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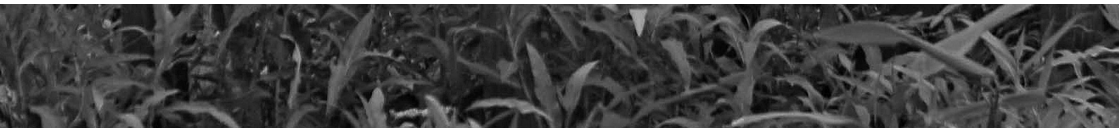
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Three times at the square: staging of a ceremony of State public apology due to the acts of paramilitary violence in Colombia

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ABSTRACT

The acts of armed violence can pour a new sense over the spaces where a community build its social identity. In Nueva Venecia, a small pile-dwelling village in the province of Magdalena (Colombia), three different armed actors (the guerrilla, the right-wing paramilitaries and the Public Force) gathered the local people, on three different occasions, in the same social space: the main square. In the first meeting, people were warned by the first one of the three groups about the possibility of a massacre that could happen there. In the second occasion, locals were both victim and witness of the way the second group executed it. At the last occurrence, the third group offered excuses for what had happened. This article analyses the way in which these three acts determined three marks of a *continuum* of violence over the local nodal space of memory. The article is a narrative organized around the last act, when National Army and Police representatives planned a ceremony asking for public forgiveness in relation of the paramilitary massacre. The study of the ceremony reveals it as becoming a stage of confrontation of memories by different agents trying to achieve social legitimacy rather than a true act of symbolic reparation.

KEY WORDS

Memory, slaughter, public apologies, reparations, Colombia.

1. Introduction

On the 29th of April of 2012 I was in the city of Barranquilla (on the Colombian Caribbean coast) packing my belongings, as I had just finished the fieldwork phase of my doctoral research and had to take a flight the following day to leave the region. That afternoon I received a call from A., who was my primary collaborator during the months I had been working in Nueva Venecia (Magdalena), a small pile-dwelling village in the middle of the The Large Marsh of Santa Marta (in Spanish, Ciénaga Grande de Santa Marta), the largest lagoon in Colombia. I had been there investigating the ways in which the settlers had adjusted to their condition of forced displacement, after nearly a decade of being considered as such by the Colombian government. I had said goodbye to A. the day before and I felt as if there was nothing left for us to talk about. That was not the case. He told me very hastily (the telephone signal from Nueva Valencia is intermittent and you have to take advantage of it when there is signal) that he had just learned that the following day a State commission would go to Nueva Venecia (headed by a minister, he said) to publicly apologize for the passivity of the Armed Forces and the National Police during the paramilitary massacre carried on the year 2000. That massacre had been the detonating force on the trail I would be working on.

A. could not give me more details; he just repeated that I should be there... and he was right. The massacre, perpetuated in 2000 by 60 extreme right-wing paramilitaries of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (in Spanish, *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, AUC), left 37 people assassinated. The paramilitary soldiers were in the town for nearly eight hours without any State authority being present. The Public Force, despite having been informed directly by the population through telephone calls, appeared nine hours after the armed group had left. Some families had to take care of the removal of the corpses themselves without any judicial presence so that they could leave the place with them.

The person who sent the armed groups to carry out the massacre, the paramilitary commander with the alias «Jorge 40», has accepted his responsibility at a public hearing, as part of the paramilitary demobilization process that took place in the year 2006. But he said that it was an «act of war» against «guerrilla collaborators» linked with the Army of National Liberation (in Spanish, *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, ELN), which had had presence in the region since the 90s. During the two years in which I worked in the area, I saw many demonstrations of indignation for this statement as well as for the absence of the authorities on the day of the massacre. The fact that the State representatives now made a presence,

in an attempt to recognize some responsibility, presented the opportunity to begin to alleviate that indignation.

This text is the product of what I observed that day in Nuova Venecia: The day in which the Colombian State, forced by a judicial sentence of the Administrative Court of Magdalena, apologized publicly to the local citizens for its impassivity during the paramilitary massacre back in the year 2000. This is part of a broader fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2012 in which the ethnographic work was made based on participant observation in the daily activities of the community, especially those related to its official status of forced displaced people: Meetings with state and NGO officials, participation in projects promoted by the State for this population, etc.

Although the article is organized around the public ceremony of excuses, it also incorporates elements from the extensive fieldwork to show how the act is the third link in a *continuum* of armed violence over this population. In the first section, it offers contextual elements about the region and the ways in which the Colombian war was present there. Then the text explores the three moments in which different armed group redefined the significance of the main square as the stage of construction for violence. Lastly, it examines the characteristics of the public apology ceremony to determine if it really served as a closure to the local cycle of armed violence.

