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A Case for Agonistic Peacebuilding in Colombia

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to discuss the concept of agonistic peacebuilding in the light of the ongoing peace process in Colombia. We subscribe to an approach to agonistic peacebuilding that acknowledges conflict as an inevitable but also possibly productive dynamic. We think that the work by the Colombian research programme *La Paz es una Obra de Arte* (Peace is a Work of Art) is an inspiring case to analyse from this perspective. This programme, based at the University of Antioquia in Medellín, helps us understand in depth how agonistic peacebuilding strategies work through the arts, using clown interventions to foster life story narratives in order to transform former enemies into adversaries and engage all actors in the creation of peace.

Key words: agonistic peacebuilding, Colombia's peace process, narrative, *La Paz es una Obra de Arte*, thick recognition, clown intervention.

Introduction

The Colombian armed conflict between state military, different guerrilla groups, paramilitary units and drug lords, which lasted for six decades, reached a crossroads in 2016 when President Juan Manuel Santos from the liberal-conservative *Partido Social de Unidad Nacional* signed a peace agreement with the largest and most important guerrilla group, *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC). This agreement, which was the culmination of several previous attempts to stop the conflict, was initially rejected in a referendum by a very short margin (50.2% against 49.8%), but later approved by the Congress. Santos was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for the agreement, but the coalition of political parties that supported the peace agreement later lost the presidency in a general election to Iván Duque Márquez and his conservative Centro Democrático Party. Duque

was supported by the former conservative president Álvaro Uribe, who fiercely opposed the peace agreement, and Duque has not fully fulfilled his obligations as a president according to the agreement. Large parts of the FARC guerrilla have put down their weapons, and the paramilitaries have since the change of government continued killing former FARC members and local community leaders in large numbers. In August 2019, some leaders of the former FARC guerrilla issued a new call to arms, forming an armed force called *Segunda Marquetalia*, popularly known as *Disidencias de las FARC* (FARC dissidents), and the peace agreement understood as an ongoing process is currently under threat. This means that the conflict is not over, and that peace initiatives that can mitigate the risk of a return to extended violence are urgent.

Theory and methodology

The concept of agonism is derived from the ancient Greek *agōn*, defined as “gathering” or “assembly” and more generally as “struggle” and “contest” (Minkinen, 2019), and was used in connection with various games and contests. More specifically, in ancient Greece, it designated a form of rhetorical battle between two opponents. As such, the concept has been related to qualities such as openness, freedom of expression, recognition and democratic participation by philosophers like Hannah Arendt, William Connolly and Bonnie Honig up to and throughout the 20th century. However, the political philosopher who has attracted most attention among scholars of conflict transformation is Chantal Mouffe, whose definition of political agonism is pretty much aligned with the etymological origin of the term *agōn*. One of the main differences between the formerly mentioned philosophers and Mouffe is, that while the former elaborate ideas about agonism as a feature of individual expression and recognition, the latter takes her point of departure in the construction of collective identities. According to Mouffe collective identities are ontologically speaking inevitable and socially contingent constructions, based on “us” – “them” relations, which means that a danger of antagonistic confrontations, where one part considers the other as an enemy to be destroyed, is always present. In other words, conflict is to Mouffe an ontological condition and agonism a way to mitigate antagonism’s violent dispositions and a possibility of turning conflict into a means for constructive political dynamics. However, in the philosophy of thinkers as Arendt, Connolly and Honig, in Mouffe’s own wording, agonism is without antagonism (Mouffe, 2013).

As mentioned in the Introduction to this volume, Mouffe’s concept of agonism is inspired by Carl Schmitt’s understanding of friend-enemy relations as constitutive of “the political”. The reason why many scholars who work with the concept of agonistic peacebuilding find Chantal Mouffe’s political philosophy inspiring is precisely her recognition of conflict as an ontological condition and the resulting possibility of recognizing conflict as a positive and productive force. While liberal peacebuilding initiatives typically consider the creation of a minimum of consensus between the conflicting parties to be paramount to establishing peace, the aim of agonistic peacebuilding is not to abolish conflict, but rather to “politicise the concept of peace and in so doing to illuminate points where peace slides all too comfortably back into familiarised hegemonic

iterations of disciplinary order” (Shinko, 2008, p. 475), and at the same time to transform the image of the “other”, held by the conflicting parties, from the image of an enemy into that of an adversary within a common symbolic field (Nagle, 2014, p. 4; Aggestam *et al.*, 2015, p. 1737).

