

Can You Hear the Trees Talking?
A collaborative arts-based methodology to listen to survivors of sociopolitical violence

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Abstract

***Can You Hear the Trees Talking?* A collaborative arts-based methodology to listen to survivors of sociopolitical violence**

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Can you hear the trees talking? is a research-creation project developed in collaboration with Comunidad, a musician and cultural leader from Tumaco, Colombia. It stems from the research question: How to listen effectively and with care to survivors of sociopolitical violence while collaborating on creative work based on their life stories? The project proposes and analyzes an oral history and art-based methodology for conducting dialogical interviews while drawing trees. Initial curiosity about Comunidad's experiences linked with his forced displacement prompted interviews and experimentation with drawing, aiming to foster a sense of comfort and safety. As the project evolved, the motivation expanded to understanding how our differing social, racial, gender, and cultural contexts have shaped our experiences of the armed conflict in Colombia.

Through the creation of two audiovisual works, "From the Balso to The Cununo" and "Eucalipto," the project integrates personal, collective, and ancestral stories by centering the symbolic significance of the Balso and Eucalyptus trees in our lives. The findings highlight a transformative shift from one-sided conversations to reciprocal dialogue, fostering a space for trust, mutual curiosity, and creative exchange. The project underscores the role of art as an essential element for transitional justice in a country grappling with the legacies of colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and systemic inequality. It contributes to the broader discourse on the ethics of socially engaged art, emphasizing the importance of listening with care in collaborative artistic processes with survivors of sociopolitical violence.

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me ha dado el oído que en todo su ancho,
graba noche y días, grillos y canarios.
—Mercedes Sosa, *Gracias a la vida*

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Listening and Drawing: Researching and Creating Amid Colombian Sociopolitical Violence

Colombia's armed conflict has its roots in complex socio-political dynamics that have evolved over more than five decades. Scholars have highlighted that this multi-faceted conflict stems from deep-seated issues, including land inequality, poverty, political exclusion, and drug trafficking (GMH 2013; Albertus and Kaplan 2012). The 2016 peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) marked a significant turning point in Colombian history, as it represented a formal end to hostilities with one of the country's most significant guerrilla movements. This historic accord, which aimed to address the root causes of the conflict and included provisions for rural reform, political participation, and drug policy reform, has been described as a landmark moment in peacebuilding (Fabra-Zamora et al., 2021).

However, significant challenges remain. Despite the peace agreement, various illegal armed groups continue to operate, fueled by ongoing issues such as the lucrative drug trade and the absence of state presence in rural areas, as noted by Global Witness (2021). Violence persists, particularly against social leaders and human rights defenders who have been at the forefront of advocating for peace and justice. The persistent threats from illegal armed groups complicate the security landscape, suggesting that while the peace process with FARC has made a significant advancement, lasting peace in Colombia remains fragile (Vuković, Dore, and Paz 2024).

Central to the Peace Accord between the Colombian government and FARC is an ambitious effort to address the rights of nearly 8 million victims of the conflict, specifically their rights to truth, justice, reparations, and guarantees of non-repetition through transitional justice (Unidad para las Víctimas 2025). At its core, transitional justice is a system to transition from a period of conflict

and violence toward a stable, peaceful society. As part of the 2016 Peace Accord between the Colombian government and the FARC, this framework is designed to listen to the victims, repair them, promote healing, and foster a national reckoning with the past. To facilitate this, three institutions were established: the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, the Truth Commission, and the Unit for the Search of Persons Deemed as Missing.

Restorative justice is a concept that falls within the broader umbrella of transitional justice. It emphasizes the repair of relationships to restore dignity and foster understanding, rather than merely punishing perpetrators. In Howard Zehr and Ali Gohar's (2003) words: "Restorative justice expands the circle of stakeholders beyond just the government and the offender to also include victims and community members" (11). However, its implementation in the context of massive human rights violations and armed conflicts has significant challenges, "especially when transferring this approach to a transitional context marked by serious crimes and the State's obligation to investigate, prosecute, and punish such crimes." (JEP 2024, 33). In Colombia's case, restorative justice focuses on acknowledging harm and responsibility, the need for truth-telling, and the commitment to reparations.

With the establishment of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) and its mandate to implement restorative justice in its proceedings, particularly in cases involving acknowledgment of responsibility, listening assumes a distinct role. As stated by Sotelo Castro (2023),

Listening to the victims has a particular characteristic that results in a promise that the institutional framework of transitional justice did not make before in Colombia: the promise that listening to the victims of the armed conflict will be the social mechanism to identify the damages suffered by a universe of victims and, as far as possible, to repair them (7).

In light of an ongoing demand for justice, care, and reconciliation, there has been a notable rise in the development of collaborative arts-based methodologies by socially engaged artists, activists, survivors, and scholars (Sotelo Castro and Shapiro-Phim 2023). Although this phenomenon is not unique to Colombia (Cohen 2012; Thompson 2008; Sotelo Castro and Shapiro-Phim 2023), the country has become a rich field for arts-based methodologies, gaining academic attention (Wills 2021; Rubiano 2017; Sotelo Castro 2020).

Contemporary art scholars have theorized collaborative art as a shift from the autonomous artist to an engaged practitioner whose work unfolds in dialogue with others (Kester 2004; Jackson 2011; Bishop 2012). In such practices, the ethical dimension is not peripheral because artists must negotiate how their actions and decisions impact co-creators, especially when working with individuals whose lives have been shaped by violence or exclusion. This implies that ethics in collaborative art is situated in the unfolding of relationships over time (Thompson 2009).

The project “*Can You Hear the Trees Talking?*” builds on collaborative art but adopts a research-creation approach, which differs from collaborative art alone in that it explicitly seeks to generate new knowledge through the creative process. Rather than treating artistic collaboration as the endpoint, I engage with it as a methodology for inquiry, reflection, and transformation. Research-creation “brings together creative and academic research practices and supports the development of knowledge and innovation through artistic expression, scholarly investigation, and experimentation” (SSHRC, 2022). Brian Massumi and Erin Manning expand this definition of research creation, highlighting “how unexpected and even unknowable its outcomes can be.” (Quoted in Chapman and Sawchuk 2015, 50).

This project examines the intersection of oral history, drawing, and listening within the context of Colombia's transitional justice process. It comprises two oral history-based audiovisual pieces: "From the Balso to the Cununo" and "Eucalipto" (Comunidad and Ochoa, 2024a, 2024b). The first video is an interview with Comunidad, a Colombian musician and cultural leader who was forcibly displaced from his territory due to armed conflict. This interview emerged from a long process of multiple formal and informal conversations about his life, drawings, memories, and experiences of violence and resistance.

Comunidad is a middle-aged, Afro-Colombian musician and cultural leader who teaches traditional music from Colombia's South Pacific Region. He was born and raised in Tumaco, Colombia. His pseudonym, Comunidad, meaning "community," was chosen for these interviews primarily for safety reasons. He views this name as a response to the social disintegration caused by his forced displacement. When I asked Comunidad if he wanted to change the name of Tumaco to protect his identity further, he responded firmly that he did not:

Tumaco is not just a region of Colombia; Tumaco is a part of the world. It is a territory inhabited by Indigenous and Afro-Colombian people who have been forgotten, to whom the world has turned its back. It is a beautiful and forgotten place. It was peaceful until the coca crops and drug trafficking arrived. I want the world to know Tumaco, to know its people, who are kind and hardworking. (Comunidad 2025)

The second video, *Eucalipto*, reverses the roles: I interview Comunidad about my family, childhood, and migratory experience in Canada. Both videos are centred on drawings we created together while we talked. In the first, we draw a Balso tree—chosen by Comunidad as a symbol of his experience of displacement. In the second, we draw an Eucalyptus tree—chosen by me as a symbol of memory and emotional connection.

From this profound symbolic resonance with trees, the title “Can You Hear the Trees Talking?” emerges. In the Colombian armed conflict, trees have been silent witnesses and, at times, victims.

As recognized by Magistrate José Miller Hormiga of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP):

The armed conflict had both direct and indirect impacts on the environment. Directly, it manifested through landmines, indiscriminate bombings, deliberate fires, armed confrontations, the establishment of camps and battalions, and oil spills. Underlying effects included illegal mining, aerial spraying of glyphosate, and deforestation. (Special Jurisdiction for Peace 2024)

However, trees also endure and regenerate, embodying the possibility of renewal. By drawing and listening to the stories that exist through these trees—*Balso* and *Eucalipto*—we listen to each other, to our different yet entangled experiences of displacement and memories of care. For Comunidad, the relationship with the Balso tree is not merely utilitarian as a source of wood for crafting musical instruments, but one of reciprocal care. It requires advanced knowledge of the tree to ensure its healthy regrowth after being cut, which in turn makes the wood particularly beneficial for musical instruments. Since Balso cannot be found in Bogotá, Comunidad recalls it as part of his identity and past, but also as a source of emotional strength in the present, embodied through the musical instruments he plays. In contrast, my relationship with the eucalyptus tree stems from an affective place, rich with memories of my childhood, my grandmother’s care, and the spaces we shared.

In this project, collaboration is not just about working with others but about creating relationships based on trust, care, reciprocity, and shared agency. This approach is grounded in the idea of co-creation, where participants contribute their knowledge, experiences, and creativity to shape the process and outcomes, facilitating a shared journey towards understanding and transformation through artistic collaboration. Co-creation, defined by Christina Horvath and Juliet Carpenter (2020), “involves the process of knowledge production through collective creative endeavour” (294). As cited by María José Pantoja Peschard (2020), Rosie Meade and Mae Shaw (2007) have

argued that “clearly the arts cannot transcend socioeconomic contexts by the force and will of their craft alone” (41). However, socially engaged arts do have the potential to “awaken people to both the negative and positive spaces which it opens up” (Pantoja Peschard 2020, 41).

Such a contribution is crucial and timely, offering valuable insights that can be applied to other contexts with prolonged and intense violent conflict. However, in the context of transitional justice, how can artist-researchers develop a listening approach that empowers survivors by positioning them not as passive subjects but as active contributors to the broader transformative process? In the Colombian context, the principle of survivors’ centrality is embedded in the peace agreement with the FARC, which prioritizes survivors’ voices and participation. Engaging survivors in co-creative processes enables them to reclaim agency over their narratives and actively shape collective memory and understanding.

Pilar Riaño-Alcalá and Erin Baines (2011) emphasize that collaborative community-based approaches also foster spaces of dignification, emotional expression, and social transformation, contributing to the broader goals of transitional justice. Survivors are not passive recipients of reparations but political subjects with agency, whose participation strengthens the legitimacy of the peace process. Nonetheless, as Sotelo and Shapiro (2023) state, if not practiced self-reflexively and with care, the artist-researcher can run the risk of ethical harm by exercising their power positions in ways that fail to listen (8). James Thompson (2009) reflects on the ethical pitfalls of applied theatre, noting that it can manipulate pain, risking a repetition of injury or even legitimizing an unintended ideology. He writes:

Questioning the limits of a sole focus on effect is important, so that the potential for problematic impact is documented and made explicit. Aspiration and idealism are not to be

discouraged, but consideration of the possible dangers of the practice might ensure that what is undertaken recognizes how it is contained or restrained by the many forces under which it operates (8).

The pursuit of social change through art, then, must be coupled with ongoing ethical scrutiny, self-awareness, and an openness to confronting the unintended consequences of even the most well-meaning interventions.

This research-creation project focuses on bringing together in proximity and dialogue a person impacted by sociopolitical violence with another person who has not been directly impacted. I want to approach this aspect from a central research question: **How can we listen effectively and with care to survivors of sociopolitical violence while collaborating on a creative work based on their life stories?**

This question unfolds within the broader and ongoing context of transitional justice in Colombia, a complex, multi-actor process. By fostering relational and creative modes of listening and collaboration, the project contributes to imagining reconciliation not as a static outcome, but as a lived and evolving practice. The Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición [CEV]) published a Decalogue for Reconciliation in 2022, offering suggestions for reconciliation.

Some of them were:

(...) accepting the truth as a condition for collective construction and overcoming denialism and impunity. (...) To build in such a way that the State, justice, politics, economy and security are at the service of Colombians' equal and sacred human dignity (...). That the current State be transformed into a State for the people, that politicians stop corruption, that business people do not exclude from participation and production a multitude that demands the right to be part of it, that those who monopolize the land hand it over; that all those who collaborate with drug trafficking, with war, with exclusion, with the destruction of nature, change (CEV 2022).

The CEV's suggestions implicitly reveal the deep-seated cracks in Colombia's socio-economic context, which are a response to the global influence of extractive capitalism. How can Colombians create the conditions for such complex transformations? In what ways can the arts influence such transformations? As explained by Martín de Almagro et al. (2024), in addition to the armed confrontations, survivors face challenges such as displacement, lack of access to food, clean water, schools, health services and the exhausting bureaucracy, all while living in constant fear.

The symbolic gestures of peace, such as dialogues, signed documents, or images of political leaders holding hands, are only the threshold of transformation. For us Colombians, the challenge lies in the daily, collective weaving of relationships with the land, with one another, and with the past. Central to this labour is the practice of listening, not as a passive reception of testimony, but as an active, ethical, and creative engagement with survivors' lived realities.

Justice Rooted in Relations

Promoting reconciliation and social cohesion are crucial objectives of transitional justice (Cole 2014). The Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) implements transitional justice with a restorative approach to address the harm suffered, reintegrate the parties into society and recover the broken social fabric. Listening within a transitional restorative context is an emerging area of research, with few studies available (Sotelo Castro, 2019; 2023). Given the irreparable damages in the Colombian context, the question arises about the most feasible reparation and effective listening.

Repair is a collective effort that must be renewed constantly, and while the law should support this process, it cannot replace it (Stauffer 2018). Restorative efforts aim to heal social divisions and

foster understanding between groups or communities affected by conflict. In this regard, Jennifer Llewellyn (2011) proposes a relational conception of restorative justice. Rather than viewing justice as the application of rules or punishments, she emphasizes the quality and health of relationships. Restorative justice, from this perspective, is not limited to addressing interpersonal harms; it is also concerned with establishing and maintaining just relations at both interpersonal and structural levels.

Furthermore, transitional justice often centers around the parties directly involved in the conflict, namely the victims and victimizers. This approach to viewing reconciliation struggles with the overlap between the categories of victim and victimizer, as individuals can simultaneously inhabit both categories in many conflicts, such as the Colombian conflict (Montalvo Velásquez et al. 2023). However, it is crucial to recognize that reconciliation rests not solely on their shoulders. As Clara Ramírez-Barat (2014) has reflected, “transitional justice measures extend beyond the confines of court chambers, reparations processes or testimony-gathering exercises” (10). Such measures aim to promote a broader social transformation that needs to take hold within the population.

In keeping with this notion, the final report (2022) of the Colombian Truth Commission emphasizes the need for participation from all members of society to create a peaceful and just future. The report also states that although the Colombian constitution recognizes a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic nation, ethnic communities, including indigenous and Afro-Colombian groups, are particularly vulnerable to the damaging impacts of the internal armed conflict, causing ongoing cycles of displacement, violence and poverty. Restorative justice, when understood as a relational process, offers a framework for addressing these historical and structural harms. It shifts the focus

from institutional solutions and legal proceedings to collective efforts, underscored by respect, dignity, and care (Llewellyn, 2011).

Research-creation is the intricate network of roots beneath the soil.

Can you Hear the Trees Talking? is a research-creation project in collaboration with Comunidad, a musician, survivor and human rights defender from Tumaco, Colombia. The project proposes an oral history and art-based methodology for conducting dialogical interviews while drawing together. Initially, my curiosity to learn about Comunidad's life and understand his experience of the armed conflict led me to conduct various interviews and experiment with formats, such as podcasting, to make him feel increasingly comfortable and safe.

However, as time passed, the driving force behind this project became the curiosity to understand how our social, gender, racial and cultural differences have shaped our experiences of the armed conflict in Colombia. If we are both Colombian citizens, why do we have such different experiences of the armed conflict? What ancestral stories must we reconfigure and challenge to gain a deeper understanding of our country's history and present? Collaborating with Comunidad has enabled us to investigate and explore these questions through drawings and conversations, facilitating the emergence of mutual life history research.

The Colombian armed conflict has grown amidst an established colonial legacy, strengthening the idea that specific populations are inferior to others due to their race, gender and cultural traditions. This legacy has led to their exploitation, brutal treatment, and even murder in countless cases (Melo González 2021). Thus, cultural, natural, and economic wealth have gone hand in hand with the absence of recognition of Indigenous, *campesinos* and black communities, leading to a long cycle

of human rights violations. This reality has profoundly impacted the beliefs, judgments, norms, values, senses, and assumptions that underlie how we relate to each other in Colombia (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022).

Comunidad is an Afro-Colombian musician from Tumaco, a port city by the Pacific Ocean, highly affected by the Colombian armed conflict. Tumaco is part of Nariño, a region historically neglected by the state. Due to its geographic location and the weak presence of the state, it has become a fertile ground for illicit economies and non-state armed groups (Salazar, et al. 2022). According to Libia Grueso (2007), Afro-Colombians are Colombian-born individuals with African roots who live in rural and urban areas and have diverse racial, linguistic, and folkloric backgrounds. Comunidad defines himself as an Afro-Colombian.

On the other hand, I am a formally educated woman and an artist who has been taught to consider myself a *mestiza* from Bogotá, the capital city. Commonly understood as "the 'mix' of different bio-cultural categories" (Wade, 2016, 325), *mestizo* is a contested term with a complex political baggage. *Mestizaje* describes a national ideology, becoming a nation-state and a "modern" republic of many Latin American countries like Colombia after their independence. Nonetheless, *mestizaje* was used as a tool for political unity amid vast diversity, and “while it made room for indigeneity as an institutionalized form of otherness, ignored or vilified blacks” (Wade 2009, 169)

Bogotá, the city where I was born and raised, has been impacted by the displacement of millions of people who have fled the violence in other regions of the country. Comunidad and I had the chance to meet in Bogotá in 2018, a few weeks after he was threatened by an illegal armed group and forced to leave his hometown. Comunidad’s growing concern about drug cartels recruiting

young people in his neighbourhood in Tumaco led him to create a cultural center that emphasized traditional music. His school grew, and Comunidad taught over 300 children and teenagers while keeping them away from weapons, violence, and drug trafficking. He was abruptly forced to leave his house, his wife and his two children behind. Comunidad relocated to a peripheral neighbourhood of Bogotá. Months later, his family joined him in Bogotá, and he continued teaching and playing traditional music.

I interviewed him several times while working as a researcher at the Museum of Memory of Colombia. At that moment, the Museum was about to open the travelling exhibition *Voces para transformar a Colombia* (Voices to Transform Colombia) in Medellin. Comunidad was part of the cultural programming. For the Museum, the exhibition was a space for dialogue “to enable agreements, but also disagreements about the interpretations of the acts of violence related to the recent history of the armed conflict in Colombia” (Museo de Memoria 2018). *Voces* included dozens of guests from different regions of the country, including survivors and leaders like Comunidad, who told their stories and accompanied visitors on their exhibition tours.

The Museum of Memory is entrusted with the duty of preserving and amplifying the stories of those who have been affected by the armed conflict. Forced displacement, one of the most common outcomes of violence in the country, is part of various survivors' accounts. During the interviews and public events connected to *Voces*, Comunidad was eager to talk about his music school and share his knowledge of traditional musical instruments. However, he was primarily silent when asked about violence in his city and the events and people that forced him to leave. These facts evidenced the difficulty of expressing painful events verbally, and the following question arose:

how to discuss Comunidad's displacement without causing further harm while protecting his identity and avoiding re-victimization?

In 2021, Comunidad and I developed the pilot of *"Can You Hear the Trees Talking?"* This comprises two oral history-based audiovisual pieces: "From the Balso to the Cununo" and "Eucalipto" (Comunidad and Ochoa, 2024a; Comunidad and Ochoa, 2024b). Furthermore, the written part discusses the development of a methodology that emerged from this project. It underscores the importance of interconnection, care, creativity, and listening as vital tools for healing in communities recovering from conflict. Our process highlights ways in which artistic practices can support the acknowledgment of harm and the creation of spaces for listening and reflection.

During my interview with Comunidad, we created lists of traditional plants and their corresponding medicinal and spiritual meanings. As the drawings emerged as a source of information for the project, it was important that Comunidad felt free to choose his symbols in this session and that the results made sense to him. As an artist, I could have selected plants that I found poetic in terms of their healing properties, but if there were no strong associations with his memory, then we could not be co-creating something meaningful for both of us.

We identified a highly symbolic tree for Comunidad: the Balso. Comunidad spontaneously drew it, showing me its parts and forms. I followed his drawing and drew it several times with his guidance. For me, the Balso was an unknown tree because it does not grow in Bogotá, where I was raised, but rather in the tropical ecosystems of the Colombian Pacific. Although I had previously looked it up online, it was only through the act of drawing and discussing it alongside Comunidad

that I began to grasp the deeper meaning of the tree, not only its physical characteristics but also its cultural and ecological significance.

Drawing became a dialogical and embodied form of learning and listening. Through his stories and gestures, Comunidad shared with me the importance of the Balso's wood, its lightness, and its traditional uses. More importantly, he described the care practices associated with it: when it should be cut, under which moon, and the way it must be treated so that it continues to grow strong and healthy. This knowledge, passed down through generations, contrasts with extractive and utilitarian logics. As Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) notes, in a culture of gratitude, nothing is done without the awareness that trees are alive. Drawing the Balso together opened a space to discuss the tree, and through it, Comunidad's story, his forced displacement, his leadership in Tumaco, and his relationship with music and nature.

This moment laid the foundation for our collaborative work. Drawing became both a method and a metaphor, an invitation to co-create not only images but also narratives that could hold personal and collective memory. Comunidad and I began to develop audiovisual stories that emerged from this shared space.

Initially, we centred our discussions around his personal life experiences. However, as the project progressed, we realized that our diverse social backgrounds, education levels, genders, races, and geographical locations within the same country made our conversations particularly valuable. We created a space for dialogue and reflection that is scarce in a country with a strong legacy of colonialism, racism, classism, patriarchy, and centralism. We transitioned from a one-sided conversation to a mutual curiosity, sharing various aspects of our lives, including childhood

memories, knowledge of Colombian flora and fauna, family histories, notions of displacement, and hopes for a better future for our country.

The connections between the Balso tree and Tumaco transcend the individual experience of Comunidad, reminding us of the interconnection of trees in the forest, trees and the moon, the moon and the ocean tides, and humans and their environments. Drawing together has allowed us to connect fragmented memories beyond our evident differences. I acknowledge the privilege of growing up in Bogotá, far from the country's most violent areas. However, Comunidad did not have this option.

Comunidad's place-specific memories in this project open possibilities for different understandings and representations of forced displacement and Tumaco. Leaving behind one's home and loved ones is a difficult choice, especially when one's life and safety are at risk. In narrating the losses associated with displacement, Comunidad emphasizes some of the elements that gave him a sense of security and identity: the land, his house, nature, the trust and the support between neighbours.

Comunidad's narratives preserve collective memory and also offer alternative epistemologies that challenge extractivist and militarized imaginaries of the Colombian Pacific. His stories reveal that displacement is not only a geographic rupture but also a disruption of identities and social continuity, resonating with Elizabeth Jelin's (2003) thoughts on how memory is embedded within social relationships and cultural frameworks. Memories are not isolated facts but are constructed and contested within social and political contexts.

All these relationships and places were lost or damaged due to forced displacement, resulting in isolation and a profound rupture with his traditional and ancestral culture. In some of our conversations, Comunidad has also narrated painful instances of racism and discrimination in his daily life:

Believe me, it is tough to get to a city like Bogotá, not just because of the weather, but also because of the coldness of many people who do not know what you have gone through to be where you are. People who look at me with fear, with anger, just because of the colour of my skin, because they don't even know me (...) (Comunidad 2021)

In Bogotá, internally displaced people encounter hostility and indifference. Afro-Colombian communities are subject to systemic racism and spatial segregation, which hinders the possibility of rebuilding their lives with dignity (Merteens 2008). Comunidad's experiences thus resonate with broader critiques of racialized urban space and how internal displacement reproduces historical patterns of inequality.

Through our drawings of plants and the unfolding conversations, this project sheds light on Comunidad's notion of its cultural identity, territory and traditions. In Bogotá, far from Tumaco, where much of Comunidad's stories take place and where the Balso tree grows, his memories are constantly redefined and re-created as a form of resistance and resilience (Halilovich, 2013). Our drawings became fragments of the conversation. Taussig (2011) has described drawings as fragments that are suggestive of a world beyond, "a world that does not have to be explicitly recorded and is in fact all the more 'complete' because it can not be completed" (13). Our drawings complement and enrich oral narrative; they do not intend to illustrate it. Sometimes, they are pedagogical, like when Comunidad draws a cununo and teaches me its different parts. Other times,

they are reflective, such as when he explains the strength of the Balso tree and connects it to the strength of his community.

Comunidad and I belong to the same *conflict community*. According to Dominic Barter (2012), this group includes not only victims and victimizers but also those who, like me, have not experienced the violence firsthand yet remain implicated in the broader social conditions that sustained the conflict. This group, affirms Barter (2012):

It is much more than a group of family members, neighbours, colleagues, or witnesses. Indirectly affected by the harm that has been done, community members also contribute to the conditions that have led to the conflict. Moreover, they are invested in sustainable transformation, as they recognize the cost to themselves of continued disconnection between people with whom they share a community (22).

Our roles may differ, but we share a collective responsibility in acknowledging and transforming the relationships, structures, and silences that allowed harm to occur. Furthermore, through our project, we desire to contribute to peacemaking in the country and recognize the high cost of continued disconnection from community members.

After filming the audiovisual [*From the Balso to the Cununo*](#), which focuses primarily on Comunidad's life experiences, the question of *how to respond to his stories* arose. This moment coincided with the writing of a text that answered the question: *In what ways can you become a witness to the creative process and intentions of your self-reflexive and dialogic research-creation project?* On it, I reflected on how the stories of Comunidad connected to my own, and I weaved an imaginary spiderweb of fragments from different moments of my life.

As I shared these thoughts and ideas with Comunidad, he proposed that we interview to expand these connections. We discussed what plant would represent me, and after a few lists, I chose the

eucalyptus. Comunidad was curious about this tree since it does not grow in his region. He saw it for the first time in Bogotá, specifically, its branches, as they are very popular with street vendors who go from house to house, offering them in many areas of the city.

In the audiovisual [*Eucalipto*](#), Comunidad asks me questions about the eucalyptus, my family, my identity, and some of my memories connected to this tree. He became the interviewer, and I became the interviewee. Some of my stories connect with his own. As we drew the Eucalipto together, musical improvisation took place. *Señora Santana*, a popular children's song with a catholic and colonial legacy, became a central node of connection and shared rhythms. We made percussion with our hands on the paper and took turns singing some verses of the song. Drawing and music emerged spontaneously and altogether.

The unknown and challenging aspects of this research-creation process have propelled creation. Confronting uncertainty has led us to create new ways of knowing. Calderón (2019) argues that the result of new epistemological relations should not intend to fix methodologies but to create (social) spaces that introduce disruption and surprise. I would add that disruption and surprises are inevitable in any research where different life stories meet. Fieldwork is confrontational “in that it is a purposeful disruption of other people's lives” (England 1994, 86). As Michael Taussig (2011) has described, our field is *a meeting place of worlds*. Fieldwork is also personal in that our biographies and positionalities are central to the process. Our words and drawings intertwine old and new stories, as well as individual and collective memories, approaching Wall Kimmerer's (2015) notion that plants and animals are our oldest teachers and healers.

