjectivities and structure the referents for the construction of collective identity. For example, Conway(Conway, 2006) describes three types of knowledge that social movements produce in their everyday life practices. The first one is tacit knowledge. These are the insights and know-how that activists employ to do what they do. This tacit knowledge is transmitted through practices, usually associated with the movement's customs and purpose.

Secondly, Conway shows that social movement produce knowledge reflexively. That is to say that activists elucidate conscious evaluations of their political practices and their efficacy. With this retrospective assessment, activists analyze what they have learned when dealing with social contexts and evaluate the achievements or failures of their collective actions. In other words, activists engage in critical reflections around their practices.

Finally, social movements engage "self - consciously and systematically in knowledge production, in which they recognize the need and value of engaging with, disseminating and advancing formal knowledges as constitutive dimension of social change work" (Conway, 2006, p. 22). This process allows activists to dispute and contest hegemonic knowledges.

In a similar vein, Casas-Cortés, Osterweil, & Powell argue that social movements are spaces and processes in which knowledge is constantly produced, modified, and mobilized by actors. This knowledge takes the form of stories, ideas, narratives, and ideologies, theories, expertise, political analysis, and critical understandings of particular events (Casas-Cortés, Osterweil, & Powell, 2008). They call these processes of knowledge production "knowledge - practices" and are concrete, embodied, lived, and have a situated character.

In turn, Della Porta and Pavan claim that "movements contribute to producing social and political change - not only, as conventionally recognized within social movement studies, by impacting activists' biographies or struggling to generate policy or cultural changes, but also through the elaboration and the experimentation of alternative epistemologies, that is, systems of ideas, theories, and strategies about the status quo and how to change it to achieve movement's aspirations and, ultimately, a genuine global democracy" (Della Porta & Pavan, 2017). Della Porta and Pavan define repertoires of knowledge as "the set of practices that foster the coordination of disconnected, local, and highly personal experiences and rationalities within a shared cognitive system able to provide movements and their supporters with a common orientation for making claims and acting collectively to produce social, political and cultural changes" (Della Porta & Pavan, 2017, p. 6).

In this interplay among everyday practices, tacit knowledge, knowledge – practices, and repertoires of knowledge, activists structure their epistemic universes with which they interpret

and act on the world. By integrating into these epistemic universes, participants learn the trajectories of the movement, and become familiar with the goals of struggle, activities that precede new members' formal incorporation. Some academics (Choudry, 2015) understand this pedagogical dimension of social movements as "non-formal" training of activists.

Although social movements, in most cases, configure accumulated knowledge that precedes the incorporation of new members, the transmission of this knowledge occurs spontaneously through daily interactions between participants, once a member has joined more or less formally.

"Here at FNEB, we do research – participatory action. We raise up all the knowledge that the relatives of victims of forced disappearance have in their bodies, hearts, and minds and translate them into reports to make the disappearance visible," Yanette told me in an interview at the end of 2019. The experience sedimented in the bodies, hearts, and minds of victims' relatives is the starting point for generating knowledge around issues critical to the praxis of activists of meaning. This knowledge is situated and contextual and is founded on the testimony and voice of the relatives. In this sense, the victims' testimonies are the critical source that feeds the epistemological production that the FNEB incorporates into its knowledge production practices. The testimony incorporates the voices and suffering silences of the relatives. In addition to being narratives that contain a deep sense of urgency (Beverley, 2004), family members condense their experience of searching for their missing loved ones into personal diaries, poems, drawings, etc. Ultimately, the situated and bodily character of the relatives' testimony is a sight of knowledge production in its own right.

Since mid-2007, the FNEB has implemented a policy of training women relatives of victims of forced disappearance. This policy's objective was to mitigate the paralyzing effects of

forced disappearance on the bodies, hearts, and minds of victims' families and transform them instead into powerful motives for the struggle for the reclamation of rights. Yanette called this policy the "School of Leadership. According to Yanette, "the leadership school is an informal learning space where we want women (victims) to empower themselves and become agents of their own lives; we want them to stop being passive objects of violence and become active, sovereign subjects of their lives. In other words, to recover what violence has taken from us."

In the School of Leadership, the oldest members of the FNEB train the new ones (including non-victims) under precepts of mutuality and horizontality. Regardless of age, the consolidated women of the School of Leadership transmit the technical knowledge around the defense of human rights so the new ones can assume their particular cases autonomously. Since School of Leadership members process the emotional effects of forced disappearance on their lives, there is an immediate ontological and emotional connection to the experiences of the new members. In this regard, Nancy, one of the oldest school leaders, told me in an informal conversation that "one of the most rewarding things about being part of the School of Leadership is that we can share experiences with new people ignored by state institutions. No one understands the pain they go through. Not everyone understands what it means to have a family member disappear. I have four disappeared sisters, and I can tell these seeker-women (*Mujeres Buscadoras*), who have been alone in their suffering, that I understand them and that they are not alone. I can tell them that I feel their pain as mine. I can do all this because it happened to me too."

With the establishment of the School of Leadership, FNEB consolidated its pedagogical and formative character under the rubric of empowerment (Pant, 2003). Rather than tending to form self-sufficient subjects under cultural parameters of neoliberal logic, the FNEB trains women in the technical language of human rights. It is worth remembering that, on some occasions, women

who come to the FNEB lack formal primary education. As Nancy mentions, "When I came to FNEB, I didn't even know how to turn on a computer. I knew how to read and write, but I had never faced writing a letter or a right of petition. Here at the school, I learned everything that the defense of human rights entails. Now my notebook and computer are my main weapons of struggle." This formative process revolves around the daily interactions between the old members and the new members. It has as its anchor the study of the judiciary files and their own experience as "mujeres buscadoras" (seeker-women).

Once familiar with the preparation of letters and documents, women begin their transformation from passive victims of violence to subjects who exercise agency and their rights when studying their court cases. In principle, FNEB lawyers guide the study of judicial files. They teach women the technical language of defending human rights: preparing complaints, identifying mechanisms of impunity in judicial institutions, among others. Over time, it is the veteran/established women in the school who teach the new members. As I will show in-depth in chapter four, school leaders often become empirical lawyers. In addition to training new relatives of victims entering the FNEB, the school's leaders train the non-victim population entering FNEB. These non-victim members come from public and private universities and sometimes have postgraduate training.

The passage through the School of Leadership is the first line of formation for the activists of meaning. Academics exploring training and learning processes in informal contexts suggest that the transmission of knowledge occurs in the realm of everyday interactions (Choudry, 2012; Foley, 1999; Hall, Clover, Crowther, & Scandrett, 2013). Pedagogical strategies introduce FNEB new members into the repertoires of the struggle for the vindication of rights and against impunity. In other words, the School of Leadership aims to re-signify the experience of citizenship and

challenge the official explanations of the evolution of the conflict. However, this technical knowledge associated with the struggle for human rights is not the only one circulating within the organization. Through everyday interactions, FNEB members become activists of meaning by sharing experiential, embodied, and testimonial knowledge that transcends the purpose of School of Leadership. This knowledge has a spontaneous character and lacks intentionality, but it is critical for generating links between people. Through daily gatherings, women transmit knowledge about collective care, solidarity, sisterhood, and ultimately, about the symbolic dimensions that concern the processing of the experience of forced disappearance. This Incidental Knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2010) ends up shaping the referents of the collective identity of the organization and prefigures the ethical-political horizons of the group. As Foley puts it, "this type of learning occurs while people perform other activities. So, for example, an experienced mechanic has learned a lot about cars, and elderly gardeners carry a great deal of knowledge of their craft. But such learning is incidental to the activity in which the person is involved, is often tacit and is not seen as learning or at least not at the time of its occurrence" (Foley, 2020).

## **2.4 Emotional communities and activists of meaning**

So far, I have argued that individual become activists of meaning by participating in two types of communities, a community of memory and a community of practice. The activists of meaning become activists of memory and mobilize the memory of the disappeared to meet demands in the present. In addition to demanding truth and accountability for the atrocities experienced, meaning activists demand openness to a deeper and more meaningful democratic

experience. In other words, by mobilizing the memory of the disappeared and staging the social death in which they find themselves, meaning activists take action to denounce the inherent inequality of Colombia's citizenship experience.

These mnemonic ventures are not spontaneous. Being a free space, the FNEB trains its members in defense of human rights. By exposing them to the symbolic universes of enforced disappearance, the FNEB trains its members by combining two pedagogical practices. On the one hand, older members train new members in the technical language of human rights advocacy, from writing letters to judicial institutions to appropriating the legal minutiae of their particular cases. On the other hand, FNEB members generate spontaneous knowledge from their own experiences as seekers. This knowledge is associated with logics of care, solidarity, and sisterhood and establishes the daily pillars for social action. These training practices have a character of horizontality, mutual aid, and mutuality. As is evident in the universe of forced disappearance, this knowledge has a vital emotional component and is the key to "heart training."

As I mentioned in the introduction, with the window of political opportunity that the signing of the peace agreement between the government of President Juan Manuel and the FARC guerrillas opens, victims' organizations find a renewed opportunity for the vindication of their rights. With the implementation of transitional institutions, victims' organizations began drafting reports on human rights violations they represented. In this new scenario where the victims enjoyed a centrality without historical precedents, the organizations opened their doors to link intellectual labor for the investigation and writing of the reports. At the same time, the window of opportunity increases the interest of academics and students of private and public universities in the universe of victims. In other words, the peace agreement led to a reunion between academia and the social movement of victims.

The arrival of students and volunteer professionals marks a milestone in the FNEB's history of struggle. Towards the end of 2017 and the beginning of 2018, students and volunteer professionals—such as myself—joined the work and practices of the FNEB. By integrating the non-victim population, the FNEB updated its pedagogical practice and initiated training of people who did not necessarily carry the effects of war on their bodies, hearts, and minds. Twelve people from different backgrounds and biographies entered to work together with victims' families in February 2018. In this first cohort, we all had university degrees, including at the postgraduate level. In general, the people who came to the FNEB were sensitive to the effects of violence on civilians. So far, the FNEB has trained 35 non-victim people.

In a regional workshop with the FNEB's Meta branch in Villavicencio and after several months of intense work by the families of victims towards the middle of 2018, FNEB members coined a concept that captures the experience of gathering among students, volunteer professionals, and victims of forced disappearance: the "community of hope." The Community of Hope expresses the unity in the struggle of victims' families with people who witnessed the conflict from the comfort of the barrier.

Rocío Bautista, younger sister of Yanette and Nydia Erika, commented on the first day that some volunteers entered that "one of Nydia Erika's dreams was to work hand in hand with students. Nydia always imagined working with students to achieve social change. Somehow, with your entry, Nydia is fulfilling her dream." However, it was not only Nydia's dream that was fulfilled. Jennifer, the coordinator of the administrative area and niece of Fernando Gómez, disappeared in

the department of Casanare, mentioned in a "Tertulia"<sup>1</sup> that "with the arrival of the students we began to feel less alone. It has been a very nice experience to share and learn from them. Hopefully, forced disappearance will begin to become visible." The daily life of the FNEB is transformed and renewed with the incorporation of students and volunteer professionals.

Interestingly, student and professional volunteers stayed at least six months in the organization. While there were stimuli for the future (possible salaries and certification of work experience), the students persisted in their work motivated only by working with victims' relatives. This persistence is directly related to the circulation of affect that is woven into the fabric of everyday life. Frey, a social worker and volunteer with the organization, told me in a conversation that "I don't know if what happens here happens in all human rights organizations. In the FNEB, you have like a soul, I don't know, that impregnates us. And one takes this soul everywhere one goes. One changes. I have become more sensitive. In addition, here I found friendship; there is a fraternity. When a new volunteer arrives, you welcome them as if they were part of the family. It is as if here we are given a symbolic embrace. That's why we stay."

The soul to which Frey refers is the pedagogical and transformative dimension contained in the testimony of the victims. More than a narrative of pain and suffering, the testimony expresses resilience and resistance in the face of the pain caused by the conflict. Additionally, there are

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<sup>1</sup> As I will show in chapter three, the "tertulias" were a space for meeting and exchange between students and relatives of key victims for the transmission of knowledge about the struggle in the defense of human rights. In a framework of total horizontality, relatives of victims and students exchanged reflections on love, the value of struggle, gender-based violence, among other topics.

testimonies that invite struggle under the criteria of horizontality, mutuality, and camaraderie. In other words, the testimony of the victims unites us on equal footing

The Community of Hope is an emotional community (Angel, Quintero, & Wolf, 2020; De Marinis & Macleod, 2018; Jimeno, Varela Corredor, & Castillo Ardila, 2015). According to Jimeno, emotional communities "are created through the process of narrating to another, testifying lived suffering through a story, a narrative, to someone else, and succeeding in the other identifying with their pain. Sometimes the narrative is performative, sometimes a ritual, in other cases it can be a political statement. I argue that this political narrative acquires great currency when it creates emotional community. That is, when the victim's pain does not remain enclosed in the victim, but spreads to other audiences, who identify with it and are deeply moved by the narrative, a political bond is created, not simply a compassionate moment. This political link contributes to enhancing actions that seek justice, punish the guilty, set the record straight about what actually happened, and lay the groundwork for holistic compensation for victims" (De Marinis & Macleod, 2018).

The testimony of victims' families is at the heart of emotional communities. With the testimony, the victims of violence name the violence suffered elaborate possible mourning procedures and establish relationships with others. Testimony condenses the will of life of the one who enunciates it. With the arrival of students and professional volunteers at the FNEB, the families of victims of forced disappearance had the opportunity to share their testimony outside the intimate and family spaces that characterize the community universe of the victims. According to Lynn Stephen, victim testimony "has the ability to reactivate not only past events but the emotions linked to them; in this way, testimony attaches those pasts emotions of the tellers to the present emotions of the listeners" (Stephen, 2013). While the testimony of the victims has a contingent and contextual character, the testimony transcends the coordinates of its place of

enunciation. The testimony breaks the spatial and temporal coordinates that initially condensed it by materializing in theatrical, audiovisual, and narrative productions.

While students and professional volunteers cannot "feel" the direct experience of the pain caused by enforced disappearance, the testimony of victims permeates us across the porous boundaries of our bodies, hearts, and minds (De Marinis & Macleod, 2018). The proximity of social interactions between victims and the non-victim population structures an updated circulation of affects. This circulation is no longer just aimed at strengthening the daily bonds between seeker-women evidenced in the School of Leadership. It seeks to emotionally affect those who have not suffered the effects of the conflict in our lives. More than a compassionate or condescending feeling toward the pain of others, the FNEB seeks to generate mechanisms of identification of students and volunteer professionals with the character of victims' struggle. This struggle is explicitly intended to restore the agency of the victims as citizens and their symbolic power as part of the nation's emotional universe.

In making the testimony of victims public, emotional communities "remove the violent event from a personal perspective (or that of a closed community), and place it on a scenario of memory building and citizen action, within the perspective of a wider community that can acknowledge its moral outrage and sympathize with the victims" (De Marinis & Macleod, 2018, p. 24). Emotional communities generate senses of belonging and articulate the processes of remembrance by including the affects of non-victims. In this regard, Yanette Bautista argued in a meeting with agents of the Truth Commission that "the Community of Hope is the second formative strategy that we have in the FNEB. Our experience of pain and suffering as victims of conflict has to come out of the confines of our intimacy to be shared by other people. In this sense, the Community of Hope expresses our effort to leave installed capacity in society. From the

involvement of students in the world of disappearance and exposing them to our struggle, we add voices, hands, and minds to vindicate our experience of citizenship. Ultimately, enforced disappearance is not only a problem for us family organizations. Disappearance is a problem that concerns the entire Colombian society."

Lynn Stephen suggests that emotional communities require intense discursive work to (Stephen, 2013, 2018) connect individuals with different biographical trajectories. This discursive work is related to the construction of collectively shared symbols that structure the referents for the configuration of collective identities. Rather than anchoring itself in fixed identity categories such as race, class, or gender, identification focuses on elaborating networks or connections generated through emotional sharing (Stephen, 2018).

## **2.5 Concluding remarks: becoming an activist of meaning**

I began this chapter arguing that my time at FNEB radically transformed my worldview as a citizen, as an academic, and now, as an activist. Not surprisingly, the FNEB achieved its mission of transforming me into an activist of meaning, a status I hope and plan to never abandon.

In the two years I worked at FNEB as a case documentation coordinator, I cried with the seeker-women when I heard their testimonies; I also laughed, danced, and sang when we organized parties and recreational activities. The daily activities of the FNEB were *my life* during those two years. Despite the difficult circumstances of the experience of forced disappearance, I learned to inhabit the confines of hope. In the seeker-women, I found practical wisdom about life, the struggle, and love that I would never have found in other spaces. It was two years of formation in solidarity.

After the first six months of working at FNEB, I understood that I couldn't be alienated from the victims' struggle. I understood that I would have to leave the space of comfortable observation, even participant observation, to step towards collaborative sociology (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Fals Borda, 2006; Rappaport, 2016, 2020; Rappaport & Pacho, 2005). By questioning the relationship between researcher and subjects of studies, I destabilized this asymmetry. Instead of objectifying experiences I assumed that the women who sought their wisdom trained me as an activist.

By recognizing the symmetry between researcher and research subject, the research process changes. From having the pretension of obtaining objective data, patterns of behavior, or achieving holistic understandings of symbolic universes, research becomes a "walk hand in hand" with research subjects. This walk implies letting our bodies be permeated by the knowledge and emotions of our companions. It involves finding ourselves in our feelings and affections with those who accompany us. Therefore, the knowledge that circulates in the process is of a collective and intersubjective nature. We learn from each other by walking together. And this training of the heart makes us senti/thinking activists, activists who link the reason of the heart with the heart of reason.

We, activists of meaning, become by joining three communities: community of memory, practice, and emotional community. Although for the people who come to the FNEB, the experience in each community appears undifferentiated, I consider that it is key to make this distinction for analytical reasons. Indeed, each community condenses concrete layers of meaning that define the symbolic universe that activists incorporate, learn and reproduce in their practices. Emotional circulation crosses the universes of the meaning of the three communities and is activated through the daily practices of those who are part of the FNEB. Through this

interconnection, the FNEB configures its pedagogical strategy to train its members in activism of meaning.

The community of memory defines the contentious practices of victims' organizations. By mobilizing the symbolic frameworks of the memory of critical events, victims' organizations transcend the mnemonic particularities of their experiences to position the problem of disappearance in public discourse. In other words, victims' organizations are fighting to question the democratic and citizenship experience in Colombia. By participating in the community of memory, we become memory activists.

In turn, the community of practice establishes the parameters for the construction and circulation of knowledge about the experience of enforced disappearance. The FNEB has two key pedagogical strategies. The first is the School of Leadership, which seeks to empower women victims to fight for their rights, or in the words of Yanette, "that women can stop being objects of violence to subjects of rights." The School of Leadership is composed mainly of women, and the older ones accompany and train the new ones. In the School of Leadership, women learn the technical language of defending human rights. Thanks to every day sharing, women generate incidental and practical knowledge that is at the base of the struggle for the vindication of rights. Women victims recreate knowledge around citizenship, sorority and sisterhood. Semantically speaking, women go from victims to seeker-women and transmit their incorporated knowledge to those who participate in this community daily.

Seeker-women also train the non-victim population that joins the FNEB. They are our masters in "heart training." The bond that professionals, volunteers, and seeker-women weave shapes the emotional community called the Community of Hope in the case of the FNEB. In Yanette's words, "with the entry of students and professionals, the FNEB not only expanded the

number of members who are part of the organization, but we also managed to combine knowledge from different backgrounds. On the one hand, our knowledge as relatives of victims is popular, grassroots, and empirical. And that of the boys who arrive, which is a piece of academic knowledge, of books. Therefore, in the Community of Hope, this knowledge is intermingled, which is key to the fight for our rights".

The Community of Hope is an emotional community that groups populations of diverse origins regarding gender, class, and ethnicity. It has as its starting point the circulation of the testimony of seeker-women. As in the School of Leadership, daily sharing between victims and non-victims configures the community of hope. In this sharing, the non-victim population manages to identify with the victims' experiences of struggle and pain. These daily interactions, Community of Hope produce spontaneous solidarities that galvanize the struggle for rights. Far from connecting the victim and non-victim population under condescension, pity, or compassion, the Community of Hope builds bonds of horizontality, companionship, mutual aid, and horizontality among its members. The Community of Hope is a community for resistance.

Activists of meaning join the FNEB community once they enter the FNEB physical space. This "enchanted" space condenses powerful networks of meaning that structure the learning process of meaning activists. In the next chapter, I will take a tour of its spatial and symbolic distribution.

### **3.0 “The Enchanted Space of the FNEB”: inhabiting the symbolic universe of enforced disappearance**

In the case of the training of activists of meaning, the place plays a critical role given its symbolic character: the headquarters of the FNEB is a place where discourses circulate around life and death, narratives about the liminal experience implied by enforced disappearance in the daily life of the victims and by powerful emotional practices. The space of the FNEB configures deep networks of meaning (Geertz, 2008) and embodies an accumulation of knowledge that will be crucial for the formation of activists of meaning.

Activists of meaning become by experiencing three distinct kinds of community: memory community, learning community, and emotional communities. While in reality, the activists of meaning experience these communities in an undifferentiated way, I believe that, for analytical reasons, delving into each of them allows us to capture the processes of formation of activists with greater precision.

I assume the space of the FNEB as a "free space." First, I will argue from an ethnographic perspective that "free spaces" have a critical mnemonic connotation with a dual function: on the one hand, space sediments the meanings of forced disappearance. I therefore assume the FNEB space to be a secular sanctuary. Second, I argue that space fosters critical emotional environments for the formation of activists of meaning. By immersing themselves in the intense emotional networks that characterize the FNEB space, activists of meaning initiate a powerful "heart training." This training is related to the trajectory of the struggle of victims, their narratives of suffering and mourning.

Taking as a starting point the history of FNEB's community of memory of the FNEB, in this chapter, I explore the inherent ambivalences of the universes of enforced disappearance. Additionally, from an ethnographic perspective, I explore the range of narratives surrounding the phenomenon of enforced disappearance: from narratives associated with the universe of pain and suffering to narratives of struggle and resistance.

### **3.1 From mnemonic agents to activists of meaning: the Bautista Family**

Organizations of the victims of enforced disappearance are usually family-type organizations (Kovras, 2017). They are families who mount intense searches for their missing loved ones, and in the process, they end up politicizing their situation. Their activism arises after experiencing critical events that radically transform their individual and collective life plans. The case of the Bautista Family is a paradigm in this sense.

In an informal conversation, Yanette told me that "I was a secretary in a multinational company. A person who put on makeup to go to work. An ordinary working girl. But after Nydia Erika's disappearance, I took off my high heels and started the struggle to find her. In this process, I learned what human rights meant, and since then, I have not stopped defending them." The Bautista family was a conventional working-class family in Bogotá. In addition to their strong religious convictions, the Bautista family had liberal, critical, deeply socially-sensitive political views and a desire to help the most vulnerable. The family environment enhances the critical spirit and social commitment of Nydia Erika (CNMH, 2014a)

On the day of her disappearance, August 30, 1987, the family was celebrating the first communion of her son Erik. While the family was comfortably enjoying themselves at home,

Nydia Erika "went out to accompany her friend to take a bus, and at that moment, several men in plainclothes approached her in the Casablanca neighborhood and took her off to who-knows-where," recalls Yanette. Andrea, who, at that time was five years old, witnessed the events, and even today, her memory lurks: "I saw when a group of men took her away. It is a moment that I can't get out of my mind. I saw when they put her in the car, and I saw when she was screaming. I've grown up with that helpless feeling, that I was a child, and I would have wanted to scream, to do something." When the news reached the house and abruptly interrupted the celebrations, the family took to the streets in distress. Yanette recalls how Nydia's father Alfonso screamed, "I don't resign myself to losing my loved one! And if she committed a crime, let them take her to jail, but not disappear her, not that death in life!". This was the last time the family saw Nydia Erika alive.

The Bautista family began the search for Nydia Erika that same night. With photographs of Nydia in their hands, the Bautista family toured the surrounding neighborhoods in the hope of finding some news of her (Bogotá, 2019). They quickly contacted the Committee of Solidarity with Political Prisoners and received legal accompaniment from lawyer and human rights defender Alirio Pedraza, who was to be disappeared by law enforcement agents in 1990. As the months passed, the Bautista family joined the Association of Relatives of Disappeared Detainees (ASFADDES) with the firm intention of finding Nydia. In ASFADDES, the Bautistas joined the social movement of victims of enforced disappearance. They began their struggle to defend human rights, not only for Nydia but also for the hundreds of disappeared that ASFADDES reported.

For several months Yanette took up Nydia Erika's case internationally; and then Yanette returned to Bogotá with the firm conviction that civic protest would be the right way to exert pressure on the authorities. In early 1990, Yanette and a group of relatives of victims occupied the headquarters of the Red Cross to protest against the inertia of the forces of law and order. The

Bautista family's lawyer, Dr. Eduardo Umaña Mendoza, acted as a mediator with the Attorney General and scheduled an appointment for the Bautista family with the Attorney General's human rights delegate, Jaime Córdova Triviño. In this case, pressure and protest proved effective.

At the time, a sergeant in the Charry Solano Battalion was delivering promising information about possible cases of disappearance (Bogotá, 2019). Before her disappearance, the sergeant accurately described the follow-ups to a woman member of guerrilla group of the M-19 in her 30s. In addition, the sergeant reported that his group had forced her into a vehicle in the Casablanca neighborhood, south of Bogotá, where Nydia Erika was located. Finally, the sergeant indicated that they took the woman to a farm in the rural district of Guayabetal, Cundinamarca. When they arrived, the group of men blindfolded her and shot her in the head. They buried the body in a hole they dug at the roadside.

On September 13, 1987, the health authorities of Guayabetal, Cundinamarca, performed an autopsy on some human remains found in a hole off the Bogotá - Guayabetal, road. The road connects Bogotá with the llanos orientales, the plains of eastern Colombia. The doctor reported that: "A woman of approximately 35 years of age presents encephalocraneal trauma from a gunshot wound" – and added – "the bullet penetrated the left occipital bone of the head" (Bogotá, 2019, p. 310) The authorities buried the remains as "N.N" in the municipal cemetery of Guayabetal.

When collating the information provided by the army sergeant and the reports of the health units, Yanette and Alfonso traveled to Guayabetal with a team of anthropologists and forensic dentists and in the company of lawyer Eduardo Umaña. After the exhumation, Yanette and Alfonso established that the remains were those of her sister and his daughter, Nydia Erika Bautista. The Prosecution Service handed over the remains in a black garbage bag, and they returned to Bogotá.

The Bautista family managed to give her a dignified burial in the Central Cemetery of Bogotá accompanied by family and friends. However, after finding Nydia Erika's body, the intelligence agencies of the military forces intensified the pressures and threats against the Bautista family. As a result of these threats, the lives of Yanette and her nephew Erik became untenable in Bogotá. The sergeant who provided the information that led to the finding of Nydia Erika's body abruptly changed his version, apparently under pressure from his superiors. In association with the legal institutions and courts, the army intelligence agencies exerted systematic pressure on the Bautista family to return the body so that the investigation could be redirected. However, Yanette and her family resisted the onslaught and managed to keep the body in the cemetery. The intelligence agencies did not let up in their harassment and threats and achieved their purpose: the Bautista family exiled themselves to Germany in the mid-nineties.

The FNEB was born in exile in 1999 in Europe. Unable to defend human rights in Colombia, given the imminent repressive actions of the Colombian State, they decided to establish their base in Germany. Rather than succumb to the paralyzing effects of enforced disappearance, and given the impossibility of exercising political activity in Colombia, the Bautista family, headed by Yanette began its work of defending human rights internationally. Yanette made several tours denouncing the case of Nydia and the constant harassment by the army. The family also supported relatives of missing women in Juarez, Mexico, and helped create the Asian Federation of Family Organizations in Turkey and Sri Lanka (Bogotá, 2019). Their work in the defense of human rights gravitated around the consolidation of international networks.

Yanette returned to Colombia in 2006 to create the Nydia Erika Bautista Foundation in Colombia despite the risks. Currently, the FNEB specializes in the legal accompaniment of the families of victims. In addition, it pays psycho-social attention to family members. In the context

of the transition to peace, the FNEB strongly impacts public policy development related to enforced disappearance.