According to John Nagle (2014), it is possible to distinguish between two types of conflict present in deeply divided societies. On the one hand, groups have a desire to obtain their share of economic wealth and political representation, and, on the other, they want their group identities to be recognized, which is qualitatively different from the former because recognition is an intersubjective relation. Recognition involves the desire of individuals and groups for acknowledgement of who they are and what they stand for (Nagle, 2014, p. 472). As Nagle claims, ethnic “conflicts have a zero-sum character, which only allows a winner or a loser. As soon as the conflict is all or nothing, it becomes particularly intractable” (Nagle, 2014, p. 476), while conflicts concerning resources seem to be easier, if not to settle, then at least to contain within non-violent frames of action. Unlike the Middle East Peace Process (Aggestam *et al.*, 2015, p. 1738) and although the ethnic factor plays a significant role in understanding the armed conflict in Colombia, the focus on the redistribution of land allows the peacebuilding process to shift from the intractable ethnic differences to the joint work among different social actors and the government to share the national resources in a more even way. In relation to the conflicts concerning land distribution and exploitation of natural resources, the ecological approach is indeed gaining more visibility as the only way to achieve “comprehensive peace” (Rojas-Robles, 2018, p. 191). However, the biggest challenge to this approach is the strong binary opposition between victims and perpetrators resulting from the last armed conflict. To be sure, the Colombian armed conflict has developed from being a conflict about resources embedded in colonial and racialized relations to being a conflict about identity and recognition, where the different actors of the conflict – Colombia’s government and armed forces, guerrillas, paramilitaries and narco criminals – at different moments and in different contexts have appeared as the “evil others” both among themselves and in relation to civilians. A focus on the resistance against the extractive industries and a claim for the protection of nature and a redistribution of land would allow the peacebuilding process to transform the conflict from an identity-based conflict back into a conflict of interests concerning distribution and create similar interests between local settlers and ex-guerrilla fighters. But, as mentioned by Andrew Schaap, “in the context of a divided society, a reciprocity of interests cannot be presupposed” (2006, p. 267), and a deeper understanding of the social and political conditions that made the “other” believe and act the way he or she did is indispensable for the recognition not only of the “other” as an adversary, but of the very existence of a common symbolic space to share. This kind of approach inevitably turns reconciliation in divided societies into a political undertaking in Mouffe’s sense, where “the political” is concerned with collective identity issues of “us” and “them” (Schaap, 2006, p. 268).

In many ways, the signing of the peace agreement in Colombia has provided an institutional symbolic space for the former enemies to become adversaries, as this is essential for agonistic peacebuilding (Aggestam *et al.*, 2015; Estrada-Ospina, 2016). However, the ways in which this transformation of the character of the conflict and of the images of “self” and “other” can happen

have not yet been fully explored. Important questions emerge in this respect: How can we create the symbolic space needed in order to change a friend/enemy or good/evil relationship into a relationship between adversaries (Mouffe, 2005; Aggestam *et al.*, 2015; Cento Bull and Hansen, 2016; Martín, 2020)? Mouffe (2013) pointed out the crucial role of artistic practice in the construction of new identities through the affective engagement that art can bring to collectivities, opening up new understandings and possibilities for agonistic approaches to conflict. In this article, we want to examine this role in an artistic practice: the use of clown interventions in relation to life story narratives by the research programme *La paz es una obra de arte* (LPOA), based at the University of Antioquia (UdeA) in Medellín, Colombia from an agonistic point of view. The approach and experience of LPOA understands “positive peace” as a comprehensive perspective (Rojas-Robles, 2018) and as a creative process that engages all actors (LPOA, 2019). In LPOA’s artistic interventions (LPOA, 2019) in the territories, the notion of “positive peace” materializes in the figure of the clown. The clown is a positive figure that engages all without excluding anyone (Velásquez, 2019). In this respect, LPOA’s approach to peacebuilding follows the concept of “positive peace” (Galtung, 1996), and additionally draws on the terms “imperfect peace” (Muñoz, 2001) and “transformative peace” (Ramos, 2015). Based on the notion of “positive peace” (Galtung, 1996), the programme deviates from the hegemonic liberal view that focuses on the promotion of respect for all human lives, general wellbeing, violence-free territories and the importance of coexistence. Conversely, LPOA critically address peacebuilding processes from a non-violent approach to conflicts with a contextual focus on the cultural, economic, geographical, sociopolitical and historical particularities of a specific territory and a given community, in order to promote economic development, respect for human rights and the reduction of structural, direct and cultural violence.

Nevertheless, with respect to “positive peace”, Lederach (2005, p. 41) admits that “we are, however, still in our infancy in reference to shaping and sustaining a positive justpeace, the rebuilding of genuine community in areas that have suffered from great division and violence”. Because of that LPOA also embraces the notion of “imperfect peace” (Muñoz, 2001), acknowledging that it is a utopia to consider the end of all forms of violence a prerequisite for peacebuilding, and understanding conflict as a capacity to drive personal, social and cultural transformations, emphasizing the need to develop conflict regulation mechanisms to be applied on a daily basis. In the same line of thought, LPOA works with the notion of “transformative peace” (Ramos, 2015), that considers peace as an always unfinished process that has to be continuously improved by the inclusion of intercultural experiences by Afro-descendants, indigenous people and mestizos. Thereby, for LPOA conflicts are active processes where personal and social needs are oriented to achieve a collective wellbeing, while peace is built amid social injustices and structural violence.