Through a process of research-creation, we made decisions. By listening to each other while drawing together, new ideas, imaginations, and solutions to the challenges we were facing began to emerge. The act of drawing and engaging in conversation for several years created a space where the project we developed could take shape. Without these years of shared drawing and dialogue, it would not have been possible to create this dissertation. This process allowed us to build not just artistic outcomes, but a deep understanding of each other's perspectives and experiences, which were crucial to shaping the direction of our work.

As will be discussed throughout this document, drawing while we talked opened a creative pathway for deeper listening. It allowed us to include our different experiences from a place of sensitivity and improvisation. Drawing created rhythm, images, and stories that helped each of us shape our own narrative on our own terms. It was a way to share authority of what and how things were remembered. It allowed us to sing together and bring the trees into our story—real trees, family trees, and imagined ones. Drawing while interviewing was therapeutic. Most of all, it helped us listen better.

By focusing on my journey with Comunidad, I discuss how our transformation required sustained, mutual listening and understanding. This type of ongoing dialogue allowed us to deepen our connection and learn how to tackle complex issues with care and empathy. However, I must also acknowledge the limitations of the proposed methodology. The reality is that not all artist-researchers have the resources, time, or circumstances that enable them to engage in such a prolonged and intensive process. The model of sustained collaboration that proved so fruitful in this case is not easily replicable for all, especially when logistical, financial, or emotional constraints come into play. Therefore, while this approach offers valuable insights into how deep

listening and creative collaboration can lead to meaningful transformation, it is important to consider who has access to such opportunities and how we can broaden these possibilities to include more diverse voices and experiences.

At Concordia University, this project builds on research-creation led by Dr. Luis Carlos Sotelo Castro at the Acts of Listening Lab, where I worked as a Research Assistant. Specifically, I learned through listening to the life stories of three founding leaders of the National Association of Peasant, Indigenous, and Black Women of Colombia (ANMUCIC) and by assisting with the design and facilitation of listening circles for their podcast, “Era necesario escucharnos.” This experience taught me about the emotional and political depth of their retellings, as well as the importance of using psychosocial tools—developed by dance movement therapist María Andrea García—to accompany such listening processes with care and responsibility.

Likewise, co-authoring the guide *La escucha como un hecho de paz. Guía para la escucha en grupo de narrativas del conflicto armado con enfoque restaurativo* (Sotelo Castro and Ochoa Ronderos 2023) encouraged me to think more deeply about the spaces where stories connected to sociopolitical violence are shared and how listening with others can meaningfully nourish our collective understanding of Colombia’s armed conflict.

From a methodology to ethical questions for artists-researchers

This research-creation project is primarily intended for artist-researchers who work or wish to work with people affected by sociopolitical conflicts. For this reason, while I present the development of an arts-based methodology that integrates oral history, plants, music, and drawing, this text outlines ethical reflections based on questions for careful listening and collaborative art-making in

contexts of sociopolitical violence. In Colombia, collaborations between formally educated artists and communities affected by the armed conflict are increasingly common. It is therefore necessary to contribute to the academic debate on the ethics of such collaborations, especially contemporary artworks that engage with the pain inscribed in the collective memory of historically and systemically marginalized and discriminated populations.

However, this dissertation is the first stage of a broader project. In a second phase, focused on disseminating our two audiovisuals, I would like to adapt the methodology developed in collaboration with Comunidad to serve as a pedagogical tool. This tool will be designed to support not only artists-researchers, but also educators, community leaders, scholars, cultural workers, and members of NGOs or grassroots organizations—people who may not identify as artists or researchers but who engage in practices of care, memory, and community transformation. In this sense, the doctoral thesis is conceived as the seed of a larger process: one that seeks to open new avenues of exploration and dialogue in both Colombia and Canada, making the methodology more accessible and adaptable to diverse contexts.

Listening Otherwise: A Theoretical Framework

Can You Hear the Trees Talking? is a research-creation project that emerges from a dialogical encounter between two individuals shaped by profoundly different social, racial, and geographical realities within the same country. Grounded in decolonial and feminist theories, this project explores how listening with care can open space for transforming relationships.

Since the political independence of Latin American countries in the early 19th century, a colonialist understanding of social reality has permeated the economic, social, gender, political, and cultural dimensions (Mignolo and Escobar 2010; de Souza Santos 2021). “In this way, race became the

fundamental criterion for the distribution of the world population into ranks, places, and roles in the new society's structure of power" (Quijano 2000, 535). Through this colonial lens and its maintenance over more than 520 years, the integration of Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples in Latin America has been symbolic in discourse but limited in practice.

These hierarchies also extend to what is known as the "coloniality of knowledge," which refers to the dominance of Eurocentrism as the prevailing perspective on knowledge (Quijano 2000). It associates intellectual production with "civilization" and emphasizes the power of written language over oral traditions (Mignolo and Walsh 2018). I am particularly interested in the intersectionality between feminism and decolonial theory, especially in considering my relationship with Comunidad. As Rodríguez Castro (2023) has pointed out, in Latin America, Indigenous and Black women have challenged white mestizas to recognize our privilege. To deconstruct coloniality from within, we must make our subjectivities, perspectives, and voices visible in the narratives we create (Mignolo and Walsh 2018).

I am particularly interested in exploring the ethics of care from a feminist-oriented framework that emphasizes responsibility, social connectivity, and collaboration (Groot et al., 2018; Tronto, 2013). This approach prioritizes caring and empathy over abstract rules, principles, and moral evaluations. Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (2003) challenged conceptions of ethics based on justice and rights, proposing an ethics grounded in the values central to human care. A key idea in this theory is the recognition that humans are inherently relational and interdependent. Tronto (2013) has made a significant impact on the way I understand the ethics of care, along with her set of principles and actions that apply to both political and institutional environments, as well as to personal caring relationships. Tronto's ethics of care comprises five stages: 1) *caring about*:

identifying the necessity for care, 2) *caring for*: assuming the responsibility to fulfill that necessity, 3) *care giving*: the actual hands-on task of delivering care, 4) *care receiving*: assessing how effectively the care addressed the needs, and 5) *caring with*: ensuring that care aligns with democratic principles of justice, equality, and freedom for everyone. This approach to care is not unidirectional (Groot et al., 2018); it involves cultivating mutual care, including care for myself as a researcher embedded in this relationship.

In alignment with Tronto's writings on care and resonating with recent scholarship in socially engaged art practices, particularly the work of Amanda Stuart Fisher and James Thompson (2020), in *Performing Care: New Perspectives on Socially Engaged Performance*, I locate this research-creation project as a contribution to the intersection between research-creation, socially engaged art and care practices. Fisher and Thompson (2020) directly challenge Joan Tronto's statement that "to create a work of art is not care" (2009, 104). Rather than positioning care as the outcome or goal of creative work, Stuart Fisher and Thompson (2020) conceptualize socially engaged performance as a mode of care in itself, one that exists "somewhere in-between art and social practice" (7). This perspective is echoed by Shannon Jackson, who writes: "whether cast in aesthetic or social terms, freedom and expression are not opposed to obligation and care, but in fact depend upon each other" (2011, 14).

At the same time, drawing on María Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) work, it is crucial to recognize that care carries both ontological and political complexities as it has often been associated with women's roles and romanticized as a pure, selfless act of love. Rather than accepting these idealizations, feminist scholarship approaches care as a contested and dynamic field that must be continually reexamined and reclaimed. In addition, I take into consideration Yuderkys Espinosa

Miñoso's call for a situated ethic that begins with the recognition of the harm produced by coloniality (Espinosa Miñoso, 2014). This approach foregrounds care as an embodied, historical, and political practice. Care demands attention to power, difference, and *colonial wounds* (Espinosa Miñoso 2014; Anzaldúa 1987). These wounds are caused by the ongoing harms of colonial systems and ideologies that continue to shape present-day identities, relationships, institutions, and knowledge systems. They are lived and embodied experiences of dispossession, racialization, displacement, epistemic violence, and the marginalization of entire communities. Addressing these wounds in research-creation involves recognizing how colonial legacies are embedded in power dynamics and creating artistic and relational practices that actively resist reproducing these forms of harm. Care is not about eliminating the rough edges of life, and love should not be a moral justification that enables appropriation in its name (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; hooks 2000).

The Colombian armed conflict has profoundly damaged the social fabric by targeting community leaders, the essential “knots” that hold together collective life and shared meaning. In places where no one cares, it becomes easier for cycles of violence to continue. This destruction is not only physical but also symbolic. As Homans (2000) explains, symbolic loss refers to the catastrophic unravelling of the rituals, narratives, and cultural practices that connect individuals within a shared worldview. When these symbols and collective memories are erased or rendered meaningless, communities experience a deep psychological rupture (Watkins and Shulman 2010). Reweaving the social fabric requires more than institutional reform. It demands the recognition and repair of these symbolic wounds through memory, culture, and care.

Rajni Shah's (2021) interest in the political and ethical impacts that artistic work has on audiences resonates with aspects of caring: “Therefore, what is, in fact, most disruptive and necessary in our

current political situation is art that takes care seriously” (69). In contexts marked by structural violence and historical silencing, artistic practices that foreground care not only challenge dominant narratives but also invite the possibility of reconstituting broken relational ties.

In this regard, the project also draws on the concept of *sentipensar* (feeling-thinking), popularized by the sociologist Orlando Fals Borda. *Sentipensar* refuses to separate knowing, feeling, mind, and body. Instead, it emphasizes the connection between bodies, their lived experiences, and the knowledge they possess. If experiences of conflict are fundamentally embodied, then transitional justice—focused on social reconstruction—must create spaces for these embodied narratives to be shared. *Sentipensar* can reveal how coloniality reshapes identities and help us move away from the colonial research paradigm, which focuses on the object of study, toward one that collaborates and creates knowledge with others (Rodriguez Castro 2023).

Literature review

Stemming from the research question: **How to listen -effectively and with care- to survivors of sociopolitical violence while collaborating on a creative work based on their life story?** A literature review for “Can You Hear the Trees Talking?” includes the following areas: 1) Ethics of listening and dialogue, 2) Self-reflexivity, and 3) Reconciliation. These areas are essential to grounding the methodological, ethical, and theoretical framework of the project.

Ethics of listening and dialogue

Reviewing the roots of the ethics of listening can start with a simple question: *why listen?* The answer has an intrinsic relationship to the recognition that aims to challenge exclusions and power imbalances related to race, class, gender, age, sexuality, ability, and cultural background, as well

as how people are rendered socially marginalized and, thus, unheard (Tyler 2013; Bassel 2017; Robinson 2020). However, as Bickford (1996) has stated, contrary to common understanding, listening is not, in itself, an empathic, compassionate, caring, or amicable act. This is especially true in conflict situations, “yet it is precisely the presence of conflict and differences that make communicative interaction necessary” (Bickford 1996, 2). The dialogue, which involves speaking and listening, does not have to solve or dissolve differences. The challenge is listening to each other attentively in the face of uncertainty and even a lack of will to achieve a joint transformation in the face of difference and conflict.

For Comunidad, sharing his story with others has transformed his solitary and intimate struggle into a collective objective. When asked about how retelling his story connected him with other survivors of the Colombian armed conflict, Comunidad replies: “If we share what has happened to us, I think in some way, the river gains strength. Because it is no longer just me. The sound is louder if we do it together”. For him, being heard is relevant to explain his leadership because social leaders in Colombia have been highly stigmatized, and their persecution is often justified with false accusations. In this regard, Comunidad mentions:

The community knows that I was doing something positive...Offering music and art to transform the lives of young people. However, having to leave without even being able to say goodbye is tough, having to run away like that. Moreover, you ask yourself, if I was doing things right, why did I have to leave? That is why I continue to do what I used to do back then. I continue to work in social work with young people. Moreover, here in Bogota, the neighbours can see it; they can see for themselves that what we are doing at *El Palafito* is changing children’s lives in positive ways.

Comunidad’s stories matter because, as Warren Cariou (2016) has noted in relation to Indigenous life-telling in the context of genocidal history in Canada, the act of telling one’s story can be a powerful affirmation of survival. In this sense, when Comunidad shares his experience, he too

asserts—against threats and persecution—“I am still here” (Cariou 2016). Over time, as a displaced cultural leader who has gained media attention and, therefore, participated in numerous interviews, including mine, his conclusive comment highlights the need not just to be heard or recognized, but to transform listening into bridges of solidarity, care, and the formation of new communities in Bogotá.

Comunidad’s thoughts inspired me to think about how I could become a better listener to experiences related to political and social violence. Even though listening attentively and with care can help us understand the world and give us ideas for a different future, “we cannot inhabit others’ perspectives or hold their opinions as they do; we are still travellers coming from somewhere else” (Bickford 1996, 148). I faced difficulties listening to Comunidad’s story during our initial encounters. As an artist and a researcher, I lacked the tools and proper training to offer anything beyond my willingness to listen. My initial reaction to many of his stories linked with political and social violence was, then, paralyzing.

Through this research-creation project, I developed an arts-based, organic, responsive, and evolving methodology that addressed these difficulties. Building on Acosta’s (2023) ideas about listening to traumatic events, the task of my project is not about finding words for Comunidad or speaking on his behalf. Instead, it is about working together to listen, respond and create dialogues around life-altering and painful experiences, including the silences they produce. As Freund (2013) noted, understanding and responding to silence requires us to learn what our interviewees express through their silences and why their silences may cause us to feel apprehensive.

Even when we are willing to listen, and institutions are open to changing their requirements to listen to recounting—such as in the case of the Truth Commission and the Peace Jurisdiction (JEP) in Colombia— survivors often have an unspoken demand to convey their experiences in familiar narrative forms (Acosta 2023). Survivors are usually expected to present their stories in ways that conform to the established frameworks we already use to make sense of the world. In a legal context, this translates to the fixed narrative of a *testimony*. In line with Greenspan’s (1998) ideas on the concept of testimony as a fixed narrative versus recounting, which connotes “the provisional and processual nature of retelling” (2), numerous recountings have emerged in the conversations in this project.

Reflecting on the stories shared by Comunidad has reminded me of my role as a listener. By immersing myself in his recounting, I become a participant, and thus, we co-create a new narrative together. Every recounting is a matter of construction because “memory is not a stable and fixed process, and its interactions with narrative are complex and creative” (Thompson 2008, 87). Memory destroys and recomposes power relationships (Riaño Alcalá 2008), and it is subject to multiple levels of revision and interpretation (Halbwachs 1992).

In contrast to legal procedures, Barrera (2018) reinforces Caruth’s (1995) understanding of listening as an act that extends beyond merely repeating the traumatic event and opens up to a possible future. Listening to a traumatic experience, writes Barrera (2018), is a relationship between the one who has suffered and the one who is called upon to listen. In this relationship, listening opens the possibility of liberating the traumatic experience from the isolation of repetition and erasure.

In connection with the harm of ‘not being heard,’ Stauffer (2018) presents the concept of “ethical loneliness,” which erodes a person’s humanity, as it may create a sense of hopelessness and distrust in the world. Not listening to survivors attentively and respectfully, as Sotelo (2020) states, might trigger this ‘ethical loneliness,’ a condition described by Stauffer (2018) as ‘the experience of having been abandoned by humanity compounded by the experience of not being heard’ (1).

Can you hear the trees talking? expands the academic debates around listening, creating an open-ended opportunity for new visual and oral representations to emerge and for Comunidad to tell his own stories on his own terms. In addition, the space we created with Comunidad encourages active engagement, allowing us to listen to each other creatively instead of being passive recipients of one another’s life experiences. Vulnerability is necessary for actively listening to one another (Stauffer 2018; Shah 2021). Being vulnerable implies a listener’s openness, even if it threatens to shatter their expectations and worldview.

I embrace Robinson’s (2020) concept of *critical listening positionality* throughout the process—a practice he defines as “a self-reflexive questioning of how race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and cultural background intersect and influence the way we can hear sound, music, and the world around us” (10). This framework guided my approach to listening not as a neutral or passive act, but as one shaped by my own social location and histories, and as deeply implicated in the power dynamics of knowledge production and exchange.

Comunidad and I discuss and question how our perception of each other is socially embodied, mediated through multiple relations of power and privilege and acquired over time. Positionality is not a fixed standpoint because it is constantly changing and influenced by the context and the

relationships involved in the listening process. Comunidad and I explore this fluxus of positionality throughout our interviews, contributing to critical listening practices by recognizing, shifting and creating different moments of intersection.

In addition, our project responds to ideas suggested by Sotelo-Castro (2019; 2023), specifically to his research on *dialogic listening* within the restorative justice approach in Colombia. In the Colombian transitional justice model, the dialogic dimension of listening is linked to the restorative justice paradigm. From a restorative perspective, when it comes to war crimes and crimes against humanity, irreparable damages cannot be fixed. Instead, the focus is on addressing current and future needs expressed orally by survivors that arise from damages or become evident in their recovery and healing processes.

Our drawings and conversations enrich debates on listening with a restorative perspective. Dialogic listening in our work can be seen as a case in which principles of restorative justice are implemented: an encounter between someone who was harmed and someone who is part of the white-mestizo society that has historically exercised violence in Colombia. While listening to our stories, we translated emotions and memories into our drawings, enhancing understanding and visually complementing and expanding our words. This was especially evident when listening to complex or emotional fragments.

Listening to the pain of others can be difficult. However, the connections that emerge from these shared experiences can catalyze the creation of broader circles of solidarity and resistance in various contexts. (Richardson and Reynolds 2014; Levesque et al. 2024). This project's approach to the listening process is not a task to be solved but a collaborative encounter to be curiously

pursued (Mølbak, 2013). In transitional contexts such as Colombia, listening must be understood as a field of practice—that is, listening as an active and creative process (Sotelo 2019). Then, by forging the artistic capacity to imagine while listening to daily challenges and memories, Comunidad and I expand the reflections on violent cycles embedded in our society and our roles within it.

Self-reflexivity

In the arts, collaboration between artists and communities involves people listening to each other with mutual understanding and agreement (Barbour et al., 2007). Working alongside Comunidad has destabilized notions of expertise and authorship, as the role of the researcher shifts to that of a co-researcher and collaborator. Watkins and Shulman (2010) have described such a reflective process as *action research* because reflection and the action that follows are not dissociated.

Watkins and Shulman (2010) have also proposed a dialogue that necessitates “the capacity to deeply receive the other and the capacity to receive oneself; to allow the other a voice and to allow the self a voice.” (187) This implies shifting the center of gravity in our practice from control, imposition and domination to curiosity, creativity and collaboration. This research-creation project proposes such a dialogue, allowing sensitivity and creative self-expression.

Romanyshyn (2021) discusses ways to bring the unconscious into play in intellectual work, ranging from active imagination to intuition, archetypes, and myths. “The work that the researcher is called to do makes sense of the researcher as much as he or she makes sense of it. Indeed, before we understand the work we do, it stands under us” (106). Romanyshyn encourages a creative, imaginative, and flexible approach to research that is in tune with the spirit of the work as it unfolds.

This view of doing/thinking of research can be complemented by the arguments of scholars, particularly feminists, who have discussed how the researcher's subjectivity influences their research "from the very first decisions made about what to research all the way through the process of data analysis and interpretation (England 1994; Frohlick 2002; Haraway 1991; Katz 1994; Valentine 2002)." (Billo and Hiemstra 2012, 321).

The concept of *reflexivity*, understood as "a commitment to thinking about how our personal biography and positionality influence our research" (Billo and Hiemstra 2012, 322), has disrupted the canonical idea of the ungendered, unbiased researcher writing proposals and gathering data like a neutral or objective vessel. An increasing need to resist colonialist impulses of exploiting community members and then leaving to write about them for professional gain has shifted the methods many researchers employ to co-create and sustain relational ties with communities (Arias López, 2017).

Auto-ethnography has been described as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011, 275). Autoethnography has emerged as a powerful literary form that connects the personal and political aspects of ethnographic representation, particularly for researchers from marginalized social classes or racial backgrounds (Walley, 2013). Mahmud (2021) argues that autoethnography has proven to be a practical methodological approach to exploring institutional and social contexts that shape personal and collective memories of racial and social experiences.

Can you hear the trees talking? involves collaborative artmaking processes and personal reflections. I ask myself Allen's (2007) questions regarding my identity in this project: "Who am I? a therapist, a friend, a fellow artist, simply someone with more resources than someone else?" (84). Looking inwards involves what Chela Sandoval (2000) has called "oppositional consciousness" (54), a capacity to reflect upon the polarizations, distances, gaps, or marginalizations that both exist in the world and within ourselves. 'We bring attention to moments when we find ourselves thinking I am (or we are) like this, and they are the opposite (or profoundly different). We begin to wonder about the construction of these differences, searching for ways to reposition our energies to explore and mediate boundaries of separation' (Watkins and Shulman 2010, 29).

My project resonates with the words of Paulette Regan (2010), a former research director for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. She refers to survivors' stories as "gifts" for which listeners must learn to reciprocate responsibly. "How do we listen and respond authentically and ethically to testimonies—stories of colonial violence, not with colonial empathy but as a testimonial practice of shared truth-telling that requires us to risk being vulnerable, to question openly our accepted world views and cherished assumptions about our colonial history and identity?" (Regan, 190). Her reflections aim to understand how colonial denial and guilt hinder transformative sociopolitical change. The question remains as to how non-survivors engage with and respond to stories shared by survivors. In this quest, building on Green's (2020) ideas about incorporating reflexivity into the research process, I have uncovered creative ways of knowing by combining arts-based research and autoethnography.

Reflexivity is central to this project, reflected in both the writing component and the creative process. As such, it has required us both to risk revealing ourselves as vulnerable individuals willing to examine our dual roles as survivors and not survivors. This project is enriched through an intersectional and decolonial lens to navigate “the cultures internalized within oneself” (Kapitan 2015, 108). Since Comunidad and I are discussing different aspects of our experiences and identities within Colombian society, this project helps us identify patterns, values, and beliefs that may contribute to our challenges. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) has written, it is through naming and providing alternatives to the conditions that create social inequalities and violence that the strength of self-reflexivity and dialogical listening is realized.

Reconciliation

This project contributes to the debate on the uses of art and listening in reconciliation processes, particularly concerning its role in receiving survivors’ emotions and supporting claims of transformative reparation. Its artistic and collaborative nature enriches the knowledge around ethics and methods for co-creative artistic initiatives. Our drawings and conversations serve as a reference for artists and researchers to witness the consequences of violent conflict and extend the *moral imagination* through their creations. Lederach (2005) describes this concept as the ability to identify turning points and possibilities for exploring new directions and creating what has not yet come into existence. He writes:

(...) the moral imagination requires the capacity to imagine ourselves in a web of relationships that includes our enemies; the ability to sustain a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity; the fundamental belief in and pursuit of the creative act; and the acceptance of the inherent risk of stepping into the mystery of the unknown that lies beyond the far too familiar landscape of violence. (5)

Over the last thirty years, numerous countries, including Colombia and Canada, have taken steps to address the issue of reconciliation, with Rwanda, South Africa, and Peru being among the most prominent examples. The word reconciliation comes from the Latin word *reconciliāre*, which means “to make good again” or “to repair”. As written by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), reconciliation is often perceived as the re-establishment of a conciliatory state. However, in many cases, including the Indian residential schools in Canada and the history of the armed conflict in Colombia, a respectful coexistence among differences has never existed.

Often considered a key goal of peacebuilding, reconciliation has become a common term in public discourse and transitional justice institutions in Colombia and elsewhere. Peacebuilding addresses the underlying causes of conflict, while reconciliation emphasizes (re) building and transforming relationships and looking back and to the future (Clogg and Parlevliet, 2021). *Peacebuilding* is a recent concept that has not yet been included in dictionaries. Peace is not merely the absence, nor the opposite, of conflict (Galtung, 1969); therefore, building peace is not about discouraging or suppressing conflict, but about transforming it by creating spaces, structures, and processes through which it can be negotiated non-violently and constructively (Hawksley and Mitchell, 2020).

Like a child taking its first steps, many Colombians, including Comunidad and me, are exploring how peace can be built. In the learning process, we do so through curiosity, trial, and error. Das (2006) explores how individuals navigate the aftermath of violence through ordinary, often tentative actions that reconstitute social bonds and communal life. This project enriches and problematizes the concept of reconciliation in Colombia, incorporating emerging knowledge on alternative forms of remembering, storytelling, and coping with transitions. Although Comunidad

and I are not related as victim and victimizer, we represent two sectors of Colombian society that are not commonly in dialogue. Our conversations do not seek to reconcile a specific situation. Still, they seek to understand some of the social and historical dynamics that have led to the radical separation of our worlds within the same country and to the social apathy between different realities in Colombia. Comunidad and I have created an uncommon and creative listening space where we imagine, draw and develop points of encounter.

There are still uncertainties and debates regarding the various interpretations of reconciliation, the degree to which these interpretations depend on socioeconomic variables, the impact of individuals' experiences with continuous sociopolitical violence and how reconciliation interacts with concurrent social and economic systems (Oettler and Rettberg 2019). As Rettberg and Ugarriza (2016) have noted, such an objective may be challenging when reconciliation has different meanings for society and policymakers, and sociopolitical conflicts may persist over time. Additionally, as Nagy (2022) has noted, an adequate transition necessitates acknowledgment, accountability, and reparation for historical colonialism and its ongoing effects, as well as the dismantling of current colonial structures and attitudes.

Comunidad is a man who was forced to leave his territory and, consequently, lost not only his support network but also spiritual, symbolic, traditional, environmental and cultural elements that were part of his daily life. His house in Tumaco is more than a house; It is a space linked to identity, family and traditions. Although the Colombian State has officially recognized him as a victim, his pain and daily struggles persist. His present is immersed in understanding and processing this loss while creating new ties and identity in Bogota, a hostile city to the displaced.

Comunidad's understanding of *home* resonates with indigenous land efforts in Canada. Maria Campbell, quoted in Robinson and Martin (2016), noted regarding a commemoration event held at Batoche, "there's a plaque, but the people still have no land." Survivors have advocated for recognition and reparations while demanding accountability for the intergenerational impacts of harm caused. Even for Indigenous nations that have negotiated treaties and land claims, their rights to land and resources remain secondary to Canada's economic development goals (Robinson and Martin 2016). Beyond the material aspects of land claims, Lincez (2022) has argued that the indigenous concept of place is a complex notion that refers to an intricate set of reciprocal interconnections between the land, the people, non-human entities, collective memory, history, the past, the future and identity.

Colombia's conflict has been marked by massive displacement, so providing reparations and restituting lands to those who were forcibly displaced will be an important step toward reconciliation. Through recasting the meaning of land and place, the nation is also conceived differently by recognizing Indigenous and Afro-Colombian understandings and practices that do not mirror oppressive and colonial nation-state structures (CEV 2022). In addition, as highlighted by Uprinmy Yepes (2009), most of the Colombian internally displaced people lived already in poverty when they were forced to leave their homes and displacement, leading them to a worse situation: extreme poverty. How do we reconcile in such an unequal society?

Debates on reconciliation present a dichotomy between the practices that originate "from the top down," such as institutional frameworks, and those "from the bottom up" which involve interpersonal dimensions and community initiatives (Bloomfield 2006). According to Bar-Tal and Bennink (2004), reconciliation "must always proceed from the top down and bottom up

simultaneously” (27), emphasizing their complementarity. Rather than emphasizing official truth and memory policies, this project takes an approach to transitional justice from below, examining how people utilize their everyday cultural and social resources to reinforce their demands for truth, justice, and reparations at the local level (Jelin 2003; Rios Oyola 2015; Riaño-Alcalá and Baines, 2011).