Andrea decides to study law to understand the legal implications of her aunt's disappearance. According to a documentary produced by the National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH, 2014a), Andrea mentioned that "for Erik, it was impressively hard to understand the legal decisions of his mother's case. For him, it was straightforward: "my mother was killed, disappeared, and sexually assaulted and there has to be a punishment." He didn't understand the reasons why that didn't happen." Andrea decided to begin training to be a heterodox lawyer so that she could legally accompany family members from a perspective that transcends the field of the law. For Andrea, this heterodox notion of legal practice involves attending family members in their feelings of pain and struggle, perseverance and faith (CNMH, 2014a).

For his part, Erik consolidates his career as a plastic artist in Germany, and becomes an icon of the struggle for human rights. His work combines artistic exhibitions and audiovisual documentaries with which he denounces the critical social conditions in Colombia and human rights violations. Known as "Chico Bauti," Erik produced extensive poetry exploring the uncertainty intrinsic to the universe of enforced disappearance. In addition, he combines lyrics and poetry with proclamations in hip-hop. Erik's work is a benchmark of aesthetic – expressive productions that surround enforced disappearance. He recently published a report (Mingorance & Bautista, 2019) showing the geo-referential distribution of enforced disappearance in Colombia, a report that he delivered to transitional institutions.

Yanette, Andrea and Rocío from the Bautista family greeted me when I first arrived at FNEB in March 2018. Rocío, Nydia's younger sister, retired from the organization a few days later to devote time to her grandchildren and family life. Erik had migrated to MOVICE (Movement of

Victims of State Crimes). Yanette was the executive director, and Andrea was the legal coordinator. It was evident to me at first glance that the legacy of struggle rested on the shoulders of their family trajectories. Over the years, the Bautistas have continued to incorporate new families of victims of enforced disappearance under their protective mantle. With the arrival of new cases, the Bautista family spreads, and as one of its slogans indicates, all the disappeared are "children of Nydia Erika." In addition, the space of the FNEB would become a free space, a place of memory. A place for the defense of human rights.

Like the Bautista family, the victims' relatives search for their missing loved ones and, in this process, organize themselves politically. Usually, family members turn to human rights discourse (Fisher, 1989; Kelly, 2018; Tate, 2007) as a meaningful framework to guide their actions. Previously-established victims' organizations such as Nydia Erika Bautista, Afaddress, and Movice, to name a few, are mediating in this process of political transformation. In other words, organizations incorporate new members into their particular memory communities. New members of this process of incorporation polish their knowledge of the struggle to vindicate their rights. By mobilizing the memories of their loved ones, family members confront State institutions to establish responsibility for these heinous episodes. With this process of politicization, families become mnemonic actors (Gutman, 2017). At the same time, the Bautista family formed a community of memory (Zarecka, 1994). The Bautista family begins its political transformation from the day that the Colombian army disappeared Nydia Erika.

Some scholars have explored the mobilization of memory as a critical starting point for collective action. This action presupposes a previous community experience where activists update the past to achieve goals in the present. Scholars such as Vinitzky – Seroussi define activists as agents of memory (Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2010). These activists are individuals committed to

vindicating the particular events that have determined them and connect emotionally to this past. Memory agents organize, shape and maintain mnemonic representations that allow others to recall specific events. These agents configure texts, rituals, monuments, stickers, and other commemorative practices. Memory agents use these practices to re-signify and contest mnemonic narratives that arise from the sphere of the State.

Similarly, Elizabeth Jelin (Jelin, 2003) defines mnemonic actors as memory entrepreneurs. For Jelin, the direct victims of State institutions are the paradigm of memory entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs seek "recognition and political legitimacy of one (their own) interpretation or narrative. In the specific case of Argentina, victims of political violence demanded that the disappeared population be searched for. They also generated support and care networks among themselves. After the transition to democracy, memory entrepreneurs challenged official accounts of political violence to eliminate historical distortions" (Jelin, 2003, p. 53). At the same time, the entrepreneurs dedicated themselves to bringing to light the stories of those directly affected that had been kept in the shadows, legitimizing the sense of urgency. They sought material and symbolic reparations from those responsible and, over time, developed commemorative rituals.

Since 2006, the year of his return from exile, the Bautista family consolidated a solid and robust community of memory. In addition to fighting for the memory of Nydia Erika, the FNEB inherited cases of enforced disappearance from other organizations. The organization Familiares Colombia delegated the legal representation of its claims to the FNEB. FNEB's struggle, however, was relegated only to the universe of victims' families. In this regard, Yanette told me that "from the beginning, our struggle has been lonely. We get new cases of victims all the time. But we were alone. For Colombian society, enforced disappearance does not exist, and we tried to do away with

this lack of visibility. We held sit-ins, meetings, commemorations. But it was only us, the victims, who participated. The arrival of the students transformed loneliness into hope."

In this sense, Gutman takes the notion of mnemonic agents further and proposes the concept of memory activists (Gutman, 2017). While for Jelin or Vinitzky-Seroussi, memory entrepreneurs or memory agents are usually the victims themselves, Gutman suggests that memory activism includes individuals who were not necessarily involved in the atrocities of the past. For Gutman, memory activists advance their political and ideological agendas, transcending the commemorative universe. Unlike the memory communities or memory entrepreneurs defined by Jelin, memory activists lack direct experiences of the historical events that those directly affected remember. In addition, these activists "aim to address a larger political issue and influence the dominant public debate in their societies, using memory practices as a means to do so" (Gutman, 2017, p. 18). Being political actors, memory activists mobilize memory practices not to gain power and status, but to position their political worldviews. Thus, "the selected past that memory activists wish to make present and their interpretation of violent histories are highly controversial, and more often attract public rejection and denial rather than legitimacy and recognition in their societies" (Gutman, 2017)

With the arrival of students and professional volunteers at the end of 2017, the FNEB began a gradual transformation. Although it is an organization of victims, the FNEB still acted as an entrepreneur and agent of memory, and the arrival of the non-victim population expanded its horizons of action. In addition to mobilizing memories of its members and bringing to the surface testimonies that are lost in the fringes of oblivion, the FNEB initiated an aggressive agenda in what Yanette calls, "training of free citizenships."

At a preparatory meeting for a national victims' workshop, Yanette told us that "we victims have fought alone all this time. We have mobilized the love we have for our disappeared to achieve justice. May those who took our loved ones from us return them alive. We have suffered the cruelties of war in our bodies, hearts and minds. And yet, we continue to fight for a more just world. We are the ethical reserves of society, and in that sense, we have a lot to teach Colombian society."

In its mediation of the memory of the disappeared, the FNEB not only uses mnemonic practices to vindicate human rights. Also, the FNEB denounces the complex system of oppression that surrounds the practice of enforced disappearance and determines the experience of citizenship in Colombia in terms of class, gender, and race, as I will show in the following chapters. FNEB denounces the atrocities of the war, and equally censures the inequities present in Colombian collective life. With this new place of enunciation, the FNEB transcends its position as a mnemonic agent to become memory activists, as proposed by Gutman. However, the FNEB goes far beyond memory activism. The FNEB has a formative, learning and training component that starts from the "training of the heart." Far from being training in condescension for the pain of others, the FNEB trains its members from intense emotional exchanges associated with the dichotomy between despair and hope. From this dichotomous experience, the activists trained in the FNEB understand that the struggle for the human rights of the disappeared relatives is also a struggle against the systems of oppression that determine us. Ultimately, this struggle cuts through our body, mind and heart. It makes us activists of meaning.

In this sense, the headquarters of the FNEB is the physical space where activists of meaning form. The walls of the building condense this history of the family's struggle. The memory of the

disappeared continues to determine their work in the defense of human rights. Their struggle even now includes the renewal of the experience of citizenship in a more extensive way.

### **3.2 Between memory and conspiracy: The free space of FNEB**

"This is a space to dream, to glimpse horizons of social change," Yanette told a group of students who came to do their internships at the FNEB, to which she added, "here we are all the same. There are no hierarchies, all our voices are legitimate, and we exchange them with full horizontality." Despite the recurrent history of harassment that State institutions have inflicted on the organization, the physical space of the FNEB is a safe space to dream. The facilities are not only the place for the activists of meaning to establish the agendas of intervention with relatives of victims, but also the stage where we configure political horizons and meaning. In addition, the symbolism inscribed in that spaces makes it possible to generate social ties among the members of the FNEB and strengthens the collective identity.

The FNEB space is free. Some scholars (Boyte & Evans, 1986; Polletta, 1999; Scott, 1990) agree that free spaces are critical spaces that enable collective action by dominated populations. Usually, these spaces are free from the influence of hegemonic forces and provide people with margins of freedom to exchange ideas and strategies for struggle.

According to Sara Evan and Harry Boyt, free spaces are environments where people are able to learn renewed versions of self-respect, and a more assertive and profound group identity (Boyte & Evans, 1986). The individuals involved recreate and strengthen their community ties in these spaces and prefigure alternative ethical-political horizons. James Scott (Scott, 1990) states that the spaces configured by the dominated are free from the effects of the tentacles of power. In

these spaces, the dominated devise hidden scripts with which they question the expectations of official discourse. Thus "slaves and serfs ordinarily dare not contest the terms of their subordination openly. Behind the scenes, though, they are likely to create and defend a social space where offstage dissent to the official transcript of power relations may be voiced. The specific forms (for example, linguistic disguises, ritual codes, taverns, fairs, the hush-arbors of slave religion) this social space takes or the specific content of its dissent (for example, hopes of a returning prophet, ritual aggression via witchcraft, celebration of bandit heroes and resistance martyrs)"(Scott, 1990, p. xi) Scott suggests that these zones of safe resistance are zones where the dominated deliberately mold symbolic universes to resist the co-optation of States (Scott, 2009). These universes include the religious, collective memory, and identity worlds.

Polletta defines free spaces as small-scale settings within a community or movement that are at a distance from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilization(Polletta, 1999, p. 1). For Polletta, free spaces have a significant mnemonic component by sedimenting the trajectories and repertoires of past collective actions. Additionally, these spaces allow activists to accumulate records of resistance (Polletta, 1999)

These spaces also have a component of learning, evaluation and analysis of contingencies. According to Polletta, free spaces are also "conceptual spaces" that activists use to frame their actions. Free spaces "provide the conceptual space in which dominated groups are able to penetrate the prevailing common sense that keeps most people passive in the face of injustice, and are thus crucial for the very formation of identity and interests that precede mobilization"(Polletta, 1999, p. 3).

From a perspective of physical spatiality, the symbolism of free spaces is critical to the formation of memory communities of activists of meaning. By integrating into the networks that free spaces provide, activists update the accumulated knowledge to project it into the struggle of the present. In addition, this exposure to deep networks of meaning allows activists to connect emotionally with practices of resistance and to generate mechanisms that reinforce the group's collective identity. Therefore, in addition to being spaces that maintain power at a distance, I argue that these spaces have two additional critical dimensions that determine the resistance and collective action of dominated or subaltern populations: places of memory and places of formation. Extending the mnemonic character that Polletta gives to free spaces, I argue that free spaces are places of memory where activists update the past of the struggle in the present (Halbwachs, 2004). In the case of the FNEB, we, activists of meaning, assume the accumulated memory of the struggle to find the disappeared as the central axis of our actions. The accumulated and sedimented memory in space includes the memory of the victims of enforced disappearance and consists of the various repertoires of collective action (Tarrow & Tilly, 2007) that we deploy as mechanisms of interaction with State institutions. In this sense, the headquarters of the FNEB as a free space acquires twin mnemonic nuances.

On the one hand, it possesses a commemorative character (Winter, 2010) that sediments the senses of enforced disappearance that, as I will show later, is associated with uncertainty and ambiguity. According to Winter, "sites of memory are places where groups of people engage in public activity through which they express a collective shared knowledge... of the past, on which the group's sense of unity and individuality is based" (Winter, 2010). In this sense, the spatial arrangement of the FNEB evokes a secular sanctuary (Balkenhol, van den Hemel, & Stengs, 2020).

After a long day of work and while we were sharing a coffee, Nancy told me that "one of our dreams is to turn this house, the headquarters of the FNEB, into a museum so that people can come and learn what enforced disappearance means. Every relative brings objects and things to commemorate the missing relatives, and people can see them." On the other hand, the space protects the collection of practices of resistance. In this case, memory would no longer be a symbolic system with commemorative functions (Schwartz, 1996). It is a performative mechanism that activists update.

The formative character of the FNEB memories that circulate in the space have a deep emotional content. Those who participate in a community of memory tend to maintain and socially articulate "a reality of the past." The community's collective identity is related to the meaning that family members give to the events experienced. Collective remembrances restore the present and articulate possible futures in the daily exchange of experiences, conversations, and joint ritualization. Memory communities share memories of suffering that mourners promote. Those memories condense knowledge about "life" that passes down from generation to generation. In this sense, the oldest members of the FNEB transfer this knowledge of the implications of struggle in practice.

In this sense too, through the introduction and familiarization of new arrivals with their collective past, the FNEB ensures that new members, by identifying with the groups' past, attain a necessary social identity (Misztal, 2003, p. 15). It is a subtle process that usually happens rather tacitly; listening to a family member recount a shared experience, for example, implicitly teaches what is considered memorable and what can actually be forgotten (Zerubavel, 1999, p. 87).

### 3.3 The enchanted nature of the free space of the FNEB



**Figure 4 Nydia Erika Foundation headquarters. Photo by the author**

The first time I visited the FNEB was very shocking. I went with my friend Carlos Rodriguez Mejía, a long-time human rights defender in Colombia. We arrived around 3:30 on a working Wednesday afternoon. Before entering the organization's headquarters, I imagined the FNEB space as a typical office of human rights defenders. I imagined hundreds of reports organized on shelves, independent cubicles, each with its own computer. I also imagined a reception or waiting room and a boardroom. In other words, the regular office of an NGO; but the moment I came through the door I realized that it was not an ordinary office at all. Images of the disappeared adorned all the walls of the house. On the same walls, FNEB members proudly displayed posters of international awards for the struggle in defense of human rights. After a simple look at the spaces, I concluded that I was not in a common space and had come to an enchanted area, to a sacred place in the strict sense of the word.

According to Durkheim, what characterizes the religious universe is the sharp distinction between the world of the sacred and that of the profane (Durkheim, 1982). This distinction supposes a symbolic division between the transcendent universe and the everyday one. In addition, Durkheim asserts that religions can exist without one or more deities, but not without this ontological division of the world. Therefore, for Durkheim, the experience of this division of the world is a key precondition for the generation- of mechanisms of collective identity, senses of belonging and moral communities. Some cultural sociologists (Alexander & Smith, 2005) delved into these symbolic dimensions. The sacred escapes exclusively religious contours and inhabits secular spaces that structure individual and collective practices outside the perspectives of religions. Therefore, the sacred is discovered (Cha, 2021). From a micro-sociological perspective, scholars such as Stephen Hopgood show how transnational human rights organizations such as Amnesty International function as moral communities within symbolic enclaves that tend to recreate a "moral authority" in the face of human rights violations (Hopgood, 2006).

One can enter the FNEB in two ways. One is through the frontdoor off the street. The other is through a store, "Revoltosas",, a self-financing project where victims of forced disappearance sell accessories produced by them. For the unsuspecting passerby, the headquarters of the FNEB is a typical house in the La Soledad neighborhood, a typical mid 20<sup>th</sup> century building which, in the area that initially functioned as a garage, is now a store of clothes and accessories, mainly for women. The original design was intended to be a middle-class family home and is now an office headquarters. It is no accident that the store is called "Revoltosas": the women who are part of the organization have taken the step from being victims of violence to being activists and human rights defenders. They are women "on the move" and are unruly. "This is a shop of victims of enforced disappearance. Here we work, victims with non-victims, hand in hand, and many of the products

you can see are made by relatives of enforced disappearance, "says Estephy, the store manager, to some ladies who looked curiously at the goods displayed there.

With this productive project, the FNEB manages to finance the salaries of the women who work in the organization. Some leaders have skills in making woven bags and scarves and sell them in the store. In some cases, the fabrics are made by regional defenders and display the features that identify their regions. Most of the members have participated as models for the advertising campaigns that promote the new seasons. Rather than resorting to the feminine stereotypes of beauty that circulate in the hegemonic universe of advertising, the campaigns show, according to Estephy, who managed the store for several years, "women as we are." FNEB women actively participate, either as models or as designers, in the store's promotional activities. When showing me some of the bags that the shop offers, Nancy humorously told me, "how many times did I prick my hands making the bags we sell there!

Some of the costume jewelry designs are also by the same women. Some members of the FNEB have participated in courses and jewelry workshops and imprint on their designs distinctive features of their fighting experience.

The Revoltosas shop is a symbolic place of special significance. The goods there are impregnated with the senses that circulate in the FNEB. Customers can also purchase diaries and notebooks adorned with the slogan "because they took them alive, we want them alive" and other utensils associated with commemorative practices.

The front door marks an abyss between the world of the sacred and that of the profane. When I first entered the FNEB compound, I suspended my daily worries. To some extent, as I took the first step inside the office, I experienced a tremendous shock: my accumulated and privilege-determined body of knowledge in terms of being a middle-class white man and academic could

not explain what I witnessed. On the wall to the right of the door hung several photographs of the faces of missing persons. They were wooden panels with the person's photo and the date and place of the disappearance. There were about 20 photographs of men, women and children from various regions of Colombia.

As the minutes passed, I realized that I was in a space where pain, anger, helplessness and sadness circulate. Torres – Rivas tellingly captures the effects of those who suffer from enforced disappearance in everyday life: "disappearance is even crueler than public assassination since it raises the perception of danger by placing it in an imaginary world, unsure but probable, created by the possibility that the disappeared person is alive. While one suspects that the disappeared person may be dead, nobody knows the truth. Doubt, prolonged over time, is a highly productive way of sowing fear" (Torres-Rivas, 1999). However, these were not the only emotions I experienced. At the same time as I walked into the world of uncertainty, I also discovered the force of struggle. On the wall next to the gallery of memory, several photographs give an account of encounters between relatives of the victims expressing the perseverance of their struggle. "The fact is that we relatives of the disappeared are very stubborn. The State and society closed their doors when we demanded to be heard, so we went out and looked for other openings. We didn't stop," Yanette told me. And indeed, some photographs express that perseverance in the struggle: meetings of relatives in public spaces where they "enchant" the space with the photos of the disappeared. Photographs of women members of the foundation participating in performances and marches, displaying their ornate bodies to attract the attention of unwary bystanders. In other words, I experienced the symbolic duality of space. With the experience of the loss of sacred centrality (Lynch, 2012), that same experience of "limbo," installs the sacred force in the universe of the living, in their struggle and temperance. As Yanette told me, "at first, our only concern was

the memory of our missing relatives. Over time, we learned that our struggle, our lives as human rights defenders, is also fundamental. Therefore, we combine the struggle for the memory of those who are not with us, with the struggle to claim our rights."

Nydia Erika Bautista's photograph is in the center of the wall. Her image has become a symbol and inhabits all the spaces of the office. For those of us who inhabit the spaces of the FNEB, Nydia Erika is a symbol of popular struggle and social conscience, of solidarity, and an icon of helping the most vulnerable. Her legacy and dreams circulate in every corner of the office. It is common to find slips of paper with her image inside books, reports, and desks. "When I have meetings with agents of the State, meetings with cooperation agencies, or meetings with relatives, I used this little portrait hanging over my heart as a symbol of protection and struggle," Yanette tells me. The mounted portrait photograph of the face of Nydia Erika accompanies all FNEB activities. She is always present.



**Figure 5 FNEB's Gallery of Memory. Photo by the author**

The facing wall there is another mounted photograph of particular significance. It is a poster with an invitation to a commemoration of the day of her disappearance in 2006. The poster contains two photos: Nydia Erika smiling, holding her baby son Erik and another photo of the Gómez family, in a tribute to Jaime Gómez, who disappeared on March 21, 2001. "We are all children of Nydia Erika Bautista," reads the headline. It also contains a reproduction of a handwritten dedication that Nydia Erika made in life to her son,

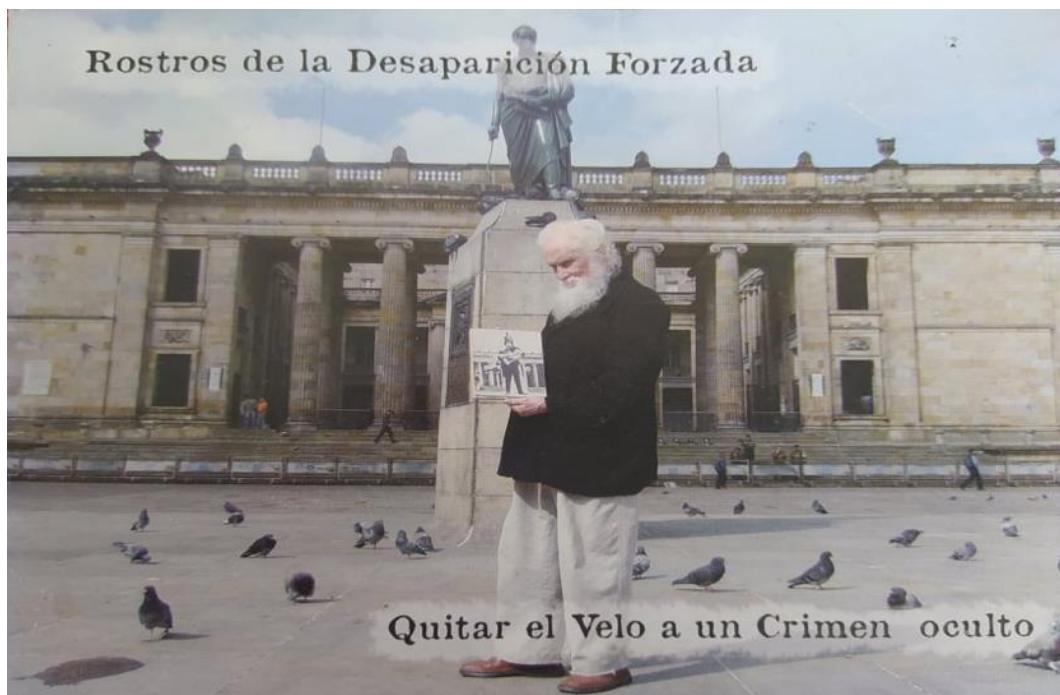


**Figure 6 FNEB's Slogan. Photo by the author**

*To my child, to my angel, to Luis Erik.*

*So that in a few years, you will commit yourself to your little brothers of the people. I know you don't understand it now, but you will realize and understand what I meant to you through life.*

"Engaging with the *little brothers of the people*" is the design and motto of the FNEB that still guides its actions. At one working meeting Yanette mentioned that "Note that enforced disappearance has a class component in Colombia. It is infrequent to find cases of disappearance in strata and upper layers of society. When similar phenomena occur in these segments, people talk about *kidnap*, not *enforced disappearance*. Enforced disappearance is a systematic weapon used against the poorest and most humble people in society." In other words, it is a weapon that the State uses against "the little brothers of the people." No one in the Bautista family could anticipate the heinous events surrounding the disappearance of Nydia Erika by the Colombian Army; but her legacy associated with popular demands and solidarity is the force that continues to inspire practices within the FNEB—this time, accompanying the "little brothers of the people" who are still missing.



**Figure 7** Poster of Alfonso Bautista with Nydia Erika at Plaza of Bolivar, Bogotá. Photo by the author

In figure 7, Alfonso, father of Nydia Erika Bautista, pictured on Bogotá's main square, Plaza de Bolívar, holding another photograph. With his white hair and beard and the statue of Simón Bolívar in the background, he embraces Nydia Erika in the photograph he had in his hands. Alfonso took Nydia Erika to the Plaza for the first time to celebrate her fifteenth birthday. According to Yanette, "For my father, who was a radical liberal, the Plaza de Bolívar was an extraordinary place. It reminded him of Jorge Eliecer Gaitán." Alfonso was a committed liberal with a "revolutionary heart" closely linked in body and soul to popular struggles. Nydia Erika, who was his eldest and his favorite daughter. "My father went to bed listening to Radio Cuba with Nydia, and he instilled in her, from a very young age, an awareness of social injustice," Yanette said in that same meeting. Alfonso instilled a powerful social conscience that would mark their practices in defending human rights in his sons and daughters. Yanette took this photo twenty-nine years later on Nydia Erika's birthday.



**Figure 8 Poster of relatives of victims of Valle del Cauca. Photo by the author**

The photographs surrounding Nydia Erika contain faces of peasant, indigenous and Afro-Colombian women and men and burst forcefully out from the office walls. Enforced disappearance is present everywhere in Colombia and does not discriminate by gender, ethnicity or age. All these images are of "little brothers of the people." Speaking of the images of Afro-Colombians, as seen in figure 5, Luz Dary, a member of the Buenaventura FNEB regional organization, told me that "back in the late nineties, the boys began to disappear in droves. We didn't know what was going on. As mothers and aunts, we thought that the boys prepared their things, made a dash for the port, and stowed away in a container to reach the United States. We would send our prayers and sing to our Orishas to accompany them. But no: what a pain it was to find that human life is disposable, and that armed actors use enforced disappearance as a weapon of war - becoming aware of enforced disappearances, knowing that it was happening - that broke up our communities."

Such a breakup is caused not only by the loss of the loved one. A disappearance breaks the ritual practice of the "ombligados" (Arocha Rodríguez, 1999) that marks the vital collective rhythms of the Afro-Colombian communities of the Pacific coast and that sustains their ancestral knowledge. Depending on the family origins and the attributes they want the child to have, families bury the navel of newborn children under a coconut palm or some other tree. Communities use this practice symbolically to connect their members with the forest, and when people die, they return to that forest to inhabit it. Enforced disappearance breaks these rhythms by making it impossible to celebrate the *novenario* - a piacular rite that returns souls to these enchanted forests.

The photographs in the gallery (figure 5) represent the wounds of an unfinished story which relatives permanently update in the present. The photographs of the disappeared thus acquire a magical and lifelike character. As Pilar puts it, "The photographs that hang here, and what we take to all our encounters with other victims, or what we carry when we make a presence in public

spaces to confront the State are a way of not forgetting them, of not forgetting the disappeared. The photographs are also a way of telling the State that we survivors don't forget what it did to them and us."

Enforced disappearance is a "state of being" (Gordon, 2008) that breaks the explanatory capacity of the frameworks of classification. There are no categories in the language that account for this state (Franco, 2013; Gatti, 2013; Gordon, 2008). The disappeared enters a liminal space where time and space are suspended. Relatives of the disappeared and survivors alter the existential foundations that bind them to the world. In addition, "the forced disappearance of people as a technique of systematic annihilation used by the State, implies an absence of the information that will allow the death of a person to be certified, the absence of a body, and no burial for that person who was arrested-disappeared; and funeral rituals truncated by see, mingly endless doubt (Colombo, 2017, p. 21)

According to Gatti, the disappeared person "is an emergency, a singularity, an unintended consequence, something unforeseen. He is a fragmented individual; a body separated from a name, a consciousness removed from its physical support, a name separated from its history, an identity deprived of its citizen cards". Gatti suggests that the "catastrophe" expressed in the impossibility of assigning an identity to those who are in a permanent liminal state or other words, is that the means to assign identity to those who are no longer there are destroyed.

In turn, Franco suggests that "the demand of the families that they be returned "alive ", the answering call of "present" to the name of a disappeared person during a roll call, is a haunting vacuum that underscores the extreme pathos of their absence, the simultaneous and impossible meeting of hope and despair" (Franco, 2013, p. 196). In a ghostly way, the photographed faces of the disappeared appeal to the living from a place that the living cannot occupy (Franco, 2013).

The space of the disappeared holds the ghost of the actions of the State that made enforced disappearance possible in the first instance. The disappeared himself carries the ghost of the State whose very power is the defining force in the field of the disappearance (Gordon, 2008). Therefore, the disappeared are not only people who inhabit a liminal space; their universe carries the motivations and interests of legal and illegal actors who used this practice to control territories and populations. Gordon suggests that "because making contact with the disappeared means encountering the specter of what the state has tried to repress, means encountering it in the affective mode in which haunting trafficks" (Gordon, 2008, p. 127). In other words, the world of the disappeared embodies those things that the actors of war wanted to repress or hide: poverty, differences in political views, grassroots political organization, etc.