On the other hand, the assumption of the “positive peace” notion that structural violence in Colombia is rooted in the former colonial past is especially enlightening in this context. Galtung acknowledged the concept of “positive peace” after examining the structural violence in Southern Rhodesia (cfr. Vera 2016, p. 131). The colonial past is therefore fundamental in order to understand the Colombian conflict and the current peacebuilding process, since the question of land’s uneven distribution is rooted in the territorial system imposed during the times of the colony. Because of that LPOA insists on including the decolonial approach to peace as the only way of subverting the coloniality of power (LPOA, 2019). Moreover, LPOA works with ancestral worldviews in order not

only to integrate the other ethnically different and main victim of the armed conflict, but also to subvert the colonial control of knowledge (LPOA, 2019; Quijano, 2000). The most recent publications on the peacebuilding process in Colombia include the colonial dimension from an ecological perspective where addressing the expropriation of the land and the exploitation of natural resources becomes unavoidable for the peace (Rojas-Robles, 2018). The role played by the coca and drug trafficking, which has permeated all layers of the country's economy, has kept the wheel of violence turning. An ecological approach to peace is therefore crucial in order to restructure the main economical source of the country and restoring an economy based on green crops for small and medium-scale consumption free from the transnational cocaine trafficking. LPOA's support to the imagination of educational ecotourism projects from the ETCR of Llanogrande, based on the ex-combatants' knowledge of the tropical rainforest, is one example of this.

Specifically, LPOA's approach to peacebuilding fits within the *epistemological turn* (Muñoz and Molina, 2010, p. 47) of taking peace as a starting point instead of violence. We are aware that the notion of "positive peace", even though it was not its aim, has been understood in many contexts as a naïve utopia without conflicts (Muñoz, 2001) or as "the 'natural' condition and war the aberration" (Aggestam *et al.*, 2015, p. 1740). Certainly "positive peace" aims at the disappearance of violence, but not of conflict. Far from withdrawing conflict, "positive peace" releases "the creative and constructive potential of conflicts rather than the potential for violence and destruction" (Galtung and Fischer, 2013, p. 125). Thus, in our view, the way LPOA implements the notion of "positive peace" is not incompatible with "agonistic peace", although it might contain elements of cosmopolitanism, like the "we are all victims" approach.

The article is the result of a collaboration between the coordinator of LPOA, Agustín Parra Grondona, and researchers from Aarhus University (AU), Denmark, with substantial experience within the field of agonistic memory research. The empirical data was collected during Diana González Martín's stay in April-May 2019 at UdeA, where she became familiarized with the activities of LPOA. In October 2019, the clown performer and researcher from LPOA, Ana Milena Velásquez, visited AU, and finally an important part of the empirical material has been provided through online conversations between Velásquez and the authors. In the following, we will provide a short introduction to the historical background for the armed conflict, which we consider crucial in order to understand the current peacebuilding practices of LPOA. In the second section, we will examine LPOA's work with the figure of the clown in the light of agonistic theory, adding some reflections on the interplay between Anglophone academic tradition and the theoretical understanding of agonism, peace and conflict by LPOA coming from a Latin American tradition.

The armed conflict and peace process in Colombia

Colombia is the world's second largest Spanish-speaking country with 49 million inhabitants, and one of the most uneven societies in the world. The country has been haunted by an asymmetrical internal armed conflict between government military forces, extreme right-wing paramilitary groups and left-wing guerrilla organizations for decades. The official number of casualties from 1958 to 2012 when the final peace negotiations started is 218,044 dead, 27,023 kidnapped, 13,000

victims of sexual violence, 10,189 victims of anti-personnel mines, 5,156 victims of illicit recruitment and more than 6 million victims of forced displacement (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2020).

The armed conflict is rooted in the peasants' struggle for land, a struggle that has been going on ever since the 1930s (Ríos, 2017). Colombia is the Latin American country with the highest concentration of land property; today, 1% of the population possess 81% of the entire country's land (Semana Sostenible, 2018). According to the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (CNMH), created by the government in 2011 in order to preserve the national memory of the armed conflict, the greatest problems in Colombia are related to agriculture and the equitable distribution of land (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2020a). However, the conflict also involves an ethnic component. More than half of the Colombian population is mestizo, 20% are of Caucasian origin, 10% are Afro-Colombians and less than 5% are indigenous Colombians (World Atlas; Index Mundi). The strong discrimination by the elites towards those "ethnically different" (Torres González, 2011) comes from the colonial past, when the Spanish Crown occupied the lands inhabited by the indigenous people and gave them to the settlers and the political elite, European descendants. The violent confrontations of the last armed conflict in the country have typically taken place in remote areas where the ethnic discrimination against indigenous people and descendants of African slaves is intimately related to the asymmetrical distribution of wealth and land. Regions in which the state presence is not particularly outspoken or outright absent.

The first attempt to open a dialogue between the government and FARC was led by the conservative Andrés Pastrana between 1999 and 2002 (Ríos, 2017). The initiative did not succeed as neither FARC nor the government stopped their military actions. Moreover, in 1999 the government signed Plan Colombia in order to receive funding from the US to increase their military resources. The outcome was a heavy-handed security policy led by the conservative president Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) (Ríos, 2017). The repression succeeded in weakening FARC, which lost 83% of their military capacity (Ríos, 2017). This, however, made FARC go into drug trafficking and reorganize in peripheral areas, which allowed them to increase their activity level again from 2012 (Ríos, 2017). Furthermore, during Uribe's repressive security policy, the army lured thousands of poor civilians with the promise of work in remote parts of the country, killed them and presented their corpses as FARC casualties of combat. This case of the so-called "false positives" was revealed and investigated in 2012. The investigation is still ongoing and numerous corpses have been exhumed as evidence of the dirty war executed by the government (Semana, 2020).