2. Description of the zone and local presence of armed conflict

The Large Marsh of Santa Marta is a lagoon complex located in the Colombian Caribbean coast. It encompasses an area of approximately 3,800 square kilometers, of which about 19% is directly aquatic. It is in the jurisdiction of 11 municipalities of the Province of Magdalena, if we take into account all the adjacent territory with which the lagoon complex acts in ecological and social terms (Vilardy, González and Montes, 2011).

The region contains one of the primary ecological reserves of Colombia, although today it faces a process of environmental deterioration (Corpamag, 2013). Likewise, it has had a great economic importance in the country, since, considered in its totality, it has traditionally been a great extraction zone for fishery and has enormous extensions of banana crops. Recently, the increase in the cultivation of African palm (used for the manufacture of biofuels) has made this one of the main sources of income for the regional economy.

There are then two main economic activities: fishery and agriculture. While large farmers represent, in general terms, a dominant social class of

landowners with political influence (not only at a regional level but also at the national one), the fisherman live mostly in conditions of poverty. The last general census prepared by the National Administrative Department of Statistics (In Spanish, Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, DANE) in 2005, shows that 72.63% of the regional rural population has at least one unsatisfied basic need (Aguilera, 2011: 28).¹ The fishermen, moreover, have no relevant political presence in Magdalena or even in the country.

The Large Marsh of Santa Marta area, otherwise, has been the epicenter of a territorial dispute between different armed actors within the Colombian armed conflict. This has happened mainly because of its strategic location as an exit corridor to the Caribbean Sea for the drug produced in the *Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta*. This is a mountainous coastal area that historically has had a large number of coca crops and laboratories for the processing of cocaine.

The communist guerrilla from the ELN, in particular the Domingo Barrios front, had a strong armed presence in the region until the 90s, when the extreme right-wing paramilitaries started its violent incursion there. They took over the region with bloodshed and fire. The regional figures of violence show the cruelty of such a territorial dispute: according to the Human Rights Observatory of the Presidency of Colombia, between 1993 and 2009, 58 massacres were perpetrated in the Province of Magdalena. 322 people were killed during these acts of terror. Data from the National Fund for the Defense of Personal Liberty shows that between 1996 and 2009 there were a total of 3,001 kidnappings there; the guerrilla being the main perpetrator of this crime. The Department for Social Prosperity (in Spanish, *Departamento para la Prosperidad Social*, DPS), points out that between 2000 and 2009, a total of 380,858 Colombians were displaced by means of violence in Magdalena, which represents nearly 10% of the total displaced persons in the country.²

Both the guerrilla and paramilitaries war strategy also have included the selective assassination of regional leaders who, in one way or another, have opposed their expansion and military project. Paramilitaries have murdered trade unionists, journalists, Human Rights defenders, academics (such as the University of Magdalena's dean of the School of

1. Unsatisfied Basic Needs are an indicator for measuring the poverty level of a population. This indicator seeks to know if the basic needs that are required for a decent life are covered. Among the indicators that are taken into account are the access to potable water, the presence of an adequate waste disposal system, and the critical overcrowding they can present, the economic precariousness of the household, school-age children who do not attend school. All of these indicators are low in Nueva Venecia.

2. All these figures can be found on the websites of these institutions.

Education), and even officials of the Technical Investigation Department of the Attorney General's Office (in Spanish, *Cuerpo Técnico de Investigación de la Fiscalía General de la Nación*). For its part, the guerrilla has assassinated executives and employees of companies in the area, and even a former Minister of Culture.

To these actions made by armed groups, it should be added that the political body of the Province of Magdalena was one of the most involved groups in the so-called «para-politics». This is the name with which the Colombian press labeled the alliance of politicians to paramilitaries to «reestablish the country» (using a textual expression from an agreement clandestinely signed in 2001 and which has served as documentary evidence to convict several politicians for their alliances with the paramilitaries). This national reestablishment took place through the formation of electoral districts in which the paramilitaries guaranteed the votes of their candidates. About 400 politicians of Magdalena have been implicated in this judicial plot, among which are councilors, mayors, deputies, governors, and congressmen from the region (López, 2010), thus conforming in this province one of the largest cases of capture and co-opted State reconfiguration (Garay, Salcedo-Albarán and León-Beltrán, 2008).