This enchanted scenario calls for urgent actions -, something must be done – and determines the formative practices of activists of meaning. Those of us who learn in this space inhabited by ghosts and specters, learn to navigate parallel realities and to attend to the sense of urgency in the present. These phantasmagorical realities include not only the interrupted life of the disappeared; as ghosts, they also recreate the life of those who intend to re-inhabit everyday life in the world of the living. Their phantasmagorical universe is unthinkable if the responsibility of those who made the disappearance possible is overlooked. These realities are incomprehensible from perspectives that privilege reason and rationality. We must resort to interpretative platforms that overcome the tension between subject and object, between the real and the imagined. We must "move beyond research and theory that can only touch what can be seen and what is known, to acknowledge and work with what is unseen but present, silent but clamorous" (Spence, 2019, p. 11). Approaching this "state of being" that is impossible to see but that, at the same time, is present is the fundamental pillar of the process of formation of the activists of meaning. By exposing

ourselves to the meaning that emanate from the photographs of "the little brothers of the people," to the horror stories they hide and to the testimonies of the members of the FNEB or, in other words, to the layers of memory that sediment in the FNEB, we begin our process of incorporation into the community of memory. In the absence of a rational foundation to support this "state of being," the relationship between the ambiguity of memory and the circulation of emotions is strengthened. We activists of meaning need to limit reason and open our hearts if we want to learn about this universe.

These "galleries of memory" have a performative character (Márquez, 2016; Ramírez, 2012). The galleries are among of the most critical repertoires of protest of victims' relatives: they are devices that sediment this memory of ambivalence and its sense of urgency. They aim to use their symbolic content to "torment" segments of the population outside the dynamics of the conflict. Memory galleries "allow the observation of the objects with which the viewer can relate, know, and read, promoting an approach to the reality of those who have been disappeared, who they were before the violent event, the circumstances of the disappearance, data on their cases and the struggle of their relatives"(CNMH, 2014b, p. 372). In addition to the framed photographs of the disappeared, each family member contributes objects, photographs, clothing, and other items that identify their missing loved one. The galleries become portable altars that the relatives place in strategic public spaces on special or commemorative dates.



**Figure 9 Commemoration of the detained- disappeared in Bogotá, August 2018. Photo by the author**

In fact, on August 31, 2018, the FNEB took its gallery to commemorate the day of the Detainee - Disappeared to the statue of General Padilla on the Parkway avenue close to its headquarters in Bogotá. The members of the FNEB took the photographs of the disappeared and distributed them in space. In the center, they located the portrait of Nydia Erika, and adorned the photographs with rose petals. The ritual of commemoration was a simple but significant act. With megaphone in hand, we summoned unsuspecting bystanders with the slogan, "because they took them alive, we want them alive." A priest from the Salesian community accompanied us and officiated an ecumenical mass around the memory of the disappeared. Instead of following the official Catholic ritual, the priest reflected on both the perverse effects of the disappearance and the relatives' resilience. After a few minutes, about fifty people accompanied us and came

curiously to observe the photographs. For a moment, the FNEB "enchanted" the space of the Parkway and its corners were inhabited by the souls of the missing.

Crossing the reception area with the memory gallery, we reach the boardroom. "In this space, the boardroom is where we meet to conspire, to plan projects, workshops, and encounters with victims. As you can see, we are not alone: we are always accompanied by the disappeared," Nancy explained to me.



**Figure 10 FNEB's boardroom. Photo by the author**

The boardroom is a quadrangular space and, on its walls, hang pots with plants adorned with the victims' names. In addition, the pots have drawings on them that represent some personality traits of the disappeared: their sports preferences, nicknames or personal tastes. Some pots also carry slogans of struggle. The boardroom walls are a kind of vertical garden where souls in a situation of ambivalence rest: they are neither in the world of the living nor in that of the dead. Yanette recalled that "we did it to signify the disappeared as living beings. It symbolizes their lives since the theme of disappearance doesn't revolve entirely around death. Enforced disappearance

is a dehumanizing practice directed not only at the victim but also at his family nucleus. It destroys the social, family, or community fabric that surrounds them: so, it is difficult to find nice things to say about enforced disappearance. It is an exercise in extracting that good part of remembering them from the bottom of the hearts of their families, in not letting them die."

In this regard, Frey comments that "The first time I visited the FNEB I felt deep respect. There were a lot of pictures of people's faces. At that time, I did not really know what the Foundation was doing. But I thought that if the photos were there, I could somehow pay homage to them. I felt as if I was entering some sacred precinct. The boardroom radiates joy, and it's like a kind of cemetery. Somehow being there gives a feeling of tranquility." Therefore, the space of FNEB is home to the souls of those whose relatives have not been able to say farewell. Unlike other memorial spaces, such as cemeteries, where the sacred and memory are to be found in tombs and mausoleums, the FNEB's space is full of the wandering memories of those who seek to be found. Graves in cemeteries represent

*"the passage between the living and the dead, and as such also the first known form of articulating an experience of pastness. The grave is a primordial site of memory in the sense of a technique for the keeping of a life that is no longer. The role and function of the grave is no just to provide an externalized representation of the deceased but of somehow housing the other, providing a room – in a metaphorically extended sense, not restricted to burial space – among the living for those no longer there"*(Ruin, 2015, p. 138)

The spaces of the FNEB are impregnated with the memory of ambivalence. Unlike sanctuaries such as cemeteries, the memories that wander around there enhance the sense of urgency implied by the desire to give a dignified closure to the cases of disappearance that the Foundation represents. They evoke the impossibility of closure - the impossibility of farewell

rituals-which ends up being conjured into the world of the living, in the struggle for their rescue, in the struggle to bring them alive again.

Most of those who search for the missing are women and mothers, aunts and daughters. In an informal conversation, Yanette commented to me that "Women like flowers, and we like to take care of them. Here we have a connection with the home, with what the home lost." The pots represent the duality between the breakdown of home and its re-habitation, between the loss of a meaningful domestic life and its re-signification." To which she added, "each of them draws the pots with words full of meaning and the expectations of truth and justice, of reaffirming there that we love the disappeared and that we do not forget them, that we fight for them. All those words that came from the hearts of the families are also an energy that is deposited there."

As a place of memory, this sanctuary condenses energies and emotional flows associated with love for the missing ones, which structures activists' struggle and perspective of the future. "It is not ideology that moves us. It is love for our disappeared," recalls Yanette in every encounter. This place of recognition, and the "growth of knowledge" structures our formation as activists of meaning. Many of us come to this place in times of stress or distress. It is a special place for reflection.

Two Virgins of Guadalupe of different sizes and shapes adorn the hanging garden. The larger one is a contemporary version adorned with vivid colors, and its face is black. The smaller one is a replica of an old version. Yanette comments that "In principle, we wanted to make an altar to Nydia Erika. But with time and the arrival of the families, we expanded the space to the memories of their disappeared."

Yanette has had a close relationship with the Virgin Mary and with the repertory of saints of the Catholic symbolic corpus. Her mother involved her in the universe of the Catholic religion

from an early age, and it been indispensable in her life. "Imagine Sebastian, every time I got a job, I went to church to say thank you. I have always entrusted myself to saints like St. Jude Thaddeus. We were a poor family, and in the face of difficulties, I entrusted myself to the saints," to which she adds, "I am not one to go to Mass every Sunday. But do you know something? Father Javier Giraldo once told me that we relatives of enforced disappearance do not have to confess in order to receive communion. We have suffered so much in life that we are free from sin."

After overcoming a three-month coma, Yanette went to Mexico to visit the Virgin of Guadalupe to thank her for her life. Yanette overcame the impact of the military criminal justice system when they announced that Nydia Erika's body was being taken away for the second time. "When we went up the hill to visit the Virgin of Guadalupe and saw her with my own eyes, I immediately thought of Nydia Erika. I related a lot to her. There is a statue of the Virgin on the hill surrounded by indigenous people, and I remember the times Nydia took us to Caloto, Cauca, where there are indigenous communities. And the Virgin's face stuck with me because it was very similar to Nydia Erika's face. Both the Virgin's face and Nydia Erika's were brown," Yanette told me. She carries these images to protect the FNEB space symbolically.

In figure 10, the Virgin of Guadalupe merges with the materials drawn by relatives of those who disappeared. With her symbolic mantle, the Virgin of Guadalupe protects the souls that circulate in the universe of the disappeared. However, rather than resorting to the traditional meaning of the Virgin of Guadalupe associated with women's docility, the victims' relatives invert their symbolic dimension to enhance the qualities of the "fighting woman." It is therefore no surprise that the FNEB memory community is composed mainly of women. It is women who most vehemently seek out their loved ones, and in the process doing so, they build meaningful bonds

with other women. Far from falling into passivity after the disappearance of their loved one, the women of the FNEB permanently face up to new challenges.

Indeed, seeker-women have sometimes confronted the perpetrator groups themselves, putting their lives at risk. Even though each woman seeks her family member, they all adopt those of the others. Although the figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe embodies the maternal figure, women “update” her, to become fighting and supportive mothers among themselves. At an induction meeting in mid-2018, Yanette told the team "One of Nydia Erika's dreams was to have an army of women fighting hand in hand for a fairer world for women and village brothers; but this time, the struggle is not armed. We, the victims, cultivate deep listening, solidarity, and care for others. That's our starting-point."

The symbolic “update” of the Virgin of Guadalupe made by the FNEB resonates with the processes of resignification that aspects of feminism make of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Some feminist academics and writers argue that the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe is a break with the traditional place that patriarchy gives to motherhood, and radically transforms it (Anzaldúa, 1996; Rodriguez & Fortier, 2007; Román-Odio, 2013). The Virgin of Guadalupe becomes a spiritual weapon of subversion to re-signify the passive universe of women. In addition, the image of the virgin evokes resistance, collective identity, memory, and hope for subaltern populations (Rodriguez & Fortier, 2007). In a beautiful evocation of the Virgin of Guadalupe that is worth quoting at length, Jeanette Rodriguez argues that,

*"Our Lady of Guadalupe is the image of inner power, in a dynamism centered around mutuality, trust, participation, and regard. The power accessed by these women in their dialogue with Our Lady of Guadalupe is the power of memory, while she continues to stand for justice, solidarity with the oppressed, belonging, unconditional love, the power of*

*expressed feelings and sharing (women come to her and share their immediate needs; and they feel heard). The power of commitment, the power to endure suffering, the power of caring, the power of risk (as long as she's besides me, I'm going to keep trying), the power of naming fears, the power of knowing that the way things are is not the way things are meant to be; and with her help they are encouraged and given hope. She gives them the will - not to suffer under injustice, but to continue la lucha (the struggle) (Rodriguez, 1996, p. 30)*

This fusion between meanings that emanate from an updated notion of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the initiatives of memory of the relatives of the disappeared mark the struggle of activists of meaning. Rather than giving a causal weight to the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe and stripping it of its traditional symbolism, the fusion expresses the sense of struggle that, in the case of the FNEB, has the same sense as the "Revoltosas": because women never cease in their struggle and because in it, they have updated ways of feeling, thinking and acting about the world of human rights advocacy.

The world of human rights does not escape this logic of sacralization and spirituality, and some academics recognize the sacred character in the contemporary world (de Sousa Santos, 2020; Ignatieff, 2011; Joas, 2013). From this perspective, the universalism that underpins human rights has a Western origin since it sacralizes the notion of "individuality" framed in a corpus of liberal ideology. While this perspective has not been without criticism and challenges (Maldonado-Torres, 2017; Mignolo, 2014), human rights discourse functions as an umbrella framework that activists fill with content with their practices from an empirical perspective.

In this sense, the activists of meaning give shape to a discursive device contemplated in the transnational human rights regime to act it, reappropriate it, stretch it into practice. These

appropriations have a profoundly symbolic, spiritual and intercultural component and include death and resistance from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The second floor of the FNEB house has four bedrooms. Each of them houses a different area of the Foundation: the documentation area, the legal area, the memory area, and the administration area.

Each area contains desks and computers where the leaders carry out legal substantiation of the cases that the Foundation accompanies. It has large windows where a current of air permanently enters to refresh the environment. Enlarged photographs of the Galarragas sisters, who disappeared in 2001, and the younger sisters of Nancy, leader of the Foundation, adorn the walls. The sisters appear smiling, young and happy in the photographs and come from the family album. In a conversation with Nancy, she told me that

*“I put the picture of my sisters there because I like to have them always alive, always present. Never in oblivion. And it transmits a commitment to continue in the struggle and continue to persist in the struggle for our disappeared. Because the moment I set foot on the Foundation, after their disappearance, I acquired a commitment from the heart. Seeing them every day reinforces that conviction. When I'm working, and I see them, and I tell myself that I have to keep moving ahead. re-establish their good name. At times they make me sentimental, and I start crying.*



**Figure 11 Poster of The Galarraga sisters. Photo by the author**

My job was located in this office, and the Galarraga sisters always accompanied me when I was coordinating the documentation team. In a way, their photographs reminded me of the importance of the struggle to make "those who were disappeared" "reappear". At the same time, the photographs evoke a frozen moment in time where those who appear in the photo grow older, which implies a rupture in the system of representation (Castillejo Cuéllar & Muñoz Marín, 2017). In other words, while we who work in the FNEB "age together," sharing experiences and configuring segments of intersubjectivity (Schutz, 1970), the disappeared who accompany us remain unscathed, their power inspiring us in the struggle that does not stop.

Over from the documentation area is the legal office. It is enough to walk a few steps, cross the corridor, and reach a universe of different meanings. Upon entering, I came across hundreds of court records located in libraries. There are so many of them that at first glance, it would seem that the files replaced the walls. These judicial files are at the heart of the FNEB's activities and include the cases that the organization legally represents.

For the people who work in the FNEB, the files carry a critical symbolic charge. On the one hand, they are the most important source of information for reconstructing the events that led to the disappearance of the people that the FNEB represents and the evolution of the cases themselves. And on the other, the files are an excellent primary source for reconstructing the history of violence at the subnational level. By containing statements from members of the forces of law and order, testimonies of captured perpetrators, witness statements, etc., from the files, stories can be reconstructed "bottom up " with details that challenge official accounts with their optimistic stories of the recovery of territories. Ultimately, the drafting of the reports has this double nuance: to make contexts of violence visible, and to recognize the damage caused.

The files are organized by colors. Each color represents a specific region or Department. The orange files collect the cases of disappearance that occurred in the department of Casanare, in the eastern plains. In this region, the paramilitary group of the United Self-Defense Forces of Casanare (ACC), in confluence with political elites, imposed a regime of terror in the late 90s. The presence of paramilitary groups since the early 1980s and their relations with oil companies and State forces of law and order marked its history. With this tripartite relationship, the local elites achieved territorial control of the civilian population. With the implementation of a counterinsurgency policy, the political forces of Casanare pursued the alleged social bases of the FARC guerrillas. They used this pretext to persecute any expression of political and social opposition that threatened the implementation of productive projects. By the 2000s, forced disappearance began to be carried out as a policy of extermination and social control against many peasant families and communities, which would also guarantee the materialization of political alliances between the Peasant Self-Defense Forces of Casanare and politicians in the region.

The brown files represent the Montes de María region. The Montes de María includes some municipalities of Sucre and Bolívar in the northern part of the Caribbean coastal region. It was a strategic area for the paramilitary expansion of the Northern Bloc of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia. In association with expansive cattle ranching and massive biofuel projects, the paramilitaries used massacres and enforced disappearance as a means of territorial control and massive dispossession of peasant farmlands. The paramilitaries of the Northern Bloc disputed these territories with insurgent cells of the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) and the FARC guerrillas.

The dark blue files hold the cases of Meta, Guaviare, and Vichada. The administrative Departments of Meta, Guaviare, and Vichada are part of the Eastern Plains region, characterized by the strong presence of the FARC-EP guerrillas since those groups originally formed, given the lack of presence of the State. This situation of state abandonment turned the region into a strategic area for the expansion plans of the FARC guerrillas and their aim to take over the capital Bogotá with the presence of one of its most important structures: the Eastern Bloc. The Eastern Bloc performed the functions of the State for decades in the region. Towards the end of the 90s, after the failed peace process between the government of President Pastrana and the FARC guerrillas, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) challenged the FARC's territorial control in the region. The departments of Meta, Guaviare and Vichada become an area of fierce territorial dispute (in some places over coca-leaf crops) and social control that has left in its wake massive human rights violations and a large number of disappeared people, of whom we still do not know exact figures.

The green files represent the victims of the Putumayo region. The Department of Putumayo is in southwestern Colombia, along the border with Ecuador. It is an Amazonian enclave and was

an area of strategic corridors for the FARC guerrillas since the 70s and 80s. This region has an added strategic value since it is a circuit for coca paste crops and drug trafficking. In the early 90s, FARC began losing its armed control due to the proliferation of localized paramilitary groups. This process of paramilitarization of the Department of Putumayo culminated with the entry of the Central Bolivar Bloc (BCB) of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia in the early 2000s. The BCB co-opted local paramilitary structures and forced the FARC Guerrillas to pull back to the jungles. The AUC imposed a terror regime on the local population, in attempts to eradicate the legacy of the FARC's insurgency. In this process of establishing a new social order, the BCB systematically used disappearance to sow terror among the inhabitants and paralyze social mobilization.

The pink files represent the victims of the Department of Valle del Cauca. The FNEB has a presence in the municipalities of the northern areas of the Department and the port of Buenaventura on the Pacific coast. The northern part of the Department had been the scene of operations of the Norte del Valle drug cartel since the late 80s. Mafia structures dominated the institutional structure of the State for decades, and controlled the daily lives of the local communities. Towards the end of the 90s, the paramilitaries of the Calima bloc replaced the cartel, taking over the drug circuit and imposing a fierce *sui generis* social order.

Buenaventura is a municipality located in the north of the Department of Valle del Cauca. It has a population predominantly of African descent and is the most important port in the country. By the end of the 90s, the resurgence of the conflict in nearby municipalities made it a focus of reception for thousands of families displaced by violence from other municipalities, especially rural areas. The FARC took advantage of the mass displacement to recruit new members. However, paramilitary groups managed to control the port and its population and the surrounding

rural and urban areas. Buenaventura is strategic, given its mineral wealth, location, and the circulation of legal and illegal capital. In this context, enforced disappearance was strategic to materialize the power of the armed groups and the consolidation of development projects that did not incorporate the communities and their traditions and customs.

The files also include the searches in which the relatives activate and show their relations with the various State institutions involved in clarifying the facts, from the police units to the legal infrastructure such as the Prosecution Service, the Attorney General, the Ombudsman, the Forensic Medicine Service and the Victims Unit.

In addition to the above, for those of us trained in the symbolic universe of the activism of meaning, the files represent the disappeared themselves. In other words, the files *are* the disappeared themselves. For this reason, the senior members of the Foundation are emphatic that the treatment of the files must be of total order and respect. This emphasis holds that altering the order implies torpedoing the work of the lawyers work and, above all, that we must handle the files as if they were sacred objects. After all, the files, rather than representing the judicial acquis for litigation, do represent the disappeared themselves.

Next door to the law office is the memory area. This area houses audiovisual information, documentary records, photographic memories of events, and encounters with regional victims. The walls are adorned with handmade craft textiles by indigenous victims of Putumayo who express their struggle and by photographs of regional encounters.



**Figure 12 Kichuas community loom. Photo by the author**

The FNEB is legal counsel for the San Marcelino Reservation of the Kichua community in the south of Putumayo and has conducted powerful memory recovery exercises, as shown in Chapter 5. Figure 12 tells the story of one of the armed incursions of the Central Bolivar Bloc of the Auto Defensas Unidas of Colombia into the Kichua indigenous reservation. The paramilitaries destroyed the social fabric and established the practice of disappearance as a *modus operandi* by sowing terror and uncertainty in the community. The figure shows the school of the San Marcelino Reservation where members of the community reflected and talked collectively. In addition, it shows a large number of armed men surrounding the school and invading the ancestral territory, symbolically illustrated by some enormous trees. The armed men arrived on foot and motorized in late-model trucks. They then proceeded to abduct community members whom they accused of collaborating with the FARC guerrillas and took them away in the trucks. For the Kichua indigenous communities, enforced disappearance has two-dimensional effects.

On the one hand, the physical disappearance of the community members leads to the breakdown of the sense of trust that sustains the collective character of the social fabric. On the

other, paramilitary incursions were a desecration of the sacred territory of the communities. With this twin circumstance, the Kichua community lost its ability to project itself collectively into the future.

On the walls of the office there are also some posters of mnemonic devices used in previous performances: the poster of Nydia Erika's face turned into a deck of cards. Diego, the coordinator of the memory area, told me that "here we try to update memory initiatives. We treat the issues surrounding the disappearance creatively so that our message reaches people that are foreign to the rawness of war." Figure 13 shows a deck of cards decorated with the face of Nydia Erika with the motto "Our dreams and struggle are our cards".



**Figure 13** Poster of FNEB memory initiative. Photo by the author

One of the critical aspects of the practice of FNEB activists of meaning is that they record all their activities. Everything from, regional workshops, meetings with institutional figures such as ambassadors, or agents of international cooperation agencies is in digital audio files. The

documentation team transcribes the recorded material as part of the systematization process. Experiences and cases are all digitalized. With this exercise, the FNEB seeks to consolidate an accumulation of knowledge to re-signify its practices and give them mnemonic content.

Finally, opposite the memory office is the administration area. The usual sound in this office is the buzz of the dot-printer, constantly producing papers. In this office, FNEB members strategically plan the activities of the organization and the execution of funds that come primarily from international cooperation. Jennifer, the coordinator of the administrative area, is the niece of Fernando Gómez, who disappeared in the Department of Casanare in early 2000. She keeps her uncle's photograph next to her on the desk. In an informal conversation, she told me, "I keep my uncle here by my side to remember the things that cannot happen to us again. My uncle's disappearance was very difficult for my family. It practically destroyed it. That's why I keep fighting, so that no one else will have to go through what we suffered."

In this chapter, I have shown the relevance of the symbolic dimension of space for forming activists of meaning. The space of FNEB condenses deep networks of meaning in order to provide meanings associated with the ambiguous experience of enforced disappearance and the emotional flows attached. I argue that the experience of enforced disappearance involves immersion in a particular emotional universe that leads activists of meaning to "train the heart." The space of FNEB circulates sacred and spiritual experiences which are critical sources for collective action. Taking as a starting point the experience of the Bautista Family, I argue that victims' organizations move forward from being agents of memory to being activists of meaning. Their struggle transcends the victims' universe to structure their struggle in forming "free citizens."

By assuming the space of the FNEB as a free space, I have shown how its space functions as a mnemonic refuge that structures the narratives of memory of the victims' relatives. In addition, the space provides an environment conducive to the updating of collective actions.

In this chapter, I have delved into the power that symbols have to train activists of meaning. In the next chapter, I will explore the pedagogical practices with which they spontaneously form activists of meaning.

#### **4.0 The inner world of seeker-women. Learning Human Rights about human rights**

##### **Advocacy**

The first meeting I had with the FNEB team was in March 2018. After accepting Yanette's offer, I arrived at the organization's headquarters at 2:00 pm as we had agreed earlier that day. As I arrived, Pilar, one of the organization's youngest members, greeted me in the waiting room: "Welcome Sebastian, it's a pleasure to meet you. Please take a seat here, and I have already let Yanette and the team know that you're here." As I climbed the stairs to reach the second floor after Pillar called me, she looked at me curiously and smiled.

I sat for about five minutes examining the photographs of the disappeared and the posters certifying the "Antonio Nariño" award that the organization won in 2016 for its defense of human rights. The governments of France and Germany have an annual competition where they recognize the work of human rights defenders, and the FNEB won it in 2016. In a conversation I had with Yanette a few months after my admission to the FNEB, she told me that "for human rights organizations being in the orbit of the international community is critical. One way for human rights organizations to defend themselves from official repression is to ensure that the authorities come to know us and know who we are. The awards means more than recognition of our work by the international community. They are also a symbolic form of protection. If the State forces attack us, they attack the countries that gave us the prizes in one way or another. It's a way to make repression more difficult."

The headquarters' old wooden stairs began to creak. Five women came down in a line, one after another, with immense curiosity on their faces, whispering and laughing quietly. "Hi Sebastian, how are you? We're glad you are here with us. Let's go to the boardroom for our

meeting," Yanette suggested as she walked downstairs. After brief introductions, we went through the kitchen and arrived at the "sanctuary." We began our meeting in the company of the virgins of Guadalupe and the presence of disappeared who "inhabiting" the flowerpots.

The director officially welcomed me: "Ok, team, we welcome Sebastián Cuéllar to the organization. He is a sociologist at Universidad Nacional and is studying for a postgraduate degree in the United States. He will accompany us as cases documentation coordinator." At that moment, I became aware of the seriousness of my position and responsibilities. "I am Sebastián Cuéllar, a sociologist, and I will accompany you in the different processes required by the Foundation. It's a pleasure and an honor to be with you," I said, overwhelmed with feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. While I am Colombian and have long studied the Colombian conflict, I've never lived it day-to-day nor experienced it corporally as my new colleagues had. As Yanette described the organization's structure and its projects, I thought inwardly, "What will be my contribution in this space?"—a question that I continue to ask myself to this day and that I hope this dissertation will answer, however partially.

Pilar, Maria Jose, Jennifer, Nancy, and Yanette were there at the table. This meeting was my first real encounter with the victims of enforced disappearance. Pilar and María José are 23-year-old twin sisters and are daughters of William Hernando Murad, who was disappeared by paramilitary groups in Cabuyaro, Meta. They are the youngest leaders in the organization. Jenny is the niece of Fernando Gómez Panqueva, who was disappeared by paramilitary groups in Villanueva, Casanare; Nancy, 45, is the sister of four missing women in the Department of Putumayo and is the veteran of the leaders.

Each woman introduced herself solemnly and shared with me their testimony of pain the atrocities experienced and their experiences of struggle finding their missing relative. In addition,

all of them identified themselves as leaders of the FNEB's School of Leadership. In front of everyone, Nancy said humorously "Sebastian, welcome to the Foundation. We know that you will be our coordinator, but we want to let you know that we will tell you how to be our boss. We're going to teach you how to be our boss," and we all laughed out loud. I took Nancy's joke very seriously and made it my maxim of conduct in the organization. I came to FNEB to learn more than to teach. Over time, I understood that learning and training in defense of human rights are done "by walking along" with seeker-women. After the meeting, Majo took me to my workplace on the second floor of the house, which for almost two years was going to be my second home.

My arrival coincided with a gradual expansion of the FNEB network at the national level, enabled by financial support from international organizations. With the window of political opportunity that opened with the signature of the peace agreement, international cooperation financed several processes of documentation of victims' cases from all over Colombia, to present them to the institutions created for transition. The FNEB incorporated new leadership and trajectories of struggles of new seeker-women. This tacit, implicit and experiential knowledge (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008; Conway, 2006) that victims carry in their bodies, hearts and minds is the starting point for the preparation of the reports that the FNEB presented to the Integral System of Justice, Truth and Guarantees of Non-Repetition. In addition, this knowledge links memories, emotions, and testimonies and is the key to forming activists of meaning.

This chapter will explore the pedagogical strategies that the FNEB deploys to train activists of meaning. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, activists of meaning connect seeker-women's experiences with biographies of the non-victim population. Through this synergy of experiences, seeker-women, professional volunteers, and university students configure ethical-political horizons for the demands of members of the public.

FNEB's training and training strategies for activists prefigure pedagogies of resistance (English & Irving, 2015; Hall et al., 2013; Perlow, Wheeler, Bethea, & Scott, 2017; Von Kotze & Walters, 2017). The FNEB has two training strategies for activists of meaning: the School of Leadership and the Community of Hope. Although these strategies have specific particularities, they share an emotional component that determines the practices of resistance and re-habiting of the everyday world of victims of enforced disappearance.

#### **4.1 The School of Leadership as a community of practice: the inner world of the seeker-women**

After that first meeting I had with the team of seeker-women, I had the chance to talk at length with Yanette. I told her about the enthusiasm and pride that Nancy, Pilar, Jenny, and Majo expressed identifying themselves as the School of Leadership leaders. In response, Yanette told me that "at the beginning of our struggle, the disappeared were the only important thing that mattered. There was tremendous feeling messianic mission, and we, as women, didn't care at all about ourselves. We weren't aware of our place as fighters. With the School of Leadership, we changed this. What the School of Leadership wants to transform is precisely our loci of enunciation: with the School of Leadership, we build our own identity every day from what we learn, and learn from our mistakes, knowledge, ignorance, but we are as we are, as women and human rights advocates ".