The current peace agreement learned from former attempts at negotiation and incorporated six fundamental points, including two demands important to the Colombian society, on the one hand, the issue of illicit drug trafficking and, on the other, a jurisdiction on victims and a truth commission. Moreover, the agreement aims to fulfil two historical demands of the FARC: a comprehensive agricultural development policy and a guarantee for political participation for the FARC as a political party. In order to fulfil the second point and guarantee the reincorporation of FARC members into the public and political life, both parties agreed on the disarmament of the entire guerrilla. The disarmament was supervised by external organisms like the United Nations and

finalized on 27 June 2017, where a total of 7,132 weapons were deposited in UN containers (Giraldo, 2017). Rural areas were habilitated for the handing in of the weapons, called *Zonas Veredales Transitorias de Normalización* (ZVTN). After the weapons had been deposited, the ZVTNs changed their function, regulation and administration, becoming spaces for education and development for the ex-guerrilla fighters' life projects. These spaces gained a new name, *Espacios Territoriales de Capacitación y Reincorporación* (ETCR), and hosted the ex-guerrilla fighters and their families. The peace agreement states that the government provides funding for the ETCRs in order to help the ex-guerrillas to start productive projects that might allow them to make a living. The hope is that these activities will contribute positively to the economy of the surrounding communities, mostly inhabited by peasants and indigenous peoples (Gobierno de Colombia, 2018).

There are 24 ETCRs spread across the country (Gobierno de Colombia, 2018). In principle, the ex-guerrillas are not obliged to stay within the ETCRs, since they are recognized as full citizens after handing in their weapons (Gobierno de Colombia, 2018). In reality, however, the situation in the ETCRs shows a clear political and economic abandonment by the government. The ETCRs are located in the most remote areas and far from the nearest health centres. At the same time, more than 800 local community leaders and 246 ex-guerrillas have been killed by paramilitaries and drug traffickers since the ETCRs started in August 2017 (Semana, 2020; Saavedra and Cano, 2020), and the killings continue (FARC-EP, 2020).

Life narratives and clown interventions as agonistic means of peacebuilding

LPOA was launched in 2016 as a response from the academic world to the signing of the peace agreement between the FARC and the government. LPOA (2021) is composed of nine professors and PhD students employed at the Faculty of Arts at UdeA. The programme was launched following a series of artistic workshop for children in rural areas in Medellín organized by the professors Yohana Parra and Gabriel Mario Vélez in 2016 (Castañeda Arboleda and Tavera, 2017). After the first workshops had been conducted, Parra and Vélez saw the opportunity to bring art closer to the communities and for students and teachers of the university to put their knowledge into practice (Castañeda Arboleda and Tavera, 2017). This commitment to collaborate closely with the rural communities remains a general guideline and has grown stronger in the last four years.

LPOA is economically dependent on the Faculty of Arts at UdeA, a public university funded by the government. In this context, it is important to differentiate between the Colombian state and the Colombian government. The former refers to the lasting institutions (i.e. universities, congress etc.), population and territory, while the latter depends on the presidential period. Because LPOA represents the state, it must, following Burnyeat (2020, pp. 39-40), be considered distinct from civil society. At the same time, the mission and methodologies of the programme has a high degree of independence from the presidential government. An important part of LPOA's work consists of handling the "contradictory emotions" about the state among the communities (Burnyeat, 2020, p. 41) and creating a space of trust where the different actors at stake can engage.

LPOA's understanding of peace and conflict

The creation of this space of trust, that we believe might be identified as the symbolic space proposed by Mouffe (2005) to include adversaries, is specially challenging when including the former FARC guerrilla members. Victims and perpetrators are target groups of LPOA. The programme has developed a genuine and local – “*en el lugar*” (Escobar, 2006) – understanding of how to deconstruct this binary opposition of victims and perpetrators. LPOA became aware that in order to implement the abovementioned productive projects in the ETCRs as stated in the peace agreement, they first had to help to “restore”, “repair”, “transform” and “heal” many areas of the ex-guerrilla fighters (Hansen and Martín, 2020). According to Ana Milena Velásquez, professor and clown, member of LPOA, without previous “restoration”, “reparation”, “transformation” and “healing” work, the necessary creativity to start the productive projects would not emerge. In Velásquez's (2020a) own words:

this is the most delicate part in this process of the agreement, because we do not know much about how to face it from the outside, right, because we know the consequences of the conflict, post-traumatic stress, we know many things, but we had not really experienced it with the person there in front of us, facing the consequences. So for us it has been an encounter with that, right, how these people are doing, and they are doing badly. [...] Our first exercise has been an exercise of listening, very empathically, very very empathically, of being able to understand what has happened to that subject. The circumstances surrounding that subject. So we are not in a process of being able to define who the victims are, who the perpetrators are, in order to do an exercise of reconciliation, taking forgiveness as a goal, if we do not really listen to what has happened to these people. Therefore, this exercise of listening has revealed that we are all victims. We are all victims. Regardless of the role you have had to play in the dynamics of war. This does not justify any violent action, but it does tell us that there is a human being who, under the circumstances of war, has taken part in certain actions, but who is there in a process of reparation, reconciliation and transition to peace (our translation).