3. The guerrilla: first mark on the nodal space of memory

On Saturday of the 1998 carnival, the inhabitants of Nueva Venecia received the order to attend a meeting that was not related to the festivities that began that day. This came from the Domingo Barrios front of the ELN, which had been present in the area since a few years prior. People were conducted to the church square, the only place on the village mainland that is not set on stilts in the swamp. This location served as a venue for community meetings and as a playground for the school. Locals used to congregate annually there on the day a priest came from outside to baptize the local children, and it would be the arena for the carnival dances over the course of the next four days. This would be the place chosen by the ELN to formally inform the inhabitants on the transformation of their territory into a stage of war dispute.

Actually, the presence of armed men was not new in the area: there were plenty of fishermen who had seen them around while doing their daily activities or some grocery stores owners that had been visited at night by guerrillas looking to buy supplies. They were sporadic presences that roamed the waters of the *Ciénaga Grande*. What was new the carnival Saturday was that these presences were concentrated in one of the central local spaces of production of community sense.

The memory of a community does not unfold in the void but around places that condense it. Local memory unfolds around nodal spaces that have marked relevance in daily life and in which the community inscribes its social identity. The meaning of these places is not given *a priori*; it is built daily through the common practices developed in them. This sense, acquired through social processes of appropriation of the community space, can nevertheless be altered through acts that have sufficient power to change the relation of a group to its place (Halbwachs, 2004). The actions of indiscriminate violence have precisely this capacity of producing a new meaning; the power to transform social spaces into places of terror and fear (CNRR, 2009). The meeting organized by the guerrilla in the town square would be the prelude to a violent act that two years later would definitively transform the sense of social space of the Nueva Venecia community and the very life of its inhabitants:

Right there [...] came a guerrilla commander, and he had five points to discuss about. Can you believe it? He told all of us at the meeting that he was going to stop on the last one because it was the one that needed more attention. The fifth point was on security. He said that there was a group from the Castaño brothers who wanted to interfere in the area, right? We needed to prepare ourselves. (Fisherman of Nueva Venecia, personal interview, February 7, 2011)³

Veena Das (2002) uses the concept of «poisoned knowledge» to refer to the painful knowledge that victims have about what happened to them, especially about the role of others in the violent events. Victims must keep such a knowledge within themselves, without any possibility to externalize it in their social relations. The image of poison responds to the fact that it is a knowledge that causes internal damage to a person who owns it and does not contribute him to transform his condition of victim. The information provided by the guerrilla (added to the place and the way in which it was supplied) represents a variation of this poisoned knowledge. It is, in this case, a knowledge poisoned *a priori*, that like the one studied by Das, becomes a burden for those who possess it.

Indeed, the mere presence of the guerrilla in the village and the exchanges that its fighters maintained with the population (the purchase of food and fuel, for example), already exposed the latter to the danger

3. The Castaño brothers were the founders of the Self-Defense Peasant Forces of Córdoba and Urabá (in Spanish, Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá, ACCU), who would later join other ultra right-wing paramilitaries factions to form the AUC, Colombia's main paramilitary organization. The group that carried out the massacre of Nueva Venecia was part of the AUC.

of assigned identities (us/them, friend/enemy, neutral/collaborator), typical of contexts of armed conflicts. In addition, the fact that the guerrillas exchange information on the presence of their enemies with the population itself deployed a device of forced alignment of the villagers with those men who, standing in front of them, referred to the presence of another external agent as a common enemy.

Having this information and having received it directly from a guerrilla group (although the inhabitants had no option other than to attend the meeting) is highly dangerous for the civilian population, due to the exchange of perspectives between the groups confronted in an armed conflict. The population that a group defines (instrumentally) as its base, the opposite actor defines it as its adversary. Once this happens, the possibility of armed actions against civilians grows: «each side in a war defines the status of civilians from a perspective taken from the rival side and the mass murder of innocent rural dwellers completes this lethal transaction» (Kwon, 2006: 19). The poisoned knowledge that was supplied to the population on the carnival Saturday exposed local people to possible retaliations of an enemy that had been assigned to them.

4. The massacre: second mark on the nodal space of memory

«He said that there was a block of the Castaño brothers who wanted to interfere in the area, right? That we would prepare». But no one could be prepared for what was to come twenty-three months after this meeting. On January 11, 2000, several dozen armed men from the Northern Block of the AUC entered the *Ciénaga Grande of Santa Marta*. The paramilitaries killed eight men in the nearby stilt population of *Trojas de Cataca*. Victims were accused by the paramilitaries of being accomplices of the ELN, a group that in 1999 had carried out a mass kidnapping in a nearby swamp.