Founded in 2007, the School of Leadership brings together men and women relatives of victims of enforced disappearance. In addition to searching for disappeared persons, the School of Leadership builds crucial bonds between participants.

The School of Leadership arose as an initiative to support women who, as a result of the violence suffered, experienced radical breaks in their life projects. Most victims of enforced disappearance are left without job opportunities and with limited options for social mobility. In other words, women find themselves in a situation of extreme vulnerability. "Enforced disappearance impoverishes women tremendously," Yanette told me. In addition to encouraging seeker-women to acquire decent employment, the School of Leadership is a source of jobs for women and, sometimes, men, who join the organization.

In that same conversation, Yanette added that "the School of Leadership aims to prevent women victims of enforced disappearance from ending up in domestic work in other people's family homes."



**Figure 14 Seeker-women of Meta and Guaviare. Photo by the author**

With the enforced disappearances of their loved ones, the life-plan of a victim begins a process of seemingly limitless withering. The armed actors not only killed and disappeared people: they also often threaten relatives and survivors, forcing them to move from their territories. With this *modus operandi* (CNMH, 2014a), armed actors in the confluence of regional powers illegally appropriate land. Enforced disappearance is the "perfect crime": it leaves no trace of the events but generates paralysis and terror in the survivors.

In many cases, domestic work is the only option that women of missing relatives find as a source of income. In this regard, Yanette told me that "it is very pretentious, but perhaps here, in the *University of the Life* that is the School of Leadership, we want to save lives. Saving lives is not a messianic ambition: it represents the opportunities that life took away from them with enforced disappearance - the opportunity to have dignity, a decent job. We think of this training so that victims can be heard and so that their knowledge is valued and enhanced."

Throughout my experience of working at the FNEB and in my process of becoming an activist of meaning, two phrases that Yanette frequently mentioned in the collective workspaces resonated in my mind: "the FNEB as a University of Life" and "Here at the FNEB, we grow older together." With the first sentence, the "FNEB as the University of *Life*", Yanette makes explicit that the practice of the defense of the human rights of the families of victims of enforced disappearance is the product of a process of training and learning. The FNEB, as a University of Life, orientates seeker-women's experience towards the struggle for the restoration of rights. "We do not give diplomas that certify specialized knowledge. That is the task of academic universities. But we train the people who make up the Foundation for resistance to fight for our rights. We are training free citizens," Yanette told me at the end of the meeting. In contexts of war such as Colombia, violence co-opts the daily life of civilians, leading to its militarization (Higgs, 2020).

The University of Life condenses, in these terms, knowledge associated with resistance to violence, survival strategies, and search strategies that the families of victims deploy in their daily lives. This knowledge has a lively, embodied, narrative character and escapes from the contours of formalized schooling. In addition, this knowledge takes the form of narratives, stories, drawings, songs, poems. In other words, the testimony of seeker-women builds solidarity among them. When the voice of women is embodied in artistic pieces and aesthetic forms, it is an extraordinary source of knowledge that transcends the intimate universe of women. I will develop the implications of the second sentence, "here at FNEB, we grow older," when I describe the practices of the Community of Hope in the next chapter.

For the moment, all that needs to be said is that the School of Leadership enhances the local knowledge that seeker-women bring and develop in their processes of searching for their disappeared loved ones. Not surprisingly, Seeker-women are researchers, journalists, empirical psychologists, and empirical lawyers.

Once they join the FNEB, women begin a process of politicization. When family members encounter people in the same condition and with similar trajectories of searching in solitude, they begin to feel less isolated and emotionally frustrated; they start to build community. With their peers, they elaborate renewed identity referents that guide their political actions, inspiring some of them to go out onto the streets to protest for the first time in their lives. Ultimately, seeker-women' and non-victims learning starts from sharing trajectories and experiences. The fact that seeker-women meet and participate in joint activities is the first step towards mobilization (Pant, 2003).

One of the objectives of the School of Leadership is to transform seeker-women into political subjects. In a systematization workshop on School of Leadership practices in mid-2019, Pilar told me that "the purpose of School of Leadership is to empower women so that they can

empower others. In this way, the networks of people who have the same thoughts and feelings expand. Also, in the School, we visibilize women's struggle and their memories and narratives. In the School of Leadership, we go from being objects of violence, that is, the experience of being a victim, passive and paralyzed, to become subject to rights. For example, being the object of violence involves sitting back and waiting for prosecutors to resolve our cases. As subjects of process, we are implicitly aware of the cases and know how they are progressing: we arrive at the court looking the prosecutor in the eye, telling him firmly, "Which documents I am missing , Mr. Prosecutor, that my case is paralyzed and you are doing nothing," or telling him that "I will have to lodge a petition to start the investigations of my case or to speak to your superiors. In the School, we learn how to put pressure on the authorities”.

The ideas circulating about empowerment within the School of Leadership are intimately related to the processes of "awareness" and critical reflection described by Paulo Freire (Freire, 2018). The School of Leadership enhances critical balances on the real conditions of existence that made forced disappearance possible in the first place. These critical reflections question the social conditions of existence and oppressive economic and social systems. In this sense, "empowerment is about understanding existing power relations and taking practical actions that challenge oppressive power structures. It involves the exercise of power by the powerless, such that they become more able to participate in decision-making processes and gain control over the resources in their environment" (Pant, 2014). The School of Leadership recognizes the individual trajectory of searching for women as crucial knowledge for defending their rights. Since enforced disappearance paralyzes survivors, the School of Leadership recognizes the search process as the first step to women's empowerment. Therefore, the starting point for the training of seeker-women is their own search experience.

In that same conversation, Pilar argued that "When the relatives of victims come to the Prosecutor's Office to report their case, the prosecutors only take the papers: they don't even look the victims in the eye, nor do they give them advice. Simply, the prosecutor tells the women, 'This document will be useful to you for your case; that one won't; you are missing this other document that you must bring in tomorrow. And since we seekers often do not know what to demand from officials, the School of Leadership trains us to face them. It teaches us to look the prosecutor in the eye and demand that he investigates.'" Seeker-women begin their empowerment process when they become aware that the atrocities of which they were victims should never have happened. In other words, seeker-women empower when they become aware that, for arbitrary reasons, someone took away their loved ones, their life plans, and their existential universe. And someone must answer for that.

Reports by human rights organizations and transnational human rights organizations (CNMH, 2013; ICMP, 2020; Mingorance & Bautista, 2019), provide statistics that indicate that the impunity rate for disappearance cases in Colombia is 98%-99%. It is under this extensive cloak of impunity, that seeker-women search for their loved ones. They usually start by asking neighbors at home or members of their communities if they have seen their loved ones lately. On other occasions, seeker-women go to the local police to ask them to find their relatives. In a case documentation workshop in Villavicencio, Meta, in 2018, some women said that when they came to file a complaint to the local police, they usually received answers like, "Your son sure left - no doubt he had annoyed somebody and they were going to kill him..."

Some women, when reporting a daughter's disappearance to the police, said that the police reacted by telling them, "Everyone knows your daughter... no doubt she went off with her boyfriend or her lover." In Chapter 4, I will explore what I call "the social construction of

impunity," but it is worth mentioning at this point that impunity unfolds its tentacles from the very moment of the disappearance of a loved one and settles in the most intimate surroundings of the seeker women. It is common to find cases where the neighbors actively cooperated with the disappearance of their sons, daughters, grandchildren or granddaughters. In contexts where everyday life is militarized, and terror is imposed (Higgs, 2020; Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004), women experience the dark feeling of distrust at all levels: they distrust their families, their neighbors, and in general, their community ties.

The School of Leadership aims to restore the confidence of seeker-women. It provides empowerment to re-signify the practical universe of women so that they will regain confidence in their searches. The School insists to seeker-women that any action to find their loved ones, however insignificant it may seem, is a source of pride and a sign of dignity. Search actions range from filing the complaint at a police station to confronting the perpetrators face-to-face or interacting with the bureaucrats of State institutions. Some women keep records of their actions in personal journals, recording their experiences and the emotions they arouse. The School not only dignifies this process of searching before the women arrive at FNEB: it also qualifies this accumulated knowledge by providing women with the technical language of human rights. Seeker-women are expert researchers. Women accumulate evidence and clues that could take them to their missing relatives or the person responsible for the disappearance; they look for signs and find witnesses in the processes. Sometimes, women come face-to-face with perpetrators, putting their lives at serious risk. In this process, the seeker-women develop a deep knowledge of the physical distribution of the territories where the disappearance occurred.

Additionally, they discover the dynamics of illegal and legal armed groups in the territories where the events occurred. Let Nancy describe this kind of knowledge: "When the paramilitaries

disappeared my sisters, I began to search for them. I became a researcher. I pretended to be friends with the paramilitaries. I took information from one; I took information from another. With what the paramilitaries told me, I would go back on my motorcycle and put a plastic bag there or something that I found on the road, a boot, for example, to point out the place they told me. In that process, with my mother, we found several graves with many bodies in them. Thanks to these strategies, I was able to find my sisters. And over time, the Prosecution Service came to exhume the bodies where we had found them. We, seeker-women, end up telling the institutions of the State how to do their work."



**Figure 15** Milestones of the search process. Photo by the autor

Seeker-women who enter the FNEB headquarters gain training in the technical language of human rights defenders. Pilar, Nancy, Jenny, and Majo are the pillars of the School of

Leadership and had their training at the FNEB headquarters in Bogotá. They are responsible for training the new arrivals.

#### **4.2 Becoming empirical lawyers: documenting cases of enforced disappearance as rite of initiation**

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, the FNEB has four areas of action. In the legal area, FNEB lawyers plan the legal defenses of victims and update progress in each case. In the area of memory, publicists and students imagine repertoires of action creatively. In the administrative area, Jenny has all the logistics and financial planning of the organization in her head. She coordinates the work of Leidy and Iris, the administrative assistants, and Doña Leo, an accountant. Finally, the case documentation area is responsible for collecting and systematizing new cases of enforced disappearance that arrive. I coordinated that area for a year and a half after going through the initiation ritual. The ritual is worth a brief description here.

Every woman and man who comes to the organization to train as a leader spends a few months in each area, for a hands-on, in-depth introduction to it; this makes them familiar with knowledge of administration, the Tienda las Revoltosas, memory initiatives, litigation, and case documentation. In an interview at the end of 2019, Nancy told me that "I started at the FNEB as a "maid-of-all-work. I did all the jobs they asked me. I started as a receptionist; I prepared coffees for everyone. I did the cleaning. I also took documents to the Attorney General's Office and filed them there. I went through all the areas of the FNEB. From that moment, I began to transform myself and learn to move forward as a woman. Imagine, when I arrived at the FNEB, I didn't even

know how to turn on a computer. That's where the learning curve began. Asking one or the other leader how things were done."

To the extent that FNEB specializes in the court representation of victims of enforced disappearance, the case documentation process supports legal work by synthesizing the enormous volumes of court records. All the people who come to the organization, whether seeker-women or non-victims start off in this documentation process. It's an exercise that ensures that all members of the Foundation become familiar with the minutiae of the cases. After reading the files, we identify the most relevant documents and summarize the contents in short digital files. In legal terms, this process is called legal substantiation. In addition to the substantiation exercises, the documentation team is responsible for transcribing audios of the victims' testimonies. It's worth remembering that the FNEB has an audio record of all its activities. From meetings with ambassadors, passing through to national meetings with victims and including even the most informal events. This effort to accumulate memories enables the FNEB to implement systematization processes using a strict approach of popular education (Kane, 2001; Von Kotze & Walters, 2017)

The documentation exercise is the ritual of initiation which is most important to the formation of activists of meaning (Cuellar Sebastián, Martínez Nathalia, Córdoba Henry, Caicedo Andrés, & Lizcano Santiago, 2021). As rites of passage, initiation marks a before-and-after stage in the individual lives of those who take part in them (Garwood, 2011; Van Gennep, 2013). The initiates (volunteer professionals, students, or seeker-women) who in the vast majority of cases do not know the legal language, become familiar with court decisions, and with the voices and testimonies of the relatives of the victims recorded in the files; and with the perpetrators' statements also with court decisions. In other words, they become familiar with the technical language of

human rights advocacy. Over and above the training for expertise in legal language the ritual of initiation immerses the novice in the complexities and vicissitudes of the conflict and the logics and *modus operandi* of armed actors in specific regions. In addition, they learn the legal and social mechanisms that reproduce impunity. Finally, we enter the universe of the long history of struggle and narratives of the sufferings of the relatives of the disappeared. The ritual immerses them in the world of war, its effects, and its resistances. In an interview at the end of 2018, Frey, a social worker who worked as a volunteer at the FNEB, commented on the initiation that "The documentation of cases was a very solemn process; it was my first encounter with the testimonies and the pain of the victims, and that was very important for me. It changed me and made me appreciate fully the impunity that surrounds the cases."

Seeker-women are included in the initiation ritual, with an additional particularity. Seeker-women document their cases. Despite being an emotionally demanding exercise since it re-activates the pain and suffering, the women familiarize themselves with the evolution of their cases, identify legal obstacles, and foresee possibilities of action. Nancy was my mentor in this documentation process, and she constantly guided me. In a conversation with her in April 2018, while explaining some legal opinions, Nancy commented that "Documenting my case was very important as a sister, as a victim, and as a member of the family. I was honored to document the case of my sisters. While documenting the case, one learns about its current status, that is, what is going on and what stage it has reached. But it was very hard - it was *too* hard. To be reminded of the facts, to find out what the paramilitaries did to my sister. But from that experience, I received the encouragement to keep fighting. I strengthened my love for my sisters and the struggle."

FNEB lawyers guide women searchers in the documentation process. As a result of this training, seeker-women acquire sufficient legal knowledge to provide practical guidance to the

next cohort of new arrivals. In this regard, Pilar described to me the effects of this training in an interview in April 2019: "In the School of Leadership, you learn a lot about everything. For example, if a new relative of someone forcibly disappeared arrives at the Foundation and the lawyers are not available, who receives him and listens to his story? Well, the leaders of the School. We as leaders know what steps must be taken to bring a case of enforced disappearance. Obviously, we cannot practice as lawyers because we are not. But we know the steps leading up to litigation. And we listen to them and recommend strategies." In addition to their own cases, the School's leaders have documented an extraordinary number of cases of other seeker-women. With this exercise, the School leaders not only know the other seeker-women in person, but they also know how their cases are progressing.

After participating in this rite of passage that lasted about a month, I understood Nancy's joke on the day of my incorporation to the FNEB when she said: "Sebastian. You're going to be our coordinator, but we're going to teach you to be it." The seeker-women of the School of Leadership were my mentors all the time I shared my initiation with them.

In addition to delving into the technical language of human rights, the ritual has a unique symbolic particularity. The files where the judicial process condenses stories of struggle and impunity *are* the disappeared people. On a Tuesday afternoon at around 4:30 pm, we received a scathing call from Andrea Torres, coordinator of the legal area. We were looking for a ruling from the Supreme Court of Justice lost in one of the files. While searching for the sentence, we left the files on the floor. Noticing the mess, Andrea told us with a firm tone, "Guys, you have to treat the files with love and respect. You can't leave them all over the place like that. The files *are* the disappeared, always remember it. Therefore, you have to assume that the files are sacred."

So, the files are sacred objects in the strict sense of the term (Durkheim, 1982) and must be treated with the greatest care, and reading them establishes a link of special significance between the reader and the victims who are their protagonists. In other words, reading the file builds a relationship of solidarity (Jimeno, Castillo, & Varela, 2010) with the victims and with our mentors. With the study of the cases, we know the victim's life (an absent being who inhabits a liminal universe, as I mentioned in Chapter 3). We imagine his world and his daily life. The reader sympathizes with the injustices experienced by the victims, and somehow, connects emotionally with them. Sometimes we imagine we are talking to them.

In fact, on Thursday 19, 2018, the documentation team and I had to submit a pilot report<sup>2</sup> on victims of enforced disappearance in the Department of Casanare. The working day was strenuous. After sending it around 11 pm, we decided to go out for a few beers with the team to a bar near the Foundation's headquarters to celebrate the delivery of the report. After a couple of glasses, I returned home and lay down to sleep, exhausted. The following day, I woke up remembering the dream I had the night before. I met an Afro-Colombian boy about 15 years old in the dream, and we talked at length. While (sadly) I don't remember anything from the conversation, the talk was enjoyable, and I laughed with the young man. While making myself a coffee for breakfast the following day, I realized that the young man I had talked to in the dream was Eyder, a victim of forced recruitment who disappeared by the Autodefensas Campesinas del Casanare whose life story I had written the night before. Inwardly I thought that the dream was a logical consequence of the hard concentration needed to write up his case. Eyder's case is painful.

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<sup>2</sup> The reporting process for the Truth Commission and the EBP part of the systematic study of the files. I will describe this reporting process later in more detail later.

After being forcibly recruited, he disappeared in "a school of terror," a training place for paramilitaries. Upon arriving at the Foundation headquarters, I immediately described my dream to Nancy. When I finished the story, she said, "Well, Sebastian, that dream means that Eyder is happy with what we are writing. That is one way for the disappeared to be grateful for our support." I will describe detail of the preparation of the reports later; for the time being, it is sufficient to say that after reading the files and with the writing up of the life stories of the victims, we "adopt" new friendships. The School of Leadership teaches us to love the disappeared.



**Figure 16 Legal files. Photo by the author**

The members of the School of Leadership accompany and monitor the initiate in this ritual. The women with longer service in the organization provide training in knowledge of the law to new arrivals, both women and non-victims. The lines of hierarchy become realigned and the relationship between new members and old acquires a tone of horizontality. "In the School of Leadership, I found the driving force for my cause: It was to support and empower other women by transmitting my empirical knowledge, the knowledge I had learned here. I hang onto the knowledge of older leaders and feed on it. And I use that knowledge to feed other women too," Pilar told me in an interview in 2019. Nancy said much the same in an interview in 2019, "I was your [students and volunteer professionals] teacher even though you are professionals. You came with specialized knowledge, but you didn't know what an indictment was. You didn't know anything about legal language and practice. Thank God I have been able to teach them."

To the extent that empowerment structures the transition from being passive victims of violence to the struggle for truth and justice, the initiation ritual is fundamental in changing meaning for seeker-women. In other words, they begin the struggle for the restoration of their rights. It is worth remembering that seeker-women are not lawyers in strategic litigation or similar practices. At the same time as they began to explore and learn about their cases, they learned to use a computer, and write letters and documents; for some women, this transformation began with their forced displacement to Bogotá; for others, it began after finishing their primary school studies. However, seeker-women become empirical lawyers. This permanent exchange between old and new members establishes a community of practice.

At the end of the initiation process, women come to self-identify as human rights defenders. Nancy put it this way in a class she taught in the Department of Sociology in October 2019:

*"[...] being a human rights defender is very shocking. Because defending our rights and being heard is what we as women have wanted. And I have felt like a human rights defender because of that transformation that I have had, and the knowledge I have been able to share with other people. (...) You begin to transform yourself into an empowered woman because you have to defend your rights as a family and as a victim. So I said to myself: I am a human rights defender because I fight for myself, for my rights, for all the change that has to take place in this country; one has to feel like an advocate in our homes, in our families, in our work. Because if you don't feel like an advocate or leader, you've nowhere to go. One must have that voice, that power, that empowerment, that power to be heard and admired".*

#### **4.3 Knowing the other's pain": Seeker-women as emotional carers**

In addition to being empirical lawyers, seeker-women in the School of Leadership are emotional carers, or as they define themselves, "empirical psychologists." Being mainly women, the School of Leadership forms its members in two key dimensions. The first is the experience of gender inequality in the search process. And second, by being fully aware of the evolution of their cases, seeker-women strengthen their critical awareness when confronted with judicial and institutional authorities. In their struggle for the vindication of the rights and the memory of their relatives, seeker-women confront obstacles associated with the obstinate gender inequality entrenched in the field of justice and embodied by police, prosecutors, lawyers, and their practices. In fact, by making visible the androcentric structure of State institutions (Brush, 2003; Fraser, 2017), the School of Leadership re-signifies the place of seekers as citizens and as women. This

re-signification is of particular importance as the phenomenon of enforced disappearance disproportionately affects mothers, sisters, and daughters. In an informal discussion about gender that we had by the end of 2019, Yanette commented that "when we fight for truth and justice, we also face the *machismo* of the prosecutors, ombudsmen, judges, the commander of the police station. We face up to *machismo*. In the School of Leadership, we talk about gender, we learn about gender, and we try to deploy this knowledge in our practices."

By staging the gender variable at the institutional and personal level, the seeker-women of the School of Leadership generate the incidental and spontaneous knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2010) that is the result of their sharing and gatherings. This knowledge has an emotional component and recreates spontaneous bonds of care, sisterhood, and solidarity. According to Tronto, care implies reaching out to something other than the self; it is not individualistic, it has a cultural and situated character, and it is an ongoing process (Tronto, 2020). In most cases, while women feel lonely in the search, and the School of Leadership builds bonds based on the feelings of companionship and mutual help among the women who come to the Foundation. By sharing experiences, seeker-women understand the pain of others in their hearts, minds and bodies. It is no wonder that women fully identify with each other's emotions by exchanging their testimonies of pain and suffering. Ultimately, the universe of the absent, whether the son, daughter, brother or sister, uncle or aunt, mother or father, the husband, is individually transformed into a collective and emotional force, that ends up as a political weapon. The School of Leadership is a community of pain (Almarío García et al., 2008; Das, 2006) that allows seeking mothers to start the process of re-habitation of everyday life. Finding themselves in the spaces of the FNEB with their deepest emotions, the seeker-women deploy collective care practices to accompany themselves in transforming pain into healing and struggle.

By sharing experiences, seeker-women become empirical psychologists with a deep ethic of care. The ethics of care also supposes a therapeutic and healing perspective of the people who come to the Foundation. By participating in FNEB psychosocial-emotional workshops, they acquire skills regarding emotional accompaniment techniques to support newcomers. Techniques range from tones of voice that case documenters use to interact with victims and, above all, strengthen their disposition for "deep" listening. "Deep listening" is also active and involves a profound process of physical adaptation to the rhythms of testimony, for example, how they exchange glances while listening or hugs when there is a moment of emotional overflow or a celebration for the achievement of a milestones in the search for their missing relatives.

Seeker women habituate a "bodily hexis" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) that ensures that listening to others does not re-victimize the speaker or engage in actions that harm. In short, it is a bodily adaptation that transcends the limits of consciousness and manages to settle in the "heart and body" of the people who share the testimonial moment. And this dimension is important because, in cases of documentation, words have an exceptional value as the weapons of the struggle of seeker-women. Seeker women also learn to process and share silences.



**Figure 17 Sharing the candle. Photo by the author**

As the figure shows, deep listening is not exclusively a narrated exercise. Deep listening involves activating all the senses in the body. In a case documentation workshop in Villavicencio, Meta, the School of Leadership put forward the activity of "lighting the candle." Organized in a "circle of the word," each woman took a candle. The first one to light it said a short prayer: "I light this candle in memory of my loved one who disappeared and as a symbol of my inner light and my struggle." The woman then lit with her candle that of the companion next to her. At the time of doing so, she said a similar prayer looking into the eyes of her companion: "I transfer to you my love for my loved ones and my flame of struggle." At the end of the activity, the women placed the candles on a makeshift altar to honor their struggle and their loved ones, as the figure shows.



**Figure 18 Makshift altar. Photo by the author**

The Colombian Psychologists Collective (COPSICO) is an organization of heterodox psychologists who accompany the organizations of relatives of victims. It is an organization allied to the victims' movement in Colombia and has a wide range of psychosocial and emotional support. Rather than tending to psychoanalytic cures (Roudinesco & Bray, 1997) or behaviorist approaches to "normalize" life, COPSICO recreates collective practices for healing. These practices center on the emotional circulation shared by the participants, processing the damages caused by the forced disappearance. Given the extensive experience with ethnic communities, COPSICO incorporates this knowledge to enhance the union between seeker-women and identify the transition of suffering to resistance. With this incorporation, COPSICO challenges the individualizing practices of social life and hegemonic Western culture to give way to the culture of encounter. The culture of encounter goes beyond the mere sharing of experiences of pain. It resorts to traditional practices

such as the weaving, typical of the indigenous communities of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. These fabrics express ancestral wisdom. Within this perspective, the body is the starting point, and usually, the activities of COPSICO begin with "the bodily activation of the senses."

In a workshop on identifying harm in Bogotá at the end of 2018, COPSICO began the activities with a ritual called "the Gaze". Carolina, director of COPSICO, told the participants that the activity was straightforward: "we are going to walk through the room in any direction, and when the bell rings, we stare into the eyes of the person closest to us. We're going to share looks with this person for two minutes without speaking." All participants exchanged gazes with each other. The figure 19 gives an account of this exercise.



**Figure 19 The gaze. Photo by the author**

"We go through life in an impressive rush. We don't have time to contemplate ourselves or others. We hardly give ourselves time to contemplate the beauty of others. A gaze connects us with our peers. As we look at each other deeply, each can feel the other; be aware of the presence of the other." The women in the ritual connect from deep looks and closeness with the bodies of others.

As I will show in Chapter 4, these deeply symbolic activities strengthen bonds between participants by recreating emotional atmospheres. These atmospheres flow into powerful emotional energies (Collins, 2014) that unite the participants. In other words, seeker-women and students experience collective effervescence where their individual sphere of feeling is briefly energized by the force of collective emotionality (Durkheim, 1982). This collective emotionality is intimately related to the driving force of the struggle, the love for the disappeared.



**Figure 20** Concluding activity: hugs. Photo by the author

As the figure shows, encounters with seeker-women, students and volunteer professionals ending in collective hugs.

Seeker-women not only exchange experiences of pain and suffering: they also transmit knowledge of their struggles to find their loved one alone or together with others. This accumulation of practical and daily experiences becomes knowledge shared by woman to woman.

In these learning processes Yanette and Andrea, founding mothers of the FNEB (see Chapter 2 play a crucial role. Both Yanette and Andrea, who are seeker-women and expert lawyers, act as legal counsel for all seeker-women who join the FNEB. As mentioned in Chapter 2 also, the Bautista family has a long history of defending human rights, and always welcomes women under their protective mantle. Yanette and Andrea become "mothers" to the women who come to the FNEB, giving them protection and accompaniment. In national meetings with seeker-women, newly-admitted women constantly appreciate the legal and psychosocial accompaniment that the FNEB offers. For example, Nancy points out that "Yanette is a mother and father to us. She is a woman who wants us as women to continue that struggle. Let us continue to fight for the clarification of the truth. They have passed their knowledge on to us as human rights defenders and their experience as fighting women."

Paulina, a mother whose search covers the Departments of Meta and Guaviare and whom I will comment on later, mentioned something similar at a regional meeting. "Dr. Yanette is like our mother. Yanette and Andrea welcomed all the mothers of Meta and Guaviare. We had a relationship with other organizations such as MOVICE, but with the FNEB, we felt accompanied in the legal and emotional aspects. With the Foundation, we somehow feel protected and heard."

Beyond reproducing the hierarchical dynamics typical of the heteronormative and patriarchal family structure (Gutiérrez de Pineda, 1998; Pachón, 2005), the School of Leadership

reproduces horizontal practices, care and mutual aid. Seeker-women assume themselves as "sisters of struggle," recreating strong ties of a sorority.

#### **4.4 Local wisdom and knowledge: The School of Leadership**

As I have argued, the School of Leadership enhances the accumulated wisdom of seeker-women as researchers, empirical lawyers, and emotional caregivers. The meeting spaces that the FNEB promotes are safe spaces for dialogue, the exchange of ideas and reflections, and emotions that sometimes acquire an aesthetic sense. Women process their pain by transforming it into a political struggle, filling it with meaning with aesthetic-expressive manifestations. With the "aestheticization" of their coping mechanisms, seeker-women transcend the intimate contours of their long experiences of struggle. They tend to raise awareness of the damage caused by enforced disappearance to society at large. As a result of aestheticization, seeker-women display "poetics of struggle." Robin Kelley states that "in the poetics of struggle and lived experience, in the utterances of ordinary folk, in the cultural products of social movements, in the reflections of activists, we discover the many different cognitive maps of the future, of the world not yet born" (Kelley, 2002). In analyzing the political communication civil rights movement in the sixties of the last century, Iton argues that the relationship between political and aesthetic communication is "aesthetic grammars that determine the relative success of political interactions and the impact of political communication in the cultural real: signs, styles and performances who's qualities transcend the political and artistic realms"(Iton, 2010, p. 9).