These words by Velásquez reflect LPOA's approach to the peace process based on bottom-up work with the “subjects”. The origin of the armed conflict between the FARC and the government lets us understand that, composed of a vast majority of peasants suffering poverty and abandoned by the state, the FARC guerrilla started as an initiative of self-defence (Fajardo, 2017, p. 563). This approach considers that violence in Colombia against peasants, indigenous and afro communities, and children and women is of a structural nature, and therefore peacebuilding is addressed in an intersectional manner. Thus, gender, ethnicity and class interact with each other, in line with the Colombian government's peace agreement with the FARC. As Boutron (2018, p. 116) has stated, “no peace agreement had ever gone so far in the inclusion of a gender perspective”. This perspective allows LPOA to take a differentiated approach to girls and women and works towards the empowerment of victims and ex-guerrilla members. This empowerment facilitates that these vulnerable groups become peacebuilding actors (Rojas, 2013). Furthermore, the Colombian

peacebuilding process is considered the world's first to include the rights of LGTB+ persons, although in practice they are seldom applied (Bocanumenth, 2020). Ultimately, however, the inclusion of women has a clearly greater weight in the Colombian peace process in relation to other groups (González, 2017).

To be sure, the work of LPOA, far from justifying the armed actions of the guerrilla during the war, consists of activating a process of working for and together with the communities. Among the most important aspects of this process, triggering the exguerrilla fighters' social and economic life (Gobierno de Colombia, 2018) and creating new social bounds is key. It is in this respect that the notion of "positive peace" (Galtung, 1996) becomes relevant and engages with the practice of "agonistic peace" reinforcing the importance of repoliticizing the context where violent acts take place. According to Cento Bull and Hansen (2016, pp. 394-395), "political agonism" aims to consider all actors involved in war as "subjects with a collective, as well as individual, political voice and agency" creating the collective memory that peace prevents us from demonizing perpetrators, opening up the possibility to re-humanize them. It is therefore important to be able to distinguish between different kinds of memory narratives and discourses. In line with Mouffe's understanding of political agonism, Cento Bull and Hansen (2016) have argued in favour of distinguishing between three ethico-political modes of remembering in cultural phenomena: an antagonistic, a universalist-cosmopolitan and an agonistic mode of remembering past conflicts.

The antagonistic mode of remembering recognizes conflict as a contemporary mean to eradicate the enemy with the purpose of creating a lasting conflict-free society, typically imagined in the image of a fictionalized past of peace and ethnic purity. In the Colombian case, this would be the kind of memory discourse one would expect to find in the government's discourses on the conflict between the Colombian state and the armed guerrillas, in the paramilitary militias and in the official FARC narratives. The universalist-cosmopolitan mode of remembering is derived from the transnational holocaust memory discourse, and takes as its point of departure the testimony of the suffering of the victims. It applies the moral categories of "good" and "evil" to abstract systems such as democracy and dictatorship with a focus on the recognition of human rights. According to Cento Bull and Hansen, the universalist-cosmopolitan mode of remembering has proved "unable to incorporate the perspective of the opposed 'Other', the perpetrator as a subject in his own right" (2016, p. 397). By contrast, an agonistic mode of remembering recognizes conflict as an ontological and fundamental feature of human society, but it unsettles the moral labelling of the "other" as an enemy on moral grounds through a social and political contextualization of the potential conflicts. It thereby allows for the understanding of the social and political context that made violent acts possible or even necessary outcomes of a conflict, without legitimizing or excusing the crimes.

The figure of the clown, the way LPOA works with it, materialises "positive peace" by including all actors (Velásquez, 2019). At the same time, the clown embodies conflict. Following Garcés (2020), the language of the clown becomes a tool for the treatment of conflicts because of the conflictual nature of clowns:

The clown is in a state of constant conflict, a being that is characterized by being in the wrong place, by having the world upside down, a crazy subject who takes advantage of the

unexpected, which allows himself to live in the acrobatics of today, because living is a risk and risk is a conflict, a constant conflict (p. 88, our translation).

LPOA's life narratives and clown interventions: how do they work

The clown, as a performative art, revolves around what Dubatti (2007) has called *convivio*, that is, a theatrical event generating a discontinuity in everyday life by means of a personal encounter in a specific space-time, in which each participant affects and at the same time is affected by the presence and behaviour of the others, reaffirming the group affectation through shared ties. In this context, through play and laughter, the clown generates a symbolic space where people can freely experiment with various possibilities of conflict transformation. In the words of Velásquez (2020, p. 272): “Experiencing the clown’s dichotomies between being and the duty of being, of himself and the others, allows to re-signify human conflict”.