The news of those killed spread quickly over the waters of the Large Marsh, and the two remaining stilt populations, Buenavista and Nueva Venecia, began to live with the growing fear of another possible armed incursion. On November 22, 2000, these fears materialized when the inhabitants of Nueva Venecia were awakened in the middle of the night by the noise of boats, shots, and the call to a new meeting. Again, men in camouflage were calling the population to meet in the main square.

Paddling towards it, escorted by about 60 armed men, the frightened villagers associated the warning made by the guerrillas at the end of the carnival Saturday meeting and the recent trial of the massacre of *Trojas*: «Can you imagine it? One going there thinking about what may happen»

(Fisher of Nueva Venecia, personal interview, April 7, 2012). Their fears would soon turn into terror: in the former space of social convergence, the same one used by the ELN guerrillas for the meeting in which they were given to poisoned knowledge about such an act, people would witness the performance of the excess of violence (Blair, 2004). Local inhabitants would become witnesses of a massacre that would leave 12 men lying on the square and another 26 killed in the swamps, the nearby swamps or in their own homes.

The paramilitary chief of the Northern Block of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), aka «Jorge 40», made his statement about the massacre, before the Justice and Peace Prosecutors in the year 2007⁴. On his hearing, he admitted to being the «indirect» instigator of the massacre: «*I have indirect responsibility, because this military operation was ordered by the “Castaño house”, which had almost an obsession to get into the Caribbean zone, and it seems that this was one of the ways*» (El Tiempo Newspaper, 2007). He added that thanks to this armed incursion, the AUC were able to counteract the actions of the ELN in the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta and the ports on the Magdalena river. In short, he referred to the massacre as an «act of war» against militants and collaborators of the guerrilla (CNMH, 2014: 34). But in fact, the massacre was part of the scorched earth strategy developed throughout the country by the AUC. This war tactic was carried out to appropriate strategic territories such as the Ciénaga Grande of Santa Marta, which constitutes an exit to the Caribbean Sea from the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta.

Not all the inhabitants were gathered at the square the fatal night. Some of them, who since heard about the Trojas of Cataca massacre had lifted some planks from the floors of their houses to escape, went into the water in silence to the mangrove swamps surrounding their homes. From there, many made phone calls to their relatives on land and others directly called the Sitionuevo police, the battalion Córdoba of the city of Santa Marta or the battalion Vergara and Velasco of the nearby municipality of Malambo, to inform them of the paramilitary incursion that was being carried out at that precise moment. It was one o'clock in the morning when the first calls were made; the massacre would not take place until about three hours later.

4. The government of Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010) carried on a negotiation process with the AUC. The legal frame for such a process was Law 975 of 2005, called «Justice and Peace Law». Under this law, former fighters could obtain some judicial benefits in exchange to their collaboration with the reconstruction of truth and reparation to their victims, and reparation to their victims, with the reconstruction of truth

Despite this early warning, no authorities came. Paramilitaries left the village in the light of dawn without anyone resisting them. The Public Force only arrived to Nueva Venecia at 3:30 p.m. on Thursday, November 23 (about 9 hours after the massacre perpetrators had left), in a helicopter that would take off five minutes later. The presence of the National Army only became effective in the town five days later. They arrived at a town almost abandoned, since the majority of its inhabitants fled the stilts soon after the paramilitaries left the town.

Massacres are devastating events at the local level, but paradoxically they do not transcend this level and do not count in national narratives (Uribe, 2004: 15). The suffering of those living in distant spaces (geographically, racially, culturally), affects little or nothing to those in the dominant center (Farmer, 2004). The forced displacement of the inhabitants of Nueva Venecia began after the devastating realization that the armed forces of the State did not respond to their calls for help; the devastating realization of knowing that their lives not only did not matter for their victimizers, nor did it seem to count for those responsible for watching over their citizen rights:

[...] That is what happened, that repression committed by illegal groups in Colombia is for that; it is in order to destabilize the country. «They destabilize the country», in quotes, but the country also shows them something. The Colombian State also tells them: «Well, you are committing this for nothing. Those people do not interest us». That is, they have been able to commit this massacre and another ten more and the State would not have bother for that. They say: «No, the action of the paramilitary groups, or the right or left groups, is a repression against the Colombian State». But the State, at the same time, says, says the State itself, without saying a single word, the State tells the criminals: «It is that to me that shitty action does not interest me, you can arrive and kill the whole population». They do not give a shit about that action. That is the message; there is no other message (Fisherman of Nueva Venecia, personal interview, July 17, 2011).