The "cultural" life of social movements is expressed in poetry, documentaries, art and music and tends to unite the political and cultural worlds in pedagogical and educational ways (Dykstra & Law, 1994). With these poetics of struggle, seeker-women re-signify the meanings of the effects of war that circulate in public opinion. By materializing the knowledge and wisdom they share in their encounters, seeker-women offer alternatives of "life" to overcome the war and achieve real and effective peace. With calls for solidarity, collective care, and "putting ourselves in the shoes of others," the seeker-women challenge the official versions that give an account of the evolution of the conflict and challenge the ethical substrate of citizenship. Seeker-women are the "ethical reserves of society," and by being so, they allow us to visualize possible worlds.

The School of Leadership leader, Pilar, has successfully explored this aesthetic dimension with an innate talent for music. She has explored rock and hip hop and, in her lyrics, narrates the experience of war, more specifically, what it means to be a victim of enforced disappearance. Pilar was a finalist in a singing competition organized by the City of Bogotá. Pilar writes her own songs for her amazing voice, which can be heard accompanying the encounters of seeker-women. One of them is "Daughters of a Disappeared",

*DAUGHTERS OF A DISAPPEARED.*

*Since they forgot...*

*The ones who never came back*

*Of those who never came...*

*Because now they are such an innate memory*

*For those who no longer speak....*

*Because their words were cut off by the many tears*

*Of those never found...*

*Because they never found peace.*

*Today I think of the endless time that has passed, where for love I still keep your  
legacy*

*I declare that I have found a mission in the warm embrace that you have left me.*

*In the hug that dad gave me, the last hug saying goodbye - when will he return?.*

*I'm thinking he may be gone for ever, a time that will never end.*

*For ever, now gone from us.*

*Life moves on as it pleases, we keep saying things,  
but we see little when we realize what is happening.*

*In this reality that fails every day, we slide into the mentality of thinking that this  
will never happen, but there is a story of a girl sitting here.*

*In a stable she was thinking about the enforced disappearance of her father, that  
he will not return.*

*Since they were forgotten...*

*Those who never returned*

*Of those who never arrived..*

*Because now they are such an innate memory*

*For those who no longer speak....*

*Because their words were cut off by the many tears*

*Of those never found...*

*Because they never found peace.*

*Recognize the absence of a pain that remains....*

*Disregard the normality of a prevailing crime.*

*An absent body with a present soul.*

*HIJAS DE UN DESAPARECIDO.*

*Desde que se olvidaron....*

*Los que nunca regresaron*

*De aquellos que nunca llegaron....*

*Porque ahora son un recuerdo tan innato*

*Por los que ya no hablaron....*

*Porque sus palabras fueron segadas en tanto llanto*

*De aquellos que nunca encontraron...*

*Porque nunca encontraron la paz.*

*Hoy pienso en el inmenso tiempo que ha pasado, donde por amor aun guardo tu  
legado*

*Manifiesto que una misión he encontrado en el cálido abrazo que me has dejado.*

*En el Cálido abrazo que me dio papá, el ultimo al despedirse cuando volverá.*

*Ando pensando si siempre será un para siempre que nunca va terminar.*

*Un para siempre, que ahora se nos va.*

*La vida se mueve a su antojo, expresamos mucho,*

*pero vemos poco cuando nos damos cuenta de lo que pasa.*

*En esta realidad que cada día fracasa, nos metemos en la mentalidad de andar  
pensando que esto nunca va a pasar pero hay relato de una niña aquí sentada.*

*En un establo estaba pensando en la desaparición forzada, de su padre que no volverá.*

*Desde que se olvidaron....*

*Los que nunca regresaron*

*De aquellos que nunca llegaron....*

*Porque ahora son un recuerdo tan innato*

*Por los que ya no hablaron....*

*Porque sus palabras fueron segadas en tanto llanto*

*De aquellos que nunca encontraron...*

*Porque nunca encontraron la paz.*

*Reconocer la ausencia de un dolor que permanece....*

*Desconocer la normalidad de un crimen que prevalece-.*

*Un cuerpo ausente con alma presente.*



was not a guerrilla; no! he was the carpenter, the healer, an important figure in that community. And seeking to restore the good name of that person in this way was how the organization began - empirically."

"Madres por la Vida" (*"Mothers for Life"*), seeks to highlight how women resist violence. As Luz Dary suggests, "Our organization is called Mothers for Life, because we learned that within the context of the armed conflict, it is the woman who experiences the harshest violence from men; so, if we are the givers of life, then we must defend that life."

They are "barefoot brigade" women because they travel through their ancestral territories on their bare feet.

Through an arduous work of recovery and re-signification of memories that range from those of their loved ones to the memory of the territory and the ancestral traditions, Mothers for Life faces the process of physical and cultural extermination of the "extended black family" that they experience as Afro-descendant communities. They engage in practices that articulate the memory of the disappeared with the memory of the community. With this articulation, they denounce the atrocities perpetrated in the armed conflict by legal or illegal actors alike. They also have a history of impoverishment and dispossession that they re-conceive with these practices.

Mothers for Life is one of the most important and longest-established organizations in Buenaventura and has promoted not only actions of accompaniment, recovery of memory and denunciation, but also aimed at leaving installed capacity, contributing to the creation of other organizations of victims and human rights defenders such as FUNDESCODES and the Network of Butterflies with New Wings, among others. According to the FNEB report, Luz Dary comments that:

*“It turns out that the armed conflict in Buenaventura had taken away our right to mourn our dead. For example, in the house where Rigoberto lived, he died, but how do we hold a wake for him? There, through our prayers, through all that ritual required to bid farewell to the dead and to have the accompaniment of his neighbors all as it should be; and how do we say farewell to him, and plant him in the earth? - we do not bury the dead, we plant them. And then the agents of violence, or at least the person who ordered the killing, sent a commission to prove that he had indeed been killed. Then they started massacring us so that we wouldn't get together at home, but had to go to the funeral 'parlor as you do around here [in the city]. (FNEB, 2019)*

Mortuary songs (alabaos, gualíes, tumba, alivios) are ritual mourning practices typical of the Afro-descendant communities of the Pacific coastal region. As artifacts of memory, they are products of the encounter between the Catholic imposition during the Spanish colonial era, campaigns of evangelization (they claim to be Catholics), and ancestral African traditions. For the same reason, they are living proof of the resistance to the devastation of their culture. (Arocha, Botero, Camargo, González, & Lleras, 2008; Vergara-Figueroa, 2018). A funeral is not so much a family, private and intimate affair as a rituals of Afro-descendant communities in which the congregation is the whole neighborhood which comes together accompanying for various ritual moments to accompany the person who died and his family (Arocha et al., 2008)

At a class session on Sociology of Violence and Human Rights at the National University, Luz Dary gave us an "alabao" that condenses the experience of violence and death,

*Para afuera viene un barco*

*No sé qué barco será.*

*Para fuera viene un barco*

*No sé qué barco será  
Será la tirana muerte que ella nos viene a llevar  
Será la tirana muerte que ella nos viene a llevar  
Tirana, tirana eres  
Tirana viene y se va  
Cuidado con mi hermanito no me lo va a desaparecer  
Cuidado con mi hermanito no te la va a llevar*

*There goes a ship  
I don't know what ship it is.  
There goes a ship  
I don't know what ship it is.  
It will be the tyrannical death that comes to take us  
It will be the tyrannical death that comes to take us  
Tyrant, tyrant you are  
The tyrant comes and goes  
Be careful with my little brother, he's not going to disappear  
Be careful with my little brother, he's not going to take him away*

Enforced disappearance makes it impossible to mourn in this way, and Mothers for Life resignifies its ritual practices to keep the ancestral memory alive. From the accompaniment to wakes as singers and leaders of the ritual spaces to the dramatization of the mortuary rites, Mothers for Life transformed the intentions of the rites of death to deny the interruption of the experience

of survival by a disappearance. For example, with the rite of the "body present" , the community gathers to sing "alivios " to call the missing person to appear. With the Mothers for Life adaptation of the "Body Present " ritual, the community gathers around a small coffin representing the disappeared person. The community shares food and sings "alivios", not "alabaos" because, according to Luz Dary, "the alabaos are only for the dead people". As the name of this threnody suggests, the "Alivios" are songs to give relief to the disappeared.

Luz Dary builds her leadership from the ancestral traditions of black communities and encounters with other peasants, indigenous and white women. In addition, she combines ancestral knowledge with the symbolic universe of the Catholic Church. With the incorporation of Mothers of Life to the FNEB, Luz Dary establishes herself as a regional leader and transfers her knowledge to the organization's members. As she told us in a 2019 interview, "I always say that the university that taught me was the university of life because I learn from every woman." It is worth quoting her at greater length:

"I was 20th when I started, I don't know who put me up as a leader, what I do know is that I have been rebellious, contradictory... I don't like to repeat someone else said, OK? So I always take that as freedom, that the leader starts from one thing: to teach, to teach so that what the leader knows passes on from generation to generation, looking at the qualities of people, with their abilities (...) I have been a leader who I like to move ahead, not stand still (...) So a leader does what geese do: she takes flight, but then lags so that can move up. When one drops back, those who move forward will judge whether what one did was right or wrong. And I am a leader that likes to handle wisdom - the wisdom that is a gift that God gives, and that emanates from the cosmic view, from what is part of the occult, from the visible, from the invisible, from what is

there, from the sacred. So that leader must know who he's going to command, who he's going to use as a guide, because he has burden of final responsibility."

By connecting ancestral spirituality with the Catholic symbolic universe, Luz Dary defines her leadership as a pedagogy of love. In the same talk at the Department of Sociology at Universidad Nacional, Luz Dary said:

"We as Mothers for Life need people like you [university students] who are interested in our processes, who come to Buenaventura and do their internships here, who "sit with us," who take the viche, the guaro, the tumbacatre. Let's dance the currulao, so that you can come to know all this. It is good to know the roots, know everything unknown, and explore the logic of this [dynamics of armed actors and practices of resistance of the communities] because the problem is common to all Colombians. When they kill a social leader, they are killing the other leaders, their ancestral knowledge, their knowledge of life. But we are still scoundrels, still leading. We lead with the teachings of Jesus Christ and his pedagogy of love. That is my pedagogy, the pedagogy of love. If I have no love, nothing serves me, and if love is not in me, I cannot descend into the victims' causes. I cannot defend the causes of the territory. I also ask our orishas to accompany us all in our empowerment processes."

#### **4.4.2 Between theatre and dolls: The Mothers of Meta and Guaviare**

July 18, 2019, was a memorable day for the FNEB. On that day, the FNEB organized a national meeting with the participation of several relatives of victims. Relatives of Mothers for Life of Buenaventura and the Mothers of Meta and Guaviare accompanied the activities. At the end of the meeting, Yanette Bautista announced great news: the Mothers of Meta and the Guaviare

had incorporated themselves into the FNEB. The joy and happiness of the Mothers were evident, as Amparo mentioned, "That was very nice because when we finished mandalas, Dr. Yanette came in and gave us the news. That moment was very good, very cool because as we have always said, we are very grateful to have this bond because here we are, many mothers. Legally we were alone; but no longer because, thank God, there is the Nydia Erika Bautista Foundation. It has given us a lot of support and many beautiful things, starting with all of you, all that wonderful team. We have done a very good job, but a lot needs to be done".

With the entry into the FNEB of the Mothers of Meta and Guaviare, the organization added invaluable experiences in terms of memory initiatives and the building of memory communities. The Mothers of Meta and Guaviare have a long history in the struggle for human rights, justice, and truth and are pioneers in elaborating artistic pieces of particular significance. With previous participation in other victims' organizations such as MOVICE (Movement of Victims of State Crimes), Las Madres del Meta and El Guaviare perform theatrical pieces to make the crime of enforced disappearance visible, with a profound impact on public opinion. With no training in the performing arts, mothers represent the tragedy of enforced disappearance on stage.

In first instance, The Mothers of Meta and El Guaviare organized the theater group El Tente and staged the play "Anunciado la Ausencia". The Tente is a bird of strong territorial character species that peasants of the region use as a protective element of their homes. In this play, the Mothers recreate both the atrocities experienced and the history of their search spontaneously, without a script. They recreate the wait for a sign or hint that will allow them to find their absent relative.

The Mothers of Meta and Guaviare stage their feelings and emotions starkly and express all their pain. Those of us who saw the play live couldn't control our tears.

The Mothers called their new theater group "Corocoras" after they had left MOVICE and joined the FNEB. The Corocoras are bright red birds that inhabit the plains of Meta and Guaviare. According to Amparo, leader of the group, the Corocoras represent, both life and blood spilled and "what nobody takes into account" because, she adds, "there are very few who put themselves in our shoes." Amparo reports that,

"The play was created on April 9, 2017. With it, we wanted to make enforced disappearance in Colombia visible and reach the whole range of government agencies. The work was composed by Himelda, Liliana, Magdalena, Marta Yanette, and myself. Each one tells the story of their missing relatives and the stories of the struggle to find them. Why "seeker mothers"? because we are looking for our missing children. Also because we speak for many mothers who have died of cancer and who no longer speak of the pain that overwhelmed them after the disappearance of their children. So we call ourselves mothers Corocora Seeker Mothers".

Some seeker-women somatize the experience of enforced disappearance. As Amparo mentions, breast cancer is common among women searching for their missing relatives. According to Amparo, the relationship between breast cancer and enforced disappearance is based on the experience of interrupted motherhood.

The Mothers of Meta and Guaviare are not just well-known theater actresses. Paulina is a prominent human rights defender. After the disappearance of her daughter Cristina Cobo Mahecha (Álvarez, 2019). Paulina started a search that is still unfinished. In the process Paulina has become an artist and poetess, and the international community recognized her for her exhibition of the Cristinas del Conflicto. After taking part in the play Teatro el Tente, Paulina made rag dolls for several years that represent "all forcibly disappeared peasant women." Paulina calls them the

"Cristinas of the Conflict" because "all the disappeared women are Cristinas; they are my daughters," she told me in an informal conversation.

Cristina Cobo Mahecha, Paulina's daughter, was a nurse at the health center in Calamar, a municipality in the Department of Guaviare. Paramilitary groups disappeared her at a roadblock somewhere on between Calamar and San José del Guaviare. The paramilitaries not only murdered her, they also manipulated her body to "play football with her head" (Álvarez, 2019). So far, there is no trace of Cristina. Paulina's struggle and persistence in her search has persuaded the authorities of San José del Guaviare to name the renovated health center of Calamar "Cristina Cobo Mahecha Hospital" to honor her memory.

In a lengthy telephone conversation at the beginning of 2021, Paulina told me that "As a leader and as a woman seeker, one comes to know many other seeker-women in meetings in all corners of Colombia. They tell me the stories of their missing daughters, and I make them a doll. And so far, I've done more than 70!"



**Figure 22 Yanette Bautista and Cristina Cobo Mahecha. Photo by the author**

In another informal conversation towards the end of 2019, Paulina told me that, "I weave these dolls not to make the pain goes away. For a mother of the disappeared, the pain never goes away. But it's a way of not paying homage to my daughter Cristina, and at the same time, it's a tribute to all the other women who have disappeared as a result of the forces of conflict."

Paulina describes women victims of disappearance, sexual violence, murder, and other crimes due to the armed conflict as a withered garden. Paulina's goal is therefore to revive the garden, which represents the world of women, by making rag dolls that she baptizes with the name of flowers. "Look, Sebastian, this doll that I give you is called Begonia, and it represents a black Palenquera woman that I met a few years ago and whose son was disappeared by the paramilitaries in the Montes de María," Paulina told me when she gave me one of her dolls. Begonia has a place of honor in my house.

Her ragdolls are all different. Each of them tells the story of a different woman with her own suffering from disappearance. Paulina has woven black women, indigenous women, peasant women, nurses, guerrilla women, military women. In that same conversation of 2019, Paulina told me that "I imagine the Cristinas as beautiful flowers of a beautiful garden. And I imagine them that way because the disappeared women are *all* beautiful women. They are beautiful flowers."



**Figure 23 Cristina of the conflict. Photo by the author**

When weaving the dolls, Paulina concentrates on their details, their singularities, always evoking the woman who gave her testimony. She uses dacron, a lightweight, sturdy, "easy-to-get" fabric, to make the skin of each doll. She uses colors pink, dark brown, etc. depending on the victim's story of the disappearance".

In the production process, Paulina speaks to dolls as if they were her daughters: "They have to look very beautiful, very beautiful. They have to show that disappeared women existed in this

society"; Paulina also weaves their hair, thread after thread. She makes them frizzy, braided, or with straight black, blond, red or brown hair; she makes the dress in dacron and each is made to measure, "so that they are not left naked"; She puts ribbons on their hair and makes their shoes. Some of them go with posies, earrings, and other distinctive details; finally, with oils and watercolors she draws the shadows of the face with, and delineates the face, lips, nose, and eyes in oils. For Paulina, the eyes are the essence of rural women, and they express their personality. Finally, Paulina baptizes them with the name of a flower. In Paulina's imagined Garden of Colombia, Dahlias, Daoses, Begonias, Lilies inhabit it.

In addition to being an actress and artist, Paulina is an extraordinary poetess. Her poems accompany the encounters of women and start from sharing experiences with them. In the first poem, "Posthumous Homage to the Cristinas of the Conflict," Paulina draws narrative lines to understand the experience of missing women. The poem says,

*"POSTHUMOUS HOMAGE TO THE CRISTINAS OF THE CONFLICT" BY*

*PAULINA MAHECHA SAYS SO*

*They were born to brighten the world and give happiness to their families*

*Songbirds celebrated their arrival with their trills, with much joy,*

*They grew up in different environments.*

*They ran in their homes playing around.*

*The full moon gave them light*

*They never felt fear, for they were innocent.*

*Everything seemed like happiness in that flower garden*

*Its beautiful petals bloomed*

*The bees were coming to suck their nectar*

*They were approaching puberty.*

*They didn't know that the enemies in the field were stalking them.*

*They were frequently watching them, following in their footsteps.*

*It's time to start falling in love*

*Their cocoons opened to show their beauty.*

*Her parents were preparing to celebrate her fifteenth birthday.*

*Their dreams were cut short because they were snatched away,*

*Kidnapped in carts and canoes*

*Gagged, harassed, tried and torn limb from limb despite her young age*

*For crimes, she had not committed*

*They hadn't even been initiated into the war.*

*They were innocent creatures that violence took away.*

*And in heaven they are enjoying the eternal presence*

*It also happened with adult women.*

*Who inhabited those regions*

*They also suffered the same fate.*

*Making their children orphans*

*Their parents and families searching for their bodies.*

*To give them Christian burial.*

*They suffer from grieving*

*The memory was frozen in their memories*

*Silently, silently*

*They walk with their heads bowed, saying nothing*

*They grew sick and died*

*With no one to take pity on them.*

*EL POEMA "HOMENAJE PÓSTUMO A LAS CRISTINAS DEL CONFLICTO" DE  
PAULINA MAHECHA*

*Nacieron para alegrar el mundo y dar felicidad a sus familias*

*Pájaros cantores celebraban con sus trinos su llegada, con mucho jolgorio,*

*Crecieron en ambientes distintos.*

*Corrían en sus casas jugueteando*

*La luna llena les brindaba luz*

*Nunca sintieron temor, pues eran inocentes*

*Todo parecía felicidad en aquel jardín de flores*

*Sus bellos pétalos florecían*

*Las abejas se acercaban a chupar su néctar*

*Se acercaban a la pubertad.*

*No sabían que los enemigos en el campo las asechaban*

*Frecuentemente las estaban observando, siguiendo sus pasos*

*Llegaba la hora de empezar a enamorarse*

*Sus capullos se abrían para mostrar su belleza.*

*Sus padres se preparaban para celebrar sus quince años.*

*Sus sueños se truncaron porque fueron plagiadas,*

*Llevadas secuestradas en carros y canoas,*

*Amordazadas, vejadas,*

*Juzgadas y desmembradas,*

*A pesar de su corta edad*

*Por crímenes que no habían cometido*

*Ni siquiera se habían empapado de la guerra*

*Eran inocentes criaturas que la violencia se llevó.*

*En el cielo están gozando de la eterna presencia*

*Igualmente aconteció con las mujeres adultas*

*Que habitaban aquellas regiones  
También corrieron la misma suerte  
Dejando a sus hijos huérfanos*

*Sus padres y familias buscando sus cuerpos.  
Para darles cristianas sepultura.  
Sufren por hacerle duelo  
El recuerdo quedó congelando en sus memorias  
Callan en silencio*

*Caminan cabizbajos, taciturnos  
Enferman y mueren  
Nadie se apiadó de ellos.*

In the second poem, Paulina pays homage to the Seeker-women. In this poem, she captures the pain and persistence of women searching for their loved ones. I think there is no better way to understand these sensitivities than by reading this poem,

*SEEKER-WOMEN OF THEIR CHILDREN*

*They sacrificed their happiness  
Searching for their forcibly disappeared children  
They have walked through valleys and mountains  
Stepping on steep stones*

*Navigating mighty rivers*

*They have slept in the thickets of the jungle*

*Thunder and lightning whipped their heads*

*They have felt fear in the dark night*

*When they heard the passage of wild beasts and their prey*

*Silent witnesses to this cruel violence*

*That struck vulnerable people*

*They had lived happily in the green fields*

*Trying to make Colombia great*

*They produced what they needed for life*

*But the war confiscated their dreams and their lands.*

*They were accused of serving the guns of both sides.*

*tried and sentenced to death*

*(naturally, after torture and humiliation)*

*Their bodies were dismembered,*

*With a knife, machete or chainsaw*

*And left 'for people to laugh.*

*In those ruined regions,*

*For the birds to eat .*

*So people knew the fate of many of them.*

*After many years of cruel uncertainty,  
Their families have not been able to grieve  
They are sick in soul and body  
They agonize waiting for news  
Of their missing children*

*On this earth you will never see them again  
They only have the consolation left  
That when they die, they be reunited with them in heaven,  
And they celebrate that happy meeting  
In the presence of an Almighty God  
Where He has reserved his many mansions for them*

*Earthly things have been left  
Behind, in oblivion;  
The fearful suffering is over now  
And the angels wait to welcome those seeker-women*

*Tireless fighters  
Ceaselessly searching for their children  
And finally finding them, in heaven*

*There they rest and are saying to among themselves.*

*“Well, was it worth it?”*

*After all those years of waiting,*

*We have been rewarded with eternal life*

*Some are here today*

*In this circle of knowledge*

*Celebrating this meeting with joy*

*In tribute to our women victims.*

#### ***MUJERES BUSCADORAS DE SUS HIJOS***

*Sacrificaron su felicidad*

*Buscando a sus hijos desaparecidos forzadamente*

*Han caminado por valles y montañas*

*Por escarpadas rocas*

*Navegando por caudalosos ríos*

*Han dormido en la espesura de la selva*

*Truenos y relámpagos azotaban sus cabezas*

*Sentían miedo en la noche oscura*

*Cuando escuchaban paso de fieras y otros animales*

*Testigos mudos de esta cruel violencia*

*Que azotó a las personas vulnerables*

*Vivían felices en los verdes campos*

*Tratando de hacer grande a Colombia*

*Producían sus medios de subsistencia*

*Pero la guerra confiscó sus sueños y sus tierras*

*Fueron acusados de servir a uno y otro grupo armado.*

*Juzgados y condenado a la pena capital*

*No sin antes torturarlos y vejarnos*

*Sus cuerpos fueron desmembrados,*

*Con cuchillo, machete o motosierra*

*Y puestos al escarnio público.*

*En aquellas regiones afectadas,*

*Para que aves de rapiña los comieran.*

*De muchos se supo qué pasó.*

*Después de muchos años de cruel incertidumbre,*

*Sus familias no han podido hacer el duelo*

*Están enfermas del alma y cuerpo*

*Agonizan esperando una noticia*

*De sus hijos desaparecidos*

*En esta tierra no volverán a verlos nunca más  
Sólo les queda aquel consuelo  
De cuando mueran en el cielo se reúnan con ellos,  
Celebran dichas aquel encuentro  
Ante la presencia de un Dios Todopoderoso  
Que les tenía reservada una morada*

*Las cosas terrenales han quedado  
Atrás en el pasado y el olvido  
El sufrimiento más temido ha terminado  
Los ángeles les dan la bienvenida  
A aquellas mujeres buscadoras*

*Luchadoras incansables en la búsqueda  
Que siempre persistieron en encontrar sus hijos  
Hasta que los hallaron en el cielo*

*Ahí descansaron y dijeron entre ellas  
Buscar si valió la pena  
A pesar de muchos años de espera,  
Hemos sido premiadas con la vida eterna*

*Algunas hoy están aquí presentes*

*En este círculo de saberes*

*Celebrando con regocijo este encuentro*

*En homenaje a nuestras víctimas mujeres.*

## **5.0 The Community of Hope: setting up solidarity networks.**

The previous chapter explored the universe of the meaning of the FNEB seeker-women and their relationship with the School of Leadership. I argued that women form a community of practice in defending human rights where they deploy their accumulated knowledge of their search processes. With this knowledge, seeker-women self-identify as empirical "researchers, lawyers, and therapists." By sharing their testimonies and trajectories of struggle, women form each other as leaders in the defense of human rights under horizontal parameters of mutual aid and solidarity. In their exchanges, women promote "active and deep listening" as a starting point for their care ethics.

Women express this testimonial, narrative, bodily knowledge in various expressive aesthetic manifestations such as songs, rag dolls, poetry, with which they attempt to sensitize society in general about enforced disappearance. These aesthetic-expressive manifestations also make women also powerful pedagogues in relation to possible futures for coexistence and peace. They are formers for peace and a dignified life.

This chapter will explore the processes of building solidarity between seeker-women and students and volunteer professionals. In other words, it explores the processes of building bonds of solidarity between victims of violence and the non-victim population, which is a key factor in the formation of activists of meaning. This chapter extends the concept of emotional community (De Marinis, 2018; Jimeno, Varela Corredor, & Castillo Ardila, 2015; Jimeno, Varela, & Castillo, 2018; Pearce, 2018; Stephen, 2018), and argues that solidarity between victims and non-victims is not built only on the circulation of the testimony of pain; it also occurs when sharing liminal

moments of a powerful emotional content that end up configuring experiences of communities (E. Turner, 2012; V. Turner, 1988). In these shared scenarios between victims and non-victims, emotional and effervescent atmospheres define the potency of the bonds.

Chapter falls into two parts. The first, will explore the daily lives of the professionals and students who arrive at the FNEB and their relationships with the women of the School of Leadership s. Through the emotional content of these interactions, seeker-women and student and professional volunteers build ethical-political horizons of action.

The second part describes the processes of preparing the FNEB reports where the cumulus of knowledge described in the previous chapters are incorporated.

### **5.1 The community of Hope: the victim – non-victim nexus**

With the creation of the Integral System of Justice, Truth and Guarantees of Non-Repetition proposed in the Peace Agreement between President Santos and the FARC guerrillas, the organizations of relatives of victims found an environment of openness to mobilize their testimonies, knowledge, and memory initiatives. Some organizations opened their doors to non-victims to prepare their reports for submission to the institutions of transition, mainly from the academic field. The FNEB was no exception. This situation was unprecedented in Colombian history, and since 2017, organizations have begun to incorporate professionals and students of human and social sciences into their teams. Sociologists, anthropologists, historians, political scientists, and students from these same disciplines supported the organizations drafting the final reports.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, I joined the FNEB as coordinator for documenting cases of enforced disappearance. As coordinator, I had a threefold function: on the one hand, I supervised the work of legal substantiation (see Chapter 2) that was part of the seeker-women's daily activities. To the extent that the work of legal substantiation is key to professional strategic litigation, I reviewed the exercises in synthesis that the leaders of the School had drafted. I also reviewed the substantiation work of the students. This exercise of substantiation is part of the initiation ritual that we all go through.