It is in this relational terrain that the arts can play a transformative role. The arts connect people and communities through alternative ways of knowing, feeling, and making meaning. Cohen (2012) understands these unique approaches to understanding and changing the world as a site where the cognitive, sensory, emotional, and spiritual converge. Within *Can You Hear the Trees Talking?* Comunidad and I move between fragmented memories, biographical facts, symbolic interpretations, drawings, and shared hopes. Oral history and visual art are not merely tools of representation; they are practices of relational meaning-making. They allow us to reimagine the future from a place of mutual recognition and care, rooted in new understandings of the past (Aras et al., 2012). This creative process, grounded in listening and co-creation, offers a space for restoring narrative agency and imagining reconciliation beyond institutional scripts.

Our research-creation project extends beyond the therapeutic objective commonly invoked in discourses of reconciliation and memory, where the healing of the wounds left by the conflict is paramount (Rigney 2012). It analyzes the concept of reconciliation from a multidisciplinary perspective, considering how memory operates at different levels to provide alternative readings and viewpoints that invite a more complex understanding of the present (Jelin 2003).

In this regard, the project dialogues with the ongoing research by the Transformative Memory International Network at the University of British Columbia (TMIN). The Network interrogates how memory: “*activates* alternative ways of seeing, listening and being in the world; *serves* to persevere, regather and refashion ways of being together in the precariousness of ongoing violence; *emerges* in sentient beings, landscapes, bodies, and objects; and, *anticipates* a different kind of future, and so *exceeds* the political, social and legal institutions that maintain relations of power, dispossession and oppression.” Our project addresses several themes researched by the TMIN, including 1) Engaging with questions on the responsibilities and limitations of bearing witness in the context of complex and silenced histories and how the memory of absence transforms relations that diminish, erase, and oppress, 2) The work of memory, living together, and the alienating effects of prolonged armed conflict and 3) how visual media offer new ways to evidence violence and oppression as well as alternative ways to visualize justice outside of the juridical.

Methodology and methods

Can You Hear the Trees Talking? is framed within Arts-Based Research (ABR), a research approach that incorporates artistic processes and practices into the inquiry process (McNiff, 1998). ABR approaches differ based on the specific art form and the research context, but they typically involve the artist-researcher engaging with participants through arts-related activities. This interaction helps the artist-researcher gain insights into the participants’ lived experiences, which in turn informs the creation of arts-based works (Wang et al., 2017; Morris et al., 2021).

The research question and various interdisciplinary methods emerged collaboratively during the creation and discussion with Comunidad. Unlike other methodologies, with ABR, the most meaningful insights frequently arise unexpectedly and may even contradict the artist-researcher’s

initial intentions (McNiff 1998; Leavy 2009). While I had an intuition about where this project could lead me and what was needed, the key aspects discussed throughout this text emerged through our collaborative art-making, reflections, and dialogues.

In alignment with ABR, this project considers the artistic process as part of the research in its own right, generating data that can be analyzed using both qualitative and aesthetic modes (Bolt 2008). Under this framework, Nelson (2013) emphasizes that “the researcher’s subjectivity is not bracketed off but is engaged as a resource,” and that practice “informs, challenges and transforms” the researcher (9). Beyond gathering, processing, transcribing, and analyzing data, Comunidad and I underwent a transformative process over the past four years that informed, challenged, and influenced the creative component.

Ideally, the resulting methodology discussed in the conclusions serves as a guide for other artists-researchers who want to explore similar problems. Rather than outlining a replicable protocol, it maps the reflexive and evolving processes through which the videos were co-developed in dialogue with the experiences, temporalities, and emotional landscapes. Experimentation with the methods and learning more about their possibilities is a primary outcome of this research creation and a guide to future professional applications.

Research-creation has been a transversal approach in shaping the structure and outcomes of this project, where the research’s theoretical, technical, and creative aspects are pursued in conjunction (Chapman and Sawchuk 2012). This project is a case study that explores creation-as-research, as defined by Chapman and Sawchuk (2012) as “the elaboration of projects where creation is required in order for research to emerge” (p. 13). Tim Ingold (2013) offers a complementary perspective by

proposing that making is a way of knowing. From his lens, the process of creation is not about applying pre-existing knowledge to matter, but about thinking through materials and movements. In this project, drawing together becomes a way of listening, reflecting, and knowing otherwise. Julia Barclay's (2009) ideas on research-creation as a "journey" or as "movement" are well-suited to my research, as they imply that something in it is alive. I began with a set of research questions and theoretical frames that I have continually been revising. My creative practice has evolved, shifting formats and taking on new shapes from one point to another. Barclay (2009) says in this regard:

In other words, there is the moment of creation itself, which not only supersedes but also generally destroys this framework, so that the creation of the work itself shows what the questions are that it wants to ask rather than the questions one may have asked at the outset.
(23)

In addition, Loveless (2019) argues that research-creation is an ethical and political stance. Research-creation aligns with feminist and decolonial work by questioning dominant forms of knowledge and valuing embodied, situated, and affective ways of knowing. It foregrounds the entanglement of the personal and the political within scholarly work, insisting that lived experience and aesthetic inquiry are not peripheral but central to the production of critical knowledge.

Likewise, **oral history**, defined as the practice of 'collecting, preserving, interpreting, and curating individual, social, and collective experiences in story form' (Aras et al. 2012: 1), has been present throughout the process. Oral history is a practice that centers memory, subjectivity, and relationships as sources of knowledge (Portelli 1991). Inspired by Michael Frisch (1990), oral historians have been encouraged to "share authority" with their interviewees and the communities they represent. Frisch challenges the traditional top-down approach to history, advocating for a

more collaborative process where historians and communities co-create historical narratives. The idea of learning with, rather than just learning about, signifies a significant shift in how knowledge is produced, challenging the traditional notion of a singular, all-knowing historical narrator or curator (Miller et al. 2017). In addition, oral narratives provide a platform for emotions, silences, contradictions, and imagination. In contexts marked by violence, oral history allows marginalized voices to be heard in the historical record, making it a vital tool in the struggles for collective memory and justice (Shopes 2002; Aras et al. 2012; Miller et al. 2017).

Comunidad and I planned a series of semi-structured interviews about different aspects of his life, starting with his childhood memories up to the present. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and underwent narrative analysis. I identified themes, characters, organization, structure and verbal and non-verbal interaction between Comunidad and me. During these interviews and after analyzing them, I noticed emotional patterns, body language and silences connected to the difficult moments in his life story, such as forced displacement and daily struggles.

These findings led to bringing art materials to the following interviews and **drawing** together as we spoke as a visual method to explore, express, and communicate experiences, ideas, and emotions nonverbally. Drawings in this project go beyond data collection, as they reflect experiences and foster discussion, co-creation, and shared understandings. Brailas (2020) and Virole and Ricadat (2022) discuss approaches to integrating participant-produced drawings into qualitative interviews. Drawings can access nonverbal aspects of experience, elicit unspoken

emotions, and serve as effective prompts during interviews. This method not only enriches data collection but also fosters a collaborative environment.

We identified a series of traditional herbal practices from the Colombian Pacific coast. Native plants carry memories of his childhood, family and neighbourhood. Then, we connected these plants with specific memories and people through **mind maps** and **journaling**. This approach aligns with postcolonial Indigenous interview methods, where symbols and culturally grounded practices help bring to consciousness connections with others, the land, and the environment (Chilisa 2011; Wilson 2008). Such methods emphasize relationality and holistic knowing, valuing embodied dimensions of memory.

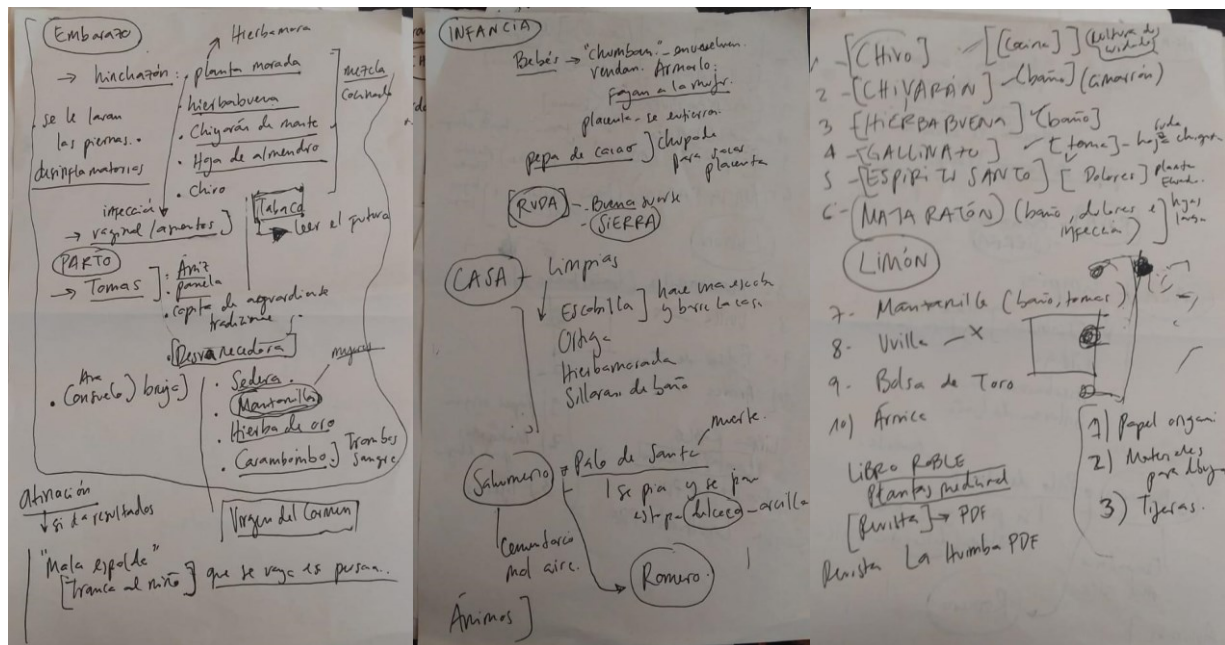


Figure 1. Mind maps co-created with Comunidad, based on the identification of plants, people, places, and key moments in his life.

We drew some of these plants in a journal based on our talks and maps. Drawing allowed other forms of communication to unfold responsively, suggesting a world beyond or “a world that does

not have to be explicitly recorded and is, in fact, all the more ‘complete’ because it can not be completed” (Taussig, 13). I am interested in drawing as a means of storytelling and the thought process. Ingold (2013), like Juhani Pallasmaa (2009), thought about drawing as a tactile exercise: ‘As I sketch a contour of an object, human figure or landscape’, Pallasmaa writes, ‘I actually touch and feel the surface.’ (126)

Our drawings complement and enrich Comunidad’s recounts; they do not intend to illustrate them. Then, we created video prototypes using cell phones to document the drawing and talking process inspired by the Balso tree. We placed them on top of our drawings, capturing only our hands and the sound of our voices. We repeated another version of this conversation at a public event held on Zoom, with other artists-researchers in attendance as the audience. The documentation of this event was then subtitled to share it with non-Spanish-speaking audiences.



Figure 2. Comunidad and I drew and engaged in conversation during a public Zoom event inspired by the Balso tree. We recorded the process using our cell phones.

In the **second stage**, we co-created the audiovisual titled [*From the Balso to the Cununo*](#). We met personally at his music school in Bogotá. We chose the drawing materials together: a set of markers and a large piece of white paper. During our rehearsals, we developed ten questions as our guide. These questions focused on the Balso tree and were visible to both of us during the recording. Balso's wood makes the cununo: a meaningful traditional instrument for Comunidad. For the recording, we used a zenithal shot, also known as a "bird's eye view." This open shot was taken with the camera positioned perpendicular to the ground, at a 90-degree angle, and above our collaborative drawing. This view is a safety measure that reduces the risk of Comunidad being identified, while allowing the audience to see the movement of our hands, gestures, and drawings.

Rehearsing the questions was essential to avoid revictimization and "circle around" painful memories. Valerie Yow refers to sociologist Jack Douglas and his advice on "waiting until the narrator is at ease in the interview situation and 'circling' around the painful question" (1995, 61). A comfortable narrator, says Yow, will often refer to the topic without being asked. During this process, I used journaling to reflect on and recollect aspects of the collaboration.



Figure 3. Screenshot from the video *From the Balso to the Cununo: A Drawn Conversation Between Comunidad and Manuela Ochoa* (2023).

In the third stage, we co-created the audiovisual entitled [*Eucalipto*](#). It emerged as a response to the first audiovisual. After discussing possible outcomes, Comunidad suggested redirecting the interview to focus on my life story. As we did before, we discussed plants, animals and symbols that I felt identified with. I chose the eucalyptus tree because it is characteristic of the area of the country where I was born, and because it surrounded my childhood games and my family in various forms. He guided and planned an interview, as I did in the first audiovisual. We met personally at his music school in Bogotá. We chose the same drawing materials together: a set of markers and a large piece of white paper. This time, the interview was characterized by **improvisation**. In Catherine Ryan's (2022) words:

Improvisation is embodied, experiential, situational and relational. It is dynamic and transformative. It begins without plan or knowing, with both the present emptiness of a space and a moment, and the complex, challenging, wonderful, threatening reality of here and now (38).

This method leverages spontaneous, creative, and unscripted processes to explore and generate unexpected data. In addition, improvisation is an essential element in the music of the Colombian

Pacific region, allowing us to explore musical moments that intertwined with the drawings and stories we shared.

YouTube was selected as the primary platform for sharing the two co-created videos as a joint decision between Comunidad and me. This choice was grounded in practical considerations: Comunidad is already familiar with YouTube, and he wanted to be able to easily access and share the videos with his community, students, and collaborators. In the Colombian context, YouTube remains one of the most widely used and accessible platforms. It functions well even with limited bandwidth, does not require an account to view videos, and allows for easy distribution through direct links.



Figure 4. Screenshot of the video *Eucalipto* (2024).

The fourth stage involved reflexive, poetic, and academic writing about the research-creation process. I produced all the writing. Writing is an integral part of the analysis process, as it clarifies thinking (Fetterman, 2020) and often reveals gaps in knowledge or ethical tensions that require further reflection. Since this is a collaborative project, Comunidad has had spaces to discuss sections of what I wrote, especially those concerning his life story, identity, and elements related to his safety and representation. These conversations did not involve co-writing, but rather a process of sharing translated drafts with him in order to ensure accuracy and mutual agreement on sensitive content. Oral history as a method invites experimentation with writing, as Portelli (2018) stated: “the narrator is pulled into the narrative and becomes a part of the story” (3). At this stage, I developed self-reflective vignettes as evocative narratives to explore and understand my own experiences, critically examine my positionality, and assess the impact of my presence on the research process. This reflective writing aligns with broader qualitative methodologies that emphasize the researcher’s situatedness and the co-constructive nature of knowledge production (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

By engaging in drawing, semi-structured interviewing, storytelling, and improvisation alongside Comunidad, the project not only accessed emotional, embodied, and nonverbal dimensions of memory and identity but also fostered shared authority and co-creation in knowledge production. The dialogic listening, accompanied by reflexive writing and experimentation, enabled us to become collaborators, blurring traditional boundaries between researcher and participant. This methodological approach aligns with decolonial and feminist efforts that value relationality, positioning artmaking not just as a means of expression but as a mode of inquiry and transformation. Ultimately, the project offers a model for artist-researchers committed to ethical and collaborative methodologies. This project aims to contribute to research-creation by

demonstrating how creative practices can support the production of ethical and collaborative knowledge in contexts of sociopolitical violence. It foregrounds the potential of art to generate insights that emerge through collaboration, expanding the possibilities of research-creation.

Chapter Structure

The first chapter of this thesis introduces *Oropéndola, Arte y Conflicto*, a digital platform that I co-created and collaboratively developed with the Museo de Memoria de Colombia and *Verdad Abierta* between 2014 and 2019. The platform documents artistic responses to Colombia's armed conflict, bringing together the work of professional artists and survivor-artists whose practices engage with memory, violence, and resilience. Over the course of five years, working on the project as a researcher and curator, I interviewed numerous visual artists whose work draws on the life stories of survivors. These encounters prompted me to reflect deeply on the ethical challenges involved in engaging with stories of violence, especially the tensions between artistic representation, care, and survivor agency.

It was through this work on *Oropéndola* that I came across the work of artist-activist Carolina Caycedo. Her approach stood out to me for its clear departure from more conventional forms of artistic engagement in Colombia's visual arts scene. In collaboration with *Movimiento Ríos Vivos*—a coalition of social organizations affected by hydroelectric and mining megaprojects—Caycedo not only created a powerful participatory performance, *Atarraya*, but also developed a replicable script designed to support the movement's ongoing activism at the Truth Commission.

Studying and analyzing *Atarraya* allowed me to reflect on how artist-researchers can co-create with communities, ensuring that the resulting work also responds to the needs and goals of

collaborators. *Atarraya* foregrounds collective authorship and long-term collaboration as key methodologies. This process-oriented approach challenges traditional hierarchies within the art world and opens up new possibilities for participatory practices that center community agency. At the same time, it prompted me to think critically about how art can enter institutional spaces—such as the Truth Commission—not as a form of representation, but as a mode of dialogue. Within such spaces, artistic practices can serve as vehicles for listening, contributing to broader conversations about justice, memory, and the pursuit of repair. This analysis of *Atarraya* was part of my doctoral research and marked my entry point into the field of art and transitional justice. It was published in 2023 as *Atarraya: Listening to Human and Non-Human Voices in Post-Conflict Colombia* (Ochoa Ronderos 2023), as part of a special issue of *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* focused on *Oral History Performance for Transitional Justice*, edited by Luis Carlos Sotelo Castro and Toni Shapiro-Phim.

In Chapter Two, I explore in depth how the ideas for this project with Comunidad began to take shape when we met in 2018. Our conversations, influenced by the presence and sound of his *cununo*, revealed deep connections between emotions, music and memory. While at first Comunidad shared powerful reflections through his instruments and lyrics, he often chose to avoid direct references to traumatic events, highlighting both safety concerns and the difficulty of articulating pain. These early interviews led me to reflect on the ethical dimensions of interviewing survivors.

The challenges and missteps I encountered offered valuable insights for how to move forward. The most significant outcome that emerged from this process was the development of drawing while talking as a method. It opened a new path, prompting us to explore this method with greater

intentionality. Out of this research creation process emerged the first pilots of the audiovisual piece “From the Balso to the Cununo,” in which Comunidad connects stories from his life in Tumaco, the Balso tree, his cununo, and his forced displacement.

Chapter Three focuses on the process following the recording of [*From the Balso to the Cununo*](#) and the development of [*Eucalipto*](#). In this stage of the research creation process, I wrote an auto-ethnographic text through which I recognize myself as a mestiza, middle-class woman from Colombia, a country marked by deeply rooted structures of racism, classism, and patriarchy. Comunidad assumed the role of interviewer, and I became the interviewee. This reversal of roles allowed us to explore a more reciprocal form of dialogue, challenging the conventional researcher–participant relationship. My personal history is shaped by the challenges and complexities of being a Latin American immigrant in Canada, a country with a living colonial legacy. This autoethnographic process prompts me to question inherited beliefs about difference, to examine how the dynamics of the armed conflict operate at both personal and structural levels, and to reflect on the kinds of collective transformations necessary to envision different futures for Colombia.

In Chapter Four, I examine the ethical responsibilities of artist-researchers working collaboratively with survivors of armed conflicts. Through reflections emerging from my collaboration with Comunidad, I argue that ethical engagement in artistic research must move beyond formal consent and protocols. It requires sustained attention to representation, power, reciprocity, and the affective dimensions of working with oral history in contexts marked by violence. The chapter proposes a set of open-ended, self-reflective questions that emerged from our collaborative process with Comunidad. These questions are meant to support artists in preparing for and navigating the ethical complexities of co-creating with survivors. While rooted in the Colombian context, the reflections

in this chapter respond to broader global challenges around memory, colonial legacies, and the responsibilities of artists-researchers who seek to collaborate and to be transformed by the act of listening.

Note on Translation

This dissertation draws on a range of interviews originally conducted in Spanish. All translations from Spanish to English are my own, unless otherwise noted. I have aimed to preserve the tone, meaning, and cultural context of the original language as faithfully as possible, while making the text accessible to an English-speaking audience.

Chapter 1:

Oropéndola and *Atarraya*: listening to artists and survivors in Colombia

Introduction:

In 2016, I began my professional career as a curator of *Oropéndola*, *Arte y Conflicto*, a digital project initially developed by the *Museo de Memoria de Colombia* (MMC) and the *Verdad Abierta* journalism platform. The platform documented, collected, recovered, and reviewed artistic material (film and video, theatre, performance, visual arts, dance, and music) related to the armed conflict in Colombia during recent decades. It included recognized artists who dedicated their artwork to making the events in the country visible, as well as communities of survivors who resisted horror by appealing to their rich cultural heritage.

Oropéndolas are orioles in Spanish. These birds are renowned for constructing remarkable, suspended woven nests in trees throughout the Americas. Orioles have witnessed the war in Colombia, as they inhabit multiple rural areas directly affected. We chose this name for the project, invoking survivors' ability to build projects and inspire others amid destruction and pain. Through this project, we aspired to create a space where stories of survival and hope could flourish, much like the nests of the orioles hanging delicately in the trees.

As Rubiano (2017) has noted, from the early 2000 and especially after the establishment of Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (National Centre of Historical Memory) and its publications on historical massacres, various visual artists in Colombia have based their work on research, oral testimonies, memory initiatives in different areas, legal decisions, and discussions with affected communities and non-governmental organizations that assist them. Artists such as Doris Salcedo

and Erika Diettes have been widely recognized for their pioneering and deeply moving responses to the Colombian armed conflict. Their works, often grounded in the testimonies of survivors, have played a crucial role in bringing visibility to the emotional and political wounds of violence, evoking collective mourning and memory (Bal, 2010; Bell, 2020; Martínez, 2020). However, their artistic strategies tend to position survivors as the source of testimony rather than as active, creative co-creators. While this approach does not diminish the significance of their work, it raises important questions about representation, listening and the possibilities of more reciprocal forms of engagement. What might it mean to move beyond bearing witness *for* survivors, toward creating *with* them, acknowledging their stories and creative, political, and epistemic agency within the process?

Such is the case for Doris Salcedo's sculpture *A flor de piel* (2011-2012), in which she stitched together numerous rose petals into a fragile shroud that sways on the ground. The petals remain caught between life and death and are so delicate that they rip upon contact. Salcedo conceived the work *A Flor de Piel* while reading the story of María Cristina Cobo, a female nurse who was tortured to death in Colombia by the paramilitaries and whose dismembered body has never been found. The artist has described the work as "a floral offering to this victim of torture, as well as all of those who have been affected by violence" (Salcedo 2014).

Months after visiting Salcedo's studio and seeing *A Flor de Piel*, I interviewed Paulina Mahecha, the mother of Maria Cristina Cobo. Mahecha has tirelessly fought to find her daughter's remains, a journey filled with pain and uncertainty as she navigates the complexities of personal loss and institutional indifference. She has also been involved with groups of relatives of the disappeared, who use artistic expressions to denounce forced disappearance, share their experiences, and begin

to heal the wounds caused by their loss. When I shared Salcedo's work with Paulina Mahecha, she expressed that she was unaware of the sculpture dedicated to her daughter. Her response underscored the significant disconnect that can exist between contemporary art and the lived experiences of those directly affected by violence in Colombia. This experience prompted me to ask: *How can artistic practices support and accompany survivors, rather than representing their experiences from a distance?*

Interviewing artists not directly affected by the armed conflict, like Doris Salcedo, allowed me to study and recognize their dedication to fostering critical thinking, advocating for human rights, and awakening sensitivity numbed by the overwhelming number of violent news reports and media misinformation. Many of these conversations were not emotionally charged narratives but rather intellectually rich discussions characterized by rational and critical reflections on the conflict's historical and contemporary aspects.

On the other hand, when I spoke with artists who were also survivors of the armed conflict, such as Paulina Mahecha, the conversations took on a different tone. I was face-to-face with raw, painful memories —stories that revealed the darkest aspects of human behaviour. However, those emotions were not the whole story. Most of the survivors I spoke with focused not just on what had been taken from them, but on what they had managed to hold onto or rebuild. Their stories were full of solidarity, strength, creativity, and the deep connections that sustained them. They shared powerful ways they have found to recover love, reclaim dignity, and heal together, even in the aftermath of violence. When I left these interviews, I often felt moved and saddened by the country's reality, but at the same time, I felt inspired and fortunate to have known their stories and shared them with others.

Through a digital platform, *Oropéndola* brought these two groups into conversation: the artists who witnessed the armed conflict from a distance and the artists who lived through it. In Colombia, formally educated artists who are not survivors of the conflict often come from urban, middle-class backgrounds and have had greater access to education, international networks, and institutional art spaces such as galleries, museums and universities. Their work is more likely to circulate in exhibitions, receive funding, and be included in narratives about culture and memory. These artists tend to operate within frameworks that are more legible to curators, art institutions, and international audiences.

In contrast, most survivor-artists I met come from rural or low-income communities, where state presence is weak or absent, and where art has often been a grassroots response to loss and survival. Their work emerges from community-led efforts, local festivals, workshops, or spiritual and ancestral practice spaces. These are not always recognized as “art” by institutional standards, yet they are deeply relevant and political. These artists are less likely to have access to funding, exhibition opportunities, or media visibility. Their work speaks directly to the legacies of the conflict, but it does so in ways often overlooked or undervalued by the dominant cultural field.

This disparity raises critical ethical questions for non-survivors, formally educated artists who, like me, wish to engage with the life stories of survivors. Their narratives carry significant emotional, political, and spiritual weight. When we artists attempt to work with these stories without establishing a relationship based on empathy, we risk re-enacting dynamics of exploitation. As Silke et al. (2018) describe empathy, it is ‘the ability to understand another person’s emotional state’ (423). Dolan (2022) has further expanded the definition of this ability, stating that it enables

the ability to respond appropriately by accurately perceiving someone else's emotions. Ideally, argues Dolan (2022), empathy leads to separating one's own feelings from those of another person.

As Jill Bennett (2005) has reflected, empathy is characterized by a combination of affective and intellectual operations. However, she also quotes Papastergiadis, "of going closer to be able to see, but also never forgetting where you are coming from...empathy is about that process of surrender...but also the catch that transforms your perception" (10). How can artists and researchers create spaces of co-creation where survivors' stories are heard, held, and treated with empathy, dignity, and care?

Atarraya

As part of my research for *Oropéndola*, I came across the collaborative performance *Atarraya* (2015–2018), created by Carolina Caycedo in collaboration with members of the *Movimiento Ríos Vivos*, a grassroots network of communities affected by hydroelectric projects and extractive industries in Colombia. *Atarraya* first caught my attention because it brings together the voices of the artist and the survivors, who are also environmental leaders, within the same performative space. This convergence transforms the work into an act of political denunciation. Rather than speaking *about* the affected communities from a distance, the performance becomes a space of presence and collaboration, where artistic gesture and lived experience interweave. *Atarraya* raises critical questions about environmental justice, the armed conflict, extractive industries, and solidarity through the interplay of art and activism.

In this chapter, I will focus on *Atarraya* as a case study to reflect on the ethical, political, and artistic dimensions of working with other people's stories, especially those rooted in histories of

dispossession and political activism. This case enables me to explore the implications of oral history, collaboration, and performance in relation to structural violence, environmental justice, and the Colombian armed conflict. I will discuss two presentations of *Atarraya* in Bogotá: the first one took place in 2016 during ARTBO, Colombia's most important art fair. The second one was presented at the Truth Commission building in Bogotá in 2018.

In this analysis, I will consider the audiences of these two versions as they interact differently; ARTBO's audience mainly consists of people related to contemporary art, such as artists, curators, art students, gallerists, and collectors. On the other hand, at the Truth Commission, the audience consists of researchers from different disciplines working to support the Commission's primary objective, which was to offer a measure of recognition.