5. Public excuses: third mark on the local space of memory

On the morning of April 30, 2012, dozens of men from the National Army, Navy, and Police entered on motorboats to the town, wearing their camouflage and carrying their weapons of support, to comply with the stipulations made by the Court Administrative Office of Santa Marta. In a ruling of October 12, 2011, this tribunal forced representatives of the

Colombian State to publicly ask forgiveness to the relatives of Mr. Roque Jacinto Parejo Esquea (murdered during the paramilitary incursion) and the other settlers of Nueva Venecia for the massacre of the year 2000.

Why was the Colombian Public Force there to apologize if the massacre executors had been men belonging to an illegal armed group? The ruling answered this question by stating that the massacre was committed «under the auspices and cover-up of agents active in the Colombian State who are members of the National Police and Army» (Administrative Court of Santa Marta, October 12, 2011). So, the guerrillas warned the population in 1998 about the possibility of a massacre. The paramilitaries executed it in the year 2000 and the Colombian Public Force was present in 2012 to excuse itself for the same massacre. Three actors, three acts and a single population. Three actors, three acts and a single place witnessed a diachronic armed action, whose prelude took place 14 years before this public act of forgiveness intended to serve as an epilogue and closure of the conflictive past. Closing a cycle of violence can have opposing meanings: a reparative or an instrumental one. In the first case, we are talking about actions focused on promoting processes to denaturalize violence that has permeated local spaces of social meaning production. In the second case, closing a cycle is reduced to a performance of actions that dilute the responsibility of those accountable for the process of settling violence. Public acts of forgiveness potentially have the capacity to acquire either of these two senses. By reviewing the way this act was performed in Nueva Venecia, we can see which of the two senses was materialized on April 30, 2012.

David Lowenthal (2009) states that public excuses ceremonies provide an ideal setting for the State to release itself promptly from its responsibilities for acts of violence against civilians. The State can easily do it through quick apologies and symbolic gestures. In doing so, it may seem that the conflictive past has been discussed and that solutions have been found to remedy the problem it posed (Nytagodien and Neal, 2004). A fundamental condition to ensure that an act of public excuses leads to an «express pardon» is to make such an event an expedited episode that cannot be transformed into a scenario of claims on the part of those affected.

Lawyers from the staff «José Alvear Restrepo» (who represented the family of Mr. Parejo Esquea), once notified of the judicial ruling ordering the public ceremony, asked the Police and Army to postpone the event until the population was consulted about the way in which they wanted this to take place. Their request was ignored. The official notification of the ceremony (sent by the Police and the Army) arrived at the town only the day before the scheduled date, making it impossible (or at least hin-

dering) any attempt to organize the local population about it. Actually, people did not have clear what was going to happen. Remember the phone call from A. saying that people were murmuring about the presence of a State minister as the ceremony chair.

At 9:30 in the morning on the appointed day, when a police officer announced that the act was to begin in 10 minutes, there were no more than a few citizens in the square, some who were unaware what exactly was going to happen there. There were, however, several dozen men armed and in camouflage around the square. The situation seemed, at that point, prepared to impose a reconciliation and prevent the ceremony from causing a dispute.

Indeed, a public forgiveness act can be used by the State to construct a reconciliation setting that operate as a solution to the social demands of a community (Humphrey, 2005). Reconciliation operates as a social legitimizer of instrumental interest, and therefore as a tool to manage local discontent with the actions of the State itself during past acts of violence. The way in which excuses are offered, the language used, and the context in which they are developed serve as clear indicators to determine whether such excuses are just for this instrumental purpose (Nytagodien and Neal, 2004). On the context we have already mentioned that it was a ceremony prepared hastily without any participation of local community in its organization. Let us now dwell on the content, the very language used during the ceremony.

Managing social discontent to dilute it in a gesture of reconciliation requires building a moral community united by the pain of shared victimization (Short, 201012). The performative dimension of the public excuses sought to construct this idea: «We feel pained before the whole nation by this extremely serious and extremely lamentable event that never should have happened», said that morning the Police Chief of Magdalena (underlining added). The Chief of Staff for the First Division of the Army, for his part, would add:

We are grateful [...] to have been able to express our sincere apologies for this type of violence that generated groups outside the law, which affects not only our soldiers but also [...] the violent ones raged against civil population [...]. We reiterate to their families our deepest condolences, always reminding those present here that their cause and ours is Colombia (underlining added).