The clown creates a safe space where mistakes are not judged and it is fine to laugh at each other. The clown eliminates all hierarchies: between children and adults, between victims and perpetrators (Velásquez, 2019). In this process of engaging all actors, including former enemies during the armed conflict, LPOA does not try to standardize all different viewpoints in order to withdraw conflict, but acknowledges conflict as an unavoidable factor in this interaction between the participants in their workshops (Parra *et al.*, 2020). LPOA’s clowns do not pretend to attain consensus. On the contrary, conflict is their *raison d'être*. LPOA’s clown performances share with the performed Greek tragedy the characteristic of “a site of embodied contest and struggle – as agonistic spatial practice” (Harrop, 2018, p. 99). But its comical nature makes it possible for dissensus to be an enjoyable experience, in which positively driven emotions promote a deepening in the acknowledgement and comprehension of adversaries’ differences, helping to surpass the polarization, the perception of the difference as a threat and of the contender as an enemy: “Laughter is associated with the absence of danger and disarms enemies” (Martínez and Velásquez, 2020, p. 8). It is from this starting point of engaging all actors to achieve peace that LPOA overcomes the dichotomy victim-perpetrator.

Within this frame, one of the main tasks of LPOA is to make the former perpetrators acknowledge their responsibility toward their victims and to achieve the active participation of the victims, following the statements of the peace agreement (Ríos, 2017). Part of their activity consists of reaching out to local *veredas*, isolated in the Colombian jungle, peasant communities in rural areas that are often too small to be considered villages. These *veredas* were frequently among the targets of the paramilitary groups as well as the FARC guerrilla when they wanted to clear an area for security reasons or for the sake of the coca cultivation. Artists, organizations and institutions have been developing strategies through art that aim to achieve reconciliation and forgiveness by victims and ex-guerrilla fighters alike (Universidad de Antioquia, 2016), and artistic practice has in this way become a pedagogical and methodological tool to end or transform the conflict. Different social stakeholders interact in these artistic interventions: ex-guerrilla soldiers, peasants, victims of past FARC military actions, ex-paramilitaries, children, etc. The dividing line between victims and

perpetrators is always blurred, and one explicit objective for the team is therefore to humanize the image of the “strange other” (Giraldo Giraldo, 2018, p. 27).

Among other activities, the programme encourages ex-guerrilla members to tell their personal stories before a public made up of peasants, children, ex-paramilitaries and former victims of the armed conflict. Victims often use this opportunity to ask for information about their disappeared relatives. During an LPOA performing arts workshop, within a group composed of victims, ex-guerrillas, social leaders and teachers, a participant told her story in this way:

The only thing I say to other people is that they will never feel my pain; don't think because I'm serious I do not understand your story. Everyone feels their own pain, because this is a very complicated issue. When I was a child all my friends were killed and my brother was threatened as well, so we had to leave home and abandon all our belongings. This was an uprooting from life, home, everything. I later returned just to find that only two or three friends had survived (Parra *et al.* 2020, p. 248, our translation).

According to Ana Milena Velásquez (2020), this narrative practice is applied in courses conducted at the university as well as in sessions at the *veredas*. Such narrative sessions give voice (Couldry, 2010) to the ex-guerrillas, providing a possibility for the evil-other to give an account of him- or herself (Butler, 2005), and oblige the speaker to reformulate his or her life experiences in the light of the experiences of their former victims. For the local communities, such sessions offer an opportunity to achieve some kind of understanding of the circumstances and motivations of the people who they might have envisioned as their deadly enemy. In a session in 2018, a rural school teacher told this story:

And before that (the moving of the FARC ex-guerrilla in the ETCR of Llanogrande's vereda), I went to the veredas to work and I met guerrillas. Once I met a (guerrilla) group fully armed, because the day before someone had been murdered. Then a lady told me: “Oh, you came alone and out there is that man that whenever he comes, he comes to kill”. Later, when I met this person in Llanogrande, I panicked. I said “This man is a murderer”. When I already had the opportunity to speak with that person, I understood many things: who he was, why he did what he did. Nothing justifies taking another person's life, but you understand the context. They don't want to talk about that war anymore, but about how they are building the present. There I learned that it is necessary to know the stories to understand many things (Parra Grondona, 2020, p. 52, our translation).

In order to mitigate and mediate the affect and possible aggression provoked by the narrative, LPOA combines the narrative sessions with the presence of clowns, who perform short interventions that engage the audience in order to transform the emotions from anger and aggression into compassion and remorse. To attain this goal, Martínez and Velásquez (2020) have developed an

innovative performative device called *Práctica Dispositiva Clownesca* (Clown's Device Practice). This dispositive, intended to be applied in community settings, is composed of five sequences:

- *Introduction and framing* – a moment for mutual recognizing and for contextualizing the process (the clown is not personified).
- *The story* – a community member tells a life story, recalled from his/her memory (the clown develops a double listening: to the narrative – the concrete and real space – and to the connotative emotional content expressed in it – the potential space).
- *The deforming effect of the first clown's intervention* – through improvised and empathic play, the clown expresses the listeners' reaction to the narrative, bridging memory, emotions and the present moment, and also mirrors the narrator's reaction to the clown's reaction to his/her narrative.
- *The fiction in two other clown interventions* – two clowns enter the group meeting, enacting in a fictional way a scene from the original narrative, transforming through humour the connotative valence of memory as a way to resignify violent past experiences.
- *A high risk closure* – a reflexive and analytical moment, to decant the strong emotions experienced during the process, accompanied by an interdisciplinary team of physicians, psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists as well as members of governmental institutions.