As a second responsibility, I coordinated the documentation of cases of new seeker-women who came to the organization. There will be a detailed description of the documentation process later in this Chapter, but at this point it is simply worth noting that before the meeting with the new women, the leaders of the School of Leadership trained us in how to lead the conversation with the newcomers. This training is used to adapt the body for deep and active listening. Finally, I coordinated the team that drafted the reports that the FNEB will deliver to the Truth Commission, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, and the Missing Persons Search Unit.

I arrived at the same time as several Social Work students from Universidad Nacional joined the FNEB team. In this first cohort, Yuli, Katy, Camilo H, Camilo R, Paula, and Karen accompanied the organization's activities. Frey, a social worker who had graduated from the university, also joined as a volunteer. As is well known, the Department of Social Work of Universidad Nacional has extensive experience in accompanying social organizations. These students mounted an intense campaign of recruitment of volunteers within the university.

By June 2018, the number of students entering the FNEB had expanded considerably. Two anthropology students from the Universidad de Los Andes, Juana and Carlota, and an anthropology student from the Universidad Pontificia Javeriana, Camilo Y joined them. In addition, Luisa, a

final semester sociology student at Universidad Nacional, also came into the organization. Finally, a social worker Nathalia and a sociologist, Henri, were involved as volunteer professionals.

At the end of 2018, several students of the last semesters of the Sociology Program of Universidad Nacional joined the organization: Juan, Puti, Ana, Oscar, Julián F, Julián Fon, Felipe, and Vargas. Given the unusual interest that the work in the organization aroused among the student population, Yanette Bautista, director of the FNEB, decided to formalize a strategic alliance with the Faculty of Human Sciences of Universidad Nacional. She consolidated an agreement to incorporate new students to do their internships with the Foundation each new academic semester. This "renewed encounter" between academia and the social movement of victims, mainly relatives of the disappeared, is one of the effects of the peace process signed in 2016 between the Santos administration and the FARC guerrillas. The relationship between academia and social movement materialized because the narratives and experiences of pain and suffering were placed at the heart of the peace agreements. The central axis of the materialization was the visibility of pain, the struggle for the vindication of human rights, and above all, a deep conviction that war and violence are not the means to achieve significant social change. The agreement between the Faculty of Human Sciences and the FNEB, stated that the FNEB would offer certification of work experience and, in some cases, a transport subsidy for students. After six months of work and according to the "commitment and mystique" that the students demonstrated, the FNEB would then consider offering them formal work, depending on budget availability.

However, not all students who came to FNEB were persistent in their work in the organization. As a documentation coordinator, I had the responsibility of interviewing student candidates for incorporation as interns. Interestingly, the candidates who came to the FNEB included several psychology students and some with training in psychoanalysis. In the interviews

they told me that they dreamed of working with victims of the conflict and applying the academic knowledge accumulated in their studies to "help process the victims' pain." However, students of psychology and psychoanalysis failed to connect with the dynamics of the organization. In an informal conversation, while we shared lunch with the leaders of the School of Leadership, Jenny commented that "we are very suspicious of people, in this case of students, who come to "teach" us how to process our pains. Psychologists have a theoretical perspective that works very well in paper but not in practice. Here we learn the how-to-heal between us, politicizing this healing process. And now we pass this on to the students who learn from us. We don't do well with people who come to tell us how to feel and do our processes." Indeed, no student of psychology or psychoanalysis belonged to the community of hope.

As Yanette mentioned when we talked in mid-2019 about the Community of Hope, "the antecedent of the Community of Hope is the need to involve society in our struggle, to accompany the families of victims of enforced disappearance, so that they will not be alone. There is the further objective of mobilizing society, so that it is shaken up after listening to what we have lived here. No-one will be the same after this experience. No-one will be the same after sharing with the victims' relatives and listening to their pain. And the relatives will not be the same either after seeing the students. They represent the new generations., They sit next to the relatives, taking notes, crying with them, hugging them, understanding them, helping them in psychosocial work; the relatives will never be the same again.

Indeed, those of us who pass through the Community of Hope do not remain the same. We went through a profound process of personal transformation that powerfully challenged our ways of seeing the world and the struggle for social justice. Our time at the FNEB as students and professionals led us to rethink our academic praxis. While social work students were more exposed

to community work in their careers, the experience was much more transformative for those with sociological training. In an informal conversation with Juan at the beginning of 2021, he told me, "I am still here at the FNEB, working with the relatives because *I feel* it, I feel deep inside me that is what I have to do. Beyond what they can pay me, I do it because I am committed to accompany seeker-women from the bottom of my heart." It is precisely this "feeling" to which Juan refers, one of the critical elements in our process of formation as activists of meaning. Seeker-women train our hearts, and with this, the non-victim population joins the struggle of the seeker families.

The community of hope is the second formative moment of the FNEB. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Yanette thought to incorporate students into the organization, given the loneliness that victims' organizations experienced in their struggle. At a team meeting in December 2019, Yanette told us that "the Community of Hope arises from the loneliness that the relatives of the historically disappeared have experienced. We experienced the loneliness of going out on the streets and working here alone, using just instinct and popular knowledge. As I have always told you, having students who, with their heads, hands, hearts and stomachs, will help us fight is always very comforting. The School of Leadership is a strategy of empowerment of the families of victims, and the Community of Hope is a tool of mixed resistance that merges academic knowledge with popular knowledge. What we intend with the Community of Hope is to leave installed capacity for the struggle in society," Yanette commented in that same meeting.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Community of Hope is an emotional community that acquires a character of resistance (Jimeno et al., 2015). The daily and emotional interaction between seeker-women and students and professionals structures ethical-political action by merging popular knowledge and feelings with academic knowledge. In the 2019 interview mentioned above, Yanette commented that "students are the hands and heads of relatives who have

not been able to go to university and who transfer their testimonies and cases of enforced disappearance to history classrooms, which will sensitize this whole country, that has always been our dream."

Students and professionals who come to the FNEB cannot experience the pain that seeker-women carry in their bodies, hearts and minds. Students and volunteer professionals have two impediments that make it impossible to understand the seekers' world of suffering and pain: our place in the gender/race/class matrix (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013) and the fact that we are not victims of armed conflict. In my case, I am a white middle-class professional man, and in the terms of the racial taxonomies that circulate in Colombian society (Wade, 2014), it is simply impossible for me to "feel" the pain of women. I share this circumstance with the male students and volunteers. The second impediment is that we do not carry the effects of conflict in our bodies. Despite these impediments, however, the daily interactions between searchers and non-victims managed to establish close links of mutual learning in the defense of human rights. In their study on the Nasa indigenous community in Cauca, Colombia, Myriam Jimeno and her collaborators argue that these abysmal differences between the non-victim population are navigated by sharing testimonial scenarios between victims and non-victims. In fact, According to Jimeno, emotional communities "are created through the process of narration one to other, testifying to the suffering they have experienced through a story, a narrative, to someone else, and managing to make that someone identify with their pain. Sometimes the narrative is performative, sometimes a ritual, in other cases, it can be a political statement. I argue that this political narrative acquires great currency when it creates emotional community. That is, when the victim's pain does not remain enclosed in the victim, but spreads to other audiences, who identify with it and are deeply moved by the narrative. This creates political bond, not simply a moment of compassion. The political

link helps to enhance actions that seek justice, punish the guilty, set the record straight about what actually happened, and win holistic compensation for the victims" (Macleod & De Marinis, 2018).

Faced with the impossibility of fully understanding the suffering of the victims, students and volunteer professionals "permeate" (De Marinis & Macleod, 2018) their bodies and hearts with the emotions that the testimonies of the victims condense. The performative character of their testimonies, whether narrated, acted, sung or woven, shakes our ontological and existential foundations, (Alexander, 2004; Taylor, 2003; Uribe, Salcedo, & Correa, 2010). But beyond sharing testimonial scenarios that are key to the configuration of emotional communities for resistance, I argue that victims of violence and the non-victim population also create links from intense emotional learning and by sharing moments of deep collective effervescences (Alexander & Smith, 2005; Durkheim, 1982; E. Turner, 2012; V. Turner, 1988). What I have called the "training of the heart" undergoes intense daily sharing with seeker-women, where women generally transfer their knowledge and perspectives on life. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, professionals and students are confronted with the knowledge circulating in the FNEB. As a result of everyday interactions, students initiate a process of "un-learning" to accompany the processes of re-habitation of the world of seeker-women and their struggle. This process of "un-learning" has an emotional component and is profoundly transformative. In other words, students and professionals learn about the social struggle, the struggle for citizenship, and the struggle for memory by "walking" hand in hand with seeker-women. In this "walk," seeker-women and student and professional volunteers establish bonds for hope.

At the previously-mentioned team meeting at the end of 2019, Yanette Bautista told us that the FNEB intended to present the experience of the Community of Hope to the Truth Commission as a particular case of empowerment, resistance and resilience. For Yanette, the Community of

Hope "embodies the hope of family members that we can all finally work shoulder to shoulder with professionals with volunteers and interns. Volunteers and student practitioners are not driven by interests of money or a salary, but by social conscience. Behind each student is a teacher who is also motivated by this hope. There are also their families who know from their kids the experience of enforced disappearance. People come to know the experience of enforced disappearance and are joining our struggle in solidarity."

In addition to the cases of enforced disappearance that the FNEB represents in courts across the country, the same practices that seeker-women, students, and volunteers establish ended up being experiences of resistance and hope, because the cases were also processes of building emotional networks. In other words, The Community of Hope and its process of drafting the reports for the integrated system of Justice, Truth, and Guarantees of Non-Repetition configured a community of resistance.

The emotional bond between the non-victim population and the seeker-women had an component of investigation or, in other words, of research praxis. Since the organizations of victims' relatives were in dire need of preparing reports for transitional institutions, the work of student and professional volunteers took the form of collaborative research (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Rappaport, 2018, 2020). At the end of the December 2019 meeting, Yanette commented that "the background of the Community of Hope is a Participatory – action - research approach because we are doing social research, but we are doing it by participating with the community of relatives of enforced disappearance and seeker-women. All this becomes action towards the mechanisms of Transitional Justice. It is a political action. The results of the reports are a door that we knock on, suddenly a very wide one, so that people will listen to us and then

transmit the results to the whole of society. The merging of popular knowledge and academic knowledge. That's the Community of Hope."

In the Community of Hope, the popular knowledge brought by seeker-women converges with students' academic experiences in conditions of absolute horizontality.

## **5.2 Training the body: the process of documenting cases of enforced disappearance**

The daily life of the FNEB was a continuous training of emotional openness and physical adaptation. As I mentioned in Chapter 3 the spaces of the FNEB condense feelings of ambivalence between pain and the strength of struggle. The training processes of students and volunteers take place in this "enchanted" space. The seeker-women and leaders of the School of Leadership were our mentors. They showed us that academic knowledge is not enough to inhabit a post-conflict scenario. By prefiguring possible worlds at peace, we have to navigate them through the world of emotions. As Nancy recounted in an interview in late 2019, "Love. The encounter between students and victims, as we tell our life stories to students, the stories of our missing loved ones, bring us all closer together. Students become aware of our pains. At the same time, I am filled with that love."

Usually, the FNEB working day starts around 9 a.m. The leaders of the School of Leadership are the first to arrive. Since the number of students and volunteers exceeds the number of computers available in the office, students arrived at FNEB in shifts. Some work from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.; others work from 1 to 7 p.m.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the leaders of the School of Leadership accompanied us permanently in our initiation ritual of case documentation. They introduced us to the process of

legal substantiation and taught us the technical language of the defense of human rights. The first months of daily work at the FNEB were spent on that: we studied the files and asked the School of Leadership specific questions. For a month or more, each student systematically studied the thousands of pages recorded in the files.

Given the regional diversity of cases that FNEB represents, students and professional volunteers were divided into groups to explore cases by region. Over time, students and volunteer professionals specialize in the dynamics of armed groups in specific regions and the resistance strategies of victims' families. In the company of the leaders of the School of Leadership, they also made field trips to the regions to document new cases of enforced disappearance. Students and seeker-women working at the FNEB headquarters in Bogotá make the files the most important source for reconstructing the history of cases of enforced disappearance.

The regional encounters are the second most important source of information. Usually, the leaders of the School of Leadership themselves make the call to newcomers in their regions of origin when preparing regional encounters. Paulina and Amparo of Mothers of Meta and Guaviare launch the call for one in the Department of Meta. The call consists of a word-of-mouth strategy. Sometimes, seeker-women consolidated as leaders of the FNEB, travel from one municipality to another, meeting new victims who have not yet reported their cases. The leaders have long days of phone calls with potential new FNEB members as well. Jenny, a seeker and coordinator of the administration area, coordinates with the regional leaders from Bogotá. This dynamic of network expansion by word-of-mouth somehow lies at the heart of the victims' movement in Colombia, in this particular case of enforced disappearance. The FNEB meetings are a unique opportunity for seeker-women and their families to establish links with other women and get their cases going

legally. The seeker-women of Mothers for Life of Buenaventura undertake the same actions to call for new victims.

Once the sample of the new seeker-women who will join the FNEB is ready, Yanette, the members of the School of Leadership, the students and the professionals, plan the activities of the encounter. I will detail the first regional meeting we had as a Community of Hope in August 2018, in Villavicencio Meta. In this meeting with Mothers of Meta and Guaviare, the FNEB's objective was to document new cases of disappearance in this region of the country. As Figure 1 shows, the FNEB has a standard interview format that guides case documentation. The FNEB uses this format to capture the victims' personal information about family composition, gender, ethnic identification, and so on. In addition, the questionnaire seeks information on the atrocities experienced, the possible perpetrators, and any additional information that could lead to the clarification of the events. Finally, the questionnaire captures the different moments of the search that the relatives undertake.

Before the meetings with the new seeker-women, the leaders of the School of Leadership teach us to "listen" to the testimonies of the non-victim population. Under their guidance, we review the questionnaire step by step, and they tell us how to ask the questions. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, seeking women develop "active and deep listening" expressed in deep bodily skills: knowing when and what to ask, looking the newcomer in the eye, sharing a sigh. In addition, they tell us which floral essences to have available for relaxation and containment in the event of emotional overflow. And we must always have a glass of water to hand. At an informal meeting, Nancy told me that "we can tell the women victims that we understand their pain, that we stand by them in solidarity. That we to have been where they've been. And we give them a heartfelt hug. But because we are not victims, we are not in a position to tell them that we understand them,

because we cannot. I suggest that we say to them "Calm down; this is a safe space for you to express yourself, and that from now on you will never be alone again. That we are going to accompany you." Since the interviews re-activate the victims' pain, the goal is to minimize the damage and suffering with supportive and attentive listening. The FNEB has a "golden rule" that we documenters may not transgress. If the new seeker-women who come to the FNEB has previous experiences of sexual violence, only women may document their case. With this rule, the leaders of the School of Leadership guarantee a primary safe space for women. Figure 2 captures the moment of documentation of cases.

The second objective of the workshop was to obtain contextual information on the dynamics of the armed actors in the region. Seeker-women know the protagonists of the war in their territories first-hand. In addition, they know the effects of war on the lives of their neighbors and relatives. In this sense, the testimony of the new members includes not only their experience of search and resistance but also readings of the dynamics of the conflict, the modus operandi of legal and illegal armed actors, and knowledge of the economics of war. This information was critical to the preparation of the reports for the institutions of transition.


Students and professional volunteers, and seeker-women establish the Community of Hope through these dynamics of learning. Hope is born because both seeker-women and non-victim population see this community as an opportunity to change the things and a possibility to build legacies, that is, to expand solidarity networks. It is an exercise in expanding awareness-raising networks. Ultimately, it is an effort to forge solidarity that transcends the space of the Foundation and that becomes a legacy, a joint effort.

Therefore, the place occupied there by young people and students as a form of generational transfer of the struggle is fundamental; the senior students train the new arrivals with the support

of the School of Leadership. The *Community of Hope ends up* enhancing enforced disappearance as an issue to be discussed in increasingly broad spaces and, above all, for public opinion to appropriate it, with its memory and the historical debt that the State and society have with the victims.

1
2

**FUNDACION NYDIA ERIKA BAUTISTA PARA LOS DERECHOS HUMANOS**



**Formato documentación para la Comisión de la Verdad**

**Documentador/a:**

**VIOLACIONES A LOS DERECHOS HUMANOS QUE SE DOCUMENTA**

**DATOS PERSONALES DE LA VICTIMA**

**1. NOMBRE DE LA/S VICTIMA/S**

Nombre:  
Apellidos:  
Apodo:

**2. FECHA Y LUGAR DE NACIMIENTO**

Lugar:  
Fecha:

**3. GENERO: (Con una x)**

Femenino:  
Masculino:

**4. RAZA/Etnia: (Con una x)**

Afrodescendiente:  
Indígena:  
Mestizo:  
Ninguna:

**5. TIPO Y NUMERO DE IDENTIFICACIÓN DE LA VICTIMA (Con una x)**

Registro Civil:  
Tarjeta de Identidad:  
Cédula de Ciudadanía:  
Ninguno:  
Otro:

N°:

**6. OCUPACIÓN**

**7. NOMBRE DEL FAMILIAR REPORTANTE Y PARENTESCO**

**8. INTEGRANTES NUCLEO FAMILIAR**

Padre:  
Madre:  
Hijos/as:  
Esposo(a):  
Hermano(a):  
Sobriño/a:  
Nieta/s:

**10. FECHA Y LUGAR DE LOS HECHOS**

Fecha:  
Lugar:  
  
Urbano:  
Rural:

Edad:  
Estado en embarazo:  
Meses:

**11. RELATO DE LOS HECHOS (Qué, Quién, Cómo, Dónde y Cómo)**

**12. PRESUNTOS RESPONSABLES**

Paramilitares:  
Guerrilla:  
Fuerzas:  
Policia:  
Otro:

Nombre del grupo:  
Nombre del Frente, Bloque o Batallón:  
Nombre o alias de los responsables individuales:

**13. MOTIVACIÓN/MÓVILES DEL CRIMEN (¿Por qué?)**

**14. MODUS OPERANDI (De los actores armados en el antes, durante y posterior a los hechos)**

3
4

**15. HECHOS VICTIMIZANTES CONEXOS CON LA DESAPARICION FORZADA ( Hechos ocurrieron en forma antecedente, durante o posteriormente a la desaparición forzada) (Con una x)**

- ☐ Otras desaparición forzada del núcleo familiar, amigos, compañero/as, conocidos/as:
- ☐ Homicidio:
- ☐ Violencia contra la mujer (física, psicológica, económica, otra)
- ☐ Violencia sexual:
- ☐ Tortura:
- ☐ Desplazamiento forzado:
- ☐ Reclutamiento forzado de menores:
- ☐ Lesiones personales:
- ☐ Despojo de tierra o bienes:
- ☐ Amenazas y/o represalias contra los denunciantes:

**DESCRIPCIÓN DE ESTOS HECHOS CONEXOS:**

**11. PRESENCIA DE ACTORES ARMADOS:**

Presencia de Fuerzas Militares:  
Presencia de Policía:  
Presencia de grupos paramilitares:  
Presencia de guerrilla:  
Otros grupos armados al margen de la Ley:  
Nexo con la fuerza pública o autoridades municipales, departamentales o nacionales:

**12. DINÁMICAS DE CONTROL TERRITORIAL EN LA ZONA**

**13. BÚSQUEDA DE LA FAMILIA**

**14. RECURSOS AGOTADOS**

Denuncia de los hechos:  
Autoridad:  
Fecha:  
Si se presentó algún negativa u obstáculo para su presentación, describa:

Investigación Penal:  
Fiscalía que lleva el caso:  
Describa qué conoce sobre las actividades que se han realizado en el marco de la investigación y qué resultados se ha obtenido:

**14. ACTIVACIÓN DEL MECANISMO DE BÚSQUEDA URGENTE**

No:  
Si:

Fiscalía:  
Radicado:  
Fecha de activación:

**15. REGISTRO DE HECHOS ATRIBUIBLES A GRUPOS ALMARGEN bajo la LEY 975/05**

No:  
Si:  
Fecha:

**15. REPARACIÓN**

Unidad de Atención y Reparación a las Víctimas Ley 1448 del 2011: Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_  
¿Fue incluido? Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_  
No. de Resolución:  
Demanda Contencioso Administrativa: Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_  
Juzgado:  
Tribunal:  
¿Hubo incidente de reparación integral bajo la Ley 975/05?:

Figure 24 Documentation of cases form.



**Figure 25 Documenting cases. Photo by the autor**

### **5.3 Emotions, body, and solidarity: the Community of Hope and communities**

The workshop with the Mothers of Meta and Guaviare began around 8 a.m. in a hotel near the center of Villavicencio. Thirty mothers of the disappeared took part, and the encounter was held to document cases. The FNEB made the call from Bogotá but delegated the search for relatives of victims of enforced disappearance to regional leaders. Paulina and Amparo, members of the Foundation for months, followed up on the new members of the Foundation. Some of these new women had had contact with other victims' organizations before, but seeing that their cases were making little or no progress in the ordinary justice system, they chose to join the FNEB.

The hotel's conference room was the venue for the meeting. Before the formal start of the event, the FNEB team adapted the space to give it the solemnity that this type of meeting demands: the students located the gallery of memory – the gallery that serves as a mnemonic device in all the Foundation's activities and workshops - on the same floor as the conference room. By accommodating the photographs of the victims of enforced disappearance that the Foundation represents, the FNEB is somehow honoring the lives of the disappeared and invoking them. This ritual of invocation begins installation of the photographs, notebooks, diaries, press cuttings, and cloth dolls by the seeker-women, as a reminder of the reasons for the struggle: to find their missing person, as shown in Figures 31 and 32.

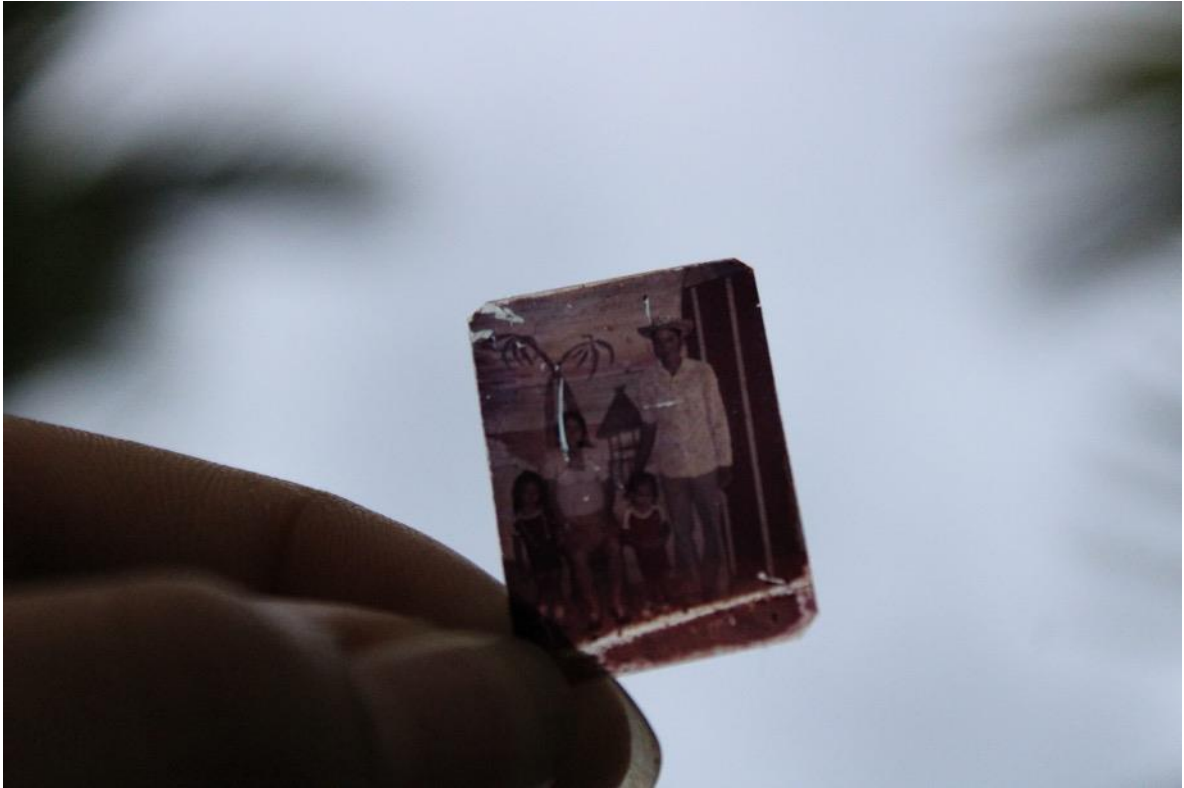


**Figure 26 Altar. Photo by the author**



**Figure 27 Altar. Photo by the author**

Some women place these "traces" of their loved ones next to the gallery of memory. On some occasions, women bring the only photograph they keep of their loved ones and place it on a symbolic altar, as shown in Figure 32.



**Figure 28 Family photo. Photo by the author**

So, before the case documentation starts, the conference room has already become “sacred” (Cha, 2021) The Community of Hope “sacralizes” the space and initiates the process of emotional activation.

After a brief presentation of the FNEB team, Yanette begins the ritual of the personal presentation of the attendees. "My name is Alicia, and I'm Jessica's mother. They were disappeared by paramilitaries in Fuente de Oro, Meta, in 2002. I've been looking for her ever since, not knowing what happened to her. No one gives me any information at all. It's all been very hard." "I am Paulina Mahecha, mother of Cristina Cobo Mahecha, who was disappeared by paramilitaries in 2002. My daughter, a nurse, was accused of helping the guerrillas, and at a roadblock, she was hustled off the bus and taken away. According to what the paramilitaries themselves have told me,

Cristina was a victim of sexual violence and then dismembered. God knows where in the jungle she is buried." All seeker-women have time to discuss their cases. This moment of presentation marks the first moment of emotional connection: when telling of their experiences, many women break down and cry, and we, students and volunteer professionals, cry with them. When each person describes their case, the leaders of the School of Leadership are standing by to go and hug them and whisper in their ears, "I understand your pain. You are fearless; it is a blessing to have you here with us to be here with us and share your testimony. Welcome to this family." This first moment is potent emotionally: while the women narrate the facts or what they know about them with deep pain and anger, the other participants are visibly shaken as they listen.

Each participant narrates the victimizing events of their relatives. As expected, the circulation of emotions intensifies over time: from deep sadness to anger and from anger to helplessness. This collective presentation is overwhelming: we can know the events that occurred and the struggle they have undertaken to recover them. That is, we come to know their voice as a weapon of their struggle. Secondly, it activates the circulation of emotions that structure a collectively-shared atmosphere: all participants cry and hug and comfort each other.

The testimonies of the seeker-women who name the alleged perpetrators turns the presentation ritual into a collective conversation about the territorial dynamics of violence. In a round table where we can all see everyone's faces, we begin a collective analysis of the armed actors and their actions. "Look, we lived more or less peacefully back in 1999 in Acacías, Meta. As a native of this region, one learns to deal with the FARC guerrillas. As long as you don't start doing bad things, they don't mess with you. I sometimes heard stories that the FARC recruited the son of one or another family. But beyond that, nothing. One kept calm. But when the paramilitaries arrived after Caguan [a failed peace process between President Pastrana's government and the

FARC guerrillas], that's when the situation got ugly. The paramilitaries came to eradicate everything that "smelled" of the guerrillas, with the support of the army. When they arrived, the guerrillas also became more savage. The paramilitaries started to commit disappearances, and the FARC then followed their example. The guerrillas began to distrust everyone, all the peasants. And they began to use the same war tactics as the paramilitaries," said a seeker woman. For the research team of the Community of Hope, this type of story is especially significant for contextual analysis. Another woman commented that "Imagine, my two eldest children were taken away by the guerrillas. They went "to the hills". Every time the guerrillas passed by the house, I hid my youngest son and daughter. One day, during an army raid, the soldiers grabbed my youngest son and took him away to join the ranks. I never heard of any of the three of them ever again."

The victims' testimony has on-the-ground experience and knowledge that contributes to shaking the students' and professional volunteers' academic perspectives.

More than a war between "good" and "bad" actors that is a "common sense portrayal" of the war in Colombia, the victims' testimony of violence expresses gray zones. It is common to hear cases of families torn by war. For example, a family member ends up as a guerrilla combatant, one brother is in the army and another brother is with the paramilitaries.