Weaving the *atarraya*

Carolina Caycedo is a member of the social movement Ríos Vivos. Caycedo's involvement with Ríos Vivos began in 2013 after reading about El Quimbo, a hydroelectric project in southwestern Colombia that was built entirely by EMGESA, the local subsidiary of the Italian multinational energy giant ENEL. Since before its construction was authorized, El Quimbo has been involved in multiple controversies. On the one hand, the effects on areas of ecological interest have been debated, for example, in threatened ecosystems such as the tropical dry forest. Likewise, the destruction of archaeological and cultural heritage sites has been denounced, further exacerbating the cultural and economic impact on traditional practices, such as artisanal fishing (Observatorio de Conflictos Ambientales, 2022).

The construction and operation of El Quimbo were processes in which the affected communities, mostly *campesinos* like Zoila Ninco, who also became a member of Ríos Vivos, needed more spaces to participate and discuss their necessities (*El Espectador*, October 5, 2015). As a result, two visions of the territory collided: on the one hand, the developmental vision that considers these mega-projects as engines for economic growth and, on the other, the relationship between communities and their surroundings, which sustains their economic, social, cultural and spiritual dimensions (Observatorio de Conflictos Ambientales 2022).

Carolina Caycedo, a formally educated artist, started *Be dammed*, a series of ongoing participatory art projects with other members of Ríos Vivos. The collaborative series includes photographs, installations, performances, presentations, and books. One of these projects is the participatory performance *Atarraya*.

In 2016, Caycedo and Ninco were invited to ARTBO, Colombia's most significant art fair, with their performance *Atarraya*, a title that can be translated as 'fishnet' but, as I will explain, holds a more profound significance. As I contextualize *Atarraya* in the Colombian transitional justice scenario, I will carefully weave fragments, a description of a video of the 2016 version and fragments of interviews with Carolina Caycedo and Diana Giraldo, a former member of Ríos Vivos and collaborator in the 2018 version of the performance



Figure 5. Zoila Ninco gathers the *ataarraya*. Photo by Carolina Caycedo, 2016. Screenshot by the author.

The camera focuses on the faces in the audience. There are many urban, young, and older people, as well as a few children. Some are recognized Colombian artists and curators. Their gazes shift to different places, as if they are looking for someone to focus on. Finally, a female voice says: 'My name is Guaira Valentina; I am a defender of the Colombian massif of San Agustín.' The camera now shows the complete scene: a semi-circle surrounded by seated people. There is a small wooden platform. Carolina Caycedo, speaking now, cannot be seen, but Zoila Ninco, dressed in black, steps in. Her face is painted black, white and red. Her hair is loose. She takes something out of a white bag. Ninco throws it on the floor, and we can now see that it is a circular fishing net or atarraya. She throws it to the ground with strength. The atarraya makes a loud noise when it hits the floor. Ninco repeats the gesture, throwing the atarraya and gathering it repeatedly. In parallel, Caycedo keeps introducing several people in the first person with her voice: 'I am Ángel Cardona, a teacher at the National School. I am part of a social movement in defence of the territory, in Pitalito, opposing all these mineral and energy projects that the government promotes.'

It was declared before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2014. After Emgesa started the dam, many inhabitants, especially members of Rios Vivos and Asoquimbo (The Association of People Affected by the El Quimbo Hydroelectric Project), denounced harassment and threats, which caused them to leave their lands. Among other petitions, Asoquimbo and Rios Vivos demanded that the Colombian state recognize forced displacement resulting from the implementation of such projects (Observatorio de Conflictos Ambientales, 2022).

Rios Vivos has stated that the dam was filled without complying with the economic, social, and environmental obligations for this megaproject, which included the restitution of productive land for campesinos and fishers, reforestation plans, and heritage conservation. In addition, people who stayed had to face continuous flooding caused by the ecological imbalance in the surrounding area of the Magdalena River. This phenomenon significantly impacted artisanal fishers in the region, who were forced to alter their lives and homes to avoid starvation (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos 2014).

In this context, Caycedo travelled to La Jagua in 2015. There, she met Zoila Ninco, a defender of the Magdalena River who introduced her to the world of fishing with an *atarraya*. Throwing the *atarraya* repeatedly, despite adverse circumstances, can be seen as an act of resistance, as it asserts that the river does not belong to a private company. Furthermore, it is a practice that embodies the continuity of a tradition and culture transmitted across generations.

In their performance, Ninco and Caycedo highlighted the force of the *atarraya*, not only as a powerful symbol of resistance but also as a handmade object connected to the body of fishers, charged with stories, textures, and sounds. Its significant presence and loud sounds on the floor make it impossible to ignore during the performance. The audience surrounded Ninco and

Caycedo, forming a semi-circle. The proximity to Ninco and Caycedo involved more than just listening to spoken words; it allowed those present to witness and sense their movements, facial expressions, posture, tone of voice, and even their breathing more intimately.

Accompanied by Caycedo's words, the performance transforms local and rural experiences into public knowledge shared in a broader urban context. *Atarraya* uses oral history to recreate and imagine a community gathering in the present. This movement of stories through time creates a 'new historical consciousness and understanding across lines of social and cultural difference, locally as well as globally' (Aras et al., 2012).



Figure 6. Carolina Caycedo reads the script. Photo by Carolina Caycedo, 2016. Screenshot by the author.

Caycedo, now visible to the audience, with her face painted in yellow, black and red, speaks on a microphone and says: 'I am Yuma, the land of friends. I was born in a lagoon in the Colombian massif's water star, and I flow to the north until I open up to the Caribbean. I am the core of entire cultures: Huyumbe, Pijao, Misak, Halcón, Hianaconas, Nasa, and Tayrona. I am the river of

tombs, the guacacayo; I am Arli, the river of fish, I am the golden thread that connects the ancestors with the living to be born.’ In parallel, we can hear the atarraya against the ground. Zoila Ninco is now on the wooden platform and throws the atarraya again. Its sound gets louder. We continue listening to Caycedo’s words: ‘We are the cassava, the tobacco, the coconuts and the red pitaya.’

The script of *Atarraya*, written by Caycedo and adapted to the context for each new version, introduces different people, primarily defenders of the river and non-human entities, such as animals, plants, and the river itself, which are affected by various hydroelectric projects in Colombia, including El Quimbo, Hidroituango, and Oporapa. About writing the first part of the performance, Caycedo says: ‘The words that I cite are part of the presentations made by each person who was present at a community activity that took place in 2015 in Oporapa (...) When there are meetings, the first thing that we do is a round of presentations. There was a circle; it was vast, and there were many people (...). We were cooking *sancocho* for everyone and stood in a circle at one point. Each said who they were, where they came from and what kind of work they were doing’ (Caycedo, April 2022, personal communication).

In *Atarraya*, this circle of presentations is expanded by introducing assassinated social leaders of the region, such as Nelson Giraldo Posada, a *Campesino* from the Bredunco canyon, who actively opposed the Hidroituango project. Their voices join the circle. Greenspan and Collection (1998) argue that survivors’ retelling reflects our role as listeners, ‘on one level, this is because survivors talk about us’ (7). Listening to the presentations of murdered leaders and their defended causes also brings questions about our roles in this situation: why are they being killed? Who is held responsible for these killings? How can we support the efforts of those who were murdered? It also raises questions about our collective responsibilities in this situation: how can we protect

environmental leaders and their territories, while demanding that these issues be addressed in legislation and public policy?

‘We are all entangled in each other’s narratives’ (Farinati and Firth 2017, 60), or as Pollock (2005) reflects, ‘performance describes a reflexive relationship between the performer(s) and audience members who mirror and prick each other’s consciousness, even when the audience remains conventionally silent’ (135). The political and social consciousness that the performance might awaken in the audience begins with listening. The voicing and sharing of experiences around El Quimbo in *Atarraya* make leaders like Zoila Ninco visible and audible to audiences in cities like Bogotá, where the abundance of news about the armed conflict can numb any intention of engagement.

Although part of the Colombian armed conflict has reached the cities, especially during the expansion of the drug cartels in the 1990s, most of the violence has affected rural communities. For young, urban citizens attending art fairs such as ARTBO, listening to *Atarraya* could be an opportunity to learn more about the intricacies of Colombia’s armed conflict and its relationship with the environment, and hopefully, to enrich their social and political consciousness.

Endangered and extinct species are also present in this circle through Caycedo’s voice, like the Samán, a shade tree that lived on the beaches of Bredunco or the jaguar. As Lederach (2005) argues, creativity transcends the mundane, and thus, artists can move beyond violent patterns, imagining and generating new and unexpected responses. By including non-human voices in the circle and imagining their message in human language, Caycedo reminds us that they have been victims of destruction and exploitation; they, too, speak to the conflict and must be acknowledged and repaired.



Figure 7. Zoila Ninco (left) and Carolina Caycedo (right). Photo by Carolina Caycedo, 2016. Screenshot by the author.

Caycedo and Ninco are now facing each other. Caycedo says: 'I am the jaguar, and when I look into your eyes, you stop being prey and become another jaguar.' Ninco replies: 'I am Zoila Ninco, I am a defender of the Magdalena River. I am here in defence of my river because the multinational Emgesa and the government expropriated us ... they took more than ten thousand campesinos from our territory. Caycedo holds her hand; she looks into her eyes. Right now, we are starving, and we are in need We are here defending this great territory because today, the Colombian people would not have food if it were not for the campesinos or the fishers.' Caycedo thanks her and proceeds to introduce herself while looking at the audience: 'I am Carolina Caycedo; I come from Los Angeles, California, where we are going through a historic drought of more than five years. (Ninco starts throwing the atarraya again, next to Caycedo). I am part of the Ríos Vivos Colombia and Descolonizar la Jagua processes. In the Bacatá Basin, we are connected to the Los Angeles River in California, to the Cuacuá River and the Yuma River in La Jagua, where Zoila comes from,

to the Yaqui River in Sonora, Mexico, through air currents, particles, precipitation and radiation. The Mamos say that all bodies of water are connected. Science says so and calls it the global hydrosphere.’ Caycedo discusses the concept of the body in pain and the idea of involvement, which involves understanding that each of us is part of the bio-cultural system. She talks about resistance as gestures, such as staying at home, fishing with atarrayas, and working the land in the midst of destruction, fear, and expropriation. ‘It is not a stubborn gesture, and it is a political gesture that clearly says NO, we do not agree with this imposed lifestyle,’ she says. Caycedo discusses the atarraya, its etymology, and its characteristics. Each atarraya contains the wisdom of weaving, accumulated ancient knowledge, the river’s rising and flowing, and the migration of fish. She notes that this knowledge cannot be acquired in a classroom because it is thoroughly embodied. She calls it ‘muscular memory’ and adds, ‘The extractivist economy ultimately threatens these ancestral, autonomous and emancipatory gestures.’

The performance of *Atarraya* took place in October 2016, shortly after the former President of Colombia, Juan Manuel Santos, and the former leader of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri, signed the peace agreement that ended the five-decade civil war. The deal had to be submitted to a referendum for approval by law. However, it was rejected by a narrow margin, primarily due to the population of areas less affected by the war. Moreover, the indifference of a significant portion of the population was a determining factor (FIP 2016). The Final Agreement was thus relegated to legal limbo until the end of November of that year, when it underwent renegotiation.

The referendum limbo sparked several civil initiatives, including massive protests in support of the peace process and public memorials, such as Doris Salcedo’s *Sumando Ausencias* (Adding Absences). Although *Atarraya* was not presented as part of this series of actions in response to the

referendum, it provided a space to denounce an urgent crisis related to environmental policies and the lack of support and protection from local authorities and the Colombian state. In this regard, Shefik (2018) advocates for ‘a shift towards thinking about art in the transitional justice context as an active process that works politically in and of itself, regardless of whether the art is actually about politics’ (324).

Likewise, *Atarraya* reached beyond the political contingency caused by the referendum and presented a broader panorama that includes the responsibility of the private companies in the Colombian armed conflict. The claims of affected *campesinos*, which have been barely discussed in the Colombian media, decisively confront impunity and injustice, providing tools such as their life stories and testimonies to establish judicial truths, access reparations, and maintain a critical dialogue with transitional justice organizations.

Before implementing the Final Peace Agreement, the Grupo de Memoria Histórica (2009), later known as the National Centre of Historical Memory (CNMH), classified memory initiatives led by victims of the armed conflict, including their artistic expressions, according to their characteristics and objectives. *Atarraya* fits into different categories, but overall, it can be described as an initiative ‘created and preserved as a historical document to make sense of a community’s experience and response to it’ (48).

It can also be described as an initiative ‘based on dialogue and in recognition of the suffering of the other’ (48). In this last group of memory actions, as well as in *Atarraya*, the human body becomes “the expressive medium to build bridges of solidarity and understanding with other citizens” (49). However, as Sotelo Castro (2020) remarks regarding memory work, clashing emotions and opposing points of view are a necessary step towards social transformation. Allowing

the participants to reflect on their identities, responsibilities, and limitations can be the pillar of collective action.

In the current Colombian transitional justice system, the Truth Commission was responsible for investigating the events, promoting coexistence, and establishing the foundations for non-repetition (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022). This mission involved victims and victimizers, but it also contemplated Colombian society. In this regard, Lederach (2005) notes that peace agreements are not short-term solutions, but rather lengthy and complex processes. They are the platform of a series of social and political negotiations that must be permanent and dynamic. To be transformative, these dialogues require engagement with the other. These exchanges are not only necessary to recognize a survivor's loss. If listening is meaningful, it has to allow vulnerability to the point that what is said might be heard 'even if it threatens to break the order of the known world for those who listen' (Stauffer 2018, 80).

In *Atarraya*'s case, this means reconsidering the narratives around the armed conflict, *campesinos* and the rivers. In my case, as a white mestiza, urban, middle-class woman, it implies revisiting what it means to live in a city, far removed from conflict, and choosing to care about someone else's story. During the final stage of the performance, the audience holds the atarraya. Participants become part of the weaving; their bodies form a circle; they are now entangled with the central object. On a metaphorical level, they are also intertwined with Ninco's stories, as the animals, rivers, and plants mentioned by Caycedo throughout the performance are also featured. The combination of visual, embodied, and auditory experiences opens multi-sensory learning and reflexivity possibilities.



Figure 8. Members of the audience become participants by holding the *atarraya* along with Caycedo and Ninco. Others remain seated. Photo by Carolina Caycedo, 2016. Screenshot by the author.

Caycedo says: 'Today we will create a collective body in this forum that I will rename as 'Sala Guatipán,' as the cacica Gaitana. We will continue weaving this atarraya with our bodies to produce an image without authorship. Then, we will be free to disseminate it. An image for all. I invite you to stop being the audience and become participants, hold the atarraya and continue weaving it with your bodies.' According to the instructions, people from the audience go to the stage around the atarraya and hold it. Little by little, the circle is filled, and a second circle of people is formed around it. Caycedo says: 'To make a geo-choreography and a collective body. To weave it, we will put our left arm over the arm of the person next to us. Let us think that the picture we are in is a solidarity gesture with fishers in our rivers and oceans, who resist and protect the water. They are on the frontline of environmental conflicts. Today I thank all the people who are on the frontline.' A photographer on a ladder takes a picture of the circle from above. Caycedo thanks the participants, and the performance finishes.

Throwing the atarraya

Atarraya has had many versions since 2016. They are all structurally similar, with some variations. The following version, performed in front of the Colombian Truth Commission building in Bogotá, includes more roles: two fishers, an artisanal miner (also known as a barequero), and one reader. In this version, Carolina Caycedo and Zoila Ninco were not present. As Caycedo explains, ‘the script exists, and it was returned to Rios Vivos so that they can use it however they want’ (Caycedo, April 2022, personal communication). For example, Rios Vivos can adapt the script to different circumstances related to the hydroelectric megaprojects, changing names and life stories accordingly. In 2018, the Antioquia division of Ríos Vivos, significantly affected by the Hidroituango project, decided to perform *Atarraya* in Bogotá in front of the Truth Commission offices.

The initiative was born internally, as Rios Vivos sought to find a space with the commissioners to discuss the negative environmental impact of hydroelectric projects nationwide, specifically one constructed by Empresas Públicas de Medellín (EPM) along the River Cauca, Colombia's second most important river. Furthermore, the project is built in one of the regions most affected by the armed conflict. Hundreds of people have been forcibly disappeared and killed in this area, and their families are still searching for the bodies (*El Espectador*, June 3, 2020). As the land is flooded, it becomes impossible to find mass graves and bodies buried there, undermining transitional justice efforts for truth, reparation, and guarantees of non-repetition of the crimes.

Before the performance, in January 2018, Rios Vivos and Colectivo de Abogados José Alvear Restrepo (Cajar) sent a petition to the Truth Commission and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) demanding preventive mechanisms to avoid the flood and, with it, the erasure of historical

evidence of the armed conflict in the area (*Verdad Abierta*, January 26, 2018). The case filed with the JEP led to the implementation of precautionary measures in the area of influence of the dam (*Semana*, November 2020). However, beyond protecting historical memory and revealing data about paramilitary groups and forced disappearances in the region, the claims of Ríos Vivos require a deeper look.

Diana Giraldo, a former member of Ríos Vivos and collaborator of *Atarraya*, says that data on how many people were killed and disappeared in the region does not explain why this keeps happening until today. For Giraldo and other Ríos Vivos members, the Truth Commission's final report should analyze the structural violence of hydroelectric projects and their relationship to other actors in the armed conflict. 'It is not only what happens with Hidroituango; it is systematic violence in every hydroelectric project in Colombia. We have the evidence and have identified that hydroelectric megaprojects involve many people' (Giraldo, April 2022, personal communication).

In December 2018, Giraldo and other members of Ríos Vivos travelled to Bogotá and prepared to perform *Atarraya*. According to Giraldo, the main objective of this version of the performance was to pressure the commissioners to open a space for dialogue with them. Even though the Truth Commission established regional offices, Giraldo thinks the message might get lost from the official to the commissioner. It is unclear *who* receives this message or *how* it is interpreted (Giraldo, April 2022, personal communication). Reparation is one of the four pillars of the transitional justice system and a key aim of the Truth Commission. However, *repair* is not a neutral practice; it is an intervention based on decisions around who speaks and who listens (Stauffer 2018).

The building manager and the guards, says Giraldo, tried to stop the performance because of the noise the performers were causing. ‘We had a speaker and a microphone that we could carry on our shoulders with a shoulder strap. So, they (the building guards) told us that we could enter if we stopped the noise’ (Giraldo, April 2022, personal communication). Ironically, the noise opened the space for dialogue and listening. Giraldo and her companions presented *Atarraya* once again before various officials, including Mauricio Katz García, secretary-general, and Catherine Romero, legal advisor to the Truth Commission. The officials became an actively engaged audience, concluding with a decisive relational moment: holding the atarraya.



Estefany Grajales
@estefanyquincha

Follow



Así culminó el performance Atarraya en la Comisión de la verdad, teniendo como logró un diálogo para establecer la ruta de investigación que esclarezca la relación entre el conflicto armado y las represas en Colombia.

Translate Tweet



8:47 AM - 7 Dec 2018

4 Retweets 10 Likes



Movimiento Rios Vivos Colombia, tatiana roa avendaño, Movimiento Nacional Ambiental and 3 others



4

10



Figure 9. Officials of the Truth Commission hold the *atarraya*, actively engaging in the performance. Tweet by Estefany Grajales, collaborator of *Atarraya*. It says: ‘This is how the performance Atarraya concluded at the Truth Commission. Its accomplishment is a dialogue to establish the action plan that clarifies the relationship between the armed conflict and the dams. Photo by Estefany Grajales, 2018. Screenshot by the author.

Even though none of the commissioners attended that day, Giraldo considers it important for performers to be present and heard in these types of spaces. She says, ‘The armed conflict has statistics and timelines, but the thing is that we are not a number; we want to go deeper than that because they are killing us. I can talk to you today; tomorrow I might get killed, and you can just count me out’ (Giraldo, April 2022, personal communication). Giraldo’s words evidence the urgency to include their voices in the face of threats. Their priorities must consider the necessities of survivors and ensure an active and engaged audience. Understanding the collective dimension of Ríos Vivos’ demands is fundamental to the purpose of *Atarraya*. Through the performers’ voices, the audience can sense that these are not individualized situations, but part of a more significant social phenomenon.

In addition, *Atarraya* rearranges how the Truth Commission is used to listen and interact with victims. How can the commissioners and other public officials of the transitional justice system get involved in the stories of the armed conflict? What happens if, instead of listening to thousands of recordings delivered by a team of assistants, the commissioners listen to the life stories of fishers and *barequeros* and then move around the room to hold the *Atarraya* together? Giraldo’s thoughts highlight that violence persists in Colombia, and people are still at high risk when making these claims. The Truth Commission considered this and prior encounters with Ríos Vivos in their final report, published in June 2022.

Gathering the atarraya

Most massacres and persecutions after the Final Peace Agreement was signed in 2016 have targeted human rights defenders and community leaders participating in the agreement's implementation or opposing the extraction of natural resources (Global Witness 2021). Moreover, the Colombian political debate of the last decades has focused chiefly on issues related to the armed conflict, mainly from a military angle. Thus, disregarding the connection between the environment and the armed conflict has increased violence, poverty, and inequality (Salazar et al. 2022)

In this context, oral history-informed art practices, and specifically participatory performance, offer an alternative space to communicate painful experiences and demand better futures, engaging broader and more diverse audiences. *Atarraya* has focused on disseminating the humanitarian and environmental crisis caused by hydroelectric and mining projects in Colombia by recollecting and imagining stories of human and non-human beings affected. It proposes an embodied listening approach where the audience listens to spoken words and participates in a collective physical activity to express solidarity and experience emotional impact.

Beyond dissemination, *Atarraya* proposes an imaginary social circle of presentations and reflections centred around the Atarraya, where the audience becomes an active participant in the end. The resulting photograph, a circle of humans holding the atarraya with their hands, might become a social media gesture of solidarity with affected communities. Still, it does not guarantee a deeper reflection on today's conflict. In addition, what makes *Atarraya* so compelling is the combination of oral, embodied, and sonic components, which are often lost in an image.

Carolina Caycedo says: 'When the atarraya breaks, it does not compromise the functioning of the whole net; it can get repaired. So, I started to think: How good would it be if our society started to function more like a fishing net instead of the wall of a dam?' (Caycedo, personal communication,

April 2022). The metaphor of the net in Colombia, also discussed by Lederach (2005), encompasses the capacity to envision ourselves and our adversaries within a web of relationships. To achieve the aims of transitional justice, which include transcending cycles of violence and repairing social bonds, artists must consider and listen to their audiences. *Atarraya*'s presentation at the Truth Commission proved not only to be a powerful and effective strategy for being heard, but, according to Giraldo, it also generated a discussion to design an action plan.

In Colombia, arts-based community initiatives have existed for decades and have been essential for clarifying the truth and disseminating the memories of survivors (GMH 2009). However, in the face of the transitional justice system, it is necessary to understand *listening* as a critical component of oral history-informed performance. Taking up Stauffer's (2018) words on the importance of collectivity in reparation measures because 'selves are formed intersubjectively, in the presence of others' (5), artists cannot only address harms but transform them into collective actions for social change.

The dialogic aspect of listening is particularly relevant to thinking about art in Colombia. How can artists reflexively and ethically engage their audiences? Social polarization surrounding historical memory and the peace process presents both a significant challenge and an excellent opportunity. To find intersections that would make dialogic listening possible, we should consider these listening moments as a collective process rather than as isolated or individual reflections. In which ways could listeners hold exchanges over time after *Atarraya* finishes? How can *Atarraya* be accessible while creating a safe environment for participants?

Atarraya is grounded in a script written by Carolina Caycedo, crafted to creatively convey the lived reality of a community displaced from its territory. When performed by someone who has

experienced this trauma firsthand, such as Zoila Ninco, the script carries a visceral emotional weight that differs from the interpretation of an artist like Carolina Caycedo, who, though deeply involved politically, comes from a different context. As I watched the performance unfold, I reflected on how Caycedo might transform the performance to present these life stories with care, especially when presenting the work in a public space, where passersby might remain unaware of the profound pain behind Ninco's story.

Systematic violence and impunity have left rage and distrust, a dense layer that prevents us from actively listening to each other. As transitional justice evolves in Colombia, it is time to weave more metaphorical atarrayas and identify the nodes between communities willing to listen to one another.

Chapter 2:

From The Balso to the Cununo

Listening to death as a fertilizer for new seeds.

Tumaco, a port city on the Colombian Pacific coast, is currently experiencing one of the most challenging sociopolitical situations in Colombia, not only because of its coca-growing economy but also, paradoxically, because of the worsening of violence and other conflicts after the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) left the zone (Cinep 2019). The first and only time I visited Tumaco, I wanted to interview members of *Teatro por la Paz de Tumaco* (Theatre for Peace in Tumaco). Accompanied by a friend, a camera, and a portable recorder, we boarded a small plane at Bogotá airport.

We arrived just in time for the group's presentation at the Church of Nuestra Señora de la Merced. It was September 19, 2014, marking thirteen years since the assassination of Yolanda Cerón, a nun who was killed by paramilitaries in front of that very church. Since 2011, the youth group *Cienpies* from *Teatro por la Paz de Tumaco* has commemorated the life of Sister Yolanda with the play "Mi otro yo" (My Other Self).

That night, after the mass concluded, nine Afro-Colombian men and women, their faces partially painted white and dressed in white shirts and black pants, stood before the altar. Initially, they appeared joyful, dancing and holding pom-poms, as they proudly talked about natural resources, landscapes and football heroes born in Tumaco. Shortly after, they lay down on the floor. One at a time, they transformed into the ghostly voices of some of Tumaco's murdered inhabitants. They

got up one by one and told the audience who they used to be, how and who killed them. Two women told us the story of Sister Yolanda in the first person.

Sister Yolanda was a mestiza who worked closely with the Afro communities of Nariño since the mid-1980s. She worked as a primary school teacher in Salahonda, on the Nariño coast. As the armed confrontations between groups of FARC and ELN guerrillas, paramilitaries and the army gained strength in the area, Sister Yolanda firmly opposed their intrusion. Most of her efforts concentrated on promoting and supporting Law 70 of 1993, which permitted Afro and Indigenous communities to establish community government councils and seek acknowledgment of their collective lands.

Sister Yolanda, along with other social leaders, initiated campaigns focused on education and awareness to empower the communities in their land struggles. Her relentless efforts to secure collective land titling for the black communities in the Pacific region of Nariño, along with her persistent denunciations of human rights violations, created discomfort among the political, economic, and military sectors of the area.

Under the guise of diminishing FARC's guerrilla presence and offering security to businessmen, several of whom have serious conflicts over land ownership with black and Indigenous communities, the illegal paramilitary group Bloque Libertadores del Sur grew rapidly with the approval of important political and economic sectors in the region (Centro Nacional de Memoria 2021). Those who suffered the most from the unrestrained violence of the Bloque Libertadores del Sur were black and Indigenous campesinos, fishermen, journalists, trade unionists, community leaders, and human rights defenders (Verdad Abierta 2014).

As explained by the Truth Commission (2022), the war in Colombia has developed and persisted due to alliances, pacts, coexistence, disputes, and tensions between the armed actors and different sectors of the State and society. Drug trafficking, anti-drug policy and the cocaine economies must be seen as protagonists of the armed conflict itself and as a factor in its persistence. Sister Cerón investigated the relationship of members of the security forces with the Bloque Libertadores del Sur. The presentation of the documentation during a local security council led to her being branded as a guerrilla by a military officer (Verdad Abierta 2014). This triggered further intimidation and threats that ended with the murder of Sister Yolanda in 2001.