Those who offer the excuses build this way an imagined community based on an alleged same shared pain. Transmitters of excuses become receivers of them when, through the discourse, they also become victims

of what happened. Those responsible thus disappear symbolically from the stage and there are only victims who can legitimately build the official memory and start a reconciliation process. Memory built this way, as the result of an apparent consensus, seeks to dilute the existing social discomfort by the past actions of those who now ask for excuses.

The construction of memory constitutes a dialectical process where memory and forgetfulness converge (Assmann and Shortt, 2012). The past is created through a particular representation that implies selectivity, reorganization and simplification (Buckley-Zistel, 2012). This representation focuses its attention on some facts while silencing others. The military-paramilitary alliance (stipulated by the court's own judgment) or the State's passivity against paramilitary rule in the region for almost ten years were not mentioned in the excuses issued by both National Police and Army representatives.

The massacre was presented as an isolated event, unrelated to a larger (and complex) historical events that intertwined the different types of violence that overlapped in the area. This is not a minor simplification, because «to give up the historical and political context is to contribute to the presentation of violence as a natural phenomenon unpredictable and inevitable» (Garza and Hernández, 2001:390). An *ex nihilo* violence, decontextualized, without connection with other social phenomena, is the one that was being shaped in the act of public excuses by the massacre of Nueva Venecia. The aim was to promote reconciliation on the grounds that none of those gathered were responsible for acts of past violence. On the contrary, all constituted in essence the same community of victims.

6. The social organizations or the stage of contestation

Before the Army representative finished reading his official excuse letter, a boat arrived to the square. The boat brought new players that would alter the unilateral development that until then seemed to have been the act. Several representatives of the José Alvear Restrepo lawyers staff, the AVRE corporation (Support for Victims of Socio-political violence and Emotional Pro-recovery), the United Families for Pain Share Association (Afusodo) and the Movement of State Crimes Victims (Movice), descended from the boat and began to mix rapidly with the population (which by that time was already in greater numbers in the square), distributing banners with the names of the massacre victims. The reconciliation field seemed to become a stage of dispute. Just as the act of forgiveness has the instrumental potential of vertical construction of a community, it also constitutes a privileged space of contestation where different social groups

can use the public representation of memory as a tool to illuminate aspects of the conflictive past that in principle pretend to be silenced (Rigney, 2013).

The mere presence of these organizations was already a declaration of principles. All they have in common the fact that their work is focused on denouncing crimes perpetuated by agents of the State. Faced with the acceptance by the Public Force of an operational inefficiency to prevent and counteract the action of the armed command that executed the massacre (which was what the judicial sentence strictly ordered), the presence of these organizations sought to send a message that discredited the passive character of the Public Force in relation to the paramilitary actions. So they see State forces as collaborators of the massacre.

The State apologies were carried out within the frame of a typical official act. They had been developed next to an atrium with the Colombian flag on it. Excuses were read in front of television cameras, some of them even operated by police officers themselves. The participation of social groups that arrived in the last minute did not lack either its own conventional elements, typical of the manifestations made by Human Rights organizations. With their methods, with their own representation of memory, these groups were there to present a counter-discourse on the imposed stage of reconciliation.

The exhibition of posters with photographs of victims is one of the common modalities adopted by the memory of extreme violence in recent decades (Ferrándiz and Baer, 2011), whose potential lies on being adequate catalysts of memory in a context of media culture (Huyssen, 1993). The photographs seek to make visible the human tragedy that is often eclipsed by statistics, chronologies or political analyses of violence (Garza, 2001). The posters carried to the square of Nueva Venecia had a little variation: instead of the face of each one of the victims, they showed a blurred photograph of the bodies lying in the square (the same one that was reproduced at the time by media). On the photograph, there was the name of a victim, accompanied by the phrase: «horizons of dignity are built over the path of memory».

To focus attention on the traumatic memory of terror —and not on the void left by the absentees— and to point out the Public Force as responsible for violence over civilian population, was then the strategy. The slogans that newcomers cried out («neither forgiveness, nor oblivion: punishment for the murderers») and the intervention of the vice president of the staff of lawyers, who would make a more or less detailed account of the massacre, would leave no doubt about it.