As Figures 31 and 32 show, the seeker-women use drawings to describe what life was like before the victimizing events, and what it is like now. Seeker-women draw the effects of war on their lives and bodies. Some new horizons of the struggle for memory and the vindication of rights emerge from this interplay between remembrances of life before critical events and the current situation of hopelessness. From anger and sadness, women start to navigate indignation and the demand for truth, justice, and reparation. Students and professional volunteers actively participate in the production of these drawings and woven portrayals.

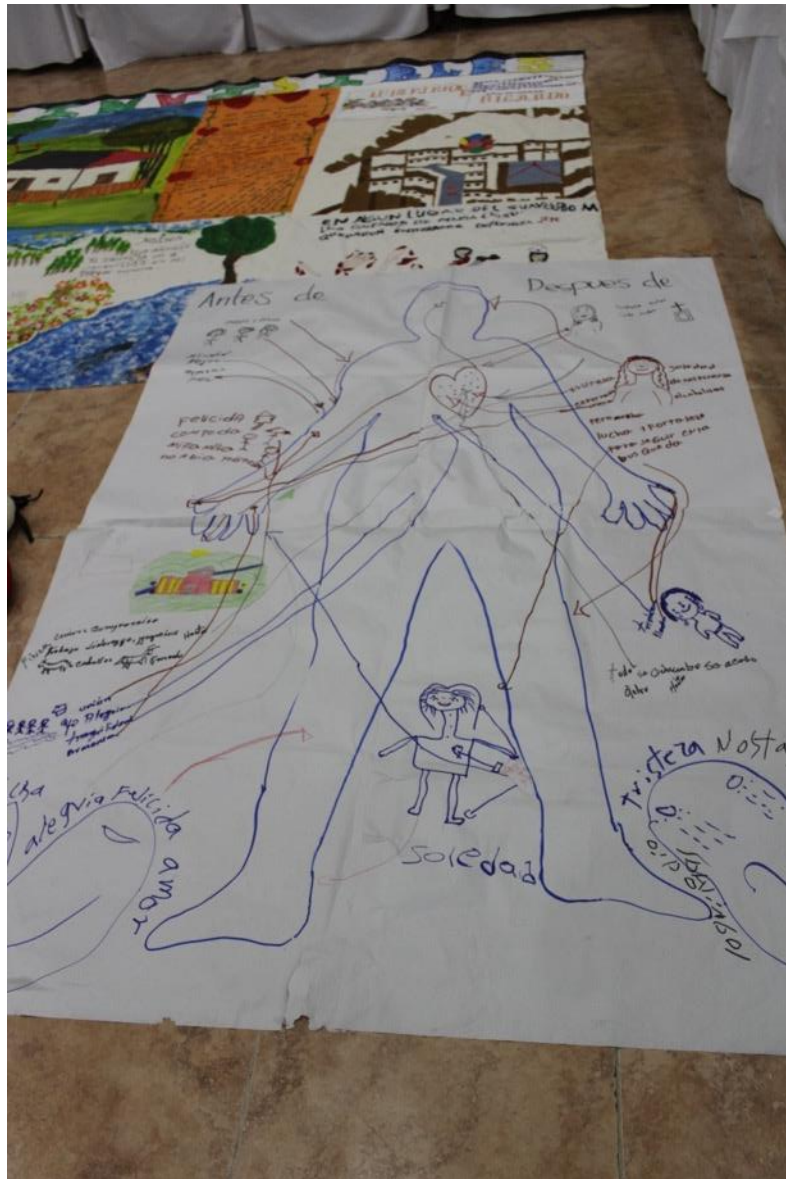


Figure 29 Cartography of violence. Photo by the author

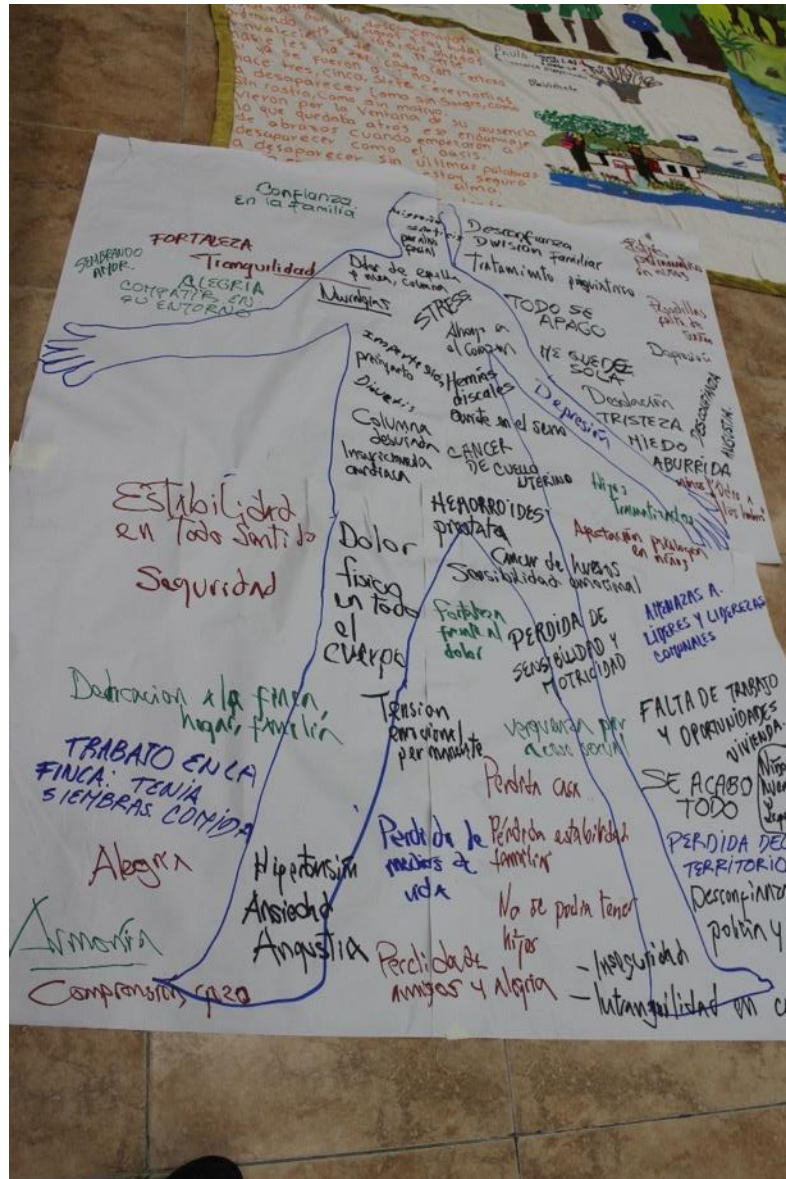


Figure 30 Cartography of violence. Photo by the author

After identifying the damage caused by the war in their lives, seeker-women identify significant moments in their struggle to find their missing loved ones. These actions begin with a complaint in the local police, passing through intense conversations with neighbors, to end in the face-to-face confrontations with alleged perpetrators. By recognizing the many kinds of actions that seeker-women take to find their relatives, the FNEB recognizes them, however insignificant

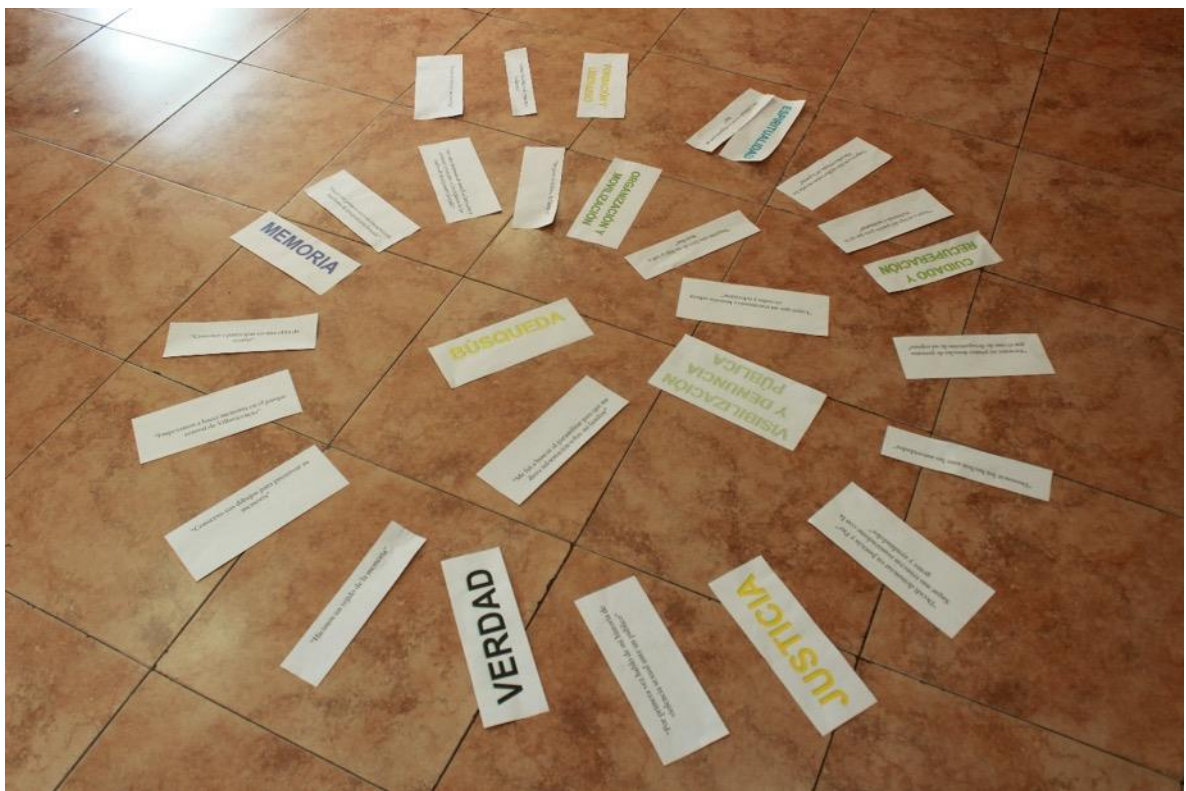
they may seem, as fundamental to the political formation of the seeker-women. Newly-incorporated seeker-women, become aware of the courage and persistence needed for their searches, as they begin their empowerment process.



**Figure 31 The journey. Photo by the author**

"We are women tough as nails. Everything we have done to find our missing relatives is worthy of admiration, from keeping a diary of our experiences to fighting face to face with the perpetrators. These actions give us dignity, and we have to remember them all, the time," Yanette told the seeker-women as they drew up the steps and milestones for a search. Indeed, the process of searching for disappeared relatives involves immersing oneself in a universe of constant re-victimization and violation of rights. Some women experience neglect by police and the courts

who ignore their sense of urgency and despair. Some women confront perpetrators face to face and go into the jungles to find a t a son or daughter. As some women reported, "I went to where the guerrilla commanders were in the jungle. I went there alone,m looking for my son. When I arrived, I was held and kidnapped for several weeks. They tied me up. But since I didn't break down, they let me go. I still returned empty-handed because they didn't give me information about my son's whereabouts." Figures 5 and 6 represent the "paths of struggle" of the search for their loved ones. At this point in the ritual, anger, sadness and helplessness transform into resentment, a reason to keep fighting.



**Figure 32 The journey of truth. Photo by the author**

The ritual of documenting cases ends up recreating atmospheres of collective effervescence. Seeker-women and students, and professional volunteers share an emotional climax with body movements and deep laughter. Carolina from COPSICO immerses us in a playful activity that she calls the "yoga of laughter." After the account of the atrocities, the identification of individual and collective damage, and the production of contextual knowledge about the war in the region, the ritual ends with an explosion of emotionality that resignifies the earlier emotions of sadness, anger and, indignation. As mentioned in Chapter 3, body training is key to dealing with pain.

In the closing activity, the seeker-women and the student and professional volunteers organized themselves in a circle so that we could all look each other in the eye. Carolina, the master of ceremonies, told us that we should start walking round. As Figures 38 and 39 show, we raised our arms and exchanged playful looks between all the participants during our walk.



**Figure 33 *Communitas*. Photo by the author**

After five minutes of walking in silence, looking into each other's eyes playfully with grimaces and moving our bodies, Carolina interrupted the activity: "Let's stop walking. Would you please stop and look into the eyes of the person in front of you. Now, say just this to that person: ha ha ha, ho ho ho! Hahaha! Ho ho ho ho! Hahaha! Ho ho ho!". Suddenly, we only heard the rumble of ha ha ha ho ho ho in the room that we all sang in unison. Hotel guests looked curiously into the conference room to see what was happening. All of us were consumed by laugh uncontrollable, catching laughter. Seeker-women and student and professional volunteers connected as we found ourselves unable to control our bodies. As a climax of the ritual, the laughter ended up transmuting the pain into solidarity. Figure 9 shows the shared laughs.



**Figure 34 Yoga of laugh. Photo by the author**

In these moments of intense emotional connection, we momentarily suspend our individualities and experience community. We immerse ourselves in a flow of collective consciousness and collectively enjoy our simple human nature. According to Edith Turner, this sense of community "occurs through the readiness of people – perhaps from need – to rid themselves of their concern for status and dependence on structure, and see their fellows as they are" (E. Turner, 2012, p. 2). After being exposed to deep emotional unrest during the earlier steps of the ritual, we forgot that we were students and volunteers, and the seeker-women forgot that they were victims.

While I have argued that students and volunteer professionals cannot experience the pain that seeker-women have, at this very moment, the differences between the victim and non-victims

become diluted. We share the emotional atmosphere as equals, as human beings. Turner suggests that this community spirit "resides in the poor and those considered inferior in their culture, a gift coming from below. In concrete circumstances, it may be found when people engage in a collective task with full attention – often a matter of ordinary work. They may find themselves "in flow". That is, they experience a full merging of action and awareness, a crucial component of enjoyment"(E. Turner, 2012, p. 3).

After 10 minutes of laughing, we stopped; the emotional atmosphere led us to the dance. We sang, danced, and laughed for the remaining 20 minutes of the activity. Despite the feelings of deep sadness, resentment, anger and helplessness, the coming together of seeker-women and students and volunteer professionals also brought enjoyment, joy, and hope. The experience of this spirit of community is intimately linked to the future horizons of a struggle that we configure by sharing these emotionally-charged spaces.

#### **5.4 Everyday life at the FNEB headquarters in Bogotá: establishing ties**

In addition to the regional meetings with seeker-women, the leaders of the School of Leadership and the students and volunteer professionals share ta daily working life. The FNEB members strengthen ties in sharing. In Chapter 4, I mentioned that two phrases of Yanette Bautista continuously come to mind. Yanette mentioned that "The FNEB was a University of Life" and I described how I became aware of its meaning in Chapter 4. Later, after some time at FNEB, the second sentence, "Here at FNEB, we grow old together," made all the sense in the world to me.

Although the phrase seems counterintuitive and it is evident that time passes and we all grow old, it has a deep vital meaning. "Growing old together" implies that the daily life of the

FNEB is the stage where we come to know the real challenges of life, social injustices and learn to fight for human rights. In other words, beyond becoming specialists in defense of rights or experts in subnational dynamics of violence, the organization's daily life condenses an enormous accumulation of wisdom with which we navigate the challenges of life. "Growing old together" implies being aware of our place in the world after sharing the emotional atmospheres with the leaders of the School of Leadership and other seeker-women. It also implies inhabiting ethical-political horizons of struggle.

Far from being a daily life free of conflict and tensions, the meeting between students and volunteer professionals forms us to face the challenges of life. In the daily life of the FNEB, there was nothing unusual in the tensions between students and volunteer professional, given the stresses and anxieties generated by the enormous workload involved in defense of human rights. There were several moments of great stress and anguish to meet deadlines. There were also ruptures of affective relationships between students. In this process of "growing old together," we learn to care for each other generously in the course of deep listening.

Listen with which we attended to the daily anxieties of students and seeker-women. In this regard, lunchtime was a pivotal moment for sharing. Usually, each member of the FNEB brought in something prepared at home, and we would exchange dishes. On other occasions, students and leaders of the School would "pass round the hat" to buy roast chicken or pizza for all to share. As Nancy mentioned in an informal conversation with me in late 2019, "We have sensitized many of you. When I cry, tell my story, or have personal problems, and tell any of you or Sebastian, I feel satisfied that you will listen to me. So all those beautiful things that we have told ourselves here have to do with the harmony we have built as companions, and I hope it does not end. We created this community, and it is a struggle, a hope, and a dream that we family members have. And it's

not just me who feels happy—also, relatives from other regions. I have heard them feel protected when they hear you. And I also feel protected."

In mid-June 2018, as coordinator of cases of forced disappearance, I implemented an additional space for sharing, informal gatherings on Friday evenings after work. In this meeting space, all members of the organization participate, including Yanette. On most occasions, there would be a guest speaker who would talk about a topic of collective interest; for example, romantic love, feminism, and gender were areas that significantly impacted the participants. In the company of Constanza, an old friend, and colleague from the Department of Sociology and an expert in gender and feminism, the leaders and students exchanged experiences about our love-lives and love in scenarios of intense conflict. We discuss the exacerbation of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and how armed actors, whether legal or illegal, use women's bodies as the spoils of war and as a critical weapon for establishing terror.



**Figure 35 Community of Hope and healing. Photo by the author**

Through the gatherings, the seeker-women of the leadership school and the students and volunteer professionals explore the universe of mutual care and solidarity. Under the direction of Carolina de COPSICO (Colectivo Psicosocial Colombiano), we established dialogues around the importance of relating to the spiritual world, regardless of individual creed. Carolina told us at a gathering at the end of 2019 that "it is essential to be aware of this spiritual dimension. We may not believe in any specific god, but it's important to connect with something that transcends us. And what transcends us can be the bonds that we are building in this struggle for the defense of human rights." As Figure 9 illustrates, the gatherings were horizontal in nature: where leaders and students contributed their opinions and perceptions about the spiritual universe with total freedom. For the FNEB, care has several components. The first is love for the disappeared and the families

of the victims. By turning love into collective action (Scribano, 2019), the FNEB transfers love to the organization's members. In one of these gatherings at the end of 2019, Nancy commented on that Love. "The encounter between students and victims, as we tell our life stories of our loved ones, is what makes you [volunteer professionals and students] arrive and stay with us because they become aware of our pains. You are filling our lives with love."

Far from having a connotation of romantic Love (Illouz, 1997), the love experienced by students and seeker-women is one of mutual care, solidarity, and horizontality. As Yanette constantly comments in all team meetings, "It is not ideology that moves us, it is love for our missing relatives." In the struggle for truth and justice, seeker-women transform that love for the missing into love for their fellow fighters.

The second dimension of collective care has an individual orientation. Given the enormous emotional burden involved in working with enforced disappearance, students and volunteer professionals develop strategies to prevent emotional overloads. One of them is to share feelings of sadness or "emotional charge" with peers.

After the Friday gatherings, seeker-women and students organize dance contests and parties. Typically, the parties started at 7 p.m. and ended at 1 a.m. Nancy and Pilar from the School of Leadership were always the best dancers. The FNEB has a good sound system, used in regional encounters with victims. Diego, coordinator of the memory area, connects the system speaker in the main room of the FNEB headquarters and starts the party and dance. Far from being a desecration of the sacred space of the FNEB, the festivities strengthen the bonds between the members of the organization. The festivities, as rituals, brought people closer to each other and evoked the shared struggle. In addition to the burdens of ambivalence, uncertainty, and pain, the defense of human rights incorporates pleasure and the festive as a means to shape solidarity.

### **5.5 FNEB as producer of knowledge: The social construction of impunity**

By merging the knowledge and experiences of seeker-women with the academic knowledge of students and professional volunteers, the Community of Hope systematizes the experiences of regional encounters with victims. It gathers together the voices of testimony in them. The particular cases of seeker-women, their search experiences, the identification of their harms, and their strategies of resistance are the raw material for preparing reports for institutions of transition. The reports condense the accumulated incidental knowledge and with academic disquisitions.

The Community of Hope was responsible for drafting the reports. The FNEB research team called these drafts "pilot reports." As I mentioned earlier, students were divided into groups and specialized in a specific region. In the first instance, we were responsible for reconstructing the cases of enforced disappearance with the information contained in the files. With this first exercise, we laid the foundation for trips to the regions to hear the testimonies of victims' families whom the FNEB represents as legal counsel. We collate and triangulate the data with the information obtained in meetings such as the one described above. The reports contain contextual elements that prove the systematic and historical nature of enforced disappearance as a State strategy of repression.

The reports are confidential, because they contain information on court cases opened against State agents who have taken part in events by action or omission. I therefore cannot comment on their content. However, I will refer later to details of three reports that the FNEB previously published and that represent a milestone in the struggle for the defense of human rights.

The Truth Commission is the only institution that is aware of the reports produced by the FNEB, in addition to the seeker-women and the Community of Hope. Before presenting the reports

to the Commission, the FNEB held socialization spaces with the victims to ensure that their voices and experiences had been correctly represented in them.

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, social movements are producers of knowledge in their own right (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008; Chesters, 2012). The case of the organizations of relatives of victims does not escape this circumstance. The FNEB not only accumulates huge volumes of knowledge about regional violence and the *modus operandi* of armed actors. It also possesses diagnoses of the impunity surrounding enforced disappearance. This knowledge is possible as a result of the seeker-women's knowledge, stored in their bodies, hearts and minds. This incidental knowledge teaches society that other worlds are possible under renewed criteria of care and solidarity.

With the meeting with students and volunteer professionals, the FNEB managed to incorporate theoretical knowledge around the processes of formation of the State on social movements, among other topics. It was able to fashion a more far-reaching story. Rather than superimpose academic knowledge over popular knowledge, the FNEB incorporates both perspectives into its final reports.

The Nydia Erika Bautista Foundation, as an organization belonging to the social movement of victims of the armed conflict in Colombia, has amongst other things, developed its advocacy mechanisms in the field of comprehensive (legal/psychosocial) care for relatives of persons reported missing. Thus, based on the articulation of the different experiences of grassroots processes with which it works (in Northern Valle del Valle, Bolívar, Putumayo, Meta, and Cundinamarca), it has also worked hard in the production of narratives, conceptualizations, and a kind of global story about enforced disappearance in Colombia. These reports precede the research of the Community of Hope for the production of the reports for the institutions of transition.

The reflection and materialization of this process of production of knowledge, which is transverse to all the organizational and advocacy strategies of the Foundation, are distilled in a series of reports published independently with international funding: a kind of background to the process opened with the implementation of the Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas, in which the FNEB, as a reference in the defense and promotion of the rights of victims of forced disappearance, has been responsible for the construction of reports for the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition (CEV), and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) (institutions which are parts of the Comprehensive System of Justice, Truth, Reparation, and Non-Repetition). Although each of these reports has its particularities, several features constitute what we understand here as a global account of enforced disappearance in Colombia.

### **5.6 Three reports on enforced disappearance in Colombia: experience, difference, and impunity.**

Three reports make up the products to which we will refer in this section: A report on forced disappearances in the department of Putumayo, published in 2012 together with the Association for alternative promotion (MINGA) and with financial support from FOS – COLOMBIA; the report *"Forced disappearances of Afro-descendants originating in northern Valle del Cauca: Discrimination and impunity 1988-2012"*, with financial support from AECID and FOS, and published in 2012; and the report *"Discrimination and Impunity: Forced Disappearances of Women in Colombia. A Case Study of the Armed Conflict 1985-2005"*, built together with UNDP and the Transitional Justice Fund, financed by FOS, and published in 2015.

Although each of them has particular perspectives and methodologies, we will try to make a descriptive comparison. They are prominent standard features that are part of that global story of understanding the experiences of forced disappearance in Colombia.



**Figure 36 FNEB reports. Photo by the author**



**Figure 37 FNEB report.**

The reports' point of departure is a differential approach. The Putumayo report is based on a territorial, gender, age and ethnic approach, a perspective based on the experience of

disappearances in the region. The emblematic cases, such as the San Marcelino Reservation of the Kófan and Kichwa communities, in the Municipality of San Miguel, or that of the Galarraga sisters in La Dorada, are proof of the need for an intersectional approach to understanding, not only the effects of disappearance, but the mechanisms of the perpetuation of human rights violations.

*The facts and situations described in this report give an account of this reality, unprecedented for the historical truth in Colombia, which remains in total impunity, invisible amid multiple violations of human rights and international humanitarian law that primarily affect women, indigenous communities and the population of poor social origin.*

(FNEB, 2012, page 5)

The report on enforced disappearances in Northern Valle del Cauca articulates territorial approaches, gender, ethnicity and age. They *"bring to light the reality of enforced disappearances (...) of Afro-descendant and mestizo people from Zarzal"* (FNEB, 2012).

In this report, the FNEB denounces not only the systematic nature of enforced disappearance in the region but also the structural invisibilization of the Afro-descendant communities in the country. The report also tackles the particular conditions of vulnerability in Afrocolombian's lives and the disproportionate impact that victims are individually and collectively made to suffer by the armed actors' repertory of repression and terror.

For its part, the report on the enforced disappearance of women focuses on 39 cases from different parts of the country, meticulously documented.

*(...) gender traits and violence against women and the differential impacts that enforced disappearances have left on the lives, bodies, and rights of victims and those who seek them (FNEB, 2015, page 9)<sup>3</sup>.*

This report has methodological and epistemological innovations. FNEB's purpose is to understand the particular impact of enforced disappearance in populations with various and differentiated conditions of vulnerability (women, peasants, ethnic communities, children, etc.).

Another common aspect of the three reports is that the main characters are victims themselves with their voices. The voices are those of friends, neighbors, and members of the communities of the disappeared persons and they form the baseline for the content of the report. The truth rises as a basis for the production of knowledge about enforced disappearance and the processes of resistance and resilience in the face of repression, terror, the social order imposed during the conflict y impunity.

"Impunity" is crucial in the three reports, and therefore, in the global narrative. The social construction of impunity articulates particular testimonies with judicial procedures and is the product of the narrative exchanges between victims.

*The actions of the justice system and the clarification of the truth of what happened to the victims of enforced disappearance in general and of the disappeared women, and the*

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<sup>3</sup> In the following quote, extracted from the same report, the intentionality and political background of this methodological and epistemological decision: *"In the world, during the last two decades the gender approach has been consolidated in the analysis of human rights violations. In Colombia this has happened partially thanks to the efforts of women and their organizations that, accompanied by the international community, have brought to light the grave reality, the forms, the extent and the origin of this heinous crime, achieving make it visible after 50 years de armed conflict."* (FNEB, 2015; page 9).

*indigenous Afro-descendant and peasant population in particular, represent an outstanding debt of the State as a whole - the executive, legislature and judiciary - with the mothers, fathers, children, wives and communities still waiting for the return of their loved ones.* (FNEB, 2012, page 5)

### **5.7 From the figures to the faces of the victimized women**

Although with different levels of depth, each of the reports builds a narrative line that starts by establishing a statistical characterization of enforced disappearance, and seeks to make the magnitude of the phenomena visible. Each report also traces a series of human rights violations that commonly surround the enforced disappearance and the search processes (forced displacement, gender-based violence, including rape, torture, etc.), the actors responsible, and the social conditions and categorizations of the victims. The three reports all capture one of the main gaps in the institutional approaches on enforced disappearance: the inconsistencies between the various official registers (the National Registry of Disappeared, the Single Registry of Victims and the reports of the Attorney General's Office, and in particular, that of the Justice and Peace law) illustrate an evident need for a unified register of victims, without which victims' access to the rights of truth and justice would continue to be hindered (FNEB, 2015). On the other hand, as can be seen in the Putumayo report (2012), there are gaps in the characterization of the victims

from differential perspectives. Political standpoints and the recognition of of vulnerabilities need to take second place to technical decisions.<sup>4</sup>

*As they currently stand, the official figures -fragmented by institution or instance- do not help to measure realities, nor therefore to identify public policies proportional to them; on the contrary, they are a mechanism of impunity that blurs enforced disappearance (FNEB, 2015, page 25)*

In addition, and perhaps more importantly, distrust of official figures deepens because there is a severe under-reporting of cases, both in regional and national registers, due to the lack of denunciations to the authorities. Under-reporting is the product of various structural problems, ranging from the permanence of armed actors in the regions to the verified alliances of armed actors with public institutions, through human rights violations concomitant with forced disappearance such as threats or forced displacement. This under-registration has a double impact on the rights of victims: on the one hand, it hinders the right of access to the truth, due to lack of judicial investigations; and on the other an under-recording of missing persons at the national level truncates the process of identifying the bodies that public institutions can exhume from mass graves, This under-reporting is illustrated by the large number of unidentified bodies (N.N.) compared to the number of individuals reported as missing (FNEB, 2015, page 23).

That is why, when contextualizing enforced disappearance - whether at the national level as in the case of the women's report, or at the regional level as in the other two reports - the records

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<sup>4</sup> In the case of the report on women, the number of missing women "without information" registered in the RND is alarming, which responds to the lack of actions by the State for the investigation and search for disappeared persons, and makes evident a "*negligence to look for them alive*" (FNEB, 2015, page 153)

of family and human rights organizations (such as the records of CINEP/PPP or the FNEB itself) have become more reliable.

*Historically, family and human rights organizations have been vital in documenting cases; at first, the State did not do so. Although the capacity and infrastructure of these organizations is limited in the face of duty and State capacity, the great advantage is the quality of their data that includes many unreported cases due to fear, reprisals or distrust towards official justice. (FNEB, 2015, page 22)*

After this first quantitative approach, all three reports then continue with the detailed narrative reconstruction of various cases, including photographs and profiles of the disappeared persons and conditions of life before the disappearance, a narrative of the atrocious events, alleged perpetrators, and, even more thoroughly, the process of search for and access to justice. This strategy corresponds to the commitment to keep the memory of the disappeared alive through the voices and perspectives of the relatives and give value to all their actions undertaken by them.

The selection of cases (27 for the Valle del Cauca report and 39 in the women's report, and several individuals or collective cases in Putumayo) responds to assessing specific features that constitute them as emblematic cases of forced disappearance. Drawing upon these emblematic cases, the FNEB identifies motivations, modus operandi, and impunity mechanisms that predominated in the three periods in which the history of disappearances of women between the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s in terms of gender<sup>5</sup> (FNEB, 2015). As the reports suggest,

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<sup>5</sup> “According to the CINEP/PPP database, peasant and indigenous women have been particularly affected by enforced disappearance. In the case of indigenous women, the largest number of records refer to the Emberá indigenous women of the Urabá Chocoan region. After peasant and indigenous women, this database registers teachers and students.” (FNEB, 2015, page 23)

*These factors have become structural and have led to impunity. As a consequence, violence against women in cases of disappeared women has come to mean to the apparatus of justice apparatus, and has been transmitted to society, that violence against women in cases of disappeared women is natural and not punishable by the courts or society; it is something that no authority asks when investigating the forced disappearances of women despite the evident and alarming context of gender violence that has been and is persistently being experienced in Colombia inside and outside the armed conflict. (FNEB, 2015, page 162)*

Women not only do not have priority in the different approaches to enforced disappearance for the production of knowledge because there are fewer cases compared to the disappeared men, but, being mothers, wives and daughters, they have also suffered all the violence that accompanies the search, and have also been victims of particular (often sexual) violence before being disappeared (FNEB, 2015).

## **5.8 Enforced disappearance and the physical and cultural destruction of ethnic communities**

The reports of the Valley (2012) and Putumayo (2012) are notable for their characterizations of the effects of the experience of disappearance from ethnic perspectives. The reports tackle the effects of disappearance on the social and cultural fabric of indigenous and AfroColombian communities. With this differentiated approach, the FNEB provides insights about understanding the particular difficulties for reparation of communities with different ritual practices, cosmologies, and particular relations with the territory.

The San Marcelino Reservation, with cases such as that of the five young women from the Grefa, Vargas, and Proaños families, aptly illustrates the findings of the Putumayo report from an ethnic perspective. Disrespect and contempt for the lives of children and young people and the values of the Kichwa community; the disrespect of the territory, considered sacred by the community, shown by the armed incursions there and the abandonment and displacement as results of the continuous threats, human rights violations and restrictions on mobility that paramilitaries imposed to the families of the Reservation. These and many other practices described in the reports constituted mechanisms for the community's physical and cultural devastating.

The obstruction of funeral rites, the explicit ban on local movement, the disrespect for Kichwa life and its principle of reciprocity, and ultimately, dispossession and displacement are factors that disrupt not only the daily life of the victims and their families but also the very fabric of a society protected by a special jurisdiction. This special jurisdiction is enshrined in the Colombian Constitution and protects the territory's collective sharing, collective identity, and cultural integrity. The imposition of an external paramilitary order has disrespected and disregarded the indigenous sacred order, which is the anchor of the social, natural and religious order to the materiality of the territory (FNEB, 2012)

Something similar happens with the Afro-Colombian communities. The report suggests that,

*The forced disappearance of Afro-descendants has caused numerous havoc, alongside the permanent uncertainty of not recognizing the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones, there is fear, terror, threats or reprisals, injustice and impunity (...) families cannot live and commemorate their rites (...) individual-family-collective mourning is not possible, the*

*vital moment to manifest the identity, culture and Afro worldview valid for farewell to the dead is interrupted , because there is no body to weep over or bury. (FNEB, 2012, page 53)*

Finally, as an innovation that integrates the differential approach with the commitment to make various visible levels of impunity that (even today) have not allowed comprehensive reparation and instead have perpetuated revictimization, was the introduction of the variable of generation. By emphasizing the effects of forced disappearance on children and adolescents, either as direct victims or as relatives, the Foundation took a step at the time not yet deepened or institutionalized: the recognition of the urgency of integrating this approach into the construction of public policies for comprehensive care for victims, as the traumatic effects of the experience of disappearance are undeniable, even more so in contexts in which, as in the Middle and Lower Putumayo, the establishment of the paramilitary order dehumanized the lives of the victims (women, children, indigenous, or black, etc.) under the pretext of the counterinsurgency war.

*The psychological and mental health impacts caused to children by the direct perception of scenes of violence and by the prolonged effects of the uncertainty caused by the enforced disappearance of their parents or relatives, has not been considered in public policies to attend to the relatives of victims of enforced disappearance or in the administration of justice as a right, nor as a matter of reparation. (FNEB, 2012, pp. 20-21)*

## **5.9 The production of knowledge as an artifact of memory and a mechanism of denunciation: the mechanisms of impunity**

However, in terms of knowledge production, the most structured development throughout the three reports is the typification and characterization of the mechanisms of impunity that seekers face. This development in investigation, which would not have been possible without a detailed assessment of the search process undertaken by the relatives of the disappeared persons independently, therefore stands out as a rebuke due to an inefficient State with a selective presence in the territories. It denounces the violation of the rights to truth, justice, integrity, and dignified life, accompanied by a series of recommendations and demands addressed to various State entities.

*The law of silence has been the norm during all these years, the permanent presence of paramilitary groups and their ability to weaken the judicial system and influence some local administrations, left no room for the protection of victims and the defense of their violated rights. (FNEB, 2012, page 33)*

The families of victims, who already live in conditions of defenselessness because they belong to vulnerable populations, in most of the cases face additional human rights violations such as abduction, forced recruitment, torture, threats, rape, and forced displacement. In addition, their distrust of State institutions is the consequence of the State's manifest or tacit alliances with armed actors. Therefore, impunity surges as lack of access to information due "sub judice confidentiality" or the premature closing or preclusion of cases. Figure 38, show the different mechanisms of impunity that FNEB has identified.

## SINOPSIS Mecanismos de impunidad y de indefensión de las víctimas

Mecanismos del contexto que contribuyen a un "estado de indefensión de hecho de las víctimas"

- *Clima de intimidación que impide la presentación de denuncias y/o la presencia de los victimarios en el lugar de los hechos (barrio, municipio, vereda, ciudad).*
- Continuidad de graves violaciones de derechos humanos en la región, v.gr. ejecuciones sumarias y reclutamientos forzados y alarmante impunidad.
- Advertencias o represalias contra las familias de las víctimas.
- Desplazamiento forzado posterior o concomitante con la desaparición forzada.
- Desconocimiento de los derechos por parte de las víctimas, Ausencia de difusión por el Estado.
- Pérdida de confianza en las autoridades por insensibilidad con el dolor de las familias, o por la complejidad de los procesos judiciales.
- Patrones culturales de discriminación tales como:
  - **Prejuicios** de las autoridades judiciales sobre la versión de las víctimas, evidenciada en falta de credibilidad a su dicho.
  - **Expresiones justificantes** para la desaparición forzada y ejecuciones sumarias, como que si la víctima estaba metida en líos con algún grupo, o quien sabe en que trabajaba.
  - **Justificación de la ausencia de investigación** por "tener casos más urgentes" que una desaparición forzada de tres jóvenes afrodescendientes.

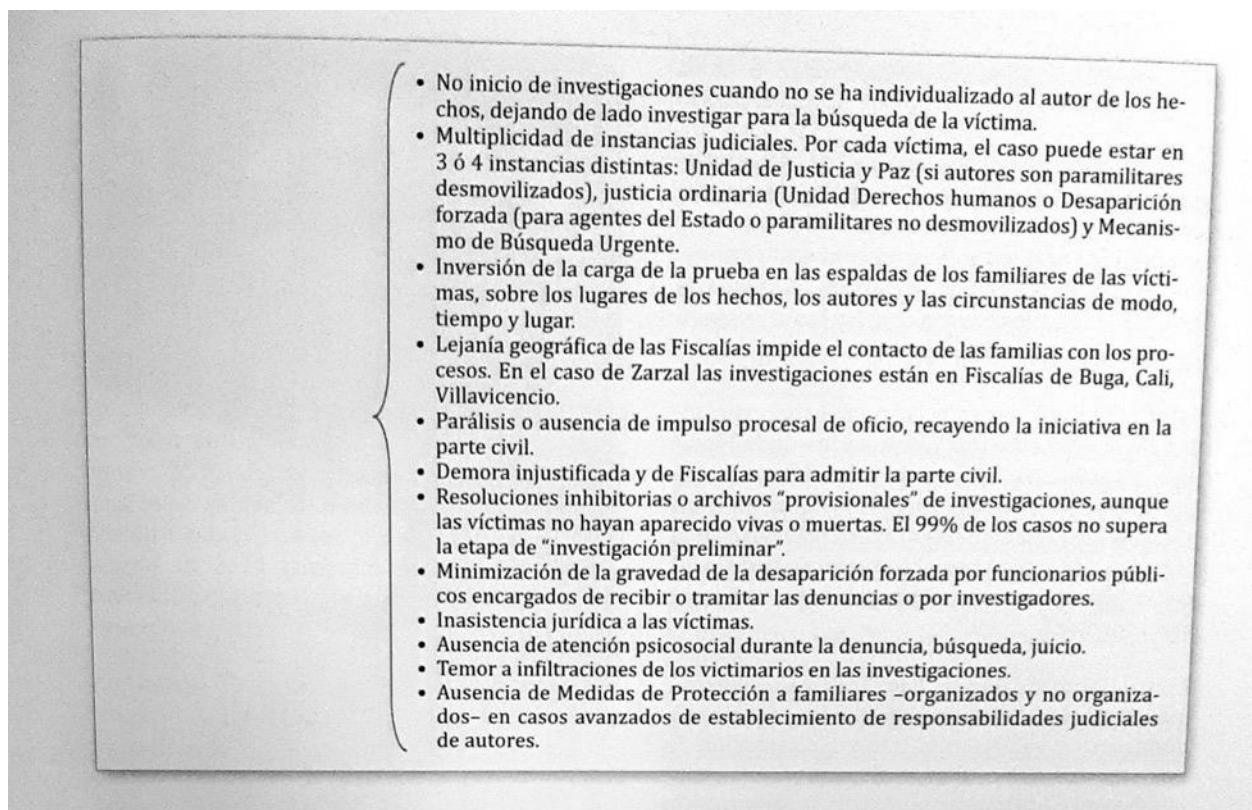
Vacíos estructurales en la política pública y judicial sobre la búsqueda de las víctimas de desaparición forzada

- Exigencia de plazos arbitrarios de 24, 48 ó 72 horas para recibir la denuncia o par a iniciar la búsqueda de la víctima, a pesar de la directriz de Policía Nacional.
- Ineficacia del mecanismo de búsqueda urgente, porque no se activa de oficio, o porque las autoridades no inician la búsqueda de la víctima a las 24 horas, o porque se somete a reparto interno, o se le aplica la reserva del sumario cuando la ley lo prohíbe, o no se practican pruebas idóneas allanamientos o interceptaciones, como se aplican en casos de secuestro.
- No destinación de los recursos logísticos necesarios para diligencias de policía judicial, como el traslado de testigos o la ubicación de tumbas.
- No aplicación del Plan Nacional de Búsqueda a los casos registrados en el Registro Nacional de Personas Desaparecidas.
- Inexistencia de Planes Regionales de Búsqueda de personas desaparecidas y víctimas de desaparición forzada.

Mecanismos de derecho que revelan un estado de indefensión jurídica de las víctimas en los procesos de búsqueda y en los procesos penales por desaparición forzada

- Pérdida de expedientes en las Fiscalías.
- Ausencia de registro judicial de las denuncias de las familias.
- Preclusión de la investigación en casos de niños y adolescentes afrodescendientes menores de 15 y 18 años.
- Reserva del sumario sobre las diligencias para establecer el paradero de las víctimas, bajo la Ley 906 de 2004.
- Asignación a Fiscalías seccionales, no especializadas, que no tienen experticia o desconocen las leyes sobre desaparición forzada.
- Negativa a recibir denuncias en el domicilio de los familiares de la víctima, aunque estos sean además mujeres desplazadas, argumentando falta de jurisdicción para investigar.
- Inversión de la carga de la prueba en las espaldas de los familiares de las víctimas, sobre los lugares de los hechos, los autores y las circunstancias de modo, tiempo y lugar.

Figure 38 Mechanisms of impunity



**Figure 39 Mechanisms of impunity**

**Table 1 Synopsis: mechanisms of impunity and defenselessness of the victims**

<p>Mechanisms</p> <p>that contribute to a "de facto defenselessness of the victims"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Climate of intimidation that prevents the filing of complaints and/or the presence of the perpetrators at the scene of the events (neighborhood, municipality, village, city).</i></li> <li>• Continuity of serious human rights violations in the region, eg. summary executions and forced recruitment and alarming impunity.</li> <li>• Warnings or reprisals against the families of the victims.</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forced displacement subsequent to or concomitant with enforced disappearance.</li> <li>• Victims' ignorance of their rights, absence of dissemination by the State.</li> <li>• Loss of confidence in the authorities due to insensitivity to the families' pain, or due to the complexity of the judicial processes.</li> <li>• Cultural patterns of discrimination such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Prejudice</b> of the judicial authorities about the version of the victims, evidenced in lack of credibility to his statement.</li> <li>- <b>Statements in justification of enforced disappearance</b> and summary executions such as that the victim was involved in trouble with some group, or who knows in which he worked.</li> <li>- <b>Justification of the absence of investigation</b> for "having more urgent case " than a forced disappearance of three young people of African descent.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Structural gaps in public and judicial policy on the search for victims of enforced disappearance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requirement of arbitrary deadlines of 24, 48 or 72 hours to receive a complaint or to start the search for the victim, despite the directives of the National Police.</li> <li>• Inefficiency of the urgent search mechanism, because it is not activated <i>ex officio</i>, or because the authorities do not start the search for the victim within 24 hours, or because the</li> </ul>

	<p>case is submitted to internal distribution, or the “sub-judice” rule of confidentiality is applied when the law prohibits it, or suitable tests, raids or interceptions, are not effected as applied in cases of abduction.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Failure to allocate the necessary logistical resources for judicial police proceedings, such as the transfer of witnesses or the location of graves.</li> <li>• Failure to apply the National Search Plan to cases reported in the National Missing Persons Register.</li> <li>• Lack of Regional Search Plans for disappeared persons and victims of forced disappearance.</li> </ul>
<p>Mechanisms of the law that reveal a state of legal defenselessness of the victims in search processes and in criminal proceedings for enforced disappearance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of files in the Prosecution Service.</li> <li>• Absence of judicial registration of family complaints.</li> <li>• Preclusion of the investigation in cases of children and adolescents of African descent aged 15 and 18.</li> <li>• “Sub judice” confidentiality applied to the proceedings to establish the whereabouts of the victims. under Law 906 of 2004.</li> <li>• Assignment to non-specialized regional prosecutors who do not have expertise or are unaware of the laws on enforced disappearance.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refusal to receive complaints at the home of the victim's relatives, even when they are also displaced women, arguing lack of jurisdiction to investigate.</li> <li>• Reversal of the burden of proof to the families of the victims with regard to the places of the events, the authors and the circumstances of time and place and manner.</li> <li>• Failure to initiate investigations when the author of the crimes has not been identified. setting aside the investigation for the search of the victim.</li> <li>• Multiplicity of judicial instances. For every victim, the case may be in 3 or 4 different instances: Justice and Peace Unit (if the perpetrators are demobilized paramilitaries), ordinary justice (Human Rights or Forced Disappearance Unit (for State agents or non-demobilized paramilitaries) and Urgent Search Mechanism.</li> <li>• Reversal of the burden of proof to the victims' relatives, regarding the places of the events, the perpetrators and the circumstances of time and place and manner.</li> <li>• Geographical distance of the Prosecutor Service's offices prevents the contact by the families with the processes. In the case of Zarzal, the investigations are in the Prosecutor's Offices of Buga, Cali, Villavicencio.</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paralysis or absence of <i>ex officio</i> procedural drive, with the initiative falling on the civil party.</li> <li>• Unjustified delay and Prosecutors' reluctance to admit civil parties.</li> <li>• Inhibitory resolutions or "provisional" files of investigations, even if the victims have not appeared dead or alive. 99% of cases do not pass the "preliminary investigation" stage.</li> <li>• Minimization of the gravity of enforced disappearance by public officials responsible for receiving or processing complaints or by investigators.</li> <li>• Lack of legal assistance for victims.</li> <li>• Absence of psychosocial care during the complaint, search, trial.</li> <li>• Fear of infiltration by the perpetrators in the investigations.</li> <li>• Absence of protective measures for relatives - organized and non-organized- in advanced cases of establishment of judicial responsibilities of perpetrators.</li> </ul>
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## 6.0 Epilogue – conclusions

Despite the 2016 peace agreement that brought hope for the deepening of the democratic experience in Colombia, thousands of young people, public servants, university students, unions, grassroots communities, victims' organizations and others took to the streets *en masse* to protest against President Duque's economic reforms. The middle classes were enraged at measures that increased their taxes, and large sectors of the population who were already in a precarious situation felt even more helpless in the face of weak implementation of the peace agreement. The streets of several cities became battlefields between the police and young people who were dissatisfied with the state of the nation. They organized themselves into groups named "Front Lines" to stand up to the forces of law and order.

The Nydia Erika Bautista Foundation also went out to the streets. In principle, it was actively linked to the national strike declared by the union organizations in reaction to the lack of implementation of the peace agreement and the systematic murder of social leaders, human rights defenders, and former combatants in several parts of the country. The Foundation's activists of meaning played an active part in marches, sit-ins, and other cultural events in the framework of the national strikes. In addition, it initiated a process of legal protection for young people in the Front Line who were arrested when they were exercising their right to protest. Andrea Torres told me in an informal conversation that "We at the FNEB became a kind of judicial Front Line. We accompanied the young people confronting the authorities and went to the police stations where they were being held. We did all this to prevent the police from disappearing the protesters, and to ensure that fundamental rights were not violated." In this accompaniment, the FNEB built

significant links with some youth leaders and acted for them in the courts. With the social explosion, the FNEB's activists of meaning updated their action repertory and capacity to influence society. Seeker women and student volunteers not only participated in the strike as political actors, but also deployed their knowledge of the struggle for the defense of human rights and took it to a population that transcended the scope of their struggle. Young people of popular extraction and participants in the confrontations with the police began to inhabit the headquarters of the FNEB to impregnate themselves with the senses of the struggle for human rights. At a meeting in March 2022 group of activists of the organization met several young people from the Front Lines at the FNEB headquarters, Yanette Bautista commented to the young people, "Guys, we are an organization of defense of human rights. We have been fighting for more than 30 years. We know how to do things and we want to share this knowledge with you. Of course, I remind you, that we are a deeply pacifist organization. Our *raison d'être* is to seek peace and prevent the persistence of enforced disappearance. We dream of a country where we are not disappeared for exercising our rights. By this, I do not mean that you should not defend yourselves against abuse or excesses of the forces of law and order. Nor is it a question of turning the other cheek in the face of unjustified violence. But we remind you that violence is not the way forward, and it would be worth reorganizing yourselves to act differently; and the FNEB can help you in this direction."

The FNEB is deploying its pedagogical and awareness-raising character to sectors outside the struggle for human rights. With this new political momentum, the Community of Hope is expanding its horizons of political action, and its pedagogical practices. These pedagogical strategies are aimed at the political empowerment of the young so that they will re-signify the experience of citizenship in Colombia. In an informal conversation I had with Nancy at the end of February, she told me that "This new job with the lads in the Front Lines has been difficult. It is

up to me to remind them that the victims of violence don't engage in violent actions. Remind them that our weapons of struggle are our voices and notebooks".

The training process of young people of the "first lines" continues today. The FNEB persists in the legal representation of young prisoners and pedagogical efforts to offer them alternatives to struggle. Although the pedagogical process with young people has not been easy for the FNEB, it shows its intentions to install in public opinion that activism of meaning transcends the confines of the victims to fight for a just and fair world. A world where human rights are the point of departure for the democratic experience.

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As I have shown throughout this dissertation, the activism of meaning is critical in times of transition from contexts of violence to effective peacebuilding. As a unique window of opportunity for victims' organizations, the 2016 peace agreement generated hopes for truth and justice among the victim population. With the arrival of the Duque administration with a party opposed to the peace process, the initial optimism of the victims of violence waned with the feeble implementation of the agreements, but the victims' organizations persisted in their work of denouncing human rights violations. In addition to the writing of reports, documentary papers, art exhibitions, and other productions of aesthetic-expressive manifestations, the daily life of these organizations became a powerful space for the training of activists of meaning. After all, the conditions of possibility for a real peace lie in the actions of the activists of meaning, despite the weak will of the Duque administration to implement the public policies that were born of the peace agreement.

Beyond the favorable environment for victims to raise their voices in demands for rights, the momentum of transition has enhanced the creation of links between seeker women and the

non-victim population. These links constitute meaningful activism. Activists of meaning aim not only to reconstruct the vital universes of victims of enforced disappearance families but also to go beyond particular struggles for memory and truth to form critical, free, and autonomous citizenship. The narratives of suffering and testimonies of the victims intermingle with the experiences of the non-victim population and break out of the intimate sphere where they originally circulated, to involve volunteer professionals and university students in their struggles. While we, the non-victim population, cannot "feel" the suffering that victims bring, shared spaces end up configuring emotional networks of high political impact. Seeker women transcend these intimate spaces by taking the struggle for the vindication of the memory of their disappeared loved ones as a starting point to the construction of an alternative offer of a renewed perspective on the protection of life with the participation of the non-victim population reconciliation in the context of the Colombian post-agreement transition. In other words, activists of meaning establish powerful symbolic and pedagogical mechanisms to re-signify the experience of citizenship at a time when the Colombian war has arrived at a truce.

By extending the definition of meaning activism proposed by Gabriel Gatti (Gatti, 2014) this dissertation shows how activists of meaning learn to defend human rights during a political transition. According to Gatti, the activism of meaning is aimed at reconstructing the worlds and universes of the detainee – disappeared, at restoring their good name and the life projects that political repression has abruptly interrupted. In this dissertation, I have shown how these efforts to reconstruct eradicated individual identities (Gatti, 2013) imply that activists participate in three different types of communities that appear undifferentiated: community of memory, community of practice, and community of practice and emotional community.

In the community of memory, activists of meaning interject the layers of meaning surrounding the experience of enforced disappearance. By exposing themselves to the memory initiatives and repertoires of collective action that victims' organizations deploy in their daily struggles for the restoration of their rights, activists of meaning reconstruct the erased identities of the disappeared and establish a political agenda of struggle that transcends any original mnemonic particularism. In other words, based on the vindication of the memory of the disappeared, the activists of meaning configure a political agenda oriented to the construction of critical citizenships. In times of political transition or deepening democracy, activists of meaning offer alternative perspectives of reconciliation and peace that start from their experience of struggle itself. Activists of sense are activists of memory (Gutman, 2017). In the case of the FNEB, we activists of sense update the repertoires of collective action to sensitize Colombian society to the atrocities that the conflict generated in large segments of the population; we claim the memory of the disappeared that the Foundation represents; and ultimately, we fight for a political agenda that tends to generate guarantees for the protest, collective action and critical thinking without the risk of being disappeared.

This process of "struggles for memory" and for the re-signification of the experience of citizenship is based on the local knowledge that the members of the organizations bring in their bodies, hearts and minds. The FNEB has a process of formation, learning, and training for activists that enhances the local knowledge of the struggle of men and women who fight for the memory of their disappeared relative. In other words, meaningful activists *learn* to defend human rights. The senior members of the Foundation teach and guide the newcomers horizontally through the practices of the defense of human rights. In this sense, activists of meaning are nourished by everyday interactions and configure a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). This community of

practice shapes the reference points of identity and sense of belonging of the activist. As I have showed, the tacit and implicit knowledge that seeker women display in their particular struggles is the basis of meaningful activism. Seeker women have diagnoses of the *modus operandi* of armed actors in specific regions and have a wealth of knowledge that they use to confront the bureaucrats of State institutions and judicial authorities. In addition, they display tacit knowledge about the processing of pain and suffering. In their daily practices, seeker women train new members in "deep listening" and instill an ethic of care based on sisterhood and mutual aid through their interactions. As an informal training space, the School of Leadership aims to empower the new members of the Foundation in their struggle for the vindication of rights.

Finally, I have shown how activists of meaning incorporate the non-victim population into the struggle for the defense of human rights. From an intense emotional exchange brought by the testimonial voices of the victims, meaningful activism configures an emotional community (De Marinis & Macleod, 2018; Jimeno, Varela, & Castillo, 2018). Seeker women and the non-victim population build meaningful bonds around the struggle for the defense of human rights by sharing emotionally-charged spaces. Seeker women train the hearts of professional academics and student volunteers. Beyond fostering compassionate moments, the interactions that shape the emotional community make the non-victim population identify with the pain and suffering of the seeker women and their perspectives of struggle. This emotional community, which in the case of the FNEB acquired the name of the Community of Hope, recreates horizons of struggle and collective action. The activists of meaning intend to re-signify the experience of citizenship in a context of transition. And we call it the Community of Hope because, for the first time in the organization's history, the non-victim population was actively involved in the practical activities of the

Foundation. It is an enduring link that has been strengthened with the implementation of institutional agreements between Universidad Nacional and the Nydia Erika Bautista Foundation.

Theoretically speaking, this dissertation contributes to the already-consolidated literature on activism and social movements. This dissertation extends Gatti's definition of activism of meaning to include and articulate several fields of academic production that revolve around the problem of collective action. The research provides new insights into the role of activists in times of transition to democracy and peacebuilding. The recognition of the role of collective memory, the pedagogical and formative practices of social movements, and the intense emotional charge organizations establish, allows the concept of activism of meaning to illuminate peacebuilding processes in other regions of the globe. Activism captures the local knowledge that circulates when dealing with the accumulated pains that armed conflicts bring and offers alternatives for overcoming conflict and consolidating peace. The concept of activism of meaning has a broad heuristic value. From my personal perspective, it provides a means to recover the local knowledge that activists produce to place them at the center of peacebuilding processes.

This dissertation is also a contribution to the field of the study of social movements. The staging of the pedagogical variable and the production of knowledge of social movements, the concept of meaningful activism becomes a way to break out of the tension between approaches that attempt to offer rationalist explanations of activism or its origins in the emotions. By giving a critical value to the processes of formation and learning, meaningful activism combines both perspectives.

The training process of young people of the “first lines” continues today. The FNEB persists in the legal representation of young prisoners and pedagogical efforts to offer them alternatives to struggle. Although the pedagogical process with young people has not been easy

for the FNEB, it shows its intentions to install in public opinion that activism of meaning transcends the confines of the victims to fight for a just and fair world. A world where human rights are the point of departure of the democratic experience.

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