Her voice, interpreted by young women and invoked at the Church where she worked and died, not only brings her ghost to the stage. Her legacy, her struggle and her defence of Afro-Colombian culture and their territory come to life in this play. Avery Gordon (2008) has written about the figure of the ghost and their *haunting* not only as a missing or dead person, nor as paranormal activity, but as a social figure. “Investigating it can lead to a dense site where history and subjectivity make social life” (8). Haunting occurs when something that has been buried or silenced demands recognition. It is a way in which the past continues to shape the present, often in unsettling ways. Sister Yolanda’s ghost is the sign, the empirical evidence that haunting is taking place.

One of the actresses of *Teatro por la Paz* concluded the play by asking us, the audience: “With Yolanda’s murder, they wanted to silence the truth. They wanted to stop the Campesinos and those of us who defend the land and their rights. People were terrified to continue with her work. Look, if they kill Yolanda, a person who was a nun, a diocesan worker, how can they not kill a common leader of a river or a community council?”.

The sound of the *cununo*

I first spoke with Comunidad in 2018. We met in front of a church in Bogotá after a brief introductory phone call. Accompanied by a colleague, I was there to interview him for an audiovisual project for the Museum of Memory. Comunidad shared that he had recently arrived at Bogota and was temporarily staying at a music school that was providing him with accommodation. At the same time, he worked to organize his new life. His family had remained in Tumaco while he searched for a new home. He suggested that we interview at the music school.

I prepared a short interview that focused on community leadership, as the audiovisual was intended to highlight the persecution faced by social leaders in Colombia. We took some shots of him playing his instruments. I could see his big smile and good humour as he explained to us how they were played. As we sat down to start the interview, he showed me the only thing he carried from Tumaco to Bogota: his cununo, a traditional musical instrument from the Pacific coast. It is a hand drum, similar in shape to a conga but smaller. Its role in music is not only percussive but also communicative, conveying emotions and stories within Afro-Colombian communities (Arcila 2016).

Comunidad's role as a leader in his community was directly linked to his role as a music teacher. Being a music teacher allowed him to deepen and expand his traditional knowledge, sharing it with others, especially children and youth, in his neighbourhood:

I was giving them tools for life. I mean, let us change this for this. Let us put this weapon down, but then let us make music, let us make art from what we know, what we carry in our blood, that we know which is ours. It was just an exchange. It was not about fighting with anyone. I did not want to fight with anyone. I wanted to do my job. I wanted to liberate them. I wanted to achieve something with them. However, the

moment came when they kicked me out. It was either leaving or my life, but thank God, they gave me a chance, and I am here.

We organically connected our conversation to the sounds of his cununo. He played it as we continued speaking, and our discussion acquired a smoother, more rhythmic tone. The cununo became part of the conversation in its mode and language. His smile faded, and prolonged silences took place as we discussed the situation in Tumaco. This interview emphasized the strength of his voice in his community. It also highlighted the importance of his music school in Tumaco and the sound of his cununo. Even though Comunidad was satisfied with the result, his sadness and silence regarding the current situation in Tumaco did not subside.

A similar situation reappeared in our second interview a year later. I was starting a podcast called *Mirlo* to share the life stories of artists and survivors of the armed conflict, highlighting their reflections on resistance, community and memory. Comunidad was Mirlo's first guest. He asked me to focus on questions unrelated to the violent events and the people who displaced him. On the one hand, he was concerned about his safety; on the other, he could not find the right words to express what had happened to him. Finally, we agreed to discuss his hometown in an evocative form: his memories of the landscape, its colours, sounds, and flavours. Then, we decided that I would record my voice as a researcher, explaining the sociopolitical context of Tumaco.

We met at a recording studio this time, and Comunidad brought his cununo and a *guasá*, a hollow cylinder made of bamboo filled with rice. He had written and prepared a song for the recording; he played the cununo as I -clumsily- played the *guasá*. Comunidad sang:

Por cosas de la vida,
Por cosas de la vida,
Mi tierra tuve que dejar,

As life would have it,
As life would have it,
I had to leave my land,

mi tierra tuve que dejar.
Abiertas las heridas,
abiertas las heridas,
me tuve que marchar.

I had to leave my land.
Open wounds,
Open wounds,
I had to leave.

His voice was powerful as he sang. The lyrics he composed poignantly articulated his emotional distress and challenges while simultaneously emphasizing the “open wounds”. Maintaining a focus on open wounds was essential. Later on, as we talked about Tumaco, the tone of his voice changed; it became soft and paused. Nonetheless, discussing the fond memories of Tumaco —food, the ocean, and music — opened the door to talking about his childhood and the first songs he learned as a child. When the past recalled things from the present, his voice cracked, his eyes welled up with tears, and it was necessary to pause.

From my perspective, sensing his pain resurfacing manifested in silence, tears and sighs. In that moment, I realized how the way I framed my questions shaped the reality of our conversation. My goal was not to revisit Comunidad’s complicated past and leave him there. The following question kept echoing in my mind: *How could I discuss the different moments of his life without bringing up the most difficult memories and leaving him with no escape from them?* This concern aligns with Richardson and Reynolds’ (2014) argument that good intentions are not enough in therapeutic and relational work. Without deliberate, co-constructed practices of safety, survivors risk being retraumatized through processes that inadvertently replicate dynamics of abandonment and harm. In this light, my approach to questioning needed to be reconsidered not simply as an act of information-gathering, but as a relational practice with significant ethical implications. As Loveless (2015, 54) asserts, “alternate research stories create alternate research worlds”; then, structuring safety required me to co-create a narrative space that honoured Comunidad’s life experiences while resisting the reduction of his story to sites of suffering alone.

Chivo, verdolaga, chiyangua and gallinazo

In 2021, as a PhD student taking an oral history seminar, I revisited the interviews with Comunidad. We arranged a new meeting in his neighbourhood in Bogotá. The city is marked by stark social contrasts between its various areas. Social segregation is deeply embedded in the city's infrastructure and social dynamics. Most of the wealthier population is of white mestizo or European descent, while poorer areas tend to have higher populations of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous people (Villamizar Santamaría 2015).

A distinct spatial distribution characterizes the socio-economic landscape of the city. Affluent neighbourhoods are predominantly situated in the northern region, where residents typically enjoy greater access to resources and amenities. Conversely, the less advantaged neighbourhoods are located on the outskirts and in the southern parts of the city, where residents often face significant challenges. These challenges include higher rates of crime, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to essential public services, which collectively contribute to a cycle of disadvantage in these areas. This disparity creates an invisible barrier, making it difficult for people from different zones of the city to connect. The geographical layout makes many people in Bogotá, including myself, feel disoriented in some regions of the city. When I first travelled to his neighbourhood from Chapinero, my home in the northeastern area, I followed all the indications of Comunidad. I got lost. Comunidad offered to meet me on a main avenue. We walked together through his neighbourhood while he showed me the most significant places in his daily life: the vegetable store, the empanada stand, and the coffee stand. The pre-interview had begun without me realizing it.

Before we started the interview, Comunidad asked me to walk with him to look at a few houses for rent. At that time, his house was a small room with no windows where he lived with his wife and two children. His dream was to have a bright, spacious house with a garden. In the Afro communities of the Colombian Pacific, houses have *azoteas*, a rectangular wooden structure - or a canoe that is no longer used for navigation - raised one to two meters above the ground to avoid the presence of animals and excess humidity. In it are planted species such as onions, tomatoes, basil, and cilantro, which are essential in the traditional cuisine of the Pacific, as well as medicinal plants for the family (Sanchez Gutierrez 2019). Comunidad explained how in Tumaco, *azoteas* are called *la huerta*. Although it was tough at the time to afford a better space with a *huerta*, we visited a couple of houses in the neighbourhood. We imagined together what his new music school in Bogotá would look like.

As we walked down the street, looking for spaces, we discussed the plants he would like to have: chivo, chiyangua, hierbabuena, and *manzanilla*. The list of plants from the Pacific region went on. He mentioned his grandmother, the community healer and midwife, the person who taught him everything about plants, gardening, and building a loving home. Plants have been part of his life since he was born. Although I had planned a semi-structured interview centred on his childhood and adolescence, this did not ultimately unfold as planned. I encouraged Comunidad to tell me more about the plants and people that have surrounded his life.

We sat at a local bakery, and the official interview started. The invitation to discuss plants while learning about their uses, narratives, and spiritual practices sparked unexpected conversations and inspired drawings. For example, Comunidad mentioned the symptoms of a baby with *malviento*,

referring to the negative energy that affects a person caused by envy, bad intentions, or exposure to specific supernatural forces.



Figure 10. Comunidad described the use and appearance of the Chivo plant. I drew some of the uses and characteristics that he mentioned. It says: “Plants are history, (they) are heritage. You must hit the baby with the leaves on their back and arms to eliminate *malviento* (disease)—hairy stem. Grab them (the Chivo plant) at 5:30 AM with your left hand. A movement to clean and get rid of *mal aire* (disease).”

Many of the plants described by Comunidad, such as the *Chivo* and the *Chiyuanga*, are native to the Pacific region and largely unfamiliar to me. In response to this gap in my knowledge, Comunidad enriched his descriptions by sketching shapes, flowers, and leaves directly into my

notebook. As he narrated, I also wrote down the movements, rituals, and figures associated with the plants, many of which surfaced spontaneously during the interview. This moment exemplifies what Myers (2020) conceptualizes as research-creation: “a mode of inquiry, a way of getting interested and involved in the world, that takes seriously embodied knowledge, craft, creativity, aesthetics, and practices of making as imminent to the process of making knowledge and telling stories about both what is known and what remains unknown” (227). In this sense, the interview became not merely a site of data collection but a collaborative and multisensory process of knowledge-making, where drawing, movement, and relational presence were integral to the emergence of understanding.

Since the beginning of our conversation, it became clear that his memories were not linear nor chronological; they were generative. Lynn Abrams (2010) proposes ideas on personal memory that reflect our interview, for example, a viable sense of self resonated throughout and made meaning of our experiences:

Memory then is about the present as much as the past. It is through which people interpret their lives and redesign the conditions of possibility that account for what they once were, what they have since become, and what they still hope to be. In other words, our memory is our roadmap: it tells us where we have been and aids us in finding where we want to go. (82)

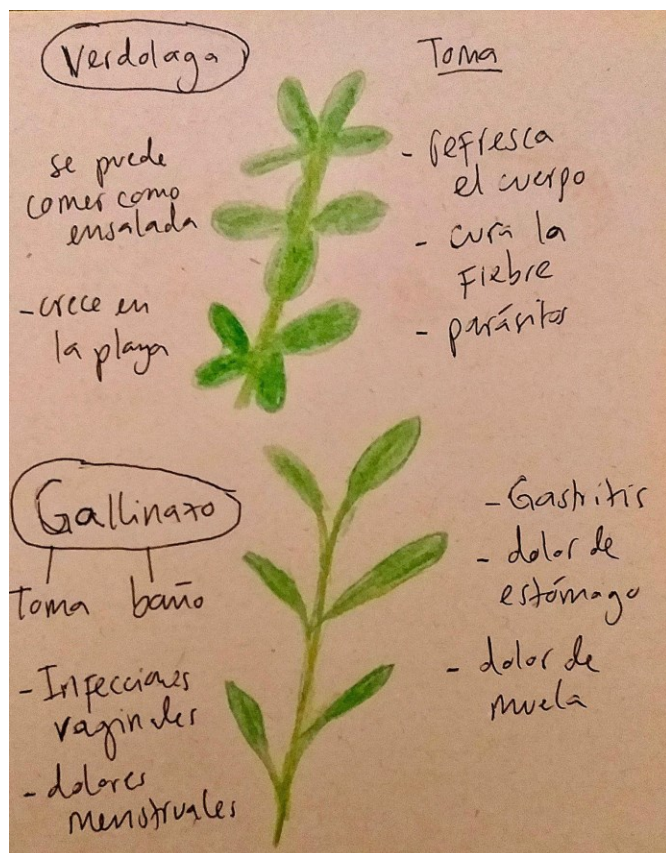


Figure 11. Comunidad described the use and drew the Verdolaga and Gallinazo plants. It says: “Verdolaga: You can eat it as a salad. It grows on the beach. It refreshes the body. It heals fever and parasites. Gallinazo: Drink and bath. Vaginal infections, menstrual pains. Gastritis. Stomachache. Tooth pain.”

As we discussed the stories of these plants, I encouraged Comunidad to share with me his connected life experiences, in as much or as little detail as he wanted. Although I was aware of the threats that compelled him to leave Tumaco beforehand, I did not prepare my questions to focus on this experience. On painful memories, Valerie Yow refers to sociologist Jack Douglas and his advice on “waiting until the narrator is at ease in the interview situation and 'circling' around the painful question”. (Yow 1995, 61) A comfortable narrator, says Yow, will often refer to the topic without being asked.

Following these words, I sought to frame my questions in ways that acknowledged the violence Comunidad had endured while centring his agency, knowledge, and the ongoing practices of care he had forged in the aftermath of displacement. Unexpectedly, a disability in his right leg became a focal point of our conversation that day. An infectious disease attacked him at two months old and kept him confined to bed for nearly a decade. Then, he told me, typhoid fever weakened his bones and left him forever unable to walk correctly. “I couldn't get up, and when I tried to walk, I found another disease: the ignorance and cruelty of the people who called me names.” (Comunidad, personal communication, 2021).

Comunidad explained how he overcame bullying through his leadership and his music practice. He told me music helped him transform his fears and social anxiety into rhythm and movement. During the long years he was locked up, he used the walls and floors of his house to imitate the traditional sounds that his neighbours played at funerals. On the Colombian Pacific coast, people sing *alabaos* and *arrullos* to say goodbye to their dead. Comunidad remembered:

As I grew older, I realized that this music was a part of me because it was already in my blood. One day, my grandmother sat down and told me that my great-grandfather played this music and was a *marimba* player. Then, I continued his legacy, which strengthened me.

When Comunidad shared his experiences of being a child and teenager who felt different from others due to his physical appearance and sensitivity, I was able to understand and validate his emotions in a calm and comforting manner. However, when after a while, he began to tell me how many of his school friends had joined illegal groups to traffic drugs and threaten Tumaqueños, everything changed. His pain and helplessness regarding the difficult economic conditions in his region were linked to trying to understand why some turned to arms and violence. However, the

realization that these individuals, who had known him since childhood, were the very same people endangering his life and that of his family left him feeling both confused and distressed.

The inability to articulate my thoughts and my discomfort with processing this pain led to an abrupt shift in the topic of conversation. I must acknowledge that his frustration became a mutual experience, significantly impeding my capacity to engage meaningfully in the dialogue. His feelings posed a challenge for me on multiple levels. On the one hand, I felt that his wound was open and that reinforcing this issue of threats would only make it worse. On the other, not having experienced anything similar, I felt that my words were empty and fell short of containing the importance of his emotions.

As Alexander Freund has written “responding to silence during interviews means learning more about different kinds of silences and attempting to find out what exactly our interviewees are expressing through their silences.” (Freund 2013, 234). Moreover, Motsemme’s (2004) analysis of women’s silences during the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission complicates dominant interpretations of silence as mere absence or suppression. Instead, she argues that silence itself can be a form of speech, a strategy of survival, and a mode of meaning-making in contexts marked by profound violence. Recognizing Comunidad’s silences in this light demanded that I attend not only to what was spoken, but also to what was withheld, resisted, or expressed non-verbally.

As an artist, not formally trained in interviewing survivors of violence, I approached these conversations without the full preparation typically emphasized in trauma-informed methodologies. This lack of formal training positioned me to encounter my own limits and to

recognize the ethical responsibilities that arise when navigating asymmetrical relations of power. Reading the transcription, I understood that he was not looking for me to rationalize or explain his emotions in words. He was reflecting upon his frustration and injustice and his silences were part of this process. My response closed the door completely. Henry Greenspan (2015) alerts us to how memory brings up knowledge and questions. Survivors do not retell just to inform others; they raise questions for all of us to engage with them together. In the following conversations, I understood his silences better and with patience and attentiveness in the process, silences became opportunities for insight and reflection

Pieces of balso and mangrove

Considering our previous walks and conversations, I thought it would be a good idea to bring colored pencils, markers, and paper for our next meeting at his home in Bogotá. The art materials aimed to focus our attention on the conversation rather than the recorder, which helped reduce our anxiety. I also thought it could work for uncomfortable or difficult moments, as drawing allows us to navigate the silences without haste or pressure. The sound of pencils on paper can be soothing.

I chose these materials for their simplicity; I wanted to use accessible materials as an invitation to talk. As an artist, I feel at ease with drawing, and I thought that engaging through sketches could create a less intimidating environment for Comunidad. Drawing offered an alternative mode of expression that did not rely solely on words and could foster a sense of co-creation rather than interrogation. Before the recording started, I set the materials out on the table so that we could use them freely during the interview. Together, we created lists of plants and linked them with different themes, moments in life, medicinal properties, and people. It was a collaborative exercise to identify the most important plants in Comunidad's life and structure our conversations around them.

I hoped we could deepen the conversation about Comunidad's displacement in the process and reflect upon his homeland as part of his identity. Comunidad was very open to thinking with plants and enthusiastic about sharing his knowledge of his community's healing practices. Plants guided our conversations; they not only contain Comunidad's memories of Tumaco and his ancestors, but they also allow us to understand Tumaco in the present as a living territory struggling to survive in the middle of a war that has not ceased. The illegal drug trade, the increasing social inequality, and the internal armed conflict are major threats to the conservation of Colombian biodiversity (Suárez 2018). In this regard, our conversations highlighted the importance of conserving care practices between human neighbors and other species.

Afro-Colombian communities have passed on invaluable knowledge about nature through oral tradition—even amidst violence and repression (Oslender 2007). Many of these inherited stories were entangled in our drawing and talking exercise. The plants guided us into their stories and environments. They, too, have witnessed violence, struggling and growing upon destruction. For example, Comunidad's abandoned house in Tumaco is currently covered and inhabited by weeds and fungi.

Our conversation was circular, going back and forth on aspects of his life and revisiting themes such as Comunidad's disability and how it was negatively perceived by his wife's family. As Katie Holmes discusses: "interviewees rarely tell their life story in purely chronological form. They often revisit episodes previously discussed, circling back to add further information and detail either as they recall them or on closer questioning from the interviewer." (Holmes 2017, 68) For Comunidad, discussing his disability was crucial in redefining it not as an obstacle to achievement

but rather as a driving force that has consistently pushed him beyond his comfort zone at various points in his life. He highlighted this perspective while recounting a physically demanding job he undertook to purchase materials for their house in Tumaco.

His drawings embody these circular layers of time and the juxtaposition of images that mirror our conversation. Another aspect that caught my attention is that not all our drawings were illustrative of the story he was telling me. For example, at times, he drew boats and the sea while we were discussing other topics.

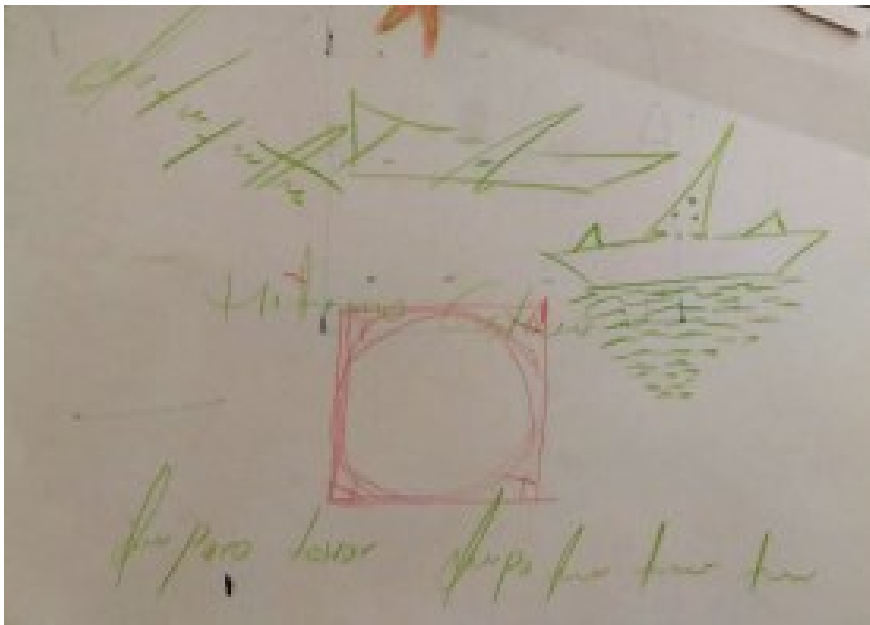


Figure 12. Comunidad drew boats as we talked. He also wrote down fragments of his stories to emphasize their importance.

The Tumaco house, his *palafito*, became a significant topic in the latter part of our conversation. He shared that it was built with balso wood and had a roof made of zinc sheets. He put a great deal of love into its construction, as he and his wife envisioned a safe and beautiful space for their family. He thoroughly explained the function of the *palafitos*' architecture and how it adapts to the tides, allowing easy access to fishing and canoe transportation.

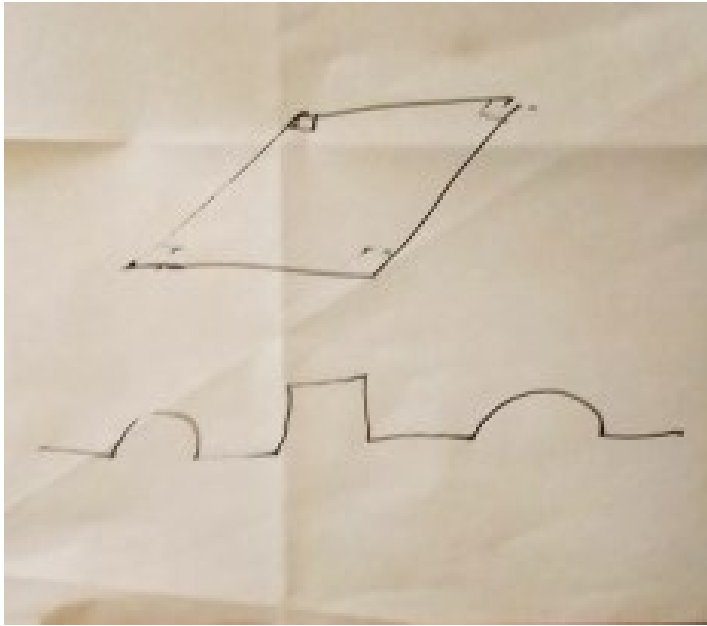


Figure 13. Comunidad drew fragments of his *palafito*, his house in Tumaco. He drew the shape of the floor and parts of the zinc roof.

He expressed his sadness over the fact that nowadays, the wood is infested with insects, putting the structure at risk of total collapse. At that moment, Comunidad did not draw the entire house, even though it was the focus of our discussion. Instead, he sketched fragments of the house, such as the floor. He felt powerless to change the situation in Tumaco. I sensed this difficulty and decided not to explore the topic further. When we wrapped up the recording, he acknowledged that discussing the house was challenging for him, as it evoked too many painful feelings.

The balso man

During our next meeting, we agreed to focus on a recurring plant from our previous discussions: the Balso tree. The Balso had been mentioned earlier in connection with the house and his *cununo*. The idea of recording the visual process and the conversation on video emerged as drawing enhanced his narratives and my understanding of his life story. It fostered collaborative meaning-

making. Thus, beyond the physical drawings, the act of drawing together and all the interactions that occur during our conversations enrich the complexities of his memories.

Filming using a mobile phone would be the simplest approach because it is not intrusive and is not technically complicated. We decided to record our drawings with two mobile phones, each focused on the owner's work. We sat next to each other and placed our phones on top of a book beside us to record from above. The camera framed our hands and drawings, deliberately keeping Comunidad's identity hidden.

I chose a black pen, and he chose a pencil. Comunidad started talking about the balso. He explained what parts of the tree were better for the cununo while he drew a trunk. I started drawing the balso that I remembered from a picture we saw beforehand, but my mental image of the tree changed as he talked.



Figure 14. Comunidad and I drew and talked as our cell phones recorded the process. Only our hands and papers are visible.

For example, he mentions that the tree is filled with knots, and I started tangling up the branches after that. At some points, the conversation guided the drawing; Comunidad drew a boat after the tree trunk because he used one to find better Balsos trees on the seaside. I asked him who taught him to cut the tree, and the first human figure appeared in the drawing. He did not reply to this question directly because he started talking generally about a man who cuts trees, and he then explained the tools and the proper clothes to do that job. Then he started drawing and talking about the cununo.

At times, the drawing became the catalyst for the conversation. The cununo stirred memories of the first time he cut a Balso tree. He recounted how he was bitten by ants. As he described the experience, he mimicked the body movements with two pencils in hand. Seeing how the pencils seamlessly transformed into part of that vivid memory was captivating. Listening to his anecdotes around the Balso tree allowed me to know more about his daily life before becoming a “survivor”. In this regard, Greenspan brings to our attention the words of Agi Rubin, one of the Holocaust survivors that he has interviewed over the years: “You have to see the individuals before they became victims.” (Greenspan 2015, 143) Too often, survivors of mass violence are remembered through the lens of their suffering, reducing them to passive figures in the face of tragedy. This drawing process allowed us to concentrate on his knowledge about cutting the Balso, one that he had performed several times before leaving Tumaco.

Comunidad explained the moon phases that are optimal for cutting trees. He drew the cununo again and described each part of the instrument carefully. When the quality of the wood changes, the sound of the cununo changes as well, says Comunidad. Humidity levels also affect the wood; when Comunidad arrived in Bogotá with his cununo he noticed how its sound was altered. This

memory revealed a brief fragment of his arrival story and the feelings surrounding it. In his drawing, the drum and the man who is playing it are one; his physical form appears to emanate from the drum itself, blurring the boundaries between musician and instrument. Comunidad closed the conversation by pointing at the drawing of the cununo-man and saying: “This is me. This is my identity and what gives me strength. If I ever stop playing the cununo, I know I will get sick and I will die.”



Figure 15. Comunidad described the use and appearance of the balso tree. He drew the trunk, and he drew himself cutting the wood and playing the cununo.

Prototyping: From the balso to the cununo

After identifying the *Balso*, a tree that symbolizes the connection between Comunidad's memories and his present in Bogotá and reflecting on the narratives that emerged during this exercise, we organized a conversation to share our drawing process with an audience. This decision was

intended to address safety concerns regarding the videos we were producing and to ensure that I did not re-victimize Comunidad during the interview.

We agreed on the following measures to minimize these two risks as much as possible: 1) We would continue to use his chosen pseudonym for this project. 2) We would keep our video cameras focused on our hands and drawings. 3) We would rehearse the conversation in advance. 4) We would collaboratively develop the questions and identify the topics that make him feel most comfortable. 5) We would not allow questions from the audience to ensure he did not have to recall or reflect on unwelcome topics.

During our conversations, Comunidad expressed his desire to sing and play the cununo, as he feels more confident when engaged with it. We also agreed that the cununo could serve as a drawing surface, like a table. This instrument transformed into an object that provided him with a sense of peace. On November 17th, 2021, the virtual conversation took place. For 50 minutes, Comunidad and I talked and drew together in a virtual meeting with ten other people, showing only our hands, pens and papers. The conversation weaved his music, memories, Balso trees, cununo, Tumaco and Bogotá.



Figure 16. Fragment of the virtual conversation *From the balso to the cununo*. Comunidad used the cununo as a drawing table.

The event was designed to be intimate, with a maximum of 15 attendees, and targeted students and individuals associated with the Acts of Listening Lab at Concordia University. As it served as a prototype for the final video, the purpose was to collect suggestions and feedback to guide further development. Participants were invited to activate their cameras, allowing them to showcase their hands and drawings. Some chose to share their creations at the end of the session, while others preferred to simply listen and observe from their screens.