During these interventions, the horrors of direct violence were exhibited without analyzing the social process by which the logic of war became normalized and incorporated into the local daily patterns. It was an exercise of necessary memory, but did not manage much «beyond a pornography of violence» (Bourgois, 2005). The image of men massacred in the square (described in the intervention of the José Alvear Restrepo's vice president) may be more or less an appropriate rhetorical tool to stir up the current judicial processes against the State for its responsibility in these concrete facts. But it hardly contribute in unraveling the network of different types of violence that surround the social space of a historically victimized community. The discourse made by the José Alvear Restrepo's staff (and by representatives of the other Human Rights collectives) was an exercise directed outwards, towards the judicial and media arenas of confrontation with the State, and not inwards, towards the community itself to stimulate initiatives that confront the causes and the wide effects of violence. On the other hand, if the more or less detailed exposition of the massacre has as its objective the «mobilization of shame» (Keenan, 2004) among public opinion, so that State agents felt compelled to commit themselves seriously to the respect of Human Rights, this strategy collides with the «fatigue of compassion» (Moeller, 1999). That is to say, these violent descriptions end up distorted among the media dynamics themselves, where «*trauma is marketed to the same extent as fun and even for the same consumers*» (Huyssen, 2002: 35).

Given that it is not possible to «understand violence without exploring the plots in which it is represented» (Ferrándiz and Feixa, 2004: 156), it is necessary to go beyond this stage of exposing horrors and to deal with conflicting memory, taking into account the very complexity of the latter. The intervention of Human Rights organizations did not fail to denounce the possible participation of State forces in the massacre or to personalize the tragedy by rescuing the memory of the victims. They failed in not surpassing the descriptive level on the surface, in not trying to unravel the complex network that has woven the violence through its historical process of consolidation in the area. In their attempt to generate an emotional impact, the number of displaced persons was doubled, the names of the dead were not careful checked (for example, the name of the commander of the paramilitary operative leaked into the speech as another victim) and left aside even the historical presence of the guerrillas in the area and the inability of the State itself to prevent it. Perhaps the most problematic aspect of the argument is that it, unintentionally, developed within the same paramilitary logic.

In fact, the social groups which were at the square are themselves immersed in the brand social process of naturalization of violence that has left more than 50 years of armed conflict. To their sorrow, they perceive war not from a civilian perspective, as an irruption or an abnormality, but rather from the «soldier's perspective» that recognizes the legitimacy of the ways of war, accepting «what would otherwise be morally and socially unacceptable» (Maček, 2001: 203). Faced with the paramilitary legitimizing strategy, which seeks to show massacres as acts of war, organizations defending Human Rights replied with the innocence of victims as the central point of their argument. Defending and promulgating the innocence of victims is not only an act of moral responsibility but also a way of «removing the guilt of the victim, after being attributed responsibility for their own tragedy» (CNRR, 2009: 12). It constitutes a way to create dignity, an indispensable instrument of reparation. At the same time, to remain alone in it as a quintessence of argumentation against the perpetrators, to dispute them only for the fact that they have wrongly chosen their victims (and not because they have granted themselves the right to exercise violence), is to accept the potential validity of their arguments. It is a tacit consent that certain «targets» could be eliminated; it means to accept that the logic of war legitimately governs social life.

It is in this context that the work of the Historical Memory Group of the former National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation has shown that «repentance of the paramilitaries does not depend on whether they kill, or how they do it, but on whom they kill; is only claimed if the victim is “innocent”» (CNRR, 2009: 143). It is a justice act to keep on claiming the innocence of victims to dignify their memory, but it must be emphasized that «a victim is such because of his helplessness rather than his innocence» (CNRR, 2009: 92). The sole vindication of the innocence of victims, without a deep questioning of the supposed legitimacy of all the actions of the armed groups, is caught up in the very process of normalization of violence, which is precisely what it is intended to overcome.

The victimizers, in their actions, reduced the victims to what with Giorgio Agamben we may call *nuda vida*: a human life considered only in the nakedness of its body (on which they dominated) and not as a subject of (human) rights. The State representatives, by not making a real claim to the construction of such a political subject, and the Human Rights organizations themselves, by insisting on the pornography of violence and tacitly accepting the paramilitary warlike logic, did nothing more than use the ceremony of public excuses as a way to reinforce the *nuda vida* imposed by the perpetrator: «Humanitarian organizations...

cannot, however, ultimately understand human life more than in the form of *nuda vida* or sacred life and they maintain, in spite of themselves, a secret solidarity with the forces they would have to fight» (Agamben 2010:169).