The purpose of this process is to activate artistic devices for representing and resignifying the suffering of the victims, the communities and the ex-guerrilla fighters. The idea is to initiate a process of narrative and emotional reflection that allows for a future coexistence based on the participants' understanding of each other's different life stories.

When people who have to live with their perpetrators in the communities state that they cannot bear the pain that this experience causes, LPOA is able to help them express their own emotions through narratives. By doing so, they engage in a process of collectively changing their victim narrative in order to construct new narratives that allow them to take control of those aspects of their well-being that they have a bearing on in the present moment, thereby opening to the possibility to reframe their own group identity for strengthen their capacities to confront their contradictors in agonistic ways. LPOA calls this transformation "forgiveness" because it allows the former victim to stop blaming the evildoer for every single pain they feel in the present (Luskin, 2002; Parra Grondona, 2020). By "forgiveness" LPOA understands an alleviation of victim's pain. The mitigation of suffering in this context can only be dealt with when victims ask for it. The mentioned transformation is rather a two-way process: listening to the narratives of the evildoers allows the former victims to understand the social, political and even personal background that made the perpetrator become a perpetrator in the first place. This transformation process is an open-ended one and it can take a lifetime. It is important to bear in mind that LPOA's work deals with the very delicate and subtle transformation of emotions, often only perceptible after a long time.

The shift from potentially antagonistic emotions, such as hate, anger and pain, to agonistic ones, like hope, happiness and love, or the dealing with ambivalent emotions such as indignation from an agonistic point of view, is key in the process of transforming former enemies into adversaries (Martín, 2020). Velásquez recounts the encounter between a former female FARC guerrilla, victims and clowns at the University of Tolima in Ibagué in 2018. In Velásquez's (2020a) words, the woman started by explaining why she joined the guerrilla, reflecting the gender inequalities presented by Björkdahl and Selimovic (2016) and their ideas of feminization of poverty and the continuity of violence from private to public sphere:

She mentions all the violence she suffered as a child and the abuse by her parents. She herself took the decision to exchange her dolls for a rifle in order to escape the violence in her family. Once in the guerrilla she faced very hard situations. Sometimes they arrived at communities where there were other armed groups present, not only paramilitaries, but also drug trafficking gangs. Then they had to do all kinds of stuff. Among the things they did in order to displace civilians from their homes was to kill their children, to burn them or chop them up, right? She tells us this from her present point of view as a mother, when it gives her great pain to think about what she did and saw others do [...] Then we all started to cry, the clowns cried, the families cried, everybody was moved by her telling. The clowns said to me "we cannot do this" and I told them "yes we can, because we will start from here, from the crying". So, what we did was to stage it. We staged the meeting with her family, she told us about her grandmother, and we also staged some situations she experienced while in the guerrilla. The clowns took boxes that represented small coffins, right, and she started to relate herself to these coffins, and those coffins gained a symbolic status, and through this symbolism the coffins thanked her because without this representation they would not be recognized, because she explained us that while there were other armed groups that never returned their victims, they did. In the end she told us that if she had known that she could become a clown, she would never have joined the guerrilla (Velásquez, 2020a, our translation).

LPOA recognises the relevance of gender identity in peacebuilding processes and therefore its gender-sensitive methodologies, based on clown-mediated narratives, allow for the expression of divergences in the Colombian population's support for the reconciliation and reintegration of former FARC guerrillas along gender lines (Oettler and Rettberg, 2019). The fact that the UdeA programme provides an opportunity for the ex-guerrillas to retell their stories before an audience that consists of a mixture of individuals who represent the people they fought for and the people they victimized makes them reinvent their stories and rethink their life-trajectories. As a military organization, the FARC had rigorously structured narrative templates for their members' self-understanding, but for the ex-guerrillas to be able to integrate into society, they need to engage in a change of identity and self-narrative, and the change of the recipient of the message provides an excellent space of exercise for this. For example, at the end of 2018, during the presentation of the

results of a series of LPOA's workshops in the central park of Dabeiba, an ex-guerrilla participant constructed this narrative in front of the whole community:

What do the arts bring to peace? They bring many things, especially time, the time you spend on this, because through the arts you are encountering yourself, you are finding in yourself a very beautiful spirituality, then you are taking away the time to do bad things, to meet ourselves in order to be able to bring art to others (LPOA, 2018, our translation).

As mentioned by Nagle (2014, p. 483) with a reference to Roth: "New narratives can be developed 'which do not directly challenge older ones, but which reframe them in more inclusive terms that deemphasize the emotional significance of differences between groups and identify shared goals and experiences,' such as civic values or a past of coexistence". Here comes to mind the American literary scholar James Phelan's (1996) narrative rhetoric, according to which the contextual circumstances and composition of the audience inevitably influence not only the rhetorical directedness but also the ethical substance of the narrative. In this way, the encounters of LPOA open up a space where the self-identities and images of the "other" lying underneath the conflict of recognition might be negotiated and modified.