Prior to the event, Comunidad and I convened to strategize the organization of our discussion. We decided to concentrate on the Balso tree and how its wood is transformed into a cununo. This approach provided Comunidad with a sense of security and confidence. He is an expert in Balso trees and the construction of this instrument, which allowed him to weave sounds, rhythms, and music throughout the conversation. The option to sing rather than respond directly to questions was

always available. We agreed to adhere to this strategy until the event's conclusion if he felt sad or overwhelmed by memories. Comunidad employed this technique at various points to relax and invited the audience to engage by clapping along with the rhythm.

Through Balso's recollections, we explored the theme of his arrival in Bogotá. The key question at that moment was: *How can one rebuild a community in Bogotá?* Comunidad discussed concepts of care, understanding the history of others, and the recent establishment of *El Palafito de Don Gú*, the music school that he created in Bogotá, which warmly welcomes children from all corners of the country, including displaced children from Venezuela. Music, as Comunidad stated, "is one of the languages humanity has chosen to build connections, transcending our differences."

The event concluded with Comunidad inviting us to learn more about and support the Palafito, enabling it to continue providing a safe, creative space for children away from danger and violence. At that moment, I realized that collaborative efforts such as this research-creation project could enhance the visibility of his work in Bogotá, highlighting not just his experience of forced displacement. Through tremendous effort and limited resources, Comunidad has successfully reestablished his music school in Bogotá.

From the balso to the cununo: a drawn conversation between Comunidad and Manuela

While using mobile phones for recording was a practical and efficient method, particularly in settings where distance posed a challenge, producing high-quality documentation that adequately captured and showcased the nuances of the drawing process remained essential. Up to this point, we had each been drawing on our own sheets of paper without considering each other's work in progress. Our conversation solely inspired our creativity. We decided to try a different approach.

We visited a stationery shop in Comunidad's neighbourhood, where we selected a large piece of paper and a box filled with colourful markers.

Recording this video at *El Palafito de Don Gú* (his music school) was a relevant decision. On the one hand, he asked me to film there for security reasons. Having control over who was listening gave him a sense of peace of mind. The current *Palafito* space is a small room in the same house where Comunidad lives. Comunidad and his students painted the walls the deep blue colour of the Pacific Ocean and drew a palafito and a fisherman in a canoe. There are musical instruments made by the children, as well as papers and colours, tables, chairs, and food to share after school. It is a small, brightly lit, colourful space, full of pleasant memories and hope.

This time, I asked a colleague to help me ensure the image's quality. She accompanied and guided us during the filming. Introducing a third person into the process did not inhibit Comunidad, who said he felt at ease with people I knew from the beginning.

Before recording, Comunidad and I met in person to rehearse. During our rehearsals, we developed ten questions as our guide. I wrote down these questions and placed them in a visible place for both of us during the recording. Again, Comunidad had his cununo by his side, although he did not use it this time. He said he was nervous about the recording, and this guide helped us to thread the ideas and ground them in a question. It also reassured him to know my questions in advance so that no surprises could destabilize his peace of mind.

Comunidad proposed to start the conversation with a *décima*: “Un saludo muy especial / para todos los presentes/ de una manera muy cordial / para que entremos en ambiente (...)”. The *décima* is a

poetic form with deep roots in Spanish literature, consisting of ten eight-syllable lines. In the Colombian Pacific region, Afro-descendant communities have embraced and transformed the *décima*, integrating it into their musical and oral traditions (Swanson 2019). It acts as a vehicle for narrative, cultural expression, and social critique, frequently accompanied by traditional instruments such as the marimba and the cununo.

As he recited the *décima*, we drew two plants that we chose according to our previous conversations and that symbolized our growth and transformation. I chose the dandelion because it is a very common plant in Bogota that grows even in difficult conditions. Comunidad chose the *verdolaga* because it grows everywhere on the Pacific coast. Not only does it taste good, but it is also healing for the stomach.

Comunidad introduced himself in his own words. He addressed the listeners and explained that we would talk through drawing. He then explained the appearance of *verdolaga* (purslane) and its medicinal uses. I continued introducing myself and inviting listeners to draw with us. Although we have not yet defined a precise audience or designed listening circles for this project, this space may emerge in the future. In this video, we directly invite the audience to draw while Comunidad tells its story.

I started the interview by asking him about the balso tree. He emphasized the healing use of the tree; the wood's ashes help to heal wounds. He expressed that through the cununo, he has come to recognize himself as a man of the Pacific and as part of a broader community. Through the drawing, he shows us what a balso tree looks like for those who, like me, have never seen one. His drawing begins to approach my dandelion, and I observe it while I ask him questions about the flowers.

Soon after, I begin to color in the leaves he has drawn. It is the first time our drawings have come together, occurring without prior planning and representing an organic exchange of creativity.

The movement of our hands and their gestures as we talk are elements that reveal the bodily dimension of this exercise. Cándida Smith asks, “What does a gesture, whether congealed in the movement of a hand, the rise in pitch of a voice, or in the shape of a fabricated object, contribute to meaning?” (2003, 3). As he elaborates on the significance of the moon in the process of cutting wood to ensure the tree remains healthy, his hands gesture animatedly while mine stay still, absorbing the information. The connection between the moon and trees is fascinating and likely new to many *bogotanos*, like me.

Comunidad continues by explaining what a *cununo* looks like and each part that makes it up. He draws it next to the tree. While he talks, I continue to draw the leaves of the balso tree and extend the trunk to bring it a little closer to my side of the paper. I listened to his explanations but decided to continue drawing the tree as a meditative act. The drawings started as a literal representation of our conversation, but as we continued talking, they became a process of thinking beyond “the projection of a thought” (Ingold 2013, 128). At this point, Comunidad explains in a very poetic and precise way the power of this tree in his community: it heals wounds directly with the ashes, but it also heals with the music produced by the *cununo*.

The question: *how do you build a cununo in Bogota if you can't get the wood from the balso tree?* was thought of as a way to start talking about forced displacement in an indirect way. Comunidad answers me that it is difficult because the *cununo* in Bogota is built with the available wood, so it sounds very different. Then I asked him to compare the tonal differences between a *cununo* in

Bogota and one in Tumaco. His response is striking: "A cununo in Bogota sounds sad." This reflects a shift in musical quality and evokes the emotional weight of displacement and the longing for cultural roots, underscoring the broader themes of loss and adaptation in Bogota.

At this point, as emotions started to surface from these questions, I began to draw anxious, imaginary streaks on the trunk of the tree. Reflecting on it now, I realize that it was unnecessary to 'invade' this tree, which holds significant meaning in the story of Comunidad. If I could go back and repeat the experience, I would approach it with more caution concerning my emotional reactions and their potential impact.

Comunidad states that the difficulty of reaching an unknown place can only be dissolved if a network of people is built. This leads us to talk about his Palafito, *El Palafito de Don Gú*, the new music school in Bogota. To explain the importance of this place, he explains what a palafito is and draws it so that we can see it. He tells us that children and young people come here to share and forge empathy with the stories of others. It is their way of building a new community through music, which is, in his words, 'of all and for all'.

At the conclusion of the interview, I posed a question regarding which tree he recalled from his arrival in Bogotá. His response was: the balso tree. He elaborated on the tree's enduring significance, emphasizing its strength and deep-rooted nature. He also associated it with the cununo, which is, in his words, his companion and longtime friend. At this juncture, the balso tree emerges as a symbol that extends beyond geographic boundaries, embodying resilience and the interconnectedness of relationships.

In this interview, Comunidad's connections between the balso tree and Tumaco transcend the individual experience, reminding us of the interconnection of trees in the forest, trees and the moon, and humans and their environments. Like the roots of trees and fungi map their relationships in a forest or a mangrove, Comunidad's stories of his community are rooted in place. Comunidad's retention of the balso tree can be seen as an ongoing act of resistance or a refusal to be displaced.

Chapter 3: Eucalipto

Mestizaje and working with discomfort

During the interviews I conducted, I noticed that Comunidad was curious about my life. I learned substantial aspects about his life while visiting his home and sharing meals with his family.

Comunidad verbalized, gestured, cried, and drew vulnerable, sometimes painful memories, such as his forced displacement, his Tumaco house, and his childhood. As our conversations unfolded, I felt compelled to share anecdotes and stories about my own family and my childhood with him.

Opening up about my life with Comunidad has not always been comfortable. As stated by Della Pollock (2005), “Because we ask the questions and reveal little about ourselves, oral historians are often in a position of power in relation to those we interview” (169). The role of the interviewer provides a sense of control. It allows emotional distance, making it a less vulnerable position compared to that of the interviewee, who might be asked to revisit intimate, painful, or politically charged memories in a setting they do not fully shape. Nonetheless, listening to Comunidad has compelled me to reflect on my place in the process. I have been aware of my place in Colombia multiple times in my life before this project, but the conversations with him have made me contemplate what it means to be recording Comunidad’s story.

Witnessing all the challenges he has faced and continues to face in Bogota has created a much deeper awareness of my privileges in Colombia. Working closely with him has put me in direct contact with systemic inequalities; Comunidad is not only a survivor of violence but also faces racism, discrimination and difficulties due to a mobility impairment in his right leg, economic

hardship, and cycles of oppression. Seeing how these layers interact made my privileges feel more pronounced.

Throughout this project, an internal tension has often emerged: *How do I engage without reinforcing harmful dynamics? How do I hold space without making it about my feelings?*

McIntosh's (2008) definition of privilege is "unearned power conferred systemically" (2008, 66), and Ahmed (2017) has thought of privilege as "an energy-saving device. Less effort is required to be or to do." (125) While checking my privilege, I ask myself Bailey's (2021) questions:

How do dominant-group privileges fasten themselves to our being? How do we unknowingly animate the unearned entitlements that shape our decisions and actions? How are the habits of privilege inherited? How do they shape our interactions and structure how we move through that world? In what contexts do these privileges have currency? Whose flesh nourishes them? (1)

For a while, I felt ashamed. I believed that discussing my life was insensitive to the reality of Comunidad. There was discomfort in not wanting to appear dismissive of his experience. However, if I wanted to establish a horizontal relationship, the solution wasn't to hide who I am. As Bailey (2021) has reflected, feeling shame about privilege is often counterproductive because shame tends to be paralyzing rather than transformative. Instead of leading to meaningful action, it can provoke defensiveness, rage, and avoidance.

I grew up as a *Bogotana*, a *middle-class mestiza*, moving through the country and the capital city with a level of comfort and access that I often took for granted. Like many middle-class, urban, *mestizo/a* children from Bogotá, my sheltered world oscillated between school, my house, my grandparents' house, and vacations in the countryside. Privilege is hard to recognize when you're

immersed in it. Comunidad's stories of everyday challenges, of navigating systemic racism and exclusion in Bogotá, unsettled me—not because racism is foreign to me in theory, but because he compelled me to question the ease of my narrative in the same city. His life story rendered my privileges and those of the social environment in which I moved tangible.

Mestizaje refers to the process of racial and cultural mixing primarily among Indigenous peoples, Europeans (mainly Spaniards), and Africans during and after the colonial period in Latin America (Wade, 2005). This term has historically served both as a socio-racial category and as a nation-building ideology in many Latin American countries. Although *mestizos/as* have historically been positioned closer to whiteness in racial hierarchies (Wade, 2005), we also carry ancestral ties to African and Indigenous communities.

Anzaldúa (1987) redefined the *mestiza* identity in a critical, decolonial framework. She introduced the concept of *mestiza consciousness* to describe the hybrid, fluid, and border-crossing identity of mestizas in the Americas. She writes:

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity... She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode (101).

As a *mestiza*, my identity is marked by colonial histories and silenced lineages. At the same time, my privileges allowed me to expand my consciousness through education and mobility. Living in Canada, a settler-colonial state shaped by whiteness and ongoing dispossession, has heightened my awareness of how racial and cultural identity is not only inherited but also constructed through relationships within changing geopolitical and historical contexts. As an immigrant, I have encountered what Sara Ahmed (2007) describes as the

phenomenology of whiteness, referring to how whiteness influences the world by determining who can occupy spaces comfortably and who is perceived as “out of place”.

In this lens, inclusion does not necessarily equal belonging. It often operates conditionally since to be included is to be invited into spaces not designed for diversity, on the terms of those who hold power. As Ahmed (2007) remarks, while the *phenomenology of whiteness* does not offer a roadmap for transformation, this refusal to promise change is where its critical force lies. By illuminating how we remain entangled in the habitual logics of whiteness and coloniality, it invites us to dwell in the discomfort of the present rather than displace it with premature hopes of reform. In Colombia, restorative and transitional justice efforts focus on naming harms and fostering the potential for transformation through collective recognition and care. Embracing the tension between discomfort and care, as well as between discomfort and possibility, is essential for envisioning decolonial futures.

Family trees

I think about how being *mestiza* in my family tree contains stories of love and resilience, but also of violence, racism and displacement that I don't know about. As theorized by scholars like María Lugones (2010) and Catherine Walsh (2009), *mestizaje* in Latin America has operated as a colonial project of erasure, one that sought to assimilate and neutralize Indigenous and Black identities under a homogenizing national identity.

In 2019, my oldest sister undertook the task of constructing our paternal family tree to support an application for Spanish citizenship under Law 12/2015, which grants nationality to individuals able to demonstrate descent from Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain. Her genealogical research involved the compilation of historical records and surnames, tracing

our paternal lineage to Leonor Vélez de la Barrera, our first Sephardic Jewish ancestor. The preamble of this legislation states that it aims to repair the injustice that derived from the expulsion of jews from Spain in 1492, recognizing a historical debt to Sephardic descendants.

Nonetheless, the requirements and processes for this benefit were expensive and difficult: legal fees, genealogical research, official document translations and international travel to appear before a Spanish notary. Despite its rhetoric of inclusivity and historical reparation, the law also responded to Spain's economy as it was mainly accessible to socio-economic elites or formally educated *mestizos/as* who could invest in the country (González 2016).

My Ochoa and Ronderos family trees have only Spanish, Catholic names, surnames and baptism records. Christianization was one of the primary mechanisms through which Sephardic, Indigenous and Black ancestors were assimilated into colonial society in Latin America (Quijano 2000). I explored my father's family tree up to the first ancestor registered in Colombia. I found the story of Juan Vélez de Rivero, who arrived from Spain to Colombia in 1665. Vélez de Rivero inherited the lands of Envigado and Sabaneta from his father-in-law, where he settled and cultivated sugarcane on a large scale.

The stories of the colonizing families in Colombia are documented and archived. The opposite is true of the families of Indigenous and enslaved Africans. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) describes this as *epistemicide*, killing entire knowledge systems through colonization. This process silenced oppressed populations and delegitimized their modes of knowing, remembering, and transmitting history, reinforcing the hegemony of Eurocentric epistemologies within the construction of national identity. This hegemony reinforces social

hierarchies in Colombia, as the histories of Indigenous and black communities have been erased, silenced or distorted, denying them agency in shaping their own narratives.

In this context, art is a key language, capable of disrupting official histories and elevating marginalized voices, ancestral memory, and alternative ways of knowing. Catherine Walsh's (2018) concept of *praxis of re-existence* refers to the ways in which historically marginalized and colonized peoples resist not only through political opposition but through the everyday, creative, and collective reconstruction of life beyond the logic of coloniality. In Colombia, the *praxis of re-existence* is particularly evident among Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and campesino communities that sustain collective memory and identity through oral traditions, spirituality, land-based practices, and cultural and artistic practices. Art, in this sense, becomes one of the vehicles for re-existence; a way of remembering what has been erased, of restoring intergenerational knowledge, and of living beyond the logic of violence, displacement, and epistemicide.

The soil is like a filing cabinet

When I was eight, I drew myself kneeling on the ground, wearing shorts, a short-sleeved shirt and a hat. Then, below the line that, in my drawing, represented the land, I drew a giant bone. I wanted to be a paleontologist, a fascinating profession that digs up the past and brings it to the present or sees what is invisible to the eye. The dream of being a paleontologist, permeated by movies of the moment like Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park*, was nourished by spiral-shaped fossils we found in the river rocks and on the road during school vacations.

In the early nineties, my mother and my stepfather bought a small house near Villa de Leyva, a semi-desert, touristy town with colonial architecture mainly visited by middle-class *bogotanos* like

us. I spent most of my childhood there, exploring Catholic monasteries built in the 17th century and walking around *El Infiernito*, a pre-Columbian archaeoastronomical site. My favourite childhood museum was *El fósil*, utterly dedicated to a fossilized dinosaur found in the area. Like most regions in Colombia and the Americas, this land is a mix of stories of colonization, ancestral cultures, fossils, and living beings. Each event echoes previous realities more like a spiral than a straight line.

A few years ago, a group of anthropologists and archaeologists studied the soil in Sabaneta, one of the territories under the control of settler families, such as Juan Vélez de Rivero's descendants. Andrés Godoy, one of the researchers, explained, "For archaeology and many other areas of science, the soil is like a filing cabinet that holds vast information. What we looked for in it were those indicators that demonstrated past human activity" (Quintero Serna, 2021). The study revealed that the Indigenous inhabitants of Monte Azul, a region of Sabaneta, modified the topography by creating small terraces. They adapted the soil using a plow and mixtures of organic matter to improve it and make it fertile (Godoy-Toro et al. 2022). Godoy concluded, "What these people did with their ancestral knowledge was transform the soil so they could grow crops there" (Quintero Serna, 2021).

The legacy of figures like Juan Vélez de Rivero and other settlers who profited from Indigenous technologies and occupied Sabaneta is deeply tied to the violent histories of land dispossession, forced labour, resource extraction, and the systematic erasure of Indigenous and Afro-descendant lineages in Colombia and across Latin America. Family trees in Latin America have historically preserved Spanish culture while erasing or delegitimizing children, either by denying their lineage

or assimilating them through the imposition of Catholic baptisms and Hispanic surnames (Martínez, 2008).

The art hive

I drew imaginative trees compulsively when I was a teenager. It coincided with my mother and stepfather's move to Costa Rica, where they worked for a few years. In a recent conversation, my parents said that by the end of the nineties, they were deeply concerned with the increasing massacres, kidnappings, and narco bombings all over Colombia. As my siblings and I approached our teenage years, job offers overseas became more tempting. When we moved in 2000, I did not understand the turbulent political climate in Colombia.

Although I understand and even share my parents' motivations now that I am a mother, moving to Costa Rica didn't feel like a privilege. Instead, I was flooded with emotions because it felt like people and things I loved were taken away from me. For a while, I felt like I was alienated.

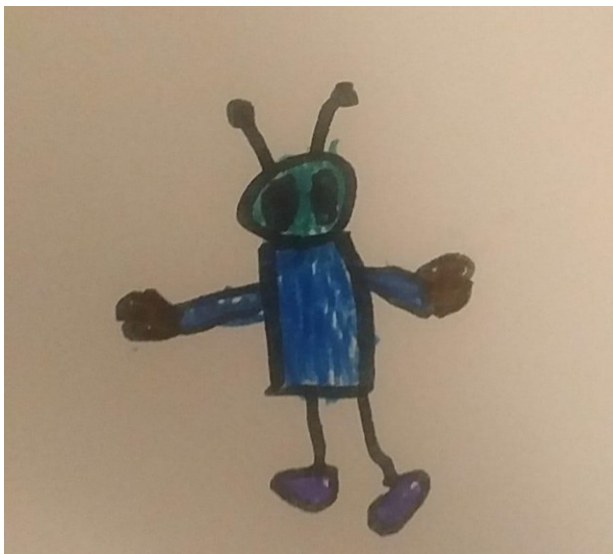


Figure 17. When asked to make a self-portrait, my son drew an alien a year after moving to Montreal.

As Watkins and Shulman (2010) explain, beneath experiences of alienation lies a rich and complex root system of interconnection. Mourning the loss of a prior identity and accepting the vulnerability inherent in leaving behind the familiar opens the possibility of recognizing this entangled system—a network of relationships, memories, and shared humanity that continues to hold us, even in states of transition or dislocation.

A few years ago, I would pick up my son from school every Friday. We walked to a vast, light-filled space that hosted the art hive, or “a potential space for creative community engagement” (Timm-Bottos 2006; Timm-Bottos and Chainey 2015). Spaces such as the art hive, a community art studio for self-directed art making, also described as a ‘third space’ (Tim-Bottos 2016), are built upon strengths, interests and experimentation rather than traumas, mental illness, developmental measures, or psychological labels.

Most psychologies of liberation, born from prolonged wrestling with psychotherapeutic and research paradigms, express the need to dis-identify from the assumptions of one’s social location or ‘to shift away from a sedimented identity’ (Watkins and Shulman 2010, 180). This process requires us to become paleontologists of our own lives. The more we dig into ourselves, the more we understand the abundance of being. ‘We often get stuck in one view of self and lose the richness of our multiplicity’ (Allen 1995, 59). Simultaneity is hard to grasp; it is a growing spiral.

At the art hive, two friendly women welcomed us. They helped us find the materials we were looking for. Other people were painting, sewing and making buttons. Then, as we did something, we discussed various aspects of life, from our plans for the weekend to the tattoos we wanted to get on our bodies. My son, guided by his insatiable curiosity and creativity, effortlessly changed

materials, built sculptures, created sand worlds, bracelets, and gifts for his friends, and drew countless pictures to hang on the walls of our house.

My pace was much slower and meditative. I began by observing the materials and selecting the ones with which I felt most at ease, namely pencils and paper. I then drew a tree, not a specific species, but an imaginative, leafless tree. As I drew, I held in mind a particular tarot card: Death. This archetype has remained with me since I moved to Canada. In the deck I use, the card depicts a human skeleton in metal armour riding a white horse. At the feet of the horse lie four figures of varying genders, ages, and socio-economic statuses, evoking the inescapable and impartial nature of death. A child stands before it with innocence, offering flowers. This gesture is fragile and tender in the face of inevitable transformation. It resonates deeply with my own process of change: a quiet, introspective confrontation with loss, endings, and the possibility of renewal.



Figure 18. The Death card from the original 1909 Rider–Waite–Smith tarot deck. Illustrated by Pamela Colman Smith. Public domain.

As I drew the tree, we talked about our experiences with migration. Most of us were immigrants. A Canadian woman recounts the story of her immigrant grandparents and their young children, and imagines how their experiences can resonate with her family's. I thought of the balso tree we drew with Comunidad in Bogotá. I recalled our conversation about the symbolic death of one's old life when birth homes are no longer present. From Tumaco to Bogotá, in his case. From Bogotá to Montreal in mine.

Comunidad's house in Bogotá, or as he has called it, *El Palaquito de don Gú*, turns into a cultural space in the afternoons. There are musical instruments and art materials for children from the neighbourhood. They are welcome to have snacks and create something together. Many were not born in Bogotá or are part of displaced families. Comunidad's house, like the art hive in Montreal for my son and me, is their safe space from a hostile outside world. These *third spaces* are liminal zones where hybrid identities and new meanings can emerge outside the binaries imposed by colonial modernity (Bhabha 1994). They are embodied, sensorial spaces of relational practice. Making art, sharing food and sitting together become a form of world-making that challenges the isolating logics of displacement, dispossession, and neoliberal productivity.

Talking and doing are not separate activities; They are co-generative. Practices like quilting, cooking, or washing dishes, often feminized and overlooked, are spaces of dialogue and collective memory. Feminist and Indigenous scholars have emphasized that knowledge is not only transmitted through verbal exchange but also through praxis. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson insists on this embodied and generative understanding of knowledge. She writes: "kinetics, the act of doing, isn't just praxis; it also generates and animates theory within Indigenous contexts, and it

is the crucial intellectual mode for generating knowledge. Theory and praxis, story and practice are interdependent, cogenerators of knowledge.” (2017, 20) This understanding echoes the everyday forms of collective making and mutual listening found in spaces like Comunidad’s home or the art hive, where presence, shared tasks, and creative gestures carry as much weight as conversations.

In Tumaco, Afro-Colombian knowledge transmission is deeply embodied and relational. Practices such as communal cooking and the ancestral preparation of *viche*, a sugarcane-based drink distilled primarily by women, demonstrate how knowledge is passed not just through words but through doing, feeling, and being together (Carr 2024). These acts engage the mind, the body, and the heart through repetition, rhythm, and presence, sustaining identity, memory and connection across generations.

However, forced displacement caused by armed conflict, narco-trafficking, and extractivist policies in the Pacific region violently interrupts these modes of transmission. Displacement disconnects people from the land, from intergenerational relationships, and from the everyday practices through which knowledge is embodied and shared. Yet, in Bogota and other major cities in Colombia, spaces like *El palafito de Don Gú*, persist and transform the local community, becoming acts of resistance, healing, and continuity in the face of disconnection.

Driven by different motives, we left things that formed our identities. Comunidad had to go to save his life, and I left looking for more opportunities, but for both, leaving meant being reborn with our families somewhere else. We gave ourselves a chance to become again. It takes courage to change, but courage involves acknowledging and integrating our fears and vulnerabilities. Working

together through art during this symbolic death has allowed us to develop the capacity to see, reflect, and recognize our situations, no matter how difficult those circumstances may be.

In various interviews, Comunidad shared that he only understood the significance of being a black person in Colombia after moving to Bogota. He explained that in Tumaco, where most of the population is black, he did not feel different. The exclusion in Tumaco was connected to his physical disability and the way he walked. He vividly recalls the day he boarded a bus in Bogotá, and passengers began to shift away and protect their belongings: “Can you imagine, Manuela, getting on a bus and seeing how people are afraid of you. And it wasn't just me on that bus, I was with my family... I had to calm my wife down. We will never forget that day” (Comunidad 2023).

This moment of hyper-visibility, of being racialized through the gaze and reaction of others, echoes Frantz Fanon’s (2008) assertion that Blackness is experienced not as an intrinsic identity but as one imposed through relational dynamics.

Comunidad also emphasized the initial difficulty of moving to his neighborhood, the arrival point for thousands of displaced people from all over the country, and forging bonds of solidarity within the neighborhood. At first, Comunidad told me, the people in his neighborhood treated him with great distrust and apathy. By offering a welcoming space for children to engage in music, art, and shared meals, *El Palafito de Don Gú* allowed families to gradually meet one another in moments of joy and creativity rather than fear.

These small, repeated encounters have fostered trust, and Comunidad, once perceived as an outsider, has become a respected and beloved figure in the neighbourhood. I witnessed this shift firsthand. The first time I visited him, we sat at a local bakery where passersby greeted him warmly

and frequently, a gesture that spoke about the relationships he had cultivated through his ongoing, community-centred work:

Through music, I have united my community and worked to strengthen it. Let us say my neighbours say hello to each other; they talk and can share. We can be together. As Comunidad, I believe that a community grows within the family, within the neighbourhood, and Colombia is a community. I think that this is where a human being is formed. (Comunidad 2021)

The Curriculum of Erasure

I am beginning to be aware of the extent to which inherited histories of conquest, colonization, and segregation in Colombia shape my identity, habits, and cultural practices. Growing up, I rarely questioned these legacies. In high school, for example, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities were never discussed as central figures in our independence process. I did not have classmates who identified themselves as Indigenous or Afro-Colombian.

Our textbooks and teachers highlighted the contributions of straight, male white-mestizos, often reducing Indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples to folkloric elements. Ronderos (2002) has remarked how Colombia's dominant historical narratives have systematically erased or marginalized Black and Indigenous peoples, excluding them from political and historical protagonism. This marginalization, as noted by Grueso et al. (1997), translates into material and spatial exclusion. Afro-Colombian communities have historically been excluded from decision-making processes about their own lands and identities, despite their foundational contributions to Colombia's history and biodiversity.