7. Resentment: by way of conclusion

The daily actions of a community within its territory have a historical dimension as semantic traces on the social space. When violence has also left a deep mark on a territory, the devastated spaces and the spaces in which everyday life is build «are combined almost to confuse» in the exercises of memory reconstruction (CNRR, 2009: 21). On April 30, 2012, over the square that was superimposed with, like a palimpsest, the outlines of community life and those of the advance of violence, the settlers were there not to mark the end of a past period, but to use the symbolic power of memory to initiate a new negotiation on their present conditions (Rigney, 2013):

[...] Victims and their families have been subjected to oblivion, poverty, lack of recognition and lack of integral reparation. [...] We, the families of the victims, want to tell the State and its military forces who are here today asking for public excuses [...] that this pardon must be accompanied by the will to repair us, to tell us the truth and to make justice (Intervention of the daughter of Mr. Roque Jacinto Parejo Esquea, April 30, 2012).

The symbolic gesture did not seem enough; the proposed reconciliation was not considered adequate. Although it is the essential requirement in an act of accepting responsibility, «sometimes saying sorry is not enough» (Dodds, 2012: 142). The excuses presented in a context of restorative reparation, like the one that is being carried out in Colombia, completely undress the paradox on which they are raised: an excuse never manages to undo what has been done, in spite of —attending to its own logic— this is precisely what it intends to do (Tavuchis, 1991). María Paula Saffon and Rodrigo Uprimny have pointed out that «the objectives of integral reparation cannot be fulfilled with measures aimed at simply stabilizing or to reduce the effects of the crisis situation derived from the violation of rights» (Saffon and Uprimny, 2009: 47).

Precisely, the excuse stage (and its contestation) was only configured to «reduce» the crisis stemming from the massacre. The official apologies did not become the starting point for a process of transformation of the

conditions that made possible the violation of Human Rights. «They imposed an endless night of pain», said a woman from Nueva Venecia at the end of the public act, referring to the way the armed conflict had transformed the daily lives of local population. That endless night could then have begun to end that day through the ceremony of recognition of responsibilities. But neither the recognition was full nor those who offered the excuses stayed to listen to the reactions of the offended.

The military and police representatives who offered the excuses did not stay on the stilt to witness the act they had organized. As soon as they had finished their interventions, they began packing what they had taken, and as the villagers approached the microphone to express their feelings or to reconstruct their memories, these members of the Public Force were already climbing back to the boats that had driven them to the town. Maybe then they did not even hear the brother of one paramilitary victim, who with visible anger did not accept the excuses offered by the State:

We are hardworking people, fishermen. We throw our stingray from sunrise to sunset; we are not bandits. So, with all due respect, I have nothing against you, gentlemen, but I do not apologize and I do not forget [...] because nobody can be happy after they slaughter our brothers or walk behind their backs as they did here (Adult man, brother of a victim of the paramilitary massacre, statement during the closing of the public excuses act, April 30, 2012).

An older fisherman, while watching Public Force members and representatives of the social organizations leave the place, summed up what appeared to be general discontent: «they come today and they forget the people again; (they are) birds of passage». More than three years later, in December 2015, talking to A. about the excuses ceremony, I tell him about this statement made by the older fisherman:

Of course ... but it is that it does not make any sense... an excuse, I mean. Apologizing does not make any sense if it is a forced action. I would believe in excuses the day they come because they felt it, because they say «shit, we're going to apologize for the pain we caused», but not because they were forced to do it. They did not come here by their own initiative, did they?

Didier Fassin (2013) states that resentment, as a form of moral or political individualization of past experiences of violence, involves recog-

dition rather than revenge⁵. It is this recognition, of what happened in the first place, but also recognition of the other-victim as a subject of rights, which was absent in the ceremony of public excuses. This recognition is also what A. is still missing. Ceremonies for offering excuses, made by the representatives of a State that allowed (or even participated) the execution of violence over civilian population, cannot achieve a reparatory scope if they are reduced to a bureaucratic act of compliance with judicial orders. The recognition demands an explanation that helps to understand the way in which the violence was legitimized in the past. It is only through this understanding that is possible to construct a social and political frame to discredit violence as a legitimate action in the present. To take into account the rightful resentment of people who have been victims of state-sponsored armed violence would have to be the goal of any accountability ceremony.

There are 37 small rocks in the square, nowadays, that remember the massacre victims. A religious ceremony takes place there every 22nd of November. State representatives also attended this commemoration. But, just as it did not happen on April 30, 2012, not even once State representatives have sought to explain their role (and why they played it) in the 2000 paramilitary massacre. Thus, the plaza awaits an act that can really contribute to stopping the continuum of the plots of violence that began to unfold there on the Saturday night of the 1998 carnival.

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5. In his study, Didier Fassin makes a differentiation between *ressentiment* y *resentment*, using the first term in the sense used here.

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