We believe that this kind of dialogized narrative of self and other, and the kind of understanding of the perpetrator's rationale of doing what he or she did, is genuinely agonistic (Strömbom and Rummelili 2021). It is commonly recognized that cultural memory processes are an integrated part of the creation of collective identities, and scholars working with agonistic peacebuilding acknowledge memory as being an important component for the development and transformation of collective conflict (Nagle, 2014, p. 477; Maddison, 2015, p. 1019). We believe that learning from the past means listening to both victims and perpetrators, and not judging any absolute truth (Olick, 2007, p. 148). As stated by Andrew Schaap, "by making political sense of past wrongs those social meanings that structured the perpetrator's actions and that make his or her choice of evil comprehensible come to the fore" (2006, p. 266). Agonistic memory, therefore, needs to incorporate the perspective of the perpetrators, if not directly deconstruct the far too easy distinction between perpetrators and victims. Cento Bull and Hansen (2020, p. 3) "do not advocate to 'taming' the representation in the image of an adversary, but to facilitate an understanding of the contexts and narratives that made such cruelty socially and politically possible". We need to provide an understanding for the "kind of social and political conditions it takes to make normal people turn into war criminals, believing they are doing the right thing" (Cento Bull and Hansen, 2020, p. 3).

By understanding conflict as a crucial and potentially productive element of social change, agonistic dialogue, according to Maddison (2015, p. 1022), is capable of leading to a deeper recognition of difference, providing greater scope for people to express the full range of their passions, and of highlighting "the shifting nature of relationships concerned with power, identity and vulnerability". We furthermore believe that this is the kind of understanding and recognition which is needed in order to produce what Bahar Rumelili and Lisa Strömbom (2021) calls "agonistic

recognition". Building on Magaret Somers' description of narrative identity (1994) the authors consider "collective self-narratives as structures of meaning forged over time, which situate the collectivity in time and distinguish it from significant Others" (2021, 4). Recognition and identity change are therefore mediated by changes in this dialogic or "multilogic" relationship between narratives on Self and Other, which again means that if the self narrative of one of the parts in a in this relation is changed and recognized by the other, this change will also affect the other's own self identity narrative (2021, 4). Agonistic recognition is, in Rumelili and Strömbom's perspective, particular rather than universal, and includes the other's cultural identity and historical background, and it is "non-finalist" in the sense that agonistic recognition "needs not culminate in full respect for all aspects of the other's identity, apology for past actions or an institutionalised future relationship of equality" (2021,6). We therefore believe that Maddison's concept of agonistic dialogue and Rumelili and Strömbom's concept of agonistic recognition go hand in hand with Cento Bull and Hansen's concept of agonistic memory. As we hope to have shown, LPOA's interventions in the territories where former perpetrators, victims and bystanders meet and listen to each other's life story narratives create a propitious scenario for mutually thick recognition between participants and for agonistic peacebuilding processes to emerge.

Conclusions

In this article, we have examined the practice of using life story narratives through clown interventions in settings composed by ex-guerrillas and local village inhabitants, employed by the peacebuilding initiative *La paz es una obra de arte*. By giving voice to the ex-guerrilla fighters who give an account of their life experiences and hopes for the future before a public composed of a mixture of the people they fought for and the people they killed, LPOA makes them revise and change the narrative template and rhetorical performance developed and rehearsed by the FARC as a military organization. This exercise of ethical self-reflection is an important precondition for the ex-guerrillas' ability to effectively integrate into the Colombian society. Moreover, the locals are given an opportunity to develop a kind of thick understanding of what made their perpetrators do what they did. This is an important precondition for changing the antagonistic identity discourse that labels the ex-guerrillas as evil enemies of the Colombian people. The strong emotions and possible aggressions provoked by the stories are mitigated and transformed through the intervention of LPOA's clown performances. On the one hand, LPOA allows the communities to engage in the playful experience of being clowns collectively, tearing down all hierarchies as a powerful way of overcoming the dichotomy of victims and perpetrators. This experience encourages people to assume their share of responsibility in conflict management, which stimulates empowerment at the individual and community level. In addition, the clown allows to manage conflict within the playful frame of the artistic intervention giving the participants the possibility of developing greater empathy toward each other and a broader understanding of mutual differences without minimizing them or taking away the other's responsibilities, which helps us to see the other as a valid opponent.

Furthermore, LPOA's clown language builds a common space among the participants through the *Práctica Dispositiva Clownesca*, an innovative five-step methodology for promoting transformative narratives of life stories in a group setting of contradictors through clown performances and interventions in the community, intended to signal a reference to reality and to the symbolic, implicit and denotative content in order to build collective resilience and, in Mouffe's terms, to foster the construction of an agonistic symbolic space. In this sense, we believe that LPOA's practice contains important agonistic elements of memory and narrative, providing thick understanding and possibly transforming the image of the "other" from that of an enemy into that of an adversary with whom it is possible engage to develop peace. Moreover, we advocate that the transformative process activated by LPOA, that empowers victims, perpetrators and bystanders capability of creating new life narratives and, by doing so, reframing their own identity and other's identity, is one of the closest examples of agonistic memory for peacebuilding in the world.

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