I attended a school following a European system, where I learned to read, write, and speak Italian. Throughout elementary school, many of my teachers were Italian missionary nuns who educated us about the Vatican and screened films depicting white Italian children witnessing miracles in the

Alps. I have no Italian ancestry. This significant disconnection from my country of birth, its history, culture, and complexities reflects social class dynamics in which European culture serves as the benchmark for knowledge, taste, and cultural appreciation. As I reflect on my adult life, I am beginning to recognize how such omissions are structural biases deeply ingrained within both the education system and everyday cultural norms.

From Bogota to Montreal

When I moved to Montreal, I shared with Comunidad about the new experiences my family was going through, including the challenges, bureaucracy, and hurdles we were facing as immigrants. Gradually, we began exchanging insights and tips on how to adapt to different cultures, which fostered a more profound understanding between us. I recalled his words about feeling out of place for the first time in Bogotá. Like Comunidad, I did not truly feel stereotyped until I arrived in Montreal.

At the theatre, a smiling woman at the entrance did not look at my ticket and instead instructed me to follow her, seating me in a specific area. Although I was confused, I did not have much time to ask questions. Next to me, I saw women of diverse backgrounds conversing in Spanish, Arabic, and other languages. As I left the performance, I understood that the smiling woman at the entrance had assumed I was part of an organization for refugee women who were victims of domestic violence and had a reserved space at the function. This quick assumption was based solely on her perception of my appearance, leaving me little time to react. I shared this experience with Comunidad, where I felt obvious as the “other” and completely invisible simultaneously.

Later, during an internship as an arts facilitator with refugee children in Montreal, I reached out to Comunidad for advice on interacting with shy children and engaging them in artistic activities. His experience as a music teacher working with displaced children in Bogota was highly significant. Our discussions ventured into the challenges of arriving in unfamiliar places and adjusting to new school systems and languages—the struggles of not having the words to describe how an immigrant child feels in a strange environment. He suggested using music as a tool that transcends different languages and connects children on a sensorial and emotional level.

Comunidad's words resonated when a reticent and shy little girl sat next to me at one of the workshops. She did not interact with any other children and only spoke in Spanish. We made an origami boat. I asked her if she knew any songs about boats, and she started singing immediately. It was a song I recognized from my childhood. As we folded paper together, we sang *habia una vez un barquito chiquitico, que no podía, que no podía navegar* (once upon a time there was a tiny little boat, that couldn't, that could not sail).

Eucalipto

In her book *“Art is a way of knowing,”* Pat Allen (1995) invites readers to set an intention before making art. For Allen, intentions are ‘the spiritual aspect of art making’ (76). This implies that an intention goes beyond the technical or aesthetic aspects of creating art; it involves an awareness and openness to what the artist seeks to express, explore, or understand through the process. Setting an intention connects the act of creating to deeper aspects of self-reflection, growth, and healing.

After choosing the intention, one has to accept whatever comes in images. “It is not necessary to try to make a picture about the problem; you have only to form a clear intention to know something

and then simply take up the materials and begin” (79). This approach emphasizes the importance of letting go of expectations and allowing the creative process to unfold, which can lead to unexpected insights and discoveries.

This exercise resonates with Natalie Loveless' (2019) reflection on curiosity, which she connects with care and attentiveness:

Etymologically, curious has the same root as careful or curate: to care. It brings warning (caution), desire (to know), and considered choice (the care at stake in curation) together as the name of the (pedagogical) game. Such a perspective challenges pedagogical ideologies that imagine the teacher in the light of knowledge and the student in the shadows of ignorance, and, instead, tells stories that are much riskier for all involved, but more accurate (to my experience of the world, at least), and more interesting. (47)

Loveless' words connect deeply with this project, where working with Comunidad through art has required me to remain open, not to what I expect to find, but to what emerges in the process. Blending semi-structured interviews with casual, everyday conversations has been essential in building trust and deepening understanding. These informal exchanges are generative spaces where ideas take shape, where we reflect, negotiate, and collectively define the next steps in the process. Such collaborative spaces could not happen within the constraints of formal interviews, which tend to fix roles and structure responses.

I set an intention after recording *From the balso to the cununo*. I wanted to understand, through art making, why I chose to work with survivors of the Colombian armed conflict and how I could deepen the dialogic aspect of my research-creation project. I created images, objects, and writing, considering these intentions. Through this practice, I engaged in a process of inquiry that was not just intellectual, but emotional, relational and spiritual.

reflects a process of trial and error that resembles the often chaotic and nonlinear nature of artistic creation and personal transformation. Allen (2007), quoting Macy (1991), remarks that “going to pieces or falling apart is not such a bad thing. Indeed, it is essential to evolutionary and psychic transformations as the cracking of our outgrown shells” (82). After finishing the necklace, I wrote these thoughts: *I weave my personal story with others and understand my story through others. Others are necessary to build my identity.*

Our interactions, influences, and connections with others continuously shape personal narratives. This act of making, falling apart, and reassembling reflects how identity is not a fixed construct but something fluid, dynamic, and continually evolving in dialogue with others. As Ahmed (2000) suggests, identity is produced through encounters with difference, when the self is confronted by the unfamiliar. These encounters are deeply embodied and shaped by histories of colonialism, race, age, class and gender. In line with Somers (1994), identities are not internal essences or static traits; rather, they emerge from the stories we tell and are told about ourselves, always situated within social, relational, and historical contexts. Thus, making, falling apart, and reassembling can be understood as part of the ongoing narrative process through which we locate ourselves in webs of meaning, shaped by structural forces and everyday relational encounters.

Through Comunidad’s life story, I find purpose, values and strength. We construct and reconstruct our stories while weaving our shared worlds when we talk and draw together. We do it not so much to understand the past, but because we both need to heal it and make sense of the present. Looking inwards means becoming a conscious witness to my feelings about being an immigrant and a mother, and the connections I create with Comunidad’s experience. Like Allen (2007), who

reflected on her inner struggles in a community project, my research-creation project began from an intellectual place, as if I knew something that Comunidad did not know.

After recording the video *From the balso to the cununo*, I invited Comunidad to set an intention together and see/listen to what emerged. We met virtually to define a question, feeling, or theme to explore through our following collaborative and creative process. I told Comunidad that doing this exercise previously made me remember my childhood, my maternal grandmother, and my father. He was very curious about my grandmother, and I shared some of my memories with him. He said that my grandmother sounded caring, just like his grandmother.

Discussing our grandmothers and their roles in caregiving during our childhood has opened a new perspective in this project. Initially, I was curious about his life and aimed to conduct a careful interview to avoid revictimization. Now, our grandmothers have entered the conversation to remind us of the importance of taking care of our needs. These grandmothers, who cared for us during our illnesses, lulled us to sleep, and provided us with tools for creativity and artistic expression, played a vital role in our upbringing. As Tronto (2013) suggests, care is not just about maintaining life but about building a web of relationships that sustain us in multiple ways.

In reflecting on our childhoods, caregiving is a personal and collective, intergenerational process that has shaped our identities, actions, and creative expressions. Fisher and Tronto (1990) define care as a human activity—something we do as a species—that encompasses everything required to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible. This “world” encompasses not only the environment but also our bodies, selves, and relationships, all intricately interwoven into a complex, life-sustaining web. Care has laid the foundation for our work together,

as we continue to explore and reimagine what it means to care, create, and heal through art and shared experiences.

This understanding of care resonates with what Yazzie and Risling Baldy (2018) describe as “radical relationality,” the idea of being-in-relation that insists on cooperation, respect, interdependence, and care as essential to decolonial efforts. They write: “keeping ourselves open to the possibility of making new relatives is one of the essential functions of life and, indeed, decolonization” (Yazzie and Risling Baldy 2018, 8). Our research creation project becomes a space where these new relations are made and practiced between us, not based on capitalist or colonial logics of difference, fear and scarcity, but on shared commitment to care about each other’s lives and the reweaving of encounter across histories, identities, and geographies

Comunidad was raised by his grandmother, the neighbourhood’s community healer. As documented by *Radio Nacional de Colombia* (2022), these women and men, known in Tumaco as parteras (midwives) and yerbateras (herbalists), embody a form of ancestral knowledge that weaves together care and spirituality. Their practices are part of a syncretic tradition that blends Catholic rituals with Afro-descendant cosmologies, including communication with spirits, plant-based healing, and ritual protection. His grandmother’s work extended beyond healing the physical body; she guided women through childbirth, prepared herbal infusions and protective smokes to shield homes from harmful energies and whispered secret prayers to the Virgin Mary. Her grandmother also helped the lingering ghosts to transcend, fulfilling the communal task of caring for both the living and the dead. Comunidad inherited these prayers and knowledge to protect his own family.

My maternal grandmother, María Helena, was an accomplished painter of landscapes and architecture. Although she never attended art school, she had an art studio in her apartment, where she painted, knitted scarves, and sewed curtains, blankets, tablecloths, and costumes for her children and grandchildren. My grandmother's sensitivity was evident in her ability to capture the colours of the sky and trees with her watercolours, in the beautiful gardens she designed, and in her insightful analyses of the characters in her favourite novels and films. Her Catholic nature was committed and disciplined. She went to Mass every Sunday and knitted wool hats with her friends for Colombian soldiers. My grandmother was an exemplary middle-class *mestiza* of her generation. She was Catholic, well-travelled, attractive, socially charismatic, and family-oriented. However, she also shared the prejudices, racism, and classism of her social circle. Although my grandmother and Comunidad's grandmother surely shared many values associated with their communities and their spirituality, the social construct of the country where both lived impeded them from sitting at the same table to listen to each other's life stories. I envision an interstellar house where they have also begun to communicate since I started talking with Comunidad.



Figure 20. My maternal grandmother, María Helena, painted our Villa de Leyva house.

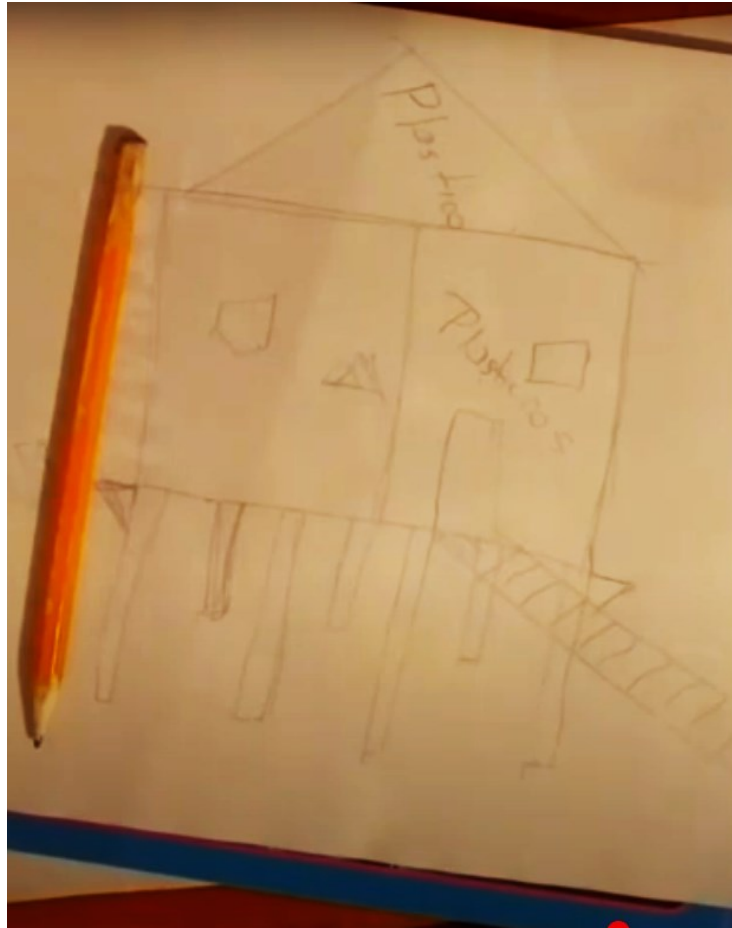


Figure 21. During one of our conversations, Comunidad drew a picture of his house in Tumaco. The roof and the walls were covered in plastic.

Looking inwards involves what Chela Sandoval (2000) has called “oppositional consciousness” (54), a capacity to reflect upon the polarizations, distances, gaps, or marginalizations that both exist in the world and within ourselves. ‘We bring attention to moments when we find ourselves thinking I am (or we are) like this, and they are the opposite (or profoundly different). We begin to wonder about the construction of these differences, searching for ways to reposition our energies to explore and mediate boundaries of separation’ (Watkins and Shulman 2010, 29). In the Colombian context, oppositional consciousness can be a potent tool in restorative justice processes. It enables

individuals and communities to interrogate the entrenched binaries that have fueled the armed conflict, such as victim/perpetrator, and to begin imagining new frameworks for solidarity and repair. By fostering a reflective awareness of how power and difference operate within us and between us, oppositional consciousness can open a space for relational forms of justice that center listening, mutual recognition, and healing.

Colombian survivors' introspection is not enough if others, unaffected by injustices and violence, think their actions determine their welfare. Although there are multiple cultures with communitarian values, such as Afro-Colombians on the Colombian Pacific Coast (Comunidad), people in cities are often educated within an individualistic paradigm of selfhood (me). This paradigm has distinct implications for mental health, developmental theorizing, and social action (Watkins, 1992) (Watkins and Shulman, 2010, 66). Separating oneself from one's social environment diminishes dependency and reliance on others. Just as *mestizaje* reflects intertwined histories and identities, acknowledging communal interdependence challenges those unaffected by injustice to recognize their role in collective healing. Moving beyond the individualistic paradigm fosters a more profound sense of responsibility, where well-being is not solely a personal pursuit, but a shared effort rooted in historical and social realities.

Throughout our meeting to define our shared intention, Comunidad kept remarking that we were not *that* different. He emphasized how my migration to Canada had opened a new space for us to connect. We talked about how, upon arriving in Bogotá and Montreal, we didn't even recognize any plants. We talked about some plants that reminded him of the distance from home. He mentioned the eucalyptus.

According to Molina (2021), the eucalyptus is an Australian tree that was brought to Bogotá at the start of the 20th century, as urban growth fueled demand for wood. However, its introduction clashed with the evolving socioecological demands of Bogotá. Forced to “retire” but already naturalized in the local environment, the eucalyptus survives and continues to work hard in parts of Bogotá and its surroundings, where it plays a medicinal and practical role in people’s lives.

The eucalyptus is one of the most unknown plants to Comunidad and one of the most familiar to me. Like the balso tree is for him, the eucalyptus holds my childhood memories and forms part of my mental landscape. Our intention came to mind at that point: *How can we find common ground in our life stories?* It was clear that our identities and life paths were different, yet our legacies were interconnected. These reflections gave rise to our second video, *Eucalipto*. For *Eucalipto*, we reversed the roles: I stopped being the interviewer and became the interviewee, while Comunidad led the conversation. Following the method we used earlier, we chose the eucalyptus as the tree representing my life story in the drawing. Comunidad asked questions about my grandmother and how I connected the tree to my childhood memories.

This shift in roles reflects Anne Oakley’s (1981) feminist critique of traditional research methods, particularly her concept of “no intimacy without reciprocity” (p. 49). Oakley argues that the conventional view of interviewing as a one-way process focused solely on extracting information from the interviewee fails to recognize the complexities of human interaction. Instead, she proposes that interviewing should be reimagined as a flexible, two-way interaction. In this revised model, both the interviewer and the interviewee actively engage in the dialogue, bringing their own distinct perspectives, experiences, and agendas to the conversation.

We rehearsed the interview a few times, but again, I felt discomfort, not just because of the role reversal, but also because being asked to narrate myself required me to be vulnerable. As highlighted by McDonald (2003), I understand that building trust and fostering connections are multifaceted processes that extend beyond merely sharing personal information. Self-disclosure involves navigating various complexities, including time, the nature of the relationship and the power dynamics between the researcher and the participant. Sharing my story was not a singular act but a layered, ongoing process.

During our rehearsals, Comunidad asked me about facts and figures related to Bogotá's history. Some of these questions made me feel uncertain or even ignorant. However, I came to realize that as Alessandro Portelli (1991) has written, oral history is not about presenting verified data or acting as a historical authority; rather, it is about meaning-making, memory, and situated perspective. My role, then, was not to be an expert on Bogotá's official history, but to share my personal relationship with the city.

At this point, I felt the need to set certain boundaries. I requested not to emphasize the historical details of Bogotá, as this was not the story I felt called to tell. I also preferred not to speak about my son's or my husband's emotions or experiences, choosing instead to center my own voice in this process. This was not only a personal choice but a methodological one. It was an effort to replicate what I had learned during the process of interviewing Comunidad, when he asked me to avoid focusing on the threats that had forced him to leave Tumaco. Setting limits became a way to control my own narrative, while honouring the collaborative spirit of our exchange.

We agreed to meet in person in Bogotá to record our conversation. We recorded at his music school because Comunidad and his wife had had a baby a few days before my arrival. This time, we did not have a printed interview guide in front of us. Although rehearsing was very beneficial for both of us because it helped us understand the limits and rhythms of the interview, Comunidad insisted on the power of improvisation. Improvisation plays a key role in Afro-Colombian oral traditions, where elders and storytellers adapt narratives to their audiences, making them relevant across generations. This fluid storytelling preserves ancestral knowledge and keeps cultural identity alive (Oslender, 2007).

In the previous exercise, I proposed making the interview structure explicit and visible in order to foster a sense of control and predictability for Comunidad. This time, he invited me to improvise, building on our previous conversations. While improvisation is not something I would choose—mainly due to my inclination toward control and planning—I accepted the challenge as an opportunity to step outside my comfort zone and explore alternative modes of interaction and collaboration.

In *Eucalipto*, Comunidad chose to start the conversation by asking about the eucalyptus oil that my grandmother used to care for me during my flu. Meanwhile, I began drawing the eucalyptus tree. He asked me questions about the tree's appearance and the effectiveness of its healing properties. He compared it to other plants in Tumaco. I brought the focus back to the eucalyptus. I did so to avoid expanding the conversation around Tumaco at that moment. Together, we sketched the tree's leaves and seeds. Up to that point, I felt at ease sharing my knowledge and memories. He then asked: *Do you remember any song that your grandmother used to sing to you to make you fall asleep?*

I was not surprised by the question because I know music plays a significant role in his life. In my response, I referenced my mother and father. I then reminded Comunidad that despite our different backgrounds, we share a familiar lullaby that we had identified in our previous conversations. I thought we would recall that lullaby together. However, his next question caught me off guard: *What has it meant for you to change from Colombia to Canada?* He immediately says, “Because at some point, our stories are somehow similar” (Comunidad 2024). After my reply, which emphasized how migration has altered my perspective of life and Colombia, he says: “When I arrived in Bogotá, I met Manuela. Manuela interviewed me. Now, I have to interview Manuela because I feel she is living in Canada, what Comunidad is living in Bogotá..” (Comunidad 2024) I giggled nervously while drawing eucalyptus leaves.

At this moment, I feel the need, once again, to tell Comunidad that our lives are not the same, that I am studying, that I have decided to leave Bogota. He insists, arguing, “Sometimes we inhabit comfortable places, but when you leave them, you think: damn. I am shocked” (Comunidad 2024). To equate our experiences initially felt unfair, like a flattening of differences. However, upon further reflection, I recognized that his proposal was not a literal comparison of our life circumstances but a gesture toward shared affective and existential experiences, particularly those related to displacement, transformation, and the reconfiguration of identity and belonging. In this sense, our lives may differ, but they are not entirely different. What connects us is not sameness but resonance—a shared grappling with what it means to unlearn, relocate, and reimagine oneself in new geographies and epistemologies.

Comunidad continued the interview by suggesting that we sing together the lullaby *Oi, oa* also known as *Señora Santana*, or *San Antonio* “to remember grandmothers”, he said. Coincidentally, Santa Ana, or Saint Anne, was the mother of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ’s grandmother. The song is a traditional Spanish lullaby that is popular in Spain and Latin America. It is also a *bunde*, an Afro-Colombian musical and spiritual practice, often performed during rituals of mourning and farewell, especially when a child dies.

The *bunde* is both a lament and a celebration, influenced by African cosmologies and Catholic syncretism, because it is believed that children become *angelitos*, “little angels”, who protect their families and their godparents (Ríos and Acarón 2020). The song narrates a simple story: a child is crying over a lost apple. Although the song has different cultural connotations for both of us, even different lyrics, we chose it to focus on the themes of care, comfort, and familial connection, infusing it with new meaning and significance for both of us. This song connects our grandmothers.

Comunidad set the rhythm by tapping his hands on the table, and I followed along. He became a music teacher, and I became his student. He encouraged me to sing, even though I’m not a singer, just as I had encouraged him to draw. He finished by suggesting that I could continue singing this song to my child, “so that history prevails.” Watching this recording, I wonder what elements of history I want to preserve and transmit to my child. What do I want to carry forward, what needs to be mourned, and what might be transformed?

I envision Comunidad’s story and mine as a space of connection, one that bridges divides rather than reinforces them. In this way, family trees can blend, not to erase differences but to remind us that we are always part of something larger, relational, and in motion. As written by Lugones (1987), “To learn to love each other, we must learn to travel to each other’s ‘worlds.’ We must be

willing to be transformed in the process. This requires playfulness, openness to surprise, a willingness to be ignorant, and to look foolish or to fail” (17). In the last minutes of *Eucalipto*, I ask Comunidad how he felt while drawing the eucalyptus. He said he learned more about the tree, even though his leaves are different from mine.

Chapter 4

Towards an Ethical Practice: Questions for Artist-Researchers in Contexts of Sociopolitical Violence

In her letter *Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities*, Eve Tuck (2009) critiques what she terms "damage-centered research", a mode of inquiry that focuses primarily on documenting the pain, suffering, and deficits of marginalized communities. While often well-intentioned, this approach can reduce communities to their wounds. Such research, though framed as a call for justice, frequently serves more to benefit researchers and institutions than the communities themselves (Tuck 2009). In response, she considers a "desire-based" framework that foregrounds complexity, hope and agency alongside struggle. Desire-based research avoids the extraction of trauma and instead affirms creativity, and the ongoing life of communities. Tuck calls on communities to rethink how research is conceptualized and carried out, and to envision new ways in which its outcomes can be used collaboratively and creatively to benefit the communities involved.

Similarly, Sotelo Castro and Shapiro-Phim (2023) argue for an ethical approach to oral history performance in transitional justice contexts, emphasizing the centrality of informed, ongoing consent. Even socially engaged artists working outside academia, add Sotelo Castro and Shapiro-Phim (2023), should recognize the research dimension of their work and draw on the ethical frameworks developed within oral history and social research to responsibly engage with survivors of extreme violence and oppression. They ask us: "whose stories to collect, why now, who should listen, how, for what purpose, with what risks? Who benefits?" (6).

In that line of thought, at this point in the development of *Can You Hear the Trees Talking?* a contribution of the project lies in its ethical reflections for artist-researchers who engage with oral histories of survivors of sociopolitical violence. While each artist brings a unique aesthetic sensibility, medium, and cultural context to their work, there is a shared need for critical awareness and ethical responsibility when listening to and working collaboratively with the life-stories of communities marked by historical trauma. Ethical questions inevitably arise not only from the content of the stories being shared but from the dynamics of collaboration, representation, power, vulnerability, and reciprocity that unfold during the research-creation process.

These ethical concerns have been explored in depth in other artistic fields, particularly in theatre. Scholars and practitioners such as James Thompson (2008) have examined the relational and moral dimensions of collaborative performance in contexts of violence and post-conflict reconstruction. He writes that “doing no harm” in arts practice must extend beyond ethical protocols and into the affective and symbolic registers of representation. This includes acknowledging how specific images, narrative framings, or even tonal choices may reproduce hierarchies, sensationalize suffering, or inadvertently expose collaborators to further violence. Similarly, *Applied Theatre: Ethics* (Sadeghi-Yekta et al., 2022) offers a valuable framework for reflecting on consent, agency, and risk within participatory theatre processes. However, within the field of contemporary art—especially in Latin America—this type of ethical reflection needs further expansion. I intend for these reflections to contribute to the emerging conversation by addressing the specificities of oral history-based and collaborative art practices.

Drawing inspiration from restorative justice, this project understands ethical engagement as not only a matter between the artist-researcher and the survivor but also as a relational and collective

concern. As Jennifer Llewellyn (2014) affirms, a central commitment of a restorative approach is the recognition that everyone in the community is deeply implicated in both its causes and its repair. In this sense, listening to a survivor's story is not merely a means to produce knowledge or representation. It must also be understood as a reflective and political practice that requires the artist-researcher-listener and the future audiences to engage with their own position, assumptions, and limitations, and finally, to respond to what they are listening (Sotelo 2023). As Robinson (2020) argues, critical listening resists extractive habits and calls for forms of engagement that are accountable to the communities involved. Listening, then, is a responsibility toward action.

Rather than offering a prescriptive method or fixed steps, I wish to share a set of guiding questions that emerged from my process with Comunidad. These questions were not derived just from theoretical reflection but are grounded in the collaborative experience of our work together. I analyzed our interviews and identified key ethical themes that helped shape the questions presented below. The process of formulating them was informed by moments of uncertainty and emotional intensity. As such, the questions are not meant to standardize practice across contexts, but to act as a reflective tool to interrogate assumptions, methods, and responsibilities when collaborating with survivors of sociopolitical violence.

The key ethical themes that emerged through the interviews and collaboration with Comunidad include: 1) The importance of reflexivity and positionality, including an examination of privilege and motivation. 2) The role of emotional safety and the need for culturally sensitive psychosocial and spiritual support. 3) Trust-building as a long-term process. 4) The impact of aesthetic and methodological choices on risk and representation. 5) The ethical implications of place and environment, including nature as an active agent in memory and storytelling. 6) Listening as a relational, embodied, and transformative act. 7) The power of drawing as a method of

communication and co-creation. 8) The constant need to navigate and adapt to asymmetries, evolving roles, and institutional shifts.

These questions are not intended to standardize practices across diverse contexts, but to serve as prompts for self-reflection and ethical positioning before and during any collaborative engagement. While in this project, drawing became a powerful tool for co-creating meaning and fostering connection, I recognize that different practices, be it sound, photography, or movement, will invite different forms of engagement and listening. It is also important to acknowledge that new questions will inevitably arise during the dissemination stage, which we plan to develop in a second phase of the project when the work moves beyond the intimate space of creation into more public arenas.

These forthcoming questions are shaped by the journey we have taken so far and will focus on the ethics of preparation and development. In this sense, *Can You Hear the Trees Talking?* encourages artist-researchers to approach each collaborative context with the will to listen carefully, to adapt, and to be changed by the encounter. My central research question guides the objective of proposing these questions: *How to listen -effectively and with care- to survivors of sociopolitical violence while collaborating on a creative work based on their life story?*

Although rooted in the Colombian context, the questions and reflections offered here may be of value in global contexts marked by historical violence, colonial legacies, and struggles for justice and memory.

1. Preparation

The preparation phase in any collaborative artistic research with survivors of sociopolitical violence can begin with a deep interrogation of one's motivations and positionality. In my work with Comunidad, I learned that approaching collaboration requires more than good intentions, the ethics protocol form, and an interview guide. It demands an ongoing practice of reflexivity, emotional attunement, and accountability. Initially motivated by activism, I came to understand how power dynamics, personal privilege, and structural inequalities shaped our relationship.

Through emotionally charged moments in our collaboration, I also came to value the need for culturally sensitive psychosocial support and the central role of spirituality and relational practices in Afro-Colombian communities. Preparation is a transformative process of becoming ethically and emotionally ready to listen, to be unsettled, and to build trust from a place of mutual care and respect.

Why Am I Approaching This Community or Individual?

Artists-researchers can begin by interrogating their own motivations and positionalities. It took me a long time to arrive at the core question that anchors these reflections: *Why do I want to collaborate with a survivor of sociopolitical violence?* This question is the first step to identify motivations and expectations. It helps envision mutual benefit, and surfaces potential risks, power imbalances, or lack of tools to sustain an ethical process. Reflexivity entails continuous attention to how one's personal, cultural, and political history intersects with the realities of the community or the individual that we want to work with.

When I first began collaborating with Comunidad, I was working within a state institution tasked with listening to survivors of the armed conflict in Colombia. I was expected to interview survivors,

support their artistic initiatives, and disseminate their work. From that institutional location, I had access to resources and decision-making power, which allowed me to offer Comunidad tangible forms of support such as public visibility, and paid opportunities for recognition. When I lost that access and became a migrant student in a foreign country with different institutional power as a Ph.D. student at a Canadian university, the asymmetries between us did not disappear but began to reconfigure.

While the benefits of our collaboration were once more concrete, this transition required us to think together about what the collaboration could offer in a new context. Although the benefits for Comunidad are not the same as those I may gain as a researcher, they include the possibility of telling his story on his own terms and becoming visible beyond Colombia. Comunidad expressed his interest in having the *Palafito de Don Gu* known outside of Colombia, to weave larger networks of solidarity in other parts of the world. For him, expanding these networks could not only bring potential economic support to sustain the *Palafito* as a cultural and political space, but also reaffirms the importance of his work within Colombia. This recognition operates on both practical and symbolic levels, validating his strength and perseverance in the face of ongoing adversity, and providing a space where his voice, and that of his community, can resonate beyond local confines.

This shift of positionalities has made visible the ways in which our relationship is mediated not just by personal intention, but by broader structures of access and legitimacy. It has challenged me to re-evaluate what solidarity means outside of institutional frameworks. This exercise also led me to recognize myself as part of the "conflict community" discussed by Dominic Barter (2009), a concept that acknowledges that conflict does not belong only to those directly affected by violence,

but to all who inhabit the systems and structures that sustain it. From this perspective, accountability and transformation must be collective and relational, not externalized onto others.

In my process with Comunidad it was initially important for me to raise awareness about the situation of social leaders in Colombia, from a place of denunciation, solidarity, and activism. Over time, however, this motivation shifted. As I interviewed him multiple times, I began to see the emotional challenges involved in telling and listening to painful stories. Listening to his experiences deeply unsettled me and made me question my own privilege—particularly the ease with which I could speak about the conflict from a more rational, and therefore less emotionally demanding, position than Comunidad.

Reflecting on Eve Tuck's (2009) insights regarding the ethics of representation and her suggestion to move away from damage-centered narratives, I began to realize that Comunidad did not wish to focus solely on pain, displacement, or the past. Instead, he aimed to highlight his present: the strength of community life in the *Palafito*, his family, his dreams for the future, and the recent birth of his youngest child. I also recognized that he was not only navigating the trauma of past violence, but he was also carefully managing how much he could share, as he did not want to put his life at risk. Although he no longer resides in the city where he was threatened, he still fears being located by illegal armed groups. This change in perspective was crucial in guiding me towards a more grounded, reciprocal, and ethical form of engagement.

Working with communities affected by war demands an honest examination of one's relation to violence, privilege, geography, and memory. In Colombia, for example, violence is both widespread and unevenly distributed. While the armed conflict has touched nearly every corner of

the country in some form, its intensity and visibility have been concentrated in rural, Afro-Colombian, and Indigenous territories that the state has historically marginalized. Therefore, it is essential to recognize how distance from direct violence can lead to forms of indifference, detachment, naivety, or even voyeurism in research practices. Well-intentioned interventions can replicate colonial logics if not practiced reflexively.

Recognizing this tendency was transformative. It revealed how my identity as a mestiza woman shaped by urban, academic, and artistic institutions is implicated in the very systems I seek to critique. As bell hooks (1994) reminds us, engaging in liberatory work requires a deep and often uncomfortable process of self-interrogation, of naming and owning the contradictions we embody. It became clear that any attempt at decolonial or feminist praxis must begin with an interrogation of the self and a willingness to be unsettled by what that reveals. This is not a theoretical exercise, but a lived reckoning with power and responsibility within the research-creation process.

Over time, I came to see that the process was not only for Comunidad's healing. I, too, am undergoing a process of emotional and historical reflection. As a migrant, this journey takes on additional layers of complexity. I am healing from my own internalized colonialism while also navigating the dislocation, cultural translation, and reconfiguration of identity that come with leaving one's homeland. I am confronting what I represent within the complex racial and class hierarchies of Colombian society, as well as within the global hierarchies of knowledge and belonging. Naming one's positionality, with all its contradictions, discomfort and difficult emotions, enables a process grounded in mutual accountability rather than unidirectional "help."

How can I prepare before interviewing my collaborator(s)?

Listening can take us to unknown places. It implies being attentive and sensitive to moments when our questions become invasive or re-traumatizing, requiring redirection not only of questions but also of methods and actions. Mistakes are not only possible but inevitable, even when guided by care and good intentions. Listening is also recognizing when our actions, however well-meaning, may reproduce harm. What becomes crucial, then, is the commitment to repair: to acknowledge missteps, to assume responsibility, and to engage in transformative actions within one's sphere of influence. Listening with care, in this sense, is not a fixed position but an ongoing practice of reflexivity, accountability, and responsiveness.

This complexity became evident during one of my first interviews with Comunidad. To understand the causes of his displacement—motivated by a political desire to denounce the armed actors involved and the lack of government response—I asked a question that unexpectedly touched a painful wound. In that moment, I recognized that although my question was well-intentioned, it had taken him to a difficult place in his memory. I did not press further or continue along that line of inquiry. I realized that while my goal of political denunciation might seem urgent, what truly matters is being careful and attuned to Comunidad's emotional well-being.

Although this moment was emotionally difficult, it became a turning point in establishing boundaries around topics that Comunidad does not wish to discuss. Setting these boundaries from the outset can help prevent emotionally overwhelming situations like this in the future. This is also an opportunity to recognize subjects that are emotionally difficult for both parties to address. Following Jill Bennett's (2005) and Veena Das's (2007) reflections, trauma exceeds narrative coherence, emerging instead through sensory and embodied expressions that resist verbalization. It is embedded in the ordinary, surfacing through everyday gestures, silences, and fragmented

speech. These insights underscore the significance of viewing interviews not as mere interactions designed to gather data, but as relational and context-dependent processes of connection.

Even though the moment with Comunidad did not escalate into a more intense emotional episode, it underscored the need for psychosocial tools and support within the project. Ideally, this would include involving psychological support even before the interviews start and at specific, sensitive moments, offering guidance in emotionally charged situations and during interviews, and helping to follow up afterward.

It is also important that any psychological or emotional support be culturally sensitive to the collaborator's background. In Afro-Colombian communities, for example, spirituality often plays a central role in emotional resilience and collective healing. Recognizing and integrating these cultural dimensions can enhance the safety and relevance of the support offered. As Michael Frisch (1990) notes, oral history is not just about recording voices, but about honouring the epistemologies and cultural frameworks that shape how stories are told and remembered. Another valuable alternative is to receive a workshop that provides the artist-researcher and the collaborator(s) with guidance and tools on how to navigate sensitive situations in the most respectful and supportive way possible before starting the interviews.

Listening with care, then, also means knowing when to step back and ensuring that the relational space we are creating is one where harm is not reproduced, even unintentionally. It also requires staying attentive and flexible to the diverse forms of care and support that exist within the cultures we work with (Watkins and Shulman 2010). As stated by Robinson (2020), a decolonial approach to listening involves not only choosing to unlearn colonial habits but also embracing a broader

perspective. It calls for a deeper reconfiguration of the frameworks, spaces, and practices through which listening occurs.

This shift often involves unsettling what is familiar or comfortable. For artist-researchers engaged in collaborative processes, this means creating conditions that intentionally disrupt normative listening habits and instead invite participants and audiences to listen in creative, unfamiliar, and sometimes disorienting ways—such practices open space for new forms of relationality.

In the collaboration with Comunidad, this approach to listening was essential. Attentive, relational listening revealed not only the traumas of conflict but also the sources of resilience and meaning in his life. Key among these were the supportive role of his family, his profound connection to music and spirituality, his relationship with plants, and—most symbolically—his bond with the Balso tree and the cununo drum. These elements became anchors for his well-being and trust within the collaborative process. Arriving at the practice of drawing together was not incidental; it emerged from a process of attentive listening to the elements that provide him with a sense of safety and resonate with him on a deep, affective level.

How can I ‘build trust’?

Before starting the creative process, it is essential to take the time to get to know one another. This involves discussing creative ideas, potential outcomes, methods, and formats, as well as answering questions, collaboratively reframing objectives, and fostering a welcoming environment where everyone feels safe to express doubts or concerns about the collaboration. To facilitate this aspect, the project was initially introduced as a broad exploration of listening to the memories of a survivor within the context of the Colombian armed conflict, allowing both parties to guide the project’s

direction. This involves not only informed consent as a procedural formality, but an ongoing, dialogic process of negotiation and mutual reflection (Shopes 2002).

In our case, trust has taken more than eight years to develop, and it remains an ongoing process. It meant meeting Comunidad's family, introducing myself, having coffee together, and simply spending time in each other's company. It meant explaining the project's goals not only to him but also to his loved ones, and listening attentively to their perspectives and needs. In Comunidad's household, decisions are not made individually, and the opinion of his wife and sons carries significant weight. Understanding this dynamic was crucial for the project to unfold respectfully and effectively.

The idea of "building trust" is widely used in collaborative practices. However, trust is not a static achievement or a guarantee. It is a complex, context-dependent process influenced by many factors, some of which are beyond the control of the artist-researcher. Historical memory, gender, previous experiences with institutions, socioeconomic inequality, racial hierarchies, and differing understandings of time, commitment, and reciprocity all shape how trust is given or withheld. Marisol de la Cadena (2015) pushes this reflection further by questioning the linear, product-oriented temporalities that often underlie research processes in academic settings. In contexts where community life is grounded in different senses of time, the pressure to produce results or "build trust" within institutional timelines can undermine it rather than build it. De la Cadena's work suggests that entering collaborative relationships requires not only listening to others' words but also attuning oneself to their rhythms.

In addition, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) emphasizes, in communities that have been historically marginalized, research is often remembered as a site of harm, making trust difficult to establish and easy to erode. In contexts marked by conflict or systemic exclusion, trust may have been repeatedly violated, and rebuilding it may take more time than a project timeline allows. Behar (1996) highlights the need for an “ethnography of the heart,” one that acknowledges the emotional labour and ethical responsibility of being with others in their stories. Trust, in this sense, emerges not only from information sharing but also from sustained engagement and presence.

Although these informal, off-record spaces can also become sites where unconscious biases and cultural misunderstandings emerge, trust-building can be framed from the beginning as an open-ended process of mutual learning. Acknowledging that mistakes may occur allows collaborators to treat them as opportunities to clarify boundaries, identify sensitive topics, and establish shared agreements. As Pink (2009) notes in her work on sensory ethnographic methods, trust emerges not only through methodological rigour but through reflexivity and openness to being changed by the field. From this perspective, the early phases of a collaboration can become encounters where missteps are necessary steps in the process of becoming accountable to one another.

What are the aesthetic risks to those I am working with?

While ethical guidelines in research often emphasize informed consent, confidentiality, and emotional safety, as artists-researchers, we must go further by interrogating the representational strategies we use or how aesthetic choices may either reinforce or subvert the very risks we are trying to avoid. Working with individuals who have experienced or continue to face serious threats requires a careful consideration of both visible and invisible risks. Pauluth-Penner (2022) remarks that “the interpretations of others’ stories may fall prey to projections or transferences of our own

agendas, thereby unintentionally misrepresenting participants' stories or intentionally discounting those deemed not sufficiently dramatic or aesthetically pleasing". (137), highlighting the ethical complexity of representation and the potential harms of misinterpretation.

In the case of Comunidad, for instance, his prior experiences of persecution meant that, although he no longer lives in the city where he was threatened, he still fears being located by illegal armed groups. As a result, we agreed on precautions to protect his identity. This concern also shaped the aesthetic decisions of our collaboration. For example, the videos we produced do not show Comunidad's face. This was a deliberate and careful choice guided by the need to minimize the risk of exposing his image through this project. Instead of centring his visual identity, we turned to other expressive elements, such as our voices, music, hands, and drawings, to convey presence without compromising his safety.

Another key element during the video production was the question of who operated the camera. In our first video, *'From the Balso to the Cununo,'* we used a tripod that required manual stabilization and was managed by a third person. This meant identifying someone we trusted, someone sensitive and open to collaborating respectfully in a context that involved vulnerable storytelling. Although a third person helped us in the first audiovisual that we produced, Comunidad later shared that he felt uncomfortable speaking about his life in front of someone he did not know at all. This feedback was crucial and shaped how we approached the second video, *Eucaipto*. For this recording, we decided to work alone and improvised a tripod using a chair and a string to secure my phone. While this solution impacted the visual quality and formal aesthetics of the video, it allowed Comunidad to feel more at ease.

2. Development

The development phase of this project required flexibility and deep attunement to the lived realities, preferences, and abilities of Comunidad and me. While my initial plan centred around producing a podcast, the process evolved organically through our conversations, shared interests, and spatial limitations. Drawing emerged as a more accessible, comfortable, and generative method for Comunidad, especially given his limited mobility.

The choice of location, the *Palafito de Don Gu*, was guided by both safety and symbolic relevance, despite posing technical challenges. There, Comunidad was surrounded by therapeutic objects such as his *cununo*, which provided comfort during filming. Nature also played an active role in this phase, not only as a source of metaphor but as a co-creator and holder of memory. Our drawings of trees—Balso and Eucalyptus—reflected memories and became living threads through which we could connect our stories.

Are the forms of representation and the methods chosen consistent with the values, culture and needs of all the people involved?

Ideally, the choice of methods should serve the research question to explore the themes that the artist-researcher is seeking to investigate. However, in oral history-based collaborative projects, a flexible project design should be considered to ensure that the collaborators' abilities, cultural backgrounds, and artistic interests are discussed and integrated. Different participants in the same project may collaborate enthusiastically with different methods or resist a proposed method completely. Alternatively, even though the methods used are often determined not by the artist-researcher's own prior decisions but by the research events and scenarios created during the

collaboration. This flexibility aligns with the ethics of participatory research, which emphasizes dialogue, reciprocity, and co-learning (Cahill, 2007).

Such was the case with Comunidad. At first, I developed a podcast that would share Comunidad's story through his own voice. However, discussing our families and the traditional plants of Tumaco, along with their healing and spiritual properties, opened an unexpected and mutually fulfilling creative path. As I mentioned earlier, Comunidad has a disability in his right leg, which limits his mobility and makes it painful for him to stand, move or walk for long periods. In this context, drawing while sitting was not only more comfortable, but also more enjoyable for him than, for example, walking together.

In our case, drawing as a method responded to the spatial and temporal limitations of our interviews at his home and became a way to invite participation in representation and co-direct the conversation without the need to teach technical skills or rely on intimidating, artistic language. The method does not require expertise; materials are readily accessible, and there are numerous ways to experiment with colour, texture, and form.

Over time, we also integrated music into our creative process. Initially, it was unclear how we could interact through music. However, we began to understand that rhythm, *décimas* (a traditional Afro-Colombian poetic form), and popular songs could become ways of engaging in dialogue between us. Singing became another accessible and culturally resonant language through which we could communicate, reflect, and co-create.

How to choose a location?

The location of an interview is never neutral. It can shape what is said, how it is said, and how safe or vulnerable the narrator feels. Ideally, it should be negotiated in advance and provide a sense of privacy and comfort for the interviewee. In some cases, the location can also carry symbolic significance that is relevant to the research process. This was true in my collaboration with Comunidad: we chose the *Palafito de Don Gu* as the recording site for our two videos. This space was not only close to his home and his newborn, but also provided a sense of protection that a public venue could not offer. While the lighting and acoustics of the *Palafito* presented technical challenges for video recording, we prioritized emotional safety over visual polish.

The primary goal of the documentation is to create a record that can serve as a meaningful tool for Comunidad's present project, supporting his ongoing work as a cultural leader, amplifying his voice, and helping to preserve and share his knowledge with broader audiences. In this sense, the audiovisual piece documents a part of his process and serves as a resource for future opportunities. For me, as an artist-researcher, the documentation is also a way of sharing our collaboration. Ideally, having the resources in the future to ensure optimal lighting and sound would allow us to maintain both technical quality and the care that such collaborative work requires.

El Palafito also housed his cununo and other musical instruments, which had become therapeutic objects throughout our process. A therapeutic object holds emotional, symbolic, or sensory significance and can help feel grounded, safe, or empowered in moments of vulnerability. These objects can act as anchors that facilitate expression, evoke memory, and offer a sense of control or familiarity during intense or emotionally charged moments. The idea of including a therapeutic object in the interview setting is something I learned and integrated into our project thanks to the learnings from the dissemination phase of the podcast *Era necesario encontrarnos*, developed by

Concordia University's Acts of Listening Lab, under the direction of Professor Luis Carlos Sotelo, and three founding leaders of the National Association of Peasant, Indigenous and Black Women of Colombia, with psychosocial support from Colombian dance movement therapist María Andrea García.

What Role Does the Environment Play in This Process?

The relationship between the environment and the Colombian armed conflict has been a concern for the Colombian transitional justice system, including the Truth Commission (CEV) and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP). Both institutions have demonstrated a growing interest in shifting away from anthropocentric perspectives (Villegas and Castrillón Gallego 2022). This shift is reflected in various legal decrees, judicial rulings, and constitutional court decisions that recognize ecosystems, such as rivers, *páramos*, forests, and entire territories, as subjects of rights and victims of the armed conflict.

Castillejo Cuéllar (2020), who led the testimonial volume of the CEV's Final Report, states that it is necessary to create new conditions that make it possible to listen to the suffering of a river or a tree and to understand the diverse fractures in relationships between human and non-human beings. This means recognizing that nature is a living body is far more than a metaphor and listen, for example, to what building dams has meant for indigenous, campesinos and Afro Colombian communities.

One of the most significant insights to emerge from this project is the role of nature as an active agent in processes of listening and memory. Trees are integral participants in the process, offering rhythm, memories, containment, and forms of knowledge that exceed human-centered frameworks.

This perspective aligns closely with Wall Kimmerer (2013), especially her idea of land not as an inert background but as a subject, capable of speaking, remembering, and teaching.

In this project, nature in our drawings facilitated movement beyond difficult memories into realms of awe, interconnection, and transformation. To acknowledge nature as a co-participant in processes of artistic and social inquiry is to propose an expanded ethical field. In conflict contexts, where institutional and interpersonal trust may be fractured, this relational attunement to the more-than-human offers an alternative path to connect.

In Comunidad's case, the Balso tree was not only a species but a character in his story that he had to understand deeply and work with skillfully to shape its wood. Among Afro-Colombian communities of the Pacific, trees like the Balso and ecosystems such as mangroves carry deep cultural connotations, rooted in ancestral knowledge, spiritual practices, and everyday subsistence. These living beings are not seen merely as natural resources but as relational entities, mediators between people, memory, and territory. In my case, the eucalyptus tree held playful and emotional memories; it became a symbolic drawing I chose to communicate a fragment of my childhood. Through these encounters, trees became more than background elements. They emerged as co-protagonists holding memory, practice, and meaning for both of us, interweaving personal histories with broader cultural and ecological worlds.

How can drawing become a form of listening that creates space for what is difficult to speak or put into words?

As it has been discussed, drawing emerged in our project as a powerful method of listening. It enriched the dialogue in ways that verbal conversation alone could not. It offered both Comunidad

and me a shared but spacious terrain, where each of us could express ideas, memories, and emotions through our own forms, colors, and symbols. In moments of silence, drawing allowed communication to continue without pressure, inviting reflection, imagination, and presence. It helped sustain a level of concentration and emotional engagement that words sometimes disrupted. For example, when we drew the Balso tree together, the act of drawing held the silences, carrying meanings that were difficult to speak aloud. At other times, when Comunidad wanted to explain something specific—such as the aspect of his house—the drawing became a visual platform through which that knowledge could be shared more precisely. While each artist-researcher will find different mediums aligned with their practice, drawing remains an accessible, low-barrier method that does not require specialized training or expensive materials. Even if it is not part of the final artistic outcomes, drawing can be an effective tool for listening and for holding the complexity of stories that emerge in contexts marked by sociopolitical violence.

Conclusions

I write these conclusions in mid-2025. A few months ago, Colombia's *Defensoría del Pueblo* (Ombudsman's Office) issued an early warning about worsening violence in Tumaco (Defensoría del Pueblo 2025). It highlighted actions by FARC-EP dissident groups such as the Oliver Sinisterra Front and Guerrillas Unidas del Pacífico, including threats and selective killings, restrictions on civilian movement, armed clashes near civilian populations and the use of explosive devices. These actions continue to affect Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities disproportionately.

Donald Trump has returned to the presidency of the United States for a second term, and early signs point to an aggressive dismantling of USAID's infrastructure. This political shift has immediate consequences for grassroots projects like *El Palafito de Don Gu*, Comunidad's cultural school located in Bogotá. *El Palafito* relies heavily on USAID to sustain its growth, operations, and infrastructure.

El Palafito de Don Gu serves a relevant social function. Each afternoon, it opens its doors to more than twenty children from the neighbourhood, providing them with a safe and nurturing environment for artistic and musical exploration. Rather than being left alone at home or exposed to the risks of the street, these children participate in musical and artistic workshops facilitated by Comunidad and his family. They celebrate birthdays, *novenas*, and children find support through family grief and domestic violence situations.

Amidst the financial and political uncertainty, we brought this phase of 'Can You Hear the Trees Talking?' to a close. However, I find myself returning cyclically to the role of art in times of hardship and social and political instability. *El Palafito de Don Gu* creates local, affective networks

of care, mutual learning, and cultural sovereignty. It offers a model of community-based resilience that resists sociopolitical violence and reclaims agency through creativity.

However, we must also confront the contradiction that in Colombia, much of what sustains these artistic communitarian ecosystems comes from the very geopolitical arrangements that create dependency, division, and inequality. In such a tense situation, the role of art is to critically engage with its conditions of possibility, to question what it means to create under the shadow of oppression, violence, and imperial economics, and to imagine otherwise. Art holds the potential to create new ways of relating in the world. In this sense, it becomes both a complement and an ally of restorative justice—not to illustrate what justice seeks to test or prove, but to open up and imagine new paths and ways of knowing about justice.

In addition, as Aggie Ebrahimi Bazaz (2018) has argued, “care, in relation to people, can reinforce a humanitarian, charity model which does not redistribute power but often reinscribes it. However, I think we are united in asking: what types of care do we wish to foster? Not necessarily more care, but effective care. Potent care. Care toward a “structural analysis” (23). The call for a potent, structurally aware care resonates with John Paul Lederach’s (2005) view on reconciliation, not merely a political or technical process, but a profoundly creative act. Artists-researchers can perceive beyond what is visible, embracing complexity, imagining new paths, and risking vulnerability in the service of new possibilities.

Unfortunately, as long as the illegal economy surrounding coca persists, and the issues of land dispossession, exploitation, and forced displacement remain unresolved in Colombia, it is tough to envision reconciliation. These are not isolated problems but deeply rooted consequences of

historical inequalities, patriarchy, racism, colonialism, and ongoing state neglect. A lasting reconciliation must therefore be rooted in a vision of society where land is redistributed fairly and where rural and urban communities, including Afro-Colombian and Indigenous areas, have access to dignified livelihoods. It demands rethinking economic structures in ways that center care, interdependence, and shared responsibility, rather than competition, violence, extraction, and control.

Transitional justice, along with the growing body of research surrounding it, represents a significant step toward reimagining the very meaning of justice and the roots of the armed conflict in Colombia. Specifically, restorative justice efforts offer the potential to create spaces where people can learn how to listen to each other's life stories, with care, recognition, and accountability. Within this framework, reconciliation is not understood as the restoration of a prior harmony or a definitive resolution of conflict. Instead, it is an open-ended, long-term process of learning to coexist with one another. In this context, collaborative art is a powerful tool for creating listening spaces. Liz Miller (Bazaz and Miller 2018) remarks on the necessity to be aware of each state of collaborative projects to lower the risk of reinforcing old paradigms:

There is the interview and then there is the radical act of deep listening to another person. This is perhaps why co-creation is such a powerful device, because it is not constructed in the same logic as a formal interview. At its best, it is a process where a group of people are all engaged in a form of shared discovery, where questions arise, reflections are discussed, and this process can shape and form a project. Ideally the form reflects the values that shape the production and these are in alignment. And I think what is interesting is that we are always at risk of reinforcing old paradigms, so we need to practice a heightened state of awareness and responsiveness at each stage of a project.

Thus, reconciliation through collaborative art demands an ongoing ethical commitment to reflexivity, where the process itself becomes a space for mutual transformation rather than a means to fixed outcomes.

As a researcher, I have used the term *social fabric* thousands of times to describe the complex network of relationships that holds a community together. I've studied how the armed conflict has torn apart that fabric, unraveling trust, kinship, and everyday forms of coexistence. But meeting Comunidad made me realize that I am not simply an observer of that fabric. I am a thread in it, dependent on other threads to create something whole. To care for the social fabric is to care for the relationships that sustain it, including my own place within it.

Working with Comunidad showed us that the desire to transform our society is not an individual or solitary endeavor. It is a *collective effort* that begins by listening carefully to one another. And while this project cannot resolve, heal, or change a country, what it does is amplify the need of listening to each other to understand ourselves, our relation to others and live with difference. This project was born from an encounter, and from a belief that listening to each other in Colombia must lead to action.

According to Tronto (2013), “caring with” is the final phase of care, a stage grounded in solidarity, mutual responsibility, and collective accountability. It demands that care be embedded in relationships and systems that uphold justice, dignity, and freedom for all. “Caring with” means transforming the conditions that make care necessary in the first place, challenging the power structures and exclusions that perpetuate violence and silence. In this spirit, drawing together while talking can become a small act of resistance against the violent and divisive structures of today's world. Drawing and talking about life opens a powerful portal for deeper listening, mutual understanding, and respectful access to one another's worlds. This has been the central purpose of this dissertation: to respond to the question *How to listen—effectively and with care—to survivors*

of sociopolitical violence while collaborating on a creative work based on their life story?

Drawing, care, and trust-building have enabled us to listen to each other more attentively.

In the context of the Colombian armed conflict, and in dialogue with Comunidad, acting means centering the stories of those most affected, and ensuring they are not only heard but engaged with through processes that do not reproduce harm. One concrete way this project seeks to activate listening is by disseminating the co-created videos with a restorative intention, not merely to “inform” about our experience but to invite others into a shared space of listening, drawing, reflection and action.

From the Balso to the Cununo and Eucalipto are tools to foster empathy, unsettle passive spectatorship, and create opportunities for understanding. They ask viewers to bear witness, to hold complexity, and ultimately, to respond—not with judgment or despair, but with care and artistic expression. By sharing these stories in classrooms, museums, community gatherings, and public forums, we hope to create spaces where people can begin to ask themselves: *What does it mean to be moved by another’s story? Moreover, what responsibilities does that movement bring?*

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Appendix 1: Ethics Certificate



CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Name of Applicant: Manuela Ochoa
Department: N/A\Interdisciplinary Studies
Agency: N/A
Title of Project: Can you hear the trees talking?
Certification Number: 30016048

Valid From: February 07, 2025 To: February 06, 2026

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard DeMont".

Dr. Richard DeMont